Writing for Strangers: Structural Transformations of the Public Letter, 1640-1790

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WRITING FOR STRANGERS:

STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE PUBLIC LETTER, 1640-1790

by

SHANG-YU SHENG

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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SHANG-YU SHENG

Advisor: Carrie Hintz

This dissertation examines public letters in England during the period spanning the English Civil War to the French Revolution, showing how authors employed the printed epistolary form to imagine different relations with the “stranger readers” who constituted the nascent reading public. I employ a formalist approach to analyze the various rhetorics made possible through the public letter’s framed structure, focusing on the assemblages of the narrative positions of letter writer, addressee, and reader. Each chapter describes a mode of the public letter in socio-spatial terms: spectacle, network, community, and public. Building on studies in book history and print culture, this dissertation revises the concept of the public sphere by arguing that the letter, as a popular form of public discourse in the early stages of print culture, reveals communication models which diverge from the Habermasian ideal of critical-rational debate, and visions of community other than Benedict Anderson’s nation state.
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INTRODUCTION

Public Letters

This dissertation offers a methodology for close reading the English public letter and placing it within the literary history of the long eighteenth century. I grapple with making sense of the period’s wide-ranging epistolary writing, which includes texts like Margaret Cavendish’s *Sociable Letters* (1664), Voltaire’s *Letters on the English* (1733), *The Letters of Junius* (1768-72), Catherine Macaulay’s *The History of England from the Revolution to the Present Time in a Series of Letters to a Friend* (1778), and Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Letters from Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796). Despite their dissimilar topics and purposes—extending from personal correspondence, cross-cultural commentary, political polemics, historiography, to travel writing, and more—these texts share the form of the public letter, whose parameters I will outline in this introductory chapter. The popularity of the epistolary mode in eighteenth-century England is evident not just in its use across genres, but also in its prevalence as a medium through which authors expressed ideas about a variety of subjects including philosophy, history, education, sociability, and politics. Indeed, authors writing for publication in the period seemed to find something useful in epistolarity, even when their chosen subject matters do not appear to require the use of the letter.

The various uses of epistolary writing comprise a major mode of public discourse in England during the period between the English and French revolutions, a period which coincides roughly with the rise and fall of the epistolary novel—dating from Aphra Behn’s *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684) to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein: the Modern Prometheus* (1818). Just as the epistolary novel fell out of fashion, replaced by narrative devices
such as free indirect discourse and the third-person narrator of the realist novel, the public letter also became less ubiquitous, as well as a less varied form, towards the turn of the century. By the end of the eighteenth century, the diverse forms of the public letter were replaced by the singular form of the open letter, a genre which continues to be relevant in our present day, and the rise of which must be understood in correlation to the solidification of the idea of a mass reading public, comprising heterogeneous and anonymous individuals—“stranger readers”—as the primary audience for whom authors know themselves to write.

My approach to the public letter may be broadly understood as formalist, while seeking to avoid the ahistoricity that is often attached to the term. I find an affinity for Marjorie Levinson’s description of the movement that she calls “new formalism”: literary scholarship that attends to “the processes and structures of mediation through which particular discourses and whole classes of discourse (literary genres, for example) come to represent the real, in the same stroke helping establish that empirical domain as the real.”¹ Using Levinson’s terms, this dissertation examines metamorphoses of the public letter as “the processes and structures of mediation” through which eighteenth-century authors both “represented” and “established” the reading public for whom they write. I am primarily interested in the evolution of the public letter as a mode of discourse during the development of the print market and public sphere in the long eighteenth century, and I argue that different manifestations of the public letter correlate to different conceptualizations of what constitutes a “public.”² This argument is based on the observation that a public letter necessarily complicates the basic epistolary discursive dyad of the I-you relationship. When a letter is made public, this dyadic narrative structure becomes triadic,

² The mention of that catchphrase, public sphere, inevitably invites questions about the work of Jürgen Habermas. Though public sphere theory is a point of reference throughout this dissertation, it plays only a minor role in my account of the public letter. I will attempt to deal with it in my conclusion.
comprising three parts: the author of a letter, the explicit addressee, and the implied reader. In this dissertation, I will show how different rhetorical positionings of the reader in the public letter create different possible shapes of the civil society in which authors imagine themselves and their readers to belong. In the following chapters, I provisionally delineate four kinds, using socio-spatial language to describe them: spectacle, network, community, and public.

I. Why Public Letters?

Despite the almost parallel fortunes of the epistolary novel and the public letter in the long eighteenth century, literary scholarship has not treated the two with equal interest. While the epistolary novel has received ample consideration, primarily in relation to the problem, inaugurated by Ian Watt’s seminal study, of “the rise of the novel,” the public letter has yet to be seriously studied, or even viewed, as a form in its own right.3 There exists, of course, rich and illuminating literary scholarship on the eighteenth-century letter, ranging from humanistic readings of the familiar letter’s language and style,4 cultural studies from a feminist viewpoint


4 Studies in this vein focus on letter writing as an art: the creation of spontaneity and effortlessness; the performative, self-fashioning aspects of letter writing; letter writing as an intersubjective, social endeavor. For example, William Henry Irving, The Providence of Wit in the English Letter Writers (Durham: Duke University Press, 1955); Howard Anderson, Philip B. Daghlian, and Irvin Ehrenpreis, eds., The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century (Lawrence, KS: The University Press of Kansas, 1966); Annabel Patterson’s chapter on letters in Censorship and Interpretation: the Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984); Bruce Redford, The Converse of the Pen: Acts of Intimacy in the Eighteenth-
pushing against the conventional understanding of the letter as a domestic genre, to the recent surge in historicist research on how letters contributed to the creation of pan-European and transatlantic intellectual, social networks. As this brief sketch of the literature indicates, the overall trajectory of the scholarship has been towards reassessing the traditional understanding of the letter as a private, domestic form, and increasingly focused on articulating the letter’s crucial role in the period’s public domains, including its social and political cultures.

In this dissertation, I will build on existing literature’s recognition of the letter’s inherent publicness, while opening up a new field of inquiry in establishing the public letter as a form with distinct structural and narrative properties. Indeed, the letter, especially in its early modern manifestations, is increasingly recognized as a form never purely private—or, as one critic calls it, a semi-public form. This is evidenced by the crossover between letter writing and news sharing, and the fact that the period’s letter writers generally expected private correspondence to

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be shared among family and friends, even acquaintances.\(^8\) However, the conventional view of the letter as a largely private and domestic form—a view formed by enduring assumptions about the ideal letter’s proper style, language, and tone—remains influential. As Thomas O. Beebee states in his comparative study of the epistolary novel in early modern Europe, today’s standard definitions of the letter generally understand it as *private* written communication between persons.\(^9\) Eighteenth-century readers and writers, inheriting humanistic ideas about the letter from Erasmus onwards, seem to agree: typical talk about letters characterizes it as the writing of conversation to a friend not present, or conversation *in absentia*.

The definition of the letter as conversation *in absentia* may be understood to include two parts: one, letter writing is a social act, and thus letters are a sociable mode of writing; two, this social act primarily takes place in the realm of private or domestic life, implying an intimate relationship between the letter writer and her addressee. The letters considered worthy of study by literary scholars—letters judged to be of value beyond the immediately pragmatic, whether aesthetic, political, or ethical—generally fit this definition. Hugh Blair, in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), offers a prime example of this view, stating that epistolary writing is “a distinct species of composition, subject to the cognizance of criticism…only, or chiefly, when it is of the easy and familiar kind; when it is a conversation carried on upon paper, between two friends at a distance.”\(^10\) Blair’s statement is representative of eighteenth-century attitudes towards the letter. This assumption that the quintessential letter is private, sociable, familiar writing—and therefore the most genuine and sincere of forms, conducive to the writer’s

\(^{8}\) Of course, many letters were, and are, meant to be (and remain) private communication. My first chapter will discuss some of the anxieties accompanying writers’ desire to maintain the privacy of their correspondence.

\(^{9}\) Beebee, 12.

unmediated self expression and representation—sits somewhat uncomfortably alongside the obviously major roles that the letter plays in the period’s public life.

The tacit understanding that letters of cultural value are those belonging to private writing may account for the scholarly attention focused on two kinds of epistolary writing in the eighteenth century: the familiar letter and the epistolary novel. Both strains of scholarship tend to view the letter as a medium for the expression of subjectivity (or intersubjectivity), and underscore its communicative qualities of immediacy, transparency, and intimacy. This is to say that while it has been well-established that letter writing is never a purely private act, and scholars have well-explored the political or public roles of eighteenth-century letters, literary scholarship has so far overlooked, as a group, letters that present themselves as explicitly public. What work on public letters does exist mainly appears within the framework of individual author studies (attempting to understand how a public letter fits into the author’s oeuvre), or as related to the study of particular historical events or themes (for example, the English Civil War or the French Revolution; travel writing or women authors). Thus, in looking exclusively at the public letter as a distinct form and tracing its development over the course of the century, I seek to write an alternate history of the letter, one that avoids the plaguing binary questions of whether letters are a public or private genre, or letter-writing a masculine or feminine activity. Instead, I ask how the formal properties of public letters allow authors to negotiate the unashamed and explicit publicness of their writing.

I thus consider these questions about the curious ubiquity of the letter in the long eighteenth century’s public culture: What kind of work is the letter presumed to do and perform? What does a public letter ask of its writer and reader, and what does it mean to choose to “publish oneself” through the letter’s carefully constructed social world? How does the letter
operate as a “sociable genre”—a medium that prescribes or represents a relational network comprising multiple actors? Do these constructed networks and the letter’s frame device have an internal relationship to each letter’s content? Historically, how are different ideas concerning publicness related to the letter’s structure, and how do late eighteenth-century published letters differ from their earlier counterparts?

Such questions hinge upon a more fundamental query: What, indeed, is a public letter? In other words, what happens to the presumed inherently private form of the letter when it is made public? In my view, public letters are apparent contradictions: they often deliberately create the semblance of intimacy while in effect addressing a wide, heterogeneous readership; their authors often adopt a style of plain-spokenness and spontaneous self-expression, while in reality devoting great effort to considering audience and tone. Although the genre may be traced to ancient traditions (say, Seneca's letters or the biblical epistles), it was not until the explosion of print culture in eighteenth-century Europe that authors could presume themselves to communicate directly with an unknown readership. I define the public letter simply: regardless of whether it originated in authentic correspondence, a public letter is a letter that was written, edited, or prepared for publication, with the general reading public as its intended audience. The premise of the form thus renders a mediated narrative structure wherein the intended audience (the general reading public) is distinct from the internal reader (the addressee of the letter); every public letter inscribes both author and reader within a specific network of relations between real, imagined, and implied persons (author, letter-writer, addressee, reader, characters, etc.).

I suggest that the form of public letters was useful for eighteenth-century authors, many who were anxious about the dissolution of traditional relationships and attracted to the
potentially restorative powers of sociability.\textsuperscript{11} Public epistolarity provided a means for eighteenth-century authors, facing fraught and undetermined relations with a nascent reading public, to imagine and perform connections with heterogeneous and unknown readers. In using the letter form to envision the structure of the civil society to which they and their readers belong, authors also stake out specific discursive positions for themselves, in relation to their stranger readers. The different assemblages of those narrative positions I previously mentioned—letter writer, addressee, implied reader—in the varied forms of the eighteenth-century public letter thus reveal the different ways in which authors responded to an emerging print culture.

In the process of negotiating a position for themselves within the structures of civil society that they delineate through forms of the public letter, the authors I discuss also assert and define identities for themselves and for their imagined readers: how they relate to, compare to, and wish to be viewed by, others. Such expressions of identity are accomplished by the rhetorical delineation of spatial and social boundaries: inclusion or exclusion; grouping, ranking, and organizing; articulations of sameness or difference. The letter is particularly useful for such efforts because, as I hope my readings will show, it is a written form fundamentally concerned with the performance, creation, maintenance, negotiation, or dissolution of human relationships.

By analyzing the ways in authors stake out positions for themselves and their imagined readers through public epistolary writing, I approach texts not as representations or vehicles of ideas, but as social agents.\textsuperscript{12} What concerns me is not so much the content of these public


letters—though it would be unwise to ignore what their authors were seeking to communicate—but the means by which they might act as active agents that enact new connections and configurations. Thus my analyses focus on close reading the rhetorical shapes of these letters. Drawing upon Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory, Rita Felski suggests “both the necessity and the sheer difficulty of description, or attending to an empirical world that often resists or refutes our assumptions” in literary interpretation:

This means taking care not to conjure textual meanings out of preexisting assumptions or explanations—honoring and detailing the singular features of a text as well as the specific routes along which it travels. Actor-network theory does not exclude the political—it is deeply interested in conflicts, asymmetries, struggles—but its antipathy to reductionism means that political discourse cannot serve as a metalanguage into which everything can be translated. The task is to account for as many actors as possible, to be specific about forms of causation and connection (which are also forms of translation), instead of hitching a free ride on a preexisting theoretical vocabulary: the familiar isms waiting eagerly in the wings, all too ready to take on a starring role.\(^\text{13}\)

Viewed individually, each of my chapters engages with a text, or grouping of texts, that critics have previously read using compelling theoretical language (feminism; Marxism; postcolonialism) or political frameworks (Royalist politics of the 1640s; the conflict between conservative and radical causes in the 1790s). Perhaps it is due to the explanatory power of such “metalanguages” that the public letters I examine have never been understood as belonging to a common literary tradition. Tracing the formal similarities as well as differences between these texts, I hope to provide thick descriptions that reveal how eighteenth-century public letters

\(^{13}\) Felski, 740.
work—how the form’s “existence makes a difference.” I come to the conclusion that when viewed as social and cultural actors, public letters structure frames of reading/writing, position subjects, and enact relational networks between multiple voices and subjectivities. They also habituate readers to reading and thinking alongside others in the increasingly complex social world of the long eighteenth century. As such, they are operative agents in the histories of modernization and individualism.

II. Print Culture and Imagined Communities

My approach to the public letter continues the narrative established by critics like Benedict Anderson and Michael Warner, who have persuasively made the historical connection between print culture, nation-building, and modernity. Following Anderson’s provocative thesis about the crucial role of “print capitalism”—books as capitalized commodities; the virtual communities formed by the novel’s wide readerships—in the formation of the European nation state, Warner studies the development of public discourse in printed materials of the early American Republic. Both are concerned with the emergence of the nation as a transcendent, imaginary entity, as well as the “metonymic” relationship between the materiality of the printed book and the abstract idea of the nation. As Warner writes, “The public was constructed on the basis of its metonymic embodiment in printed artifacts. That is how it was possible to imagine the public supervising the actions of officials [in newspapers, pamphlets, broadsides, etc.] even when no physical assembly of the public was taking place. . . . In their routine dispersion, and in the conventions of discourse that allowed them to be political in a special way, these artifacts

14 Ibid., 738.

represented the material reality of an abstract public: a *res publica* of letters."\(^{16}\) In Warner’s study of early American literature, print is central to the consolidation of the public sphere, a process that in turn upholds the formation of the idea of the early republic. Reading and writing, then, are the paradigmatic public actions: the primary means by which one participates in civil society. They are what *make* the idea of a public even possible.

I bring Warner’s insight together with the argument that in the early development of print culture, authors writing for publication were in constant negotiation with who and what constituted their “public.” Warner’s work focuses exclusively on print’s role in the development of an abstractly defined, *a priori* public—a Kantian or Habermasian world where all who are literate (and male, bourgeois) may participate equally in public discourse, defined as critical rational debate. However, in recent years, book history and literary scholars have complicated the meaning of early modern “public discourse” through studying the media transition in Europe from manuscript to print culture, and from orality to literacy. These studies show that from the sixteenth century to the early eighteenth century, manuscript circulation and printed publication existed simultaneously as legitimate choices for aspiring authors.\(^{17}\) Moreover, written and printed texts were not just read in the privacy of one’s home, but performed in social spaces. We now know about the cultural practices of oral reading (as opposed to silent reading) that persisted into the eighteenth century.\(^{18}\) We also know that writing did not necessarily take precedence over speech in the early modern period: some authors considered their writing as proxy for, even


secondary to, speech—as virtual performances that must adhere to the social rules relating to rank and hierarchy that bind face-to-face interactions.\(^{19}\) Taking into account these advances in our understanding of print as a social mechanism in its early stages, we may build on Warner’s insight about the metonymic relationship between how readers and writers respond to printed materials, and how they imagine the communities to which they belong.

It seems to me that the public letter is the ideal place to begin this venture. The letter’s form (its paratextual elements: address, opening remarks, closing, signature) already makes visible and tangible the dyadic sociable relationship between author and addressee; the public letter’s form—complicated by the aforementioned triadic communicative structure—thus provides a starting point to begin tracing how public imaginings of community are embodied in printed texts. Along these lines, Diana Barnes’s *Epistolary Community in Print, 1580-1664*, published in 2013, is a recent study in how seventeenth-century authors use printed correspondence to publicly imagine the kinds of community to which they and their readers belong. Focusing on the period before the Restoration, Barnes argues “printed familiar letters pervaded both the gradual processes of socio-political change and watershed political events because the genre provided an ideal forum for debates about community fuelling political change during this period.”\(^{20}\) Her study centers on how “claim[s] for political sovereignty” and “new modes of community taking shape in England” are represented in epistolary discourse, a discourse that has its origins in “a rhetorical art founded in classical traditions.”\(^{21}\) This dissertation shares Barnes’s conviction that the public letter was an important medium for

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\(^{21}\) Ibid., 5-6.
authors of the long eighteenth century to negotiate the socio-political revolutions which they face: the form’s possible rhetorical structures make explicit authors’ assumptions about communication and sociability, and embody different visions about how one might participate in an increasingly complicated civil society. However, while some of (English Civil War period) texts I discuss in my first chapter overlap with Barnes’s choices, her study attends primarily to their political ideas regarding the creation and maintenance of community, while I am more concerned with how public epistolary renders expressions of degrees of publicness (that then extend to ideas about community formation). Also, mine is a longer history of the public letter that extends into the late eighteenth century; as such, compared to Barnes’s deep study of mainly Royalist letters, each of my chapters explores a different form of the public letter, each manifesting a different literary imagination about the possible shape of a changing civil society.

III. The Affordances of Epistolary Forms

My approach towards the study of the forms and rhetorical structures of public letters is in accordance with Caroline Levine’s broad definition of “form” as referring to “an arrangement of elements—an ordering, patterning, or shaping . . . all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference.” Taking formalism out of the purely aesthetic or literary realms, Levine argues, “It is the work of form to make order . . . [and thus] forms are the stuff of politics.” Like form, politics involves “distributions and arrangements,” including the ordering and ranking of time, space, bodies, subjects, etc. Above all, “politics is a matter of imposing and enforcing boundaries, temporal patterns, and hierarchies on experience,” and therefore “there is no politics without form.”

22 Following this understanding of form, I suggest a

reading of the different assemblages of the public letter’s narrative positions as embodying authors’ ideas about social identities, the ordering of those identities within the larger society, and the shapes and boundaries of what constitutes civil society. In my analyses, a consideration of the above elements of public epistolary texts also show how they correlate to the thematic content: for example, in my first chapter, I show how in speaking about the vexing relationship between women and matters of war and politics, Margaret Cavendish employs a specific form of the public letter to represent the specific shape of discursive community in which her controversial, and potential dangerous, discussion exists.

A further aspect of Levine’s theorization of form is instructive for my discussion, particularly in considering the public letter’s relationship to other kinds of epistolary writing in the eighteenth century. This is Levine’s use of the concept of affordance, borrowed from design theory, to discuss form: “the particular constraints and possibilities that different forms afford, and the fact that those patterns and arrangements carry their affordances with them as they move across time and space.” Levine posits: “Rather than asking what artists intend or even what forms do, we can ask instead what potentialities lie latent—though not always obvious—in aesthetic and social arrangements.” To view forms in terms of their affordances—which may be understood as potentialities contingent on place, time, and context—points towards a formalist methodology that avoids the fallacy of presenting texts as unitary, coherent systems. Thus, the form of the letter may have multiple affordances, some of which are readily discernable in the familiar letter, others more apparent in the epistolary novel, and still others primarily observable in the public letter.

23 Ibid., 6.
24 Ibid., 6-7.
From this view, questions about the letter and its affordances necessarily become increasingly complicated the more we try to consider the different circumstances of its potential authorship and readership, and the possible processes of its transmission, interception, circulation, or publication. In a recent special issue on epistolarity in the journal *Life Writing*, the editors open their discussion with a declarative sentence that represents the standard view on letters: “Letters are often seen in the humanities as giving insight into the private lives of famous or notable people—a peep-hole through which to glimpse the person behind the creative or political public testimony.” Letters, in other words, afford access to a person’s genuine, unfiltered, self-expression or self-reflection in their communication with an intimate trusted other. Yet this view of letters is revealed as naïve once we delve into the social, ethical, and political aspects of letter writing. As the editors, Kylie Cardell and Jane Haggis, continue to consider the issue:

What about letters never intended to be read by others apart from the intended recipient? . . . Also what of the artifice and conventionalities of self-presentation? . . . Is [a letter] simply a remnant, trace or fragment of the absence or loss involved in temporal and spatial separation? Or do “the letter” and “the correspondence” constitute a sociological process of dynamic relational connectedness that involves techniques of self-making as much about presence and performance as about absence or loss? In other words in what ways might “the letter” produce rather than reflect or augment aspects of sociality such as friendship or intimacy? What about different forms of letter, for example the “official” correspondence produced out of the interstices of individual lives and governmentality; are these best viewed entirely within the bounds of the public, or do they traverse the

public and private through the creative performativity of self involved in their representational and narrative qualities? What about the open letter or the postcard? The former designed usually to speak to any/one or many, the latter, open to all but written to specific one(s)?

Because the letter is so malleable a form, and its uses potentially infinite, the questions quickly multiply. This may be why studies of letters, even if focusing only on the period between 1600 and 1800, need to limit and define the kind of epistolary writing with which they are specifically concerned.

For example, the familiar letter—typically arising out of private correspondence—is generally valued for the ways in which it simultaneously affords individuality and sociality. Studies of the familiar letter, like Bruce Redford’s, focus on how writers approach letter writing as a communicative art form limited by cultural conventions regarding style, language, and subject matter, yet still allowing for the creative expression of the writer’s individual character (her wit, intelligence, knowledge, penmanship, etc.) as well as the intersubjectivity of a particular set of social relations (the level of intimacy or rapport between correspondents). The familiar letter also appears as unmediated communication: Samuel Richardson famously depicted his characters “writing to the moment” to create a sense of immediacy and spontaneity. These ideas are founded on the view of the familiar letter as private communication, as a written message intended only for the recipient. However, studies of early modern letter writing have shown that often letters were shared and circulated within social circles because they comprise valuable sources of news and entertainment. Thus, even if not so explicit, the familiar letter tacitly affords

26 Ibid., 129-30.
mediated communication and inclusiveness because of its ability to speak to those other than the explicit recipient or intended readers.

For a different conception of the letter’s affordances, we may look to formalist studies of fiction written in letters. In Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form (1982), Janet Gurkin Altman delineates the main features of the epistolary novel, with an interest in “the pressure exerted by form on meaning.” Altman finds the themes of absence and presence central to plot development in epistolary novels, showing how letters connect two distant points (“temporal, spatial, emotional, intellectual”); how letters convey distance or intimacy between confidants; how letter writing creates narrative overture or closure. Most of all, Altman discusses how the absence/presence structural elements of epistolary form afford affect and affectability—rendering narratives of seduction, desire, and sentiment. Similar to Altman, Nicola J. Watson describes the eighteenth-century epistolary novel as “the paradigmatic sentimental plot of seduction, occasioning extravagant displays of feeling recorded at length in impassioned correspondence.” A different but related strain of scholarship about the epistolary novel explores its affordance for polyphony—including dialogism, fragmented meaning, and narrative fissures.

While epistolary fiction allows us to consider the letter’s affordances in terms of temporality (e.g., the spontaneity of expression; the deferral of desire; gaps in understanding), letters in history reveal the letter’s affordances in terms of spatiality: the ordering of bodies in geographical and social space. These are the third main kind of epistolary writing studied in the

27 Altman, 189.
28 Ibid., 119.
29 Watson, 4.
30 I have in mind, in particular, the works of Thomas O. Beebee and Elizabeth Jane MacArthur.
secondary literature: the letters that comprise social, intellectual, and political networks in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Increasingly, we now recognize this period as not just the age of Enlightenment, but also the age of Empire. Thus recent scholarship on epistolarity, like Lindsay O’Neill’s *The Opened Letter* (2014), has focused on its contribution to *connectedness*, *circulation*, and *networking* in eighteenth-century transatlantic communities. Part of O’Neill’s work, like Stanford University’s online project *Mapping the Republic of Letters*,31 employs data visualization techniques to represent the movement of letters in geographical terms, allowing us to better understand the circulation of ideas, objects, and peoples in the creation of physical networks.

Another recent approach to the letter in history focuses on its *disciplinary power* and *constitution of modern subjectivity*. Eve Tavor Bannet analyzes the extent to which writers wishing to negotiate social expectations and rank emulated, but also subverted, the influential letter manuals of the early modern period; Susan E. Whyman develops the concept of “epistolary literacy” as a key part of becoming a modern subject in the eighteenth century (bringing to mind current debates about digital literacy and coding education); Konstantin Dierks links letter writing to the formation of white middle class subjecthood in America, arguing that epistolarity constitutes a crucial aspect of race relations in the early Atlantic world. In sum, rather than discussing the letter’s potential for access to the writer’s psychological interiority, these studies consider letters as social actors that create large-scale networks or enforce ideologies and hierarchies—as social and political agents that make the eighteenth-century anglophone world what it was.

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IV. Public Letters and What They Do

Focusing on the public letter, my take on epistolarity is closest to the last group outlined, revealing the different ways in which the public letter affords *connectedness* and *social formations*. My readings hinge on showing how the various rhetorics of the public letter build on the basic epistolary discursive form of the *I-you* relationship, and how in so doing, the form engages in the collective imaginings about publicness and civic participation that evolved over the course of the long eighteenth century. My chapters will form a narrative that is roughly chronological, moving from the politically contentious period of the English Civil War and Restoration to the flourishing of print culture in the widely circulated periodicals and political pamphlets of the first half of the eighteenth century, and to the impassioned debates over the French Revolution in England towards the end of the century. Since letters are a kind of life writing, they necessarily prompt an interest in the persons of their authors. Each of the authors of the texts I discuss displays awareness of this fact, and in writing public letters, they are all implicitly concerned with the crucial question: How does one become public? This question must be understood in a specific sense, as a question that can only be possible in the age of mass media. “Public,” then, refers to the condition knowing oneself to be, and presenting oneself as, a part of a potentially unknowable and heterogeneous mass of individuals.

My account of the public letter begins in the late seventeenth century, with texts produced during the tumultuous periods of the English Revolution and Restoration. In my first chapter, I focus on the printed familiar letters of James Howell and Margaret Cavendish—texts presented to their readers as authentic and originating in private correspondence. These are highly performative letters written by members of the social elite anxious to affirm their status in politically uncertain times. I read these letters as domestic theater. Presenting their content as
spectacles and positioning their readers as spectators, such letters embody exclusive communities that are conscious, even inviting, of the public’s voyeuristic gaze. The unfolding of intimate, private conversation in these letters displays an inward-looking sociability and constitutes a way for the author to publicly assert his or her membership in high society. In negotiating the author’s publicness, the letter form is used to both self-fashioning and self-effacing effect.

After discussing the public letters of authors anxious to perform their elite identities, my second chapter turns to the readers’ letters in the *Spectator* to consider the representation of the voices of the masses in early eighteenth-century print culture. I show that the Spectator’s public letters comprise a non-exclusionary network that presents itself as ever expanding: an openly inviting public conversation that potentially includes every reader. Regardless of whether the reader actually participates in the act of letter writing, the shape of this epistolary network positions him or her as a participant. The only condition for joining this inclusive network is that every author of the *Spectator*’s printed letters must identity him or herself in social terms, i.e., with regard to rank, status, occupation, gender, or other criteria (that may appear meaningless to the twenty-first century reader). Therefore the inclusiveness of this network does not indicate chaos or even a free, liberal democracy: every participant is knowable and visible, and able to be positioned in a social category.

Continuing my discussion of how the public letter reveals the eighteenth-century impulse to impose order and social categories on the world, my third chapter examines Jonathan Swift’s *Drapier’s Letters* with attention to the interrelationship between the epistolary form and community formation. These are political letters explicitly concerned with the problem of identity, and they articulate their author and readers’ Irish identity through using epistolary address to convey a sense of community as aggregate. I argue that the *Drapier’s Letters* may be
read as aiming to shape the subaltern’s relationship to the empire by making explicit internal differences within Ireland (in both economic and social terms), with the goal of asserting Ireland’s equal status with England. Thus, by speaking to his community in letters, the Drapier not only makes the shape of the community but also articulates its identity.

I conclude by examining a different kind of political letter—one which continues to be influential as a powerful mode of public discourse: the open letter. My fourth and last chapter discusses Edmund Burke’s and Helen Maria Williams’s public letters written in response to the French Revolution and aiming to sway public opinion in England. Though they belong to opposite ends of the political spectrum, I argue that Burke and Williams employ a similar rhetorical strategy by making, through the manipulation of epistolary address, their readership into the “public.” This concept of the public encompasses both the individual and group: Burke and Williams are thus able to present their views on politics as universal and commonsensical, and to render their readers in agreement with their arguments. Thus, the metamorphoses of the public letter allows us to observe the consolidation, towards the turn of the century, of what Samuel Coleridge so emphatically called “a READING PUBLIC.”

32 The capitalization is Coleridge’s. In Samuel Taylor Coleridge, The Statesman’s Manual; or the Bible the Best Guide to Political Skill and Foresight: A Lay Sermon (London: Gale and Fenner, 1816), 45.
CHAPTER ONE
Spectacles of the Public Familiar Letter

I. Letters in a World of Print

Humanistic discourse associates a specific kind of sociality with epistolarity: letters should cultivate “an easy, intimate style, and the expression of individual feelings of affection.”33 Similarly, early modern rhetorics about letters stress their capability to express intimacy, bridge physical distance, and embody affective relations between correspondents. Thus, instruction manuals often describe letter writing as the writing of conversation in absentia: For example, Angel Day’s widely read The English Secretorie (1586) opens with a pithy definition of the letter as “the messenger and familiar speeche of the absent,” and even a century later in 1680, a similar idea could be found in Lucerna Scholastica, which defines letters as “a Discourse wherein we speak to an absent Friend, as if we were with him.”34 In place of a formal, hierarchical relationship between correspondents or the medieval preference for the Ciceronian oratory style, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers strived for “sincerity, clearness, and simplicity,” conceiving of letter-writing as that “in which we even mingle our soul with a friend’s and pour our very thought into him.”35

Early modern letters, with their first-person narrators (like the sonnet), were understood to be expressive of not only the subjectivity of the letter writer, but also the friendship between letter writer and recipient. The common terms of this rhetoric about epistolarity—“the messenger

34 Angel Day, The English Secretorie. Wherein is contained, A Perfect Method, for the inditing of all manner of Epistles and familiar Letters (London, 1586), and J.B., Lucerna Scholastica, or, The Scholar's Companion in Two Parts (London, 1680).
and familiar speech of the absent”; the means by which one may “speak to an absent Friend”—
evoke the imagined power of letters to bring together individuals across vast distances to meet
and converse with each other. To early moderns, moreover, the physical product of epistolarity—
the letter in its material existence, its size and weight, the accidentally torn pages and blots of
ink—seems to not only manifest but also embody intimate relationships, both figuratively and
literally.\footnote{The materiality of an early modern letter—the size and quality of the paper, the kind of ink and handwriting used,
the physical layout of the page, the fold and seal of the letter, etc.—contains social codes about the depth and type of
particularly Chapter 4.}

Letters are also essentially \textit{performative}, in the sense that the subjectivity of the letter
writer and the intersubjective relationship between letter writer and recipient are reproduced
because they do not merely say things, but also \textit{do things}.\footnote{See J. L. Austin, \textit{How to Do Things with Words}, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).} From this view, every letter is a
speech act, whose tone and parameters determined by the real and imagined, social and political,
contours of the relationship between its correspondents. Every \textit{public} letter, then, is a public
speech act.

Thus print expands the social parameters of a letter, complicating the work that letters are
supposed to do. Focusing on their performative work, in this chapter I read early modern letter
collections with more attention to what the text looks like than what it says. The public self-
fashioning of the authors’ identities in these texts is not rendered through \textit{directly telling} the
reader—as narratee—what to believe (e.g., with the unfolding of an autobiographical narrative),
but by way of performative epistolary exchanges wherein the reader—as audience—is \textit{indirectly}
shown the exclusive, closed communities in which these authors belong. Public familiar letters allow writers to be publicly self-fashioning while remaining not completely subject to the risks and dangers associated with one’s self-exposure.

Epistolary communication is more concretely embodied and localized than other modes of public discourse because the form dictates that it be explicitly addressed to a specific person. The publication of a letter adds a further social dimension to epistolary communication in the person of the real (implied) reader. My interest lies in the shape of the social relations displayed through public epistolary exchanges: the positionings of letter writer, addressee, and reader-audience, and the ways in which the author performs his or her identity through the arrangement of these rhetorical positions. I am concerned with how public familiar letters create symbolic and affective boundaries between the world within the letter (defined by the presented dyadic relationship I-you, between letter writer and intended reader), and the world without (where the reader-audience is presumed to reside). These boundaries are central to the performative work of letters, both establishing their authors’ identities and producing the social networks in which the authors imagines themselves to belong. In this chapter, I explore how early modern authors use the genre of printed familiar letters to make social worlds, perform relationships, and fashion public identities.

The work that public familiar letters do as a special kind of public discourse is closely linked to the humanistic view of the letter as the most truthful and authentic form of writing—

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39 Scholars of the European Renaissance have shown that the humanists used published letters as “tools of self-conscious image-building, self-fashioning.” For example, Erasmus’s letters served “his program of religious improvement through a cohesive world of learning built on a Europe-wide scholarly brotherhood.” See Almási, “Humanistic Letter-Writing.” Also Judith Rice Henderson, “Humanist Letter Writing: Private Conversation or Public Forum?” in Self-Presentation and Social Identification: The Rhetoric and Pragmatics of Letter Writing in Early Modern Times, ed., Toon van Houdt et al. (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2002), 17-38. I shift my focus to exploring how the published letter’s inherent sociality allowed authors to show that they belong to certain intimate networks that are beyond the reach of the general reader. Put another way, I am interested in not only the crafting of public images, but how the published letter has the capacity to shape the relationship between writer and reader.
and therefore most expressive of the self. The potency of this view continues into the early eighteenth century, captured in a statement made by Mr. Spectator: “I have ever thought Men were better known, by what could be observed of them from a Perusal of their private Letters, than any other way.” Public familiar letters are performative texts in part through exploiting the double myths of the truth-telling, soul-baring letter writer and the idealized relationship between letter writer and addressee. Early modern epistolary language is highly coded to reinforce these myths: the specificity of date and place; greeting and signature; articulations of epistolary continuity and reciprocity; “expressions of sincerity, modesty, politeness, authenticity, and veracity,” etc. Such epistolary codes appear as much in public familiar letters as in personal letters, but their social significance changes with the insertion of a letter into a public forum. Gary Schneider argues that in printed letters, such codes operate as rhetorical tools that serve persuasive purposes (as in propaganda and news), demonstrate personal affiliations like patronage (as in the dedicatory epistle), or function as forms of literary self-fashioning. With regard to the latter, though, Schneider focuses mainly on how, for the author, the moral-didactic or aesthetic qualities of their letters serve to legitimize their publication. My concern, in contrast, will be how authors of published familiar letters render their own public identities by using epistolary codes to perform spectacles through creating epistolary communities (or social networks) that are closed off, exclusive of their reader-audience.

The coded language of early modern epistolarity further reflects the way familiar letters—before publication—already function as social actors. Paul Trolander, in a recent study

43 Schneider, chapters 5-6.
of the sociology of early modern literary networks, suggests a reading of early modern letters as social scripts that craft subject positions through the use of social codes: by employing a “highly modular language” (what some scholars of the letter call “letteracy”), letter writers participated in a “friendship discourse” that was also “formulaic in its terms and functions,” thus validating the literary networks in which they belonged and reproducing the “ideology of early modern Friendship.” Specifically, Trolander argues that letter writers craft subject positions by presenting letter recipients in certain social roles (“proxies, authors, consumers, book trade representatives, state officials and so on”) and their actions in standard forms that are “directly tied to rules of epistolary rhetoric, including requests, news reports, recommendations, censure, critical appraisal and many more.”

Thus the idea of letters as having an essentially personal and private nature coexists with commentators’ repeated insistence on their sociability: their ability to bring people together across distances. In other words, early moderns view letters as a form that is both inward turning (personal and private; suitable for intimate confessions; embodying close friendships) and outward reaching (sociable; enabling the formation of social networks; facilitating commerce and trade). Moreover, as Schneider reminds us, early modern letters were first and foremost “sociotexts”: “collective social forms designed, understood, and expected to circulate within designated epistolary circles.” Letters, as an important source of news and entertainment in the early modern period, were shared, borrowed, transcribed (in part or in whole), exchanged, and transmitted: Schneider compares the communities formed by epistolary exchange to Harold Love’s paradigm of “scribal communities” which acquired and transmitted information, and

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46 Schneider, 22.
bonded like-minded individuals through the transcription and circulation of handwritten texts.\textsuperscript{47}

In other words, both narratively and socially, letters are always already part of a social network.

Letters are therefore complex social actors. Each epistolary text enacts two kinds of social networks. The first and more immediately perceptible is the dyadic, affective, relationship between letter writer and addressee, made explicit through the act of letter writing. The second (and secondary) is the implied epistolary community or literary network in which the letter was understood to circulate, and of which the letter writer and addressee are obvious members.

Moreover, each epistolary text presumes the existence of an absent third party, who must not belong to the social networks of which the letter is performative, but is yet an essential part of the letter’s narrative structure. As Gerald MacLean suggests, an important feature of the letter is “the constitutive trace of the third-person reader, the person neither writing nor addressed, the reader who is supposed to be not-there.”\textsuperscript{48} This “third-person reader” is an integral part of the form because “Letters are inscriptions directed from a first person or persona to a second person or group of persons, but as matters of discourse they invariably entail—directly, implicitly, or by way of exclusion—the position of a third person, singular or plural.”\textsuperscript{49} Though letter writers typically use epistolary language to establish a private relationship with the intended letter recipient and insist that the letter should circulate only within its intended epistolary community, every letter also contains within its narrative structure an invisible third-person reader who resides outside of these two social networks. In fact, the existence of this third-person reader is a condition of the letter’s own coming into existence.


\textsuperscript{49} MacLean, 177.
Within the convention of circulation and the context of censorship, early modern letter writers were painfully conscious of the implicit third-person reader who exists within the letter’s rhetorical structure. Assertions about one’s sincerity and truthfulness are often accompanied by anxiety about whether the letter can really remain private. One’s letters may fall into the wrong hands, one’s secrets revealed to the wrong person. In this age of state surveillance, letter writers were also constantly threatened by the possibility of interception. In her discussion of censorship in the early modern period, Annabel Patterson notes that even as letter writers admired and emulated the “psychological nakedness” of Cicero’s *Letters to Atticus*, they also self-consciously echoed Cicero’s fear of censorship and interception. This is the double bind of letters: the more authentic and personal—the more true to the cultural demands placed on their form, the more vulnerable their authors.

Public letters are therefore especially interesting because the publication of a letter inserts a presumably private piece of writing into a public forum; the posited third-person reader of a letter becomes actualized in the persons of the general reading public. For MacLean, the published, intercepted letters of 1640s England serve as a particularly useful case for understanding the third-person reader because in the early years of the English Civil War, both sides used letters to construct the enemy for their readership, giving the enemy names and voices and revealing their secrets to the public. Moreover, the increased accessibility of print technology in the late seventeenth century led to a polemical war in which public letters played a

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51 Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation*, 204-208.


53 MacLean, 185-87.
central role, perhaps precisely because the publication of a letter personifies its structural third-person reader in the flesh-and-blood members of the general public.

One early defining moment in English political history centers on the public letter and the ensuing personification of the third-person reader in the persons of the reading public.\(^{54}\) In 1645, a packet of Charles I’s personal correspondence was seized after the Battle of Naseby and published under the title *The Kings Cabinet Opened*. As propaganda for Parliamentarians, this title reflects the common view of the letter as a form that has the ability to expose what is usually hidden: the secrets of the King’s most private chambers.\(^{55}\) To demonstrate the authenticity of the letters, Parliament even placed the original copies in Westminster for public viewing. Paradoxically, Charles I’s letters could be so effectively manipulated for political purposes only because the letter was widely recognized as a fundamentally private genre—the rare place where a person could be understood to reveal his or her true self. As Schneider notes, “the assumption . . . that letters *necessarily* constitute a clear window on one’s mind and intentions . . . was vital to the effectiveness of [letters as] propaganda.”\(^{56}\) The tension between Charles I’s public image and his private person, as portrayed in his correspondence, challenged the very idea of kingship and contributed to his eventual execution.

Polemical public letters do their work by calling upon the general reader-audience or, indeed, the collective third-person reader, as simultaneously neutral observer, potential ally, and adjudicator. As Robert Wilcher observes, “much of the polemical material issued during the first

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\(^{54}\) My final chapter will focus on another key period in English political history, more than a century later, in which public letters also played a central role. As bookends to my account, these are pivotal moments in the evolution of the form, and their comparison revealing of the changes in the writer-reader relationship within print culture that occurred over the course of the long eighteenth century.

\(^{55}\) For an account of the publication of *The Kings Cabinet Opened*, and the way Parliamentarians reshaped the letters for publication, see Laura Lunger Knoppers, “‘Deare heart’: Framing the Royal Couple in *The Kings Cabinet Opened*,” in *Politicizing Domesticity from Henrietta Maria to Milton’s Eve* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 43-67.

\(^{56}\) Schneider, 221.
year [of the English Civil War] was presented in the form of a dialogue or familiar letter. Propagandists in both camps seem to have realized that it might be more effective to enact the process of persuasion in the text than to aim their arguments directly at the reader.\(^57\) During this period, many writers employed the narrative device of correspondence between friends to capitalize on the idea of letters as a transparent medium. Many political arguments were publicly rehearsed under the guise of familiar letters. The publication of epistolary exchanges between stock characters like “a Scholar of Oxford” and “a Citizen of London” (whom readers would have immediately understood to have belonged to the Royalist and Parliamentarian camps, respectively) not only presented the arguments of both sides, but also demonstrated an ideal type of civic sociability—one that was taught by letter manuals of the period—that a proper citizen of the state should maintain in situations of disagreement. When Wilcher states, “the dialogue form itself effectively asserts the need for both sides to be granted full recognition [by the public] in any peace settlement,” he implicitly points to the important role of the third-person reader in the public speech acts of polemical letters.\(^58\)

II. Positioning the Third-Person Reader

Studies of early modern public letters have typically centered on political letters, exploring extensively how the form serves as propaganda in the seventeenth century, as a rhetorical tool that is employed by the writer to persuade the general reader of a certain political view.\(^59\) In contrast, familiar letters have generally been read mainly as belles-lettres, or as semi-


\(^{58}\) Wilcher, 147.

\(^{59}\) In addition to the previously cited work of MacLean, Schneider, and Wilcher, a pertinent discussion of published political letters as propaganda can be found in Jerome De Groot, *Royalist Identities* (Basingstoke: Palgrave
historical literature that offer us glimpses into an author’s psychological life. In addition, studies of the familiar letter tend to focus on how the form allows the writer to create a distinctive epistolary voice, or how familiar letters employ the epistolary codes I previously discussed to cultivate affective relationships between the letter writer and addressee.\textsuperscript{60}

Diana Barnes’s recent book is the rare study that focuses on the familiar letter as a public form. Barnes argues that seventeenth-century authors “utilize familiar epistolary discourse to call together the members of a particular reading community in the name of a shared ideal or set of values,” exploring how public familiar letters create inclusive, democratic, “epistolary communities.”\textsuperscript{61} Barnes explains:

The familiar letter, the genre of friendship, was ideally suited to dialogue about what binds individuals in a community and print opened this discussion to the reading public. . . . The printed familiar letter is a sociable form that speaks for the group rather than the individual. . . . This epistolary dialogue between familiars bound by strong affective ties provides the discourse and rhetoric to conceptualize a more inclusive vision of community.\textsuperscript{62}

In addition to their “inclusive vision of community,” Barnes also celebrates the democratic significance of these letters:

The prevalence of familiar letters in the mid-seventeenth-century political pamphlet wars provide perhaps the best evidence for [the argument] that printed familiar epistolary


\textsuperscript{61} For an example of the former, see Redford, \textit{The Converse of the Pen}. For an example of the latter, see Schneider, 109-42.

\textsuperscript{62} Barnes, \textit{Epistolary Community in Print, 1580-1664}, 12.
discourse was crucial to the expansion of public political discourse to permit broader enfranchisement and participation in the public sphere. Thus this print genre plays an important role in anticipating the rise of democracy.\textsuperscript{63}

Despite Barnes’s claim to focus on public familiar letters, her statement about “broader enfranchisement and participation in the public sphere” actually follows an observation about the prevalence of the use of published letters as political discourse (i.e., political letters). Though the distinction can be blurry (since genres necessarily overlap), I would argue that a crucial difference between public familiar letters and political letters is that the latter are usually discernable as political discourse because they speak primarily about current issues of debate. In contrast, public familiar letters are presented as real correspondence, and typically explore the subjectivity of the letter writer, the relationship between letter writer and addressee, and personal topics that relate to public interest only in an auxiliary sense.

While I share with Barnes an interest in printed correspondence as public discourse, I disagree with her sweeping statement that the genre works to “conceptualize a more inclusive vision of community.” The public familiar letters that I consider in this chapter are rather “closed letters” which present a vision of community that deliberately holds the reader-audience at a distance. These texts display an insular concern with only those who already belong. Schneider’s discussion of the “third-person reader” highlights a key point in my argument about public familiar letters:

\[ \text{[P]rint letters as mechanisms of dissemination presupposed—and occasionally attempted to create—a reading community: the imagined “third reader” became the general reading audience. . . . Hence, the ubiquitous “third party,” so threatening to letters circulated in} \]

\textsuperscript{63} Barnes, 12.
manuscript contexts, was embraced; letters ciphered, secretly transmitted, or otherwise hidden to avoid the gaze of the third reader were published for all to witness as third readership became equated with the purposeful dissemination and democratization of information.64

Like Barnes, Schneider sees in published letters democratizing impulses. As support for this claim, he cites examples from prefaces to published letters, where early modern authors seem to “embrace” the third-person reader by addressing the “gentle reader” as a “friend.”65 From this view, publication seems to equal the disclosure and dissemination of information; the publication of an epistolary text necessarily includes the third-person reader as part of a textual or discursive community.66

However, not all published letters position third-person readers in the same way. While I am also interested in how published familiar letters publicly create “epistolary communities,” my argument fundamentally differs from Barnes’s and Schneider’s. In this chapter, I examine James Howell’s Epistolae Ho-Elianæ (1645) and Margaret Cavendish’s Sociable Letters (1664), among others,67 to show how the form of the public letter serves as a rhetorical strategy for authors to carefully position—and distance—their own identities and the communities in which they

64 Schneider, 231.

65 For example, in the preface to The Copie of a Letter Sent from Sea by a Gentleman (1589), the publisher writes, “Having gotten a Copie of this Letter (gentle Reader) I thought good to make thee partaker of the same by publishing it in print: that therby thou, and as many as wish well unto the state of England, may according to our duty thanke our God, that hath so mercifully delivered us from our proude enemies.” Quoted in Schneider, 231.

66 The interest in “textual communities” represents a strain in studies of the English Civil War period. For example, Elizabeth Sauer, in a study of seventeenth-century pamphlet wars, argues that Dissenters “welcomed the printing press because it democratized information,” and that we can perceive the formation of “textual communities” by studying “the ways in which writings not only were read, but also reproduced, circulated, and answered.” Elizabeth Sauer, Paper-Contestations and Textual Communities in England, 1640-1675 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 10.

67 Other published familiar letters of the period that perform the same work—some of which I will discuss in this chapter—include John Dennis, Letters Upon Several Occasions (1696), Katherine Philips, Letters from Orinda to Poliarctus (written between 1661 and 1664, published in 1705) and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Turkish Embassy Letters (written between 1716 and 1718, published 1763).
belong) with regard to a large, indiscriminate, and anonymous reader-audience. These published familiar letters are oddly insular and exclusive—or, at the very least, they place certain demands on the reader before he or she can presume to enter those communities. They display a kind of “inward sociability” where participants in the epistolary exchange are concerned primarily with those who already belong. As correspondence, they appear circular, as each letter reaffirms the same intimate relationships between letter writer(s) and addressee(s). Though letters are supposed to connect people, expand social worlds, and enable the formation of social networks, these letters instead create enclosed communities that lack conflict or even interaction, and whose members are homogeneous. While ostensibly dialogues, they are really monologues: the multiple voices and perspectives of epistolary exchange ultimately converge into one voice and one perspective. As public speech acts, these texts reproduce and consolidate the author’s identity for an audience. They also allow their authors to perform public discourse for a wide reader-audience while remaining relatively self-effacing, primarily through asserting their own membership in exclusive communities.

Public familiar letters position the imagined third-person reader not in the place of participant (included as part of the epistolary conversation), but as voyeur (residing outside the conversation).68 The King’s Cabinet Opened is an exemplary case. The original letters between Charles I and Henrietta Maria were written in cipher, some of which Parliament failed to crack.

As certain facets of the private conversation between king and queen remain ultimately illegible,

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68 Using gossip as a model for the “communicative exchange between reader and writer in the special case of published personal letters,” Patricia Meyer Spacks writes of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s letters: “the experience of reading the letters . . . is for the reader one of encountering ‘other people’ as objects of narrative. Between the acts of writing and of reading, the fact of publication has intervened. Like the processes of gossip, those of publication objectify the thinking, feeling, composing subject. In effect, publication changes the you and I of the letters into the he and she Barthes deplored (‘The third-person pronoun is a wicked pronoun’): for the reader, Lady Mary can be neither you nor I. Her literary status resembles that of Clarissa, who also declares herself a consciousness (within a fiction), yet is perceived by the reader as a character. Even if the reader identifies with that character, the person evoked by words on a page remains other, more distant than any recipient of a letter.” Patricia Meyer Spacks, Gossip (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 76.
readers are reminded of their status as eavesdroppers. In fact, Schneider writes that in the early modern period, “the rhetoric of dis-covering, exposing, and revealing personal lives and secret matters was a crucial language employed to frame letter collections in print”\(^{69}\)—as a strategy for early modern authors and publishers to legitimize the publication of letters, a presumably private genre. This rhetoric about secrets also points to the voyeuristic pleasure of reading public familiar letter collections.

The earliest printed letter collections register the reader as voyeur through their titles, which are commonly elaborate affairs. Such titles include terms like “private letters” or “letter to friends,” signifying to readers that the printed text originated in private correspondence; they also often supply information about the author and the intended recipient(s). Some of these texts concern contestable topics of their time: like the Civil War propaganda letters previously discussed, the third-person reader is imagined to be an observer who resides outside of the presented conversation. Others present letters to recipients sharing an identity with the letter-writer, thus creating the sense of an intimate community: for example, *The Pastoral Letters of the Incomparable Jurieu, Directed to the Protestants in France Groaning under the Babylonish Tryanny* (1699) and *A Pastoral Letter from the Lord Bishop of Meaux, To the New Catholicks of his Diocess* (1686). More common are those letter collections which present their contents as intercepted or stolen material: Nicholas Breton’s *A Poste with a Packet of Mad Letters* (1643)—the modifier “mad” effectively indicating a distance between the reader and the content therein—and Charles Gildon’s *The Post-Boy Rob’d of His Mail, or, The Pacquet Broke Open Consisting of Five Hundred Letters, To Persons or Several Qualities and Conditions . . . Published by a Gentleman concern’d in the Frolick* (1692). One may also read in this vein those works of early

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\(^{69}\) Schneider, 240. Schneider further quotes *The Compleat Ambassador* (1655): “There is no kind of Writing, that men do generally with more greediness look into, then Letters” (A. H., To the Reader, unsigned). Schneider, n31, 339. Annabel Paterson’s discussion of letters in *Censorship and Interpretation* also touches on this subject.
epistolary fiction, presented to the reader as authentic letters, like Aphra Behn’s *Love Letters Between Polydorus, the Gothick King, and Messalina, Late Queen of Albion* (1689) or her more well known *Love Letters Between a Noble-Man and His Sister* (1684-87).

Still other epistolary texts rhetorically posit the reader-audience outside of an established social network by clearly outlining, at the outset, the parameters of the epistolary exchange. For example, John Dennis’s *Letters Upon Several Occasions: Written by and between Mr. Dryden, Mr. Wycherley, Mr.---, Mr. Congreve, and Mr. Dennis. Published by Mr. Dennis* (1696) describes clearly on its title page a particular social network of famous literary men, of which Dennis is a part. Thus Dennis advertises his membership in an exclusive group, while simultaneously positioning the reader-audience as outsider. Each letter reinforces the group’s collective identity as friends of John Dryden and important patrons of Will’s Coffeehouse.70 A great number of the letters are posted to or from Will’s, and even those that are not contain references to the coffeehouse as the bedrock of this social circle. One letter posted from London, from Wycherley to an unnamed addressee, mentions in a postscript, “All your Friends of the Coffee-house are well, and . . . are in spite of your Absence your constant humble Servants”; another letter, again by Wycherley and posted from “Cleve near Shrewsbury” (Wycherley’s home town), requests of the recipient, “Pray give all the honest Gentlemen of the Coffee-house of my acquaintance and yours, my humble Service, whom with you, I hope to see again, within these three weeks at London.”71 Some letters continue conversations begun at Will’s, while others make reference to recent adventures at the coffeehouse. Implicit in the letters’ discussions

71 John Dennis, *Letters Upon Several Occasions: Written by and between Mr. Dryden, Mr. Wycherley, Mr. ---, Mr. Congreve, and Mr. Dennis* (London: Sam Briscoe, 1696), 33, 38.
of predictable topics like wit and humor, or Shakespeare and Jonson, is the existence of a tight-knit, exclusive social circle with shared experiences and inside jokes: the letters, though written by multiple correspondents, even share a common voice and style. Thus the letter book posits the general reader-audience, who would not have read the manuscript version of these letters—which we should assume had already circulated among the members of the group, as voyeurs residing outside of the presented epistolary exchange. In this way, Dennis’s letter collection constitutes a self-fashioning performance of his literary status.

III. Writing for a Public

The new medium of print created new problems for the ambitious writer. Patterson has shown how the attempted circumvention of government censorship influenced the development of early modern genres. If fear of censorship is the fear of being overheard by those who shouldn’t hear, print created a parallel situation where writers who embraced the newly emergent readership simultaneously feared revealing too much. The tactical navigation of this new readership preoccupied seventeenth-century writers. Nigel Smith argues that during the 1640s, accompanying the increased circulation of printed materials, “secrecy—withholding information, and displaying enemy information—was paradoxically a public obsession common to the nation. . . . Secrecy became a key element in the construction of different cultural identities.”

Building on Patterson’s thesis of the formative relationship of censorship to early modern literature, for example, Lois Potter explores the intricate means through which the Royalist literary community coped with political defeat by creating a distinct literary style that satisfies a

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psychological need for secrecy. Moreover, commentators worried about “the participatory impact of cheap print,” fearing political instability and disruption of the social order. In other words, while propagandists published with a mind to reach as many readers as possible, many writers of the period were more cautious about the democratizing implications of print and the dangers of its heterogeneous readership.

All writers in the second half of the seventeenth century encountered an unprecedented terrain. In contrast to the small, relatively predictable readership of manuscript circulation, the commercial market for print created a new audience that was potentially all-encompassing and, what’s more, anonymous and unknown: as Daniel Defoe writes in 1704, “Printing of Books is Talking to the whole World.” Cecile M. Jagodzinski summarizes the problem:

How does the author negotiate with these new audiences? How can he achieve some of the intimacy of the coterie, attain to fame, and not offer himself (and his possibly seditious thoughts) to the power of the anonymous crowd? What happens to readers in this setup? The give-and-take of the coterie disappears as reading moves to private spaces and readings are performed, not by the author, but by readers outside the author’s private circles. . . . [T]he reader becomes more a force to be reckoned with, an unknown quantity who might need to be placated and cajoled.

The new print market created the thorny problem of “stranger readers” at the same time as it facilitated the emergence of what has come to be known as “the public sphere.” On the one hand,

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75 Daniel Defoe, preface to The Storm: Or, a Collection of the most Remarkable Casualties and Disasters Which happen’d in the Late Dreadful Tempest, both by Sea and Land (1704).
publication makes a text available to all (or at least those who have the inclination and resources). On the other hand, this is also the period when reading gradually moved from an oral, communal activity to an increasingly private, silent, individual act: printed texts will eventually be mainly read in private chambers. Print thus creates a “nation of strangers” whose members are bound together as the intended collective audience of books and in their simultaneous consumption of printed texts, but who are ultimately unknowable to the author, and to one another.

To recapitulate Jagodzinski’s question: “How does the author negotiate with these new audiences”? My preliminary answer is that late-seventeenth-century authors used public letters to write for a general readership while also maintaining careful distance with these “stranger readers.” This claim is perhaps counterintuitive because, as I have discussed, epistolarity suggests intimacy and unobstructed self-expression: the popularity of public letters may in part be accounted for by their semblance of private, intimate exchange. Yet what is at stake in these texts is the creation and maintenance of an exclusive community. This community forms the grounds for the performance of the author’s public identity, and for that sake, it is crucial that the unknown reader be imagined as outsider or voyeur. Patterson and Potter have shown how early modern writers navigate the indiscriminate readership of print to circumvent censorship and create communities through secret language or codes, i.e., how writers speak through a mass audience to reach the intended, select few. I hope to show that the form of public letters allows writers to perform their identities in front of a general audience by creating an exclusive community in which the general reader is presumed to not belong.

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The late seventeenth century was a pivotal moment in the historical transition from manuscript to print culture: as Margaret J. M. Ezell argues, during this time scribal publication was as viable—perhaps even more prestigious and desirable—a choice for literary publication as print.\textsuperscript{78} Indeed, though letters (or epistles) have long been part of the literary tradition, they were late to appear in print.\textsuperscript{79} Therefore, that authors made the conscious decision to publish their letters must be considered as central to the meaning of these texts. In scribal publication, the text circulates within coterie circles maintained through real social contact; in print, however, the text is received by an anonymous and heterogeneous audience, whose reading process the author cannot control. This difference in audience and manner of circulation dictates the appropriate genres and rules of conduct available to the author and his critics. Harold Love argues that the author writing for scribal publication is offered more latitude, both in terms of subject matter as well as in the author’s language and tone: “The reserved nature of scribal publication and the fact that the initial readership of the scribally published text was usually a circle sympathetic to the author meant that opinions were uttered with a freedom and directness that would have been highly imprudent in print.”\textsuperscript{80} In contrast, “The ruling decorum of print was essentially that which governed the public utterances of gentlemen. A certain level of formality was expected.”\textsuperscript{81} An author writing for print would not only need to find the suitable language and tone for a wide audience, but also must learn to navigate the potentially hostile responses of unknown readers.

\textsuperscript{78} Ezell shows that instead of what we would characterize as “literary texts,” sermons, ballads, pamphlets, and other small books comprised the majority of the supposed “flood” of English printed books in the latter half of the seventeenth century; even after 1700, “script was still a competitive, if not the dominant, mode of transmitting and reading what we term ‘literary’ and ‘academic’ materials. See Margaret J.M. Ezell, \textit{Social Authorship and the Advent of Print}, 12-13.

\textsuperscript{79} Schneider writes that in England, “vernacular single- and multiple-author letter collections began to appear in print regularly beginning in the second half of the seventeenth century—late compared to vernacular collections of letters published on the continent.” See Schneider, 233.

\textsuperscript{80} Love, 293.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 189.
Love notes the preference for—and relative prestige of—handwritten texts over print in the early stages of print culture. For example, subscribers to seventeenth-century newsletters considered printed letters a less reliable medium than manuscript letters; in 1696, when the circulation number of Ichabod Dawkes’s newsletter grew so large as to make the transition to print necessary, he tried to preserve the aura of manuscript circulation for readers by developing a special font that looked like script. Historically speaking, then, the printed text had “considerably less social authority” than manuscript. Wendy Wall writes of the early modern period: “Manuscript writing . . . was seen to constitute a bid for gentility, while publishing belied one’s reliance on a ‘common’ audience. Because it bridged socially differentiated readers, print played indiscriminately on real and perceived fears about the collapse of social difference.” Thus print was in many ways stigmatized, associated with social transgression, and the literary marketplace often figured as a site of sexual scandals and prostitution.

If submitting one’s literary endeavors to print was still a somewhat transgressive act in the late seventeenth century, this was even more true for women writers, who risked their reputations in becoming published authors. In this regard, it is interesting that some of the earliest published texts by women took the form of letters. I believe this is because public

82 Ibid., 10-11.
84 Wall, 12.
86 Schneider notes that “a very blurry boundary between fictional and actual characterizes various collections of print letters by women: as with the fictional contexts of [Delarivier] Manley’s and [Katherine] Philips’s letters, both [Margaret] Cavendish’s and [Aphra] Behn’s letters lie unfixed between fiction and fact. All existed in an undetermined domain that perhaps constituted a space in which women’s correspondence might see print, a space where the questions of vanity and shame were less consequential. The ‘imaginary’ context in which these letters
familiar letters present a structural distinction between the internal reader (the addressee) and the actual reader-audience (the third-person reader), so that writers may maintain a sense of privacy and modesty by nominally addressing their intimate friends and family, while in reality writing for a wide and indiscriminate print audience.

An example may be found in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s *Turkish Embassy Letters*, which grew out of Montagu’s travels abroad—though one cannot safely assume that the letters are faithful transcriptions of real correspondence—and circulated widely as a manuscript letter book during Montagu’s lifetime. The text, carefully rendered in fair copy, existed only in manuscript form for the first forty years of its existence, but Montagu clearly intended it for posthumous publication and took care to edit it for that purpose. Published as a travelogue, the text appears as a series of intimate letters among Montagu’s social circle, and even in revision Montagu retains the markers of authentic epistolary exchange: formal greetings, places and dates, and references to an ongoing intimate correspondence. She addresses some correspondents by initials or aristocratic titles, while keeping obscure the names of others. Though the text states its purpose as presenting a lady’s interesting travels and observations (the preface promises to show the world “to how much better purpose the Ladies travel than their Lords”), the reader is constantly reminded that what is written takes place within an intimate social network. Like the public familiar letters I previously discussed, Montagu’s letters present a clearly demarcated epistolary network, with regard to which the reader is positioned as outsider and voyeur: the title page tells us that these are the “Letters of the Right Honourable Lady M—y W---y M----e,” written to “persons of distinction, men of letters, etc. in different parts of Europe.” In this way, were printed might have served the purpose of deflecting the potential criticism that hindered women like Mary Evelyn from publishing their personal correspondence.” See Schneider, 269.

87 For a helpful account of the text’s history, see Teresa Heffernan and Daniel O’Quinn, “Introduction” to *The Turkish Embassy Letters* (Toronto: Broadview, 2013), 12-16.
Montagu’s posthumous reputation may be saved from accusations of immodesty or social transgression.

Perhaps because print exposes writers to criticism from unforeseeable quarters of society, many writers still wrote for a coterie audience right through the first decades of the eighteenth century.88 Since readers of manuscript copies were governed by the codes of conduct that regulated real social interaction, writers whose work circulated in manuscript form felt secure from harsh or hostile criticism. Paul Trolander and Zeynep Tenger argue that manuscript culture was accompanied by the practice of “sociable criticism” in early modern England:

The rules that determined the expectations governing poetic production and circulation of criticism were . . . fashioned after the conventions of sociability that guided social groups organized as coteries, court-related groups, families, or loose clusters of friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. . . . [B]y the rules of friendship, individuals were theorized as developing bonds of intimacy, trust, moral virtue, and ethical behavior that meant service to one’s fellows as well as their service in return.”89

Since manuscript copies were circulated and passed along “chains of friendship and commitment,”90 writers could be confident that this small and homogenous audience would be bound by the rules of politeness and sociability.91 If, as I have argued, the performativity of authorial identity in published familiar letters is accomplished through the creation of enclosed epistolary communities, the inward sociability displayed by such enclosed epistolary

88 Alexander Pope, for example, participated in both scribal publication and commercial print culture.
90 Ibid., 19.
91 Michael McKeon also notes of this period, “scribal publication provided texts a more nuanced spectrum of degrees of publicity, or of relative privacy, than was possible with print technology.” Michael McKeon, The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 56.
communities may be read as approaching the “chains of friendship and commitment” of early modern manuscript circulation. In this way, the form allows early modern authors to distance their authorial subjectivities from the newly emergent and potentially dangerous “nation of strangers.” Authors could thus reap the benefits of print—in reaching a wide readership and attaining literary fame—while indulging in the assurance of a friendly and civil “sociable criticism” which they themselves produce and control through epistolary conversation.

Each of the letters in Dennis’s letter book, for example, contains mutual flattery between the correspondents. The text includes only one letter by Dryden, who is unquestionably the most important figure in the presented social network—as Dennis puts it, he is “the Head” of this “Party” of friends. Dryden’s letter responds to two immediately preceding letters in the volume, both written by Dennis and containing no substantial content besides the expression of admiration for Dryden’s character and genius, and reference to previous correspondence between the two men. Dennis writes, “The Commendations which you give me, exceedingly sooth my Vanity. For you with a breath can bestow or confirm Reputation; a whole Numberless People Proclaims the praise which you give, and the Judgments of three mighty Kingdoms appear to depend upon yours.” In turn, Dryden’s letter begins effusively:

    When I read a Letter so full of my Commendations as your last, I cannot but consider you as the Master of a vast Treasure, who having more than enough for your self, are forc’d to ebb out upon your Friends. You have indeed the best right, to give them, since you have them in Propriety; but they are no more mine when I receive them, than the Light of the Moon can be allowed to be her own, who shines but by the Reflection of her Brother.

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92 Dennis, 46.
93 Dennis, 51.
Your own Poetry is a more Powerful Example, to prove that the Modern Writers may enter into comparison with the Ancients . . .”

This passage is representative of the majority of the letters in Dennis’s letter book: the modest dismissal of a previously paid compliment, and the return of a more elaborate compliment. Though Dennis’s response is not included, one can readily imagine it following the same formula. In this way, the letters are linked together, literally, to perform a “chain of friendship and commitment,” made public through the printed letter.

IV. James Howell and the Performance of an Epistolary Community

In this section, drawing examples from James Howell’s Epistolae Ho-Elianae, I will discuss how paratextual features such as the title page, prefatory epistle, and choice and arrangement of addressees in printed familiar letter collections render an exclusionary epistolary community. Such organizational strategies allow authors of public familiar letters to position their authorial selves within an intimate network, while situating the reader-audience as outsider. In noting this rhetorical structure, I agree with Cynthia Lowenthal’s observation that letters such as Montagu’s invoke “an older model of experience, drawn from the theater.” Before print became affordable and accessible enough to be the obvious choice of medium for public expression, theater seems the most natural and convenient model for imagining the relationship between a writer and a general readership.

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94 Dennis, 53.
96 Though theater’s process of engagement with the public is certainly different from that of print. See Alexandra Halasz, The Marketplace of Print: Pamphlets and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and Steven Mullaney, “What’s Hamlet to Habermas? Spatial Literacy, Theatrical Publication and Publics of the Early Modern Public Stage” in Making Space Public in Early Modern
Theater offers an apt analogy for discussing how the earliest English public letters imagine their readers. Indeed, some printed texts from this period deliberately invite the theatrical comparison: for example, a 1689 text titled *The Theatre of Complements: Or, a Compleat New Academy*, promises “expressions of love and friendship . . . and letters both moral and amorous; with their several answers.” In this theatrical scenario, the reader-audience is posited as an onlooker who stands outside the epistolary exchange, in effect occupying the position of the “fourth wall.” If the reader is voyeur or spectator, such texts certainly display exhibitionist tendencies. Yet curiously, as I will proceed to show in the next section with Margaret Cavendish’s *Sociable Letters*, in some cases a rhetorical structure modeled upon the theater can allow the author of public letters to be more self-effacing than if he or she were writing other genres. In this sense, the form may be read as a strategy through which writers negotiated with the fraught status of the published author in this period.

My reading of the public familiar letter as theatrical performance builds on the work of Bruce Redford and Cynthia Lowenthal. Redford, in a study of six eighteenth-century letter writers, reads letter writing as social performances in the vein of eighteenth-century conversation, arguing that in place of the “gesture, vocal inflection, and physical context,” letter writers devised techniques like “masking and impersonation” to create a sense of intimacy in the written word. In response to Redford, Lowenthal notes that scholars of the letter often “abandon the

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97 Howell’s letter book, published in 1645, the same year as *The Kings Cabinet Opened*, is often cited as the first attempt of an English writer to publish personal letters in the vernacular. Schneider writes that *Epistolae Ho-Elianae* and *The Kings Cabinet Opened* are “catalysts for the letter collections that followed in subsequent decades.” See Schneider, 234.


99 Redford, 2.
metaphor [of theatricality] in favor of the language of painting and portraiture” because individual letters tend to offer a static image of the letter-writer. The experience of reading a letter collection is then presented as a process of shifting “back and forth between the continuous action of a complete correspondence and the individual scenes, frozen in tableau, that compose the collection as a whole.”

In contrast, Lowenthal analyzes Montagu’s letters to reveal a fluid identity: “a constantly evolving presentation of a dramatic and emerging ‘self,’ a theatrical recreation of experience, and a specifically fashioned form of conscious artistry.” Thus the theatrical metaphor reminds us to attend to the ways in which letter writers consciously cultivate self-images even in personal correspondence.

In the case of public familiar letters, the stakes of performance are even higher: the intended recipient of the letters is no longer a specific individual of whom the letter writer has personal knowledge (family, friends, or—in the case of letters which are circulated within social circles—friends of friends), but members of an anonymous general reading public. These texts are therefore risky public spectacles. Furthermore, they are both performances and performative through the production of social relationships: the author situates him/herself in spatial and social terms within the epistolary community thus created. The authorial self is not just the isolated or autonomous “portraiture” of an individual letter, or a fluid, changing identity that reveals itself through interaction with different correspondents and under different scenarios; rather, the authorial self is determined by the shape of the epistolary community, as well as how and where the author rhetorically positions him/herself in that community.

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100 Lowenthal, 21. Adopting the idea of everyday life as performance from sociologist Erving Goffman, Lowenthal explains: “[T]he letter writer first establishes his or her sometimes idealized but always constructed particularity in the transaction [of epistolary exchange]; as the relationship grows, such repeatable particularity authenticates the performance. Simultaneously the letter writer adds new facets to the role as an emergent self is constantly shaped. A break in the pattern may signal emotional difference, a shift in the role may indicate change, but the continuousness of the persona . . . generates identity.” See Lowenthal, 22.

101 Ibid., 10.
That Howell’s letter book constitutes a conscious public performance may already be gleaned from the way its title provides authorial information: *Familiar Letters Domestic and Forren; Divided into six Sections, Partly Historical, Political, Philosophical, Upon Emergent Occasions: By James Howell Esq; One of the Clerks of His Majesties most Honourable Privy Counsel*. The lengthy title serves as Howell’s signature and also indicates the way in which he wishes his work to be read by the reader. From the term “familiar letters” the reader readily recognizes the work as belonging to the tradition of Cicero’s *Ad Familiares*: we anticipate expressions of intimacy and sincerity; we understand the letters as representing “conversation in absence” between close friends; and we expect to gain access to the writer’s inner heart and soul instead of receiving a coherent narrative or history.¹⁰² That the letters are both “Domestic and Forren,” and their contents so diverse as to encompass the “Historical, Political, and Philosophical” fields of knowledge, suggest that the author is an educated, well-travelled, worldly man. The modifier “Upon Emergent Occasions” enforces the idea that these letters arose out of a real need to communicate, i.e., they are authentic. In addition, the author describes himself as “One of the Clerks of His Majesties most Honourable Privy Counsel,” which, in 1645, clearly expresses an affiliation with the Royalist cause. The text’s publication information is also significant, since the printer, Humphrey Moseley, was known for his Royalist affiliation. Finally, the title page includes Howell’s portrait in the company of that of important classical figures: letter writers Cicero and Seneca, statesmen Caesar and Marcus Aurelius, and the goddesses of historia and philosophia.

Figure 1. Title page to *Epistolae Ho-Elianeae*, first edition, 1645. Available from: *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*.
We may read the title page, with its inclusion of the author among classical luminaries, as a conventional bid for literary stature and immortality. My interest, though, lies with the historically specific community of individuals in which Howell’s letter collection situates its author. The title page indicates Howell’s literary and political aspirations—at the time of publication, he was imprisoned in the Fleet, and just beginning his literary career. The motto that accompanies Howell’s portrait—*Sub mole resurgo* (from under troubles I rise anew)—constitutes not only a comment on Howell’s personal hardship, but also Charles I and the entire Royalist community’s predicament in 1645. Though the title page initially presents Howell in the company of classical figures, the letters in fact position him within the presence of contemporary eminent persons: the volume begins with a dedicatory epistle addressed to Charles I, titled “To His Majesty.” Schneider notes that “[d]edicating letters indicated, defined, and—in print—publicized affiliation, a social relationship actual or desired,” and this is certainly true in Howell’s case. Yet Howell’s introductory letter does more than demonstrate a singular (however desirable) social relationship; it also delineates, at the outset, the shape of the epistolary community that his readers will witness as they continue to read.

Within the structure of a public familiar letter collection, the dedicatory epistle loses its conventional paratextual status and becomes part of the text, as the first of a series of letters. The

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103 Schneider comments that “travel and imprisonment allowed Howell a reason for publishing in what, in 1645, was a very atypical genre for print (particularly for an ‘obscure man’ still living): the personal letter in the vernacular.” See Schneider, 250.

104 It is unclear on what charges Howell was imprisoned. Howell’s contemporary Anthony à Wood, who was dismissive of his literary accomplishments, attributes it to debt. Yet more admiring commentators suggest that Howell’s work as Royalist intelligencer in the 1630s and early 40s may have led to his arrest by the Parliament. In this sense, Howell’s troubles was closely linked to the Royalist cause. That his papers were seized upon his imprisonment seems to support the latter opinion. For biographies of Howell, see Anthony à Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses Vol. III*, ed. Philip Bliss (London: 1817); Joseph Jacobs, “Introduction” to *Epistolae Ho-Elianae* (London: David Nutt, 1892), xxi-lii; Agnes Repplier, “Introduction” to *Epistolae Ho-Elianae* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1907), v-xxiv.

105 Schneider, 222.
esteemed patron, though certainly taking precedence over all other addressees, still belongs to the epistolary community that is produced by the collected letters, and must be understood as one among many of those who belong to this community. Thus when Howell dedicates *Epistolae Ho-Elianae* “To His Majesty”—King Charles I then in the midst of a fierce political struggle with Parliament—he not only pledges his personal political allegiance, but also proclaims his membership in a Royalist network. Addressing Charles directly, Howell begins by picturing a visual image of the community delineated through his letters: “These Letters address’d (most of them) to your best degrees of Subjects, do as so many Lines drawn from the Circumference to the Centre, all meet in your Majesty; who as the Law styles you the Fountain of Honour and Grace, so you should be the Centre of our Happiness.”106 The repetition of “you” in this passage emphatically underscores the author’s personal relationship with the king, as one that supersedes any other relationships. “Your best degrees of subjects” marks the parameters of the community for which the letters are intended, underscoring the idea that this is a community that requires special membership. Furthermore, this passage employs a spatial metaphor to envision an enclosed, social space created by the epistolary connections between correspondents: all letters meet in the person of the king, as do “so many lines drawn from the circumference to the center.”

That is a curious visual image: Howell imagines his epistolary text to produce a circular community composed of intersecting straight lines: every letter represents a line that bridges Howell with a famous personage (each belonging to Charles I’s “best degrees of Subjects”); all lines converge in the center of the circle, in the person of the king. The presentation of such an image is quite counterintuitive: when one thinks of an epistolary community represented by a letter collection, the image that comes naturally to mind is rather a community centered on the

author, i.e., the letter writer; after all, according to the conventional view of letters as an expressive medium, letters represent the subjectivity of the letter writer. Howell instead presents an alternate shape of community that compels his readers to imagine a Royalist drama unfolding in front of their eyes—indeed, Howell concludes the prefatory epistle by telling the king that the letters are “Records of your own Royal Actions.” In so doing, Howell also implicitly includes himself within those “best degrees of Subjects,” i.e., as one, among many, key players in that performed drama.

Howell goes on to speak of his letters alternately as “Letters of Credit,” “Credential Letters,” and “Letters of Mart.” He states that the letters’ credibility and authority originate from the king (who is “the Fountain of Honour and Grace”), and his use of the military metaphor in the phrase “Letters of Mart” suggests that the letters are symbolic of the king’s righteousness and legitimacy to rule. He describe the letters first going forth into the world as the king’s agents, then returning safe to port “with rich Returns.” In this narrative, Howell’s letters undergo metamorphoses. First they are a means of communication, an instrument for contact and the sharing of information among the king’s subjects (“Letters addressed to your best degrees of subjects”). Then the letters are Royalist agents, going forth into the world to fulfill the king’s mission. At the end of this dedicatory epistle, they become personified as members of the King’s community as the actual subjects over whom the king rules. Howell concludes thus: “This [the published collection of letters] brings them [the letters] to lie prostrate at your Feet, with their Author, who is, Sir, Your Majesty’s most Loyal Subject and Servant, J. Howell.”

Howell’s dedicatory epistle, then, contains a miniature dramatic scene: the actors—Howell’s letters, i.e., the king’s agents; the action—the adventures and travels of these letters

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107 Ibid., 4.
108 Ibid., 4.
around the world, on royal business; the denouement—the return to the king’s court, where the letters, alongside their author, prostrate at the king’s feet in patriotic fervor. In this way, the printed collection of letters embodies a public act: not only a public declaration of Howell’s inclusion in a Royalist community, but also a dramatic representation of the workings of that community. Each individual letter sketches the circumference of that community. Howell writes in a poem, “To the knowing Reader, of Familiar or Letters-missive,” that follows his dedicatory epistle: “Letters as Ligaments the World do tie,/ Else all commerce and love ‘twist men would die.” These lines remind the reader to consider the shape of the particular world that is presented in Howell’s letter book. This is a world comprising specific individuals (his addressees) and centering on the king: it is a small and homogenous world, in which the average reader presumably does not belong.

Following the dedicatory epistle and prefatory poem, Howell further indicates the shape of his epistolary community by providing his readers with a list of the individuals to whom his letters are written. In a brief statement appended to the list, he explains:

These Letters, for their principal subject, contain a Relation of those Passages of State that happen’d a good part of King James His Reign, and of His Majesties now Regnant: As also of such Outlandish Occurrences that had reference to this Kingdom: Wherein there goes along a Legend of the Authors Life, and of his several employments, with an account of his Forren Travels and Negotiations; wherin he had occasion to make his addresse to these Personages, and Persons underwritten.

Thus, at the very outset, Howell not only presents his personal history as intertwined with

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109 Ibid., 15.
110 Neither Jacobs’s nor Repplier’s edited editions of Epistolae Ho-Elianae, both published around the turn of the twentieth century, include this list and the accompanying statement.
Royalist history, but also invites his readers to take notice of the identities of his correspondents. And, he emphasizes that the texts that follow are resoundingly letters, rather than historical narratives, essays, or personal memoirs. To return to a point I made in the beginning of this chapter, here the reader-audience is positioned as the third-person reader, as one who resides outside the enclosed epistolary dialogues between Howell and his correspondents, and presumably does not belong to their world. Furthermore, Howell’s list of correspondents that follows this statement does not adhere to the chronology in which the letters appear, but presents three subheadings: “Letters to Noblemen” (beginning with “the Duke of Buckingham”), “To Knights, Doctors, Esquires, Gentlemen and Merchants,” and “With diverse others.” In other words, this is not the order in which the letters are arranged to be read, but represents the social network—and appropriately acknowledging its pecking order—in which we should imagine the author to belong. The list has the effect of including Howell, who occupies a more precarious position in terms of prestige, whether political, social, or literary, within a group of powerful and influential personages. Thus the “self-fashioning” of the epistolary self is rendered through the production and performance of social relationships, as each letter unfolds.

The inclusion of famous personages among Howell’s correspondents is key to his public performance. The collection contains letters to important contacts including various aristocratic lords and ladies, prestigious statesmen, Howell’s former tutors and mentors at Oxford (then widely known as a bastion of Royalism), and the poet Ben Jonson (who had recently died in 1637 and whose literary fame was closely associated with the Stuart court). Howell also includes

111 Howell sought royal employment throughout his tumultuous life (though he seems to have also flirted with the idea of coming to terms with Cromwell’s government), and was finally rewarded the title of Historiographer Royal in 1661. See Jacobs, “Introduction.”
correspondence with Charles I. According to David Manuszak, such letters added commercial value to Howell’s letter volume. Moreover, the inclusion of letters to luminaries alongside letters to intimate friends and family is essential to Howell’s performance of a privileged community. The letters to eminent figures are interspersed with letters to Howell’s father, brother, cousins, and other friends who appear to possess no title—some have “Esquire” added to their names, while others are addressed simply by their names or initials. As such, besides increasing the letters’ commercial value and attraction to readers, the juxtaposition of the two types of addressees also has the altogether effect of creating a community that appears to be beyond the reach of the text’s average reader.

Moreover, the tone and content of the letters do not change substantially with the change of addressee: Howell uses the same casual, familiar voice to address great lords and earls as he writes to his brother and cousins. He indiscriminately recounts news and gossip, reports his observations from travels abroad, and meditates on general topics like friendship, marriage, his career, religion, etc. The letters, regardless of addressee, make reference to normal, day-to-day social interactions: gifts sent and received, daily errands, social visits and stays, condolences upon illness or death, and even the occasional recommendation of a domestic servant. Such content has no clear relevance for Howell’s readers, except that they add to the authenticity of the letters and position the reader outside, as a voyeur looking in upon presumably real intimate


113 Manuszak writes, “The commercial value for Howell of including along with King Charles I such luminaries as Sir Kenelm Digby, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, and Bishop Usher as addresses was enormous. Given the audience of the earlier letter-books—people who were rising on the social scale—the readers of Epistolae Ho-Elianae would appreciate the sense of intimacy with the high-born and famous that Howell’s letters conveyed. This appreciation, enhanced by a nostalgic view of the old days of the monarchs, James and Charles, before the Revolution, made Epistolae Ho-Elianae popular well into the eighteenth century.” David Manuszak, “Beyond the Guidebooks: The Freeing of the Familiar Letter in James Howell’s Epistolae Ho-Elianae,” Cahiers Elisabethains 24 (1983), 51.
conversations between close acquaintances.\textsuperscript{114}

Howell’s first letter to Ben Jonson stakes a public claim to his status as a “Son of Ben.” He addresses Jonson directly as “Father Ben” and, by way of praising the inspired madness of Jonson’s genius, begins with a brief catalogue of Jonson’s plays and poems. Howell’s tone is deliberately casual:

I find that you have been oftentimes mad; you were mad when you writ your Fox, and madder when you writ your Alchymist; you were mad when you writ Catilin, and stark mad when you writ Sejanus; but when you write your Epigrams, and the Magnetick Lady, you were not so mad: Insomuch that I perceive there be degrees of madness in you.

Excuse me that I am so free with you. The madness I mean is that divine Fury, that heating and heightening Spirit which Ovid speaks of.\textsuperscript{115}

The easiness and almost irreverence of this voice belongs to private conversation; it does not seem meant for the ears of the public. Yet, as Manuszak observes, Howell attends carefully to his audience: “In this letter, as frequently elsewhere in Epistolae Ho-Elianae, he translates Latin quotations into English. On this occasion the technique allows him to give his less educated readers the sense that they are being brought into the inner sanctum of correspondence with the

\textsuperscript{114} Critics have made note of these “small inconsequential touches in the texts—little remarks which could have no interest and little meaning for an outside reader, but which seem to vouch for the authenticity of the documents.” See Verona M. Hirst’s discussion of Jacob’s annotations in “The Authenticity of James Howell’s Familiar Letters,” The Modern Language Review 54.4 (1959), 560. Hirst observes that these personal touches appear less frequently than in actual correspondence, and speculates that Howell may have removed many of them to prepare his text for publication. Hirst is the rare critic who believes that Howell’s text originated in real correspondence; she suggests that Howell used a “digest” method—taking bits and pieces from his correspondence—to compose Epistolae Ho-Elianae. Other critics adopt Anthony à Wood’s idea—based on discrepancies in the text and the fact that no manuscript version has been found for any of the letters—that the letters were fabrications. For further discussions of the problem of authenticity, see Maude Bingham Hansche, The Formative Period of Familiar Letter-writers and Their Contribution to the English Essay (Philadelphia: n.p., 1902), 41-44, and Jacobs, lxxi-lxxxi.

\textsuperscript{115} Howell, 267.
great classical poet.” The casual voice, then, is an act: an attempt to construct a public image through spectacle, i.e., through the performance of social relationships.

Sequentially speaking, the letter to Jonson appears at the end of Book I, following two letters to Howell’s father and brother that focus on mundane, domestic topics. Howell’s letter to his father discusses the gainful employment of two younger brothers (apprenticed to a “Mercer” and “Silk-man”) and the difficulty of getting up in the world as a new tradesman. In the letter to his brother, a clergyman, Howell mentions the gifts accompanying the letter (“Warrants for four brace of Bucks and Stag…[and] a great Wicker Hamper, with two Geoules [jowls] of Sturgeon, six barrels of pickled Oysters, three barrels of Bologna Olives, with some other Spanish commodities”) and offers Dr. Howell a new living worth 500 pounds a year, by virtue of his then employer—the details of the benefice are discussed, and its advantages weighed carefully. Such novelistic minutiae certainly add to the pleasure one derives from reading Howell’s familiar letters. Yet it may seem incongruous to follow these domestic letters with one to Jonson the great poet, except that subsequent to his praise of Jonson’s poetic brilliance, Howell writes:

I cannot yet light upon Dr. Davies’s Welsh Grammar, before Christmas I am promis’d one: So, desiring you to look better hereafter to your Charcoal-fire and Chimney, which I am glad to be one that preserv’d it from burning, this being the second time that Vulcan hath threaten’d you, it may be because you have spoken ill of his Wife, and been too busy

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116 Manuszak, 51.
117 Howell, 265-66.
118 As Thackeray writes, almost two centuries later, on the keeping of Epistolae Ho-Elianae as a bedside book: “I love, I say, and scarcely ever tire of hearing, the artless prattle of… the priggish little Clerk of King Charles’s Council.” From Roundabout Papers: On Two Children in Black. Quoted in Jacobs, xviii.
with his Horns.\textsuperscript{119}

The implication is that Jonson is a part of Howell’s inner circle—as much family as his biological father and brother. The letter to Jonson is presented matter-of-factly, as part of the common fabric of Howell’s daily correspondence: the next letter in the volume is a brief note that accompanies the gift of “a hamper of Melons” to Sir Arthur Ingram. That sense of continuity adds to the performance of an existing network. In the above passage, Howell refers to events that do not appear in the letters (Jonson’s request for a copy of Davies’s Welsh Grammar); the Welsh Grammar is mentioned again when Howell reports having procured the book in a subsequent letter to Jonson, which appears several pages later in the volume.

Howell’s letter book is thus organized haphazardly and with no apparent regard to order or hierarchy. The three letters to Jonson—though they are clearly pieces of continuing correspondence—are placed randomly. The letter to Charles I follows one to “Mr. T. V., at Brussels” and precedes another to “E. Benlowes, Esq.” Letters to great statesmen and patrons appear alongside letters reprimanding a young cousin or discussing a family feud. The sense of haphazardness is especially marked for the first edition, in which there are no dates attached to the letters; beginning with the second edition, Howell added dates to each letter, but the letters are still only roughly chronologically ordered.\textsuperscript{120} Because of this sense of casual arrangement and the fact that the letters are not individually distinctive based on the change of addressee (either in terms of the style or contents of the letters), Howell’s mutterings to different addressees in the individual letters have a tendency to merge into one another. Put another way, when reading Howell’s letter book, what matters seems not to be the content of the letters, but that Howell has

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\textsuperscript{119} Howell, 267.
\textsuperscript{120} The dates assigned to each letter also appear inaccurate. This inaccuracy is the primary reason why the authenticity of the letters has been called into question. Yet, regardless of whether the text originated in real correspondence, it seems obvious that Howell added the dates as an afterthought.
\end{flushleft}
the means and connections to exchange intimate letters with them. Together the letters are a form of self-promotion: they tell Howell’s life narrative and achievements through performing his connections with important personages, but do so in a way that is self-effacing because written in missives directed to those who are presented as intimate friends.

V. The Inward Sociability of Margaret Cavendish’s Sociable Letters

Cavendish’s *Sociable Letters*, published in 1664, constitutes a particularly interesting case when considered in the light of the argument I have made in this chapter. Compared to Howell’s extensive travels and involvement in state affairs, Montagu’s cross-cultural experiences, or Dennis’s confidently urbane affectations, Cavendish’s letter book, written in exile during the English Civil War, conveys an almost desperate sense of claustrophobia and restraint. The book includes 211 letters addressed to a female friend, dealing with the kinds of loosely arranged topics that typically emerge in casual conversation. Each of the letters follows a general formula: first beginning with a piece of news or gossip, then moving to more general reflections on a related subject. Themes range from those traditionally feminine, like marriage and the role of women, to controversial yet timely topics like religion, politics, and war. Female friendship lies at the fore of the letters, not only in the implied intimacy and mutual understanding between the correspondents, but also in the text’s established sense of community, achieved through the narrator’s constant references to mutual acquaintances and shared social settings.

The book, then, appears aptly titled because female sociability acts as the premise of its existence. Cavendish also follows the conventional script of epistolarity when, in the preface, she represents her letters as “an Imitation of a Personal Visitation and Conversation.” Yet through
the spectacle of epistolary exchange, the letters also present a philosophy of “inward sociability” that is derived from the experience of war and political conflict. By this I mean that Cavendish expresses a sense of uneasiness about human society at large that is tied to her use of the letter, primarily by creating a small textual community that explicitly excludes her readers. While the letter would seem to be a form that encourages reader identification or emotional immersion, Cavendish’s reader is never invited to join the insider’s circle of gossip and jokes. Rather than directly receiving the narrator’s observations, ideas, or feelings, the reader is set aside by the structure of the letters, and in effect looks upon a dialogue between two or more *dramatis personae* (the correspondents). The letters set up a small and enclosed epistolary community, of which the only named members are Cavendish, her husband (to whom a prefatory epistle is addressed), and a few select close friends. In fact, almost all the letters are addressed to an unidentified “madam,” whose side of the correspondence is often referred to but never shown, and whose identity seems easily interchangeable with that of the narrator. In this sense, the letters seem almost monologic.

Cavendish embraces letter writing as a strategy to speak publicly on sensitive topics while limiting political risk. Though Cavendish was a prolific and daring writer—publishing during her lifetime thirteen books which experimented with genres ranging from drama, letters, natural philosophy, oration, biography, and prose fiction—*Sociable Letters* belongs to a small

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121 This idea of “inward sociability,” which I argue is an effect of the rhetorical structure of published familiar collections, is analogous to Louise D’Arcens and Anne Collett’s term “unsocial sociability,” with which they describe a feature of women’s life writing: “the complex, uneasy relationship between the female autobiographical self that is ‘a part’ of communities and institutions, and the self that stands ‘apart’ from them.” Though dealing with different species of texts, both terms point towards how certain genres are conducive to the expression of a writer’s ambivalent relationship with her world at large. See Anne Collett and Louise D’Arcens, eds., *The Unsocial Sociability of Women’s Lifewriting* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1. Especially the first chapter, Louise D’Arcens and Anne Collett “‘Femmes a part’: Unsociable Sociability, Women, Lifewriting,” 1-17.

122 James Fitzmaurice comments that many of Cavendish’s letters “are less recognizable today as epistolary efforts and more readily understood as essays in the tradition of Francis Bacon and Michel de Montaigne.” See Fitzmaurice, “Introduction” to *Sociable Letters* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2004), 12.
number of her works (including her personal memoir and memoir of her husband, William of Newcastle) that deal with her experience during the war and in exile. As Schneider notes, in this letter book, Cavendish’s “principal concern seems to be exploring issues more weighty than friendship.”¹²³ For example, war and suffering predominantly overshadows Sociable Letters. Yet Cavendish seldom mentions these issues outright. Her experience of war often emerges during discussions of apparently innocuous or apolitical matters. Describing the innocence of youth in response to her friend’s lament of the passing of time, she explains, “they have not been terrified with bloody Wars, nor forsaken of Natural Friends, nor betrayed by feigned Friendships; they have not been robbed of all their Maintenance, nor been banished their Countrey.”¹²⁴ Recounting a recent visit by a group of scholars, she exclaims, “at last the Theologers and Philosophers became so Violent and Loud, as I did fear they would have Fought, if they had had any other Wounding Weapons than their Tongues.”¹²⁵ Reflecting on happiness after an account of a social visit, she writes, “those that place their Happiness Without them, as on the Opinion of Men, or the Vanities of the World, shall have nothing but Loss, Trouble, and Vexation, instead of Peace, Rest, and Content.”¹²⁶ Thus, it is only through prosaic reports of gossip and social visits that we get a sense of the pain Cavendish may have suffered, or a sampling of her more serious reflections on war.

In her preface, Cavendish suggests to her readers a specific way to read the letters. “The truth is,” she confesses,

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¹²³ Schneider, 266.
¹²⁵ Ibid., 129.
¹²⁶ Ibid., 157.
[T]hey are rather Scenes than Letters, for I have Endeavored under the Cover of Letters to Express the Humors of Mankind, and the Actions of Man’s Life by the Correspondence of two Ladies. . . . But the Reason why I have set them forth in the Form of Letters, and not of Plays, is, first, that I have put forth Twenty Plays already, which number I thought to be Sufficient, next, I saw that Variety of Forms did Please the Readers best, and that lastly they would be more taken with the Brevity of Letters, than the Formality of Scenes, and whole Plays, whose Parts and Plots cannot be Understood till the whole Play be Read over, whereas a Short Letter will give a Full Satisfaction of what they Read. And thus I thought this to be the Best Way or Form to put this Work into.127

In this extraordinarily self-conscious consideration of literary form, Cavendish displays not only a keen awareness of audience, but also expresses some of the uncertainties she might have felt about publication: Cavendish was still only the second upper-class woman to voluntarily submit her name to print in English history.128 Here she invites a comparison of her work (aiming “to Express the Humors of Mankind, and the Actions of Man’s Life”) to that of contemporary dramatists. She also suggests a reading of Sociable Letters with attention to its performativity: as “rather Scenes than Letters.” Cavendish seems to have perceived the genres of letter and drama as interchangeable because both comprise mainly dialogues. In her second volume of plays, Plays, Never Before Printed (1668), she writes in the preface, “having pleased my Fancy in writing many Dialogues upon several Subjects, and having afterwards order’d them into Acts and Scenes, I will venture, in spite of the Criticks, to call them Plays.”129

127 Ibid., 42-43.
129 Margaret Cavendish, Plays, Never Before Printed (London: A. Maxwell, 1668).
Thus Cavendish made a conscious choice with regard to literary form in *Sociable Letters*. Oddly, and perhaps intentionally, although written in the first-person voice, the letters—in constituting “scenes”—allow Cavendish to be more self-effacing than if she had written essays. Since each letter is part of a presumed dialogue, rhetorically Cavendish avoids directly expressing her opinions to the reading public: she appears to address a bosom friend rather than the world at large. Creating the sense that her opinions are not voluntarily offered, but solicited or provoked, the letters often begin with formulations like “I cannot/do not wonder,” “I hear,” “I am sorry to hear,” “you were pleased to desire my opinion/an account of;” etc. While it may be tempting to identify the letter writer with the author (whose name is printed on the title page), each letter is signed with an enigmatic “your friend and servant.” Even when Cavendish sharply criticizes society or particular individuals, the structure of letters renders the criticism or cutting sarcasm as part of a private conversation between close friends, and therefore seems not directed towards the public.

The letters in *Sociable Letters* are generally fictional, although a few seem to have been based on actual correspondence, and many refer to real-life situations or individuals, e.g., the Cavendishes’ exile in Antwerp, or the allusion to Charles II by the initials C. R. Compared to drama or long prose narratives, the lack of plot, character development, or even concretely described situations defends what is written in *Sociable Letters* against easy recognition by contemporaries. The abruptness with which each short letter concludes also disavows continuity. In this way, using the letter for semi-autobiographical expression allows Cavendish to create a safe and secluded space to comment on thorny issues.

Reading *Sociable Letters* “as rather Scenes than Letters” also prompts us to attend to the performance of its authorial self. Much of Cavendish scholarship has focused on Cavendish’s
idea of female authorship or the female self that is presented in her plays and other writings: there exists a long tradition of commentary on the eccentric self that Cavendish presented to her contemporary public, and critics have productively examined her self-characterization as solitary genius as a protective strategy against detractors, or within the context of Interregnum royalist literary production.\(^{130}\) Most notably, Catherine Gallagher argues for a strong correlation between the ideology of absolute monarchy and what she calls “an ideology of the absolute self” in the works of seventeenth-century women writers: since early modern women were not considered political subjects, women writers turned their lack of subjecthood into an ideology of the absolute self, wherein their existence relies on no other beings. Reading Sociable Letters alongside Cavendish’s other works, Gallagher contends that Cavendish associates the female self with a “private, sequestered place” which “is not simply country retirement, nor is it the sphere of the family, nor the scene of domestic productivity, nor the space of erotic encounter. It is, rather, absolute privacy, void of other bodies and empty even of other minds.”\(^{131}\) However, the idea of the absolute female self, albeit useful, does little towards accounting for the ways in

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which, as I have shown, Cavendish does engage with the pressing problems of her time through the creation of an enclosed epistolary community. Of course, this may be because Gallagher is primarily interested in exploring the absolute female self’s implications for women’s political agency: she argues that later Tory feminists, in pushing for political reform, had to fight against the notion to remove “woman’s sovereign self from the complete political and social isolation in which Cavendish had placed her.”

Still, Gallagher’s highly influential argument contains insight for understanding the “inward sociability” of Sociable Letters. She suggests that the absolute female self is a paradoxical entity: in its singular absoluteness, it necessarily constitutes a multiplicity of beings. Thus the text’s resolutely solitary authorial self resides within epistolary dialogue and an intimate female community. As Gallagher explains, “when a kingdom of the self is invoked, it carries with it implications of multiplicity: one is a commonwealth. And the more grandiose the metaphor of the microcosmic monadic self, the more pluralized an entity the individual becomes.”

Most of Cavendish’s works portray not only strong and outspoken female subjects, but also feature female utopias: ideal communities, existing separately from a patriarchal world, established by her heroines. Not coincidentally, the word “sociable” also appears in the title of another of her works: a comedic play called The Sociable Companions, about a group of royalist women plotting marriage at the war’s end. Such “secluded female communities” appear repeatedly in Cavendish’s writings, including her best known work, The Blazing World (1666).

With regard to the plays, Hero Chalmers argues that the “experiences of enforced exile or dispossession fostered the royalist need to produce representations of voluntary retreat from the

132 Ibid., 33.
133 Ibid., 30.
traditional public sphere as contented and self-sufficient. . . In a suggestively relevant paradox the spaces of retreat which such plays depict (as well as the “closet” of their reading, or perhaps, private performance) become linked to the public display inevitably invoked by their use of the dramatic medium.”  

In other words, the performance of these enclosed communities in front of an audience (even if only a reading audience and not a theatrical audience) reinforces their singularity and their seclusion from the world at large.

We see Cavendish’s investment in the creation of an enclosed textual community most clearly in Letter 29, which is the longest letter in the volume and also the only one that includes no formal closing. I read this letter as a manifesto for the letter book’s performance of inward sociability. Here Cavendish defends her life of exile as a secluded life which she has chosen, and explains her relationship with the reading public:

I live a Retired Life, a Home Life, free from the Intanglements, confused Clamours, and rumbling Noise of the World, for I by this Retirement live in a calm Silence, wherein I have my Contemplations free from Disturbance, and my Mind lives in Peace, and my Thoughts in Pleasure, they Sport and Play, they are not Vext with Cares nor worldly Desires, they are not Covetous of worldly Wealth, nor Ambitious of empty Titles . . . [T]hey have no quarrelling Disputes amongst them; they live Friendly and Sociably together . . . and those my Mind likes best, it sends them forth to the Senses to write them down, and then to send them out to the publick view of the World.  

This theme of a troubled external world appears time and again in Sociable Letters, often in comparison with a peaceful life in retreat. Yet Cavendish does not simply describe a quiet,

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136 Cavendish, 77.
sedentary life; rather, the separate world that she envisions is lively and playful. It is a space
where, removed from corrupting forces like ambition or wealth or envy, its inhabitants—in this
case, her thoughts—“live Friendly and Sociably together” without “quarrelling Disputes.”
Cavendish does allow for civic participation from a position of seclusion. It is only that she
imagines active engagement with the rest of the world to be accomplished through the
publication of one’s thoughts, the organization of which seems predicated on one’s residence in
an enclosed, inwardly sociable, community of one’s own. Cavendish goes on to proclaim:

Some delight in Troubles, I delight in Ease, and certainly much Company and
Conversation cannot chuse but be Troublesome; for in much Company are many
Exceptions, much Envy, much Suspicion, much Detraction, much Faction, much Noise,
and much Non-sense. . . . But I am not so Retir’d, as to bar my self from the Company of
my good Friends, or such as are free from Exception, as not to Translate harmless and
simple Words, to an evil Sense or Meaning, or such as are so Noble, as not to
Dispraise. . . . [T]his Retired Life is so Pleasing to me, as I would not change it for all the
Pleasures of the Publick World, nay, not to be Mistress of the World, for I should not
desire to be Mistress of that which is too Big to be Commanded, too Self-willed to be
Ruled, too Factious to be Govern’d, too Turbulent to live in Peace, and Wars would
Fright, at least Grieve me, that mankind should be so Ill-natur’d and Cruel to Destroy
each other. . . . [A]nd all this I have declar’d to you, that you may let the Lady S. P. know
that my Retirement from the publick Concourse and Army of the World, and Regiments
of Acquaintance, is neither through Constraint, nor Fantastick Humour, but through a
Love to Peace, Ease, and Pleasure, all which you Enjoy; which is the fulfilling of your Ladiships faithful Friend and Servant’s Happiness.\textsuperscript{137}

This is more than an honest and poignant accusation of the effects of war. It is a statement about the nature of human society, or, couched in Cavendish’s military terms, “the publick Concourse and Army of the World, and Regiments of Acquaintance.” This description of ordinary human relations articulates Cavendish’s perception of the precariousness of life in a world full of “Exception, Envy, Suspicion, Detraction, Faction, Noise, and Non-sense.” In contrast, “the Company of good Friends” creates a separate space and alternative world, where one may communicate ideas freely and remain unmarked by unfair slander. For Cavendish, such an ideal space may be essentially female and predicated on women’s subjecthood-less state. As Cavendish writes in an earlier letter:

Madam, the disturbance in this Countrey hath made no breach of Friendship betwixt us, for though there hath been a Civil War in the Kingdom, and a general War amongst the Men, yet there hath been none amongst the Women, they have not fought pitch’d battels.\textsuperscript{138}

It is paradoxically because women are \textit{de facto} excluded from the polity that the correspondents in \textit{Sociable Letters} obtain the ability and freedom to converse about matters of the world. And they do so in way that is deliberately exclusive of the reader, making it clear that their conversation exists separately from the world in which the general reader resides.

\textit{Sociable Letters} constitutes a textual performance of an exemplary and sociable—but exclusive, and therefore “inwardly sociable”—space. The reader of the text is deliberately held at arm’s length and asked to assume the position of spectator. Cavendish’s epistolary dialogue

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 78-80.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 61.
creates the sense of an enclosed world, made up of only her correspondents and close friends.

Yet this is no space of retreat or inactivity. Rather, it is this exclusive sociability which enables
an intellectual freedom that is impossible in the greater world, which Cavendish deems “too
Big . . . too Self-willed . . . too Factious . . . too Turbulent.”
CHAPTER TWO

Reassembling the Public: Epistolary Networks in the Spectator

I. The Social World of the Spectator

In contrast to the closed epistolary spectacles created by elites during the English Revolution and Restoration periods, this chapter will discuss the expansive social networks embodied in the readers’ letters printed in the Spectator. Whereas crafted letter collections present a tightly controlled social world, the assemblages of letters in the periodical, issued six days per week, afford the imagining of a widely inclusive and inviting epistolary community, of which all readers are posited as potential members.

Readers’ letters comprise not only a substantial, but also integral, part of the Spectator papers: over 500 letters appeared in 266 issues (nearly half of the Spectator’s total 555 issues), and all remained in print throughout the Spectator’s afterlife, when the original sheets were reprinted and bound into the eight-volume sets that were popular among self-improving readers during the next century. We know, moreover, that contemporary readers took great interest in submitting letters, as Mr. Spectator’s comments on the subject reveal: “My Correspondents take it ill if I do not from Time to Time let them know I have received their Letters”; “My Correspondents grow so numerous, that I cannot avoid frequently inserting their Applications to me.”¹³⁹ The interest continued at least a decade after the Spectator had ceased publication: in 1725, a two-volume collection of “original and genuine letters” appeared in print.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ The two-volume edition, Original and Genuine Letters sent to the Tatler and Spectator, During the Time those Works were publishing. None of which have been before Printed, was brought out by Charles Lillie, one of the original printers of the Spectator.
Spectator 22 is representative of the way public letters were incorporated into the periodical papers. It includes an editorial paragraph and five brief letters. The issue opens with Mr. Spectator commenting that though he frequently receives “Letters relating to Plays and Operas,” the theater contains “very little which concerns human Life, or is a Picture of Nature.” He then introduces the letters:

But the Letters of my Correspondents will represent this Affair in a more lively Manner, than any Discourse of my own; I therefore shall give them to my Reader with only this Preparation, that they all come from Players. . . . [O]ne or two of them are rational, others sensitive and vegetative Actors, and others wholly inanimate.\(^{141}\)

The remainder of the issue, which continues on the two sides of a folio half-sheet, includes five reader’s letters printed contiguously, without editorial interjection. Each letter addresses Mr. Spectator by name or “Sir,” and concludes with a simple signature, often a pseudonym. As Mr. Spectator promises, each letter writer is an actor, and each self-identifies by his theatrical part: the first, Thomas Prone, who plays “the wild Boar that was killed by Mrs. Tofts,” complains that he was not given “the Part of the Lyon of Hydaspes”;\(^{142}\) next, William Serene, who has “acted several parts of householdstuff with great applause for many years,” requests Mr. Spectator’s recommendation for a speaking part; then, Ralph Simple introduces himself as “a master . . . in representing human and still Life,” hoping to become Mr. Serene’s successor “in the hangings”;\(^{143}\) the next, anonymous, correspondent identifies himself as the part of Thirst in a

\(^{141}\) No. 22, in Bond, The Spectator, vol. I, 92

\(^{142}\) Based on the story of the warrior-maiden from Aeneid, the opera Camilla opened in London in 1705; Mrs. Tofts, an English singer, performed the titular role. Hydaspes is an Italian opera that opened in London in 1710, the main action of which is the combat between the hero and a lion.

\(^{143}\) The names Thomas “Prone” (in contrast to the “uprightness” required of acting human parts), William “Serene” (“screen”), and Ralph “Simple” are obvious pseudonyms that relate to each letter writer’s theatrical role and the respective messages of their letters.
recent play, describing with embarrassment his too literal costume (“I come in with a Tub about me, that Tub hung with Quart-potts, with a full Gallon at my Mouth”) while lamenting his audience’s crude taste; finally, “the King of Latium” relates his difficulty in “put[ting] off a Character which one has appeared in with Applause,” pleading that Mr. Spectator will help to “procure a Subsidy for a Prince.”

It was likely such letters that prompted Donald F. Bond, editor of the authoritative five-volume edition of the *Spectator*, to remark, “Too frequently . . . they are rather pointless, and badly written.” Bond’s view is indicative of the scholarship’s overall tenor: critics tend to ignore the *Spectator’s* letters, treating them as mere space-fillers, or insignificant appendages to Mr. Spectator’s balanced essays. Besides the perceived low aesthetic value of the letters, their unresolved, ambiguous authorship also accounts for the critical neglect. Though we know from the survival of unused letters that many were genuine reader submissions, a good number were also written by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele. Some are outright forgeries; others, heavily modified versions of original letters. Addison certainly adds to the confusion when, in a late issue, he justifies his way of casting “Thoughts into Letter” by citing the “Opportunity of introducing a great variety of Characters . . . several ludicrous Compositions . . . [and] additional Reflections.”

Yet it would be an oversight to read the *Spectator* exclusively for its Augustan prose while viewing its letters as inconvenient accessories. The difficulty in making sense of the letters may result in part from our desire, as readers of archives, to read symptomatically: to go beyond

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146 Ibid., xxxix-xlii.
the surface of texts in order to excavate meaning that lies hidden or repressed. The *Spectator*’s letters, perhaps because of their apparent randomness and throwaway nature, defy the hermeneutics of suspicion. In this chapter, I will attend to the textual surface of the *Spectator*’s letters, aiming to outline the communicative structure exhibited through the spatial texture of epistolary exchange. I show that the unfolding of letters, composed by persons with diverse interests and backgrounds and dispersed across multiple issues of the *Spectator*, effect a discursive network in an ever-changing and amorphous configuration. Together the rhetorical structure of the epistolary exchange positions the reader as a potential node in the network it creates. The only precondition for participation is the reader’s self-identification, in socially salient terms, of where he or she stands in the overall social world. In this way, the *Spectator*’s mass reader, though still anonymous, becomes knowable and visible.

My reading focuses on describing the text’s “surfaces, operations, and interactions” in order to show how readers’ letters speak to one another across issues, constituting disorganized, nonlinear conversations that overlap and never reach conclusion, while expanding irregularly with the addition of each new participant. In their formulation of “surface reading,” Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus suggest that the “embrace of the surface as an affective and ethical stance . . . involves accepting texts, deferring to them instead of mastering or using them as objects.” Similarly, Rita Felski urges, “The task is to account for as many actors as possible, to be specific about forms of causation and connection (which are also forms of translation), instead of hitching a free ride on a preexisting theoretical vocabulary.” From this view, I read each of the *Spectator*’s letters as an actor within a relational structure—each a social agent working to


enact and together embody a complex, fluid network of human relations that is made real through the serial printing of the periodical papers.

Such a reading practice provides us with a critical lens with which to take seriously the Spectator’s seemingly “pointless and badly written” letters. On the one hand, extant criticism tends to mine the Spectator for insights into eighteenth-century perspectives on topics like aesthetic pleasure, commerce, or women’s education. As Sean Latham and Robert Scholes note, the thematic focus is indicative of periodical studies in the past: “we have often been too quick to see magazines merely as containers of discrete bits of information rather than autonomous objects of study.”

With recent advances in media technology, however, the increasing availability of digital archives has facilitated a holistic view of periodicals as “cultural objects” in and of themselves. On the other hand, surface reading allows us to interrogate the longstanding critical consensus that the Spectatorial project is essentially normative in promoting a particular social and political vision, whether this be an urbane and polite sociability, or the rational-critical debate that informs the Habermasian

152 Ibid., 519.
153 Erin Mackie’s statement represents such a view: “The task the papers set themselves is to reform the sensibilities—aesthetic, sartorial, social, and sexual—of each man and woman in the reading audience so that he or she, guided by the principles of good sense, decorum, and benevolence, would then do, say, like, and buy the right thing.” Erin Mackie, The Commerce of Everyday Life: Selections from The Tatler and The Spectator (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1998), 2. Also Jon Mee: “Within the historiography of eighteenth-century Britain, the Spectator is often identified with the development of the nation’s identity as ‘a polite and commercial people.” Jon Mee, Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community, 1762 to 1830 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 8.
154 For example, Thomas Woodman writes, “the mode of free, apparently random discourse is used to disguise an ideological program, or rather is its entirely appropriate medium. . . . [T]he whole process is a deeply political and ideological one. Thomas Woodman, Politeness and Poetry in the Age of Pope (Rutherford, Madison, and Teaneck: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1989), 27. Likewise, Brian asserts, “the reform and discipline of public sociability at the heart of its agenda. A crucial aspect of this social reform project was to close off and restrain, rather than to open up, venues for public debate and especially debate on matters of political concern. Brian Cowan, “Mr. Spectator and the Coffeehouse Public Sphere,” Eighteenth-Century Studies 37.3 (Spring, 2004): 346.
public sphere. Moving away from a critique of the *Spectator*’s ideology, we are better situated to examine and describe its textual composition.

To be clear, I do not argue with the idea that the *Spectator* provides its readers with models for polite behavior in a newly urbanized and commercialized age, nor do I downplay the *Spectator*’s formative role, to borrow Norbert Elias’s term, in the civilizing process. Complementing such established wisdoms, however, an examination of the communicative structure of the *Spectator*’s letters will revise our understanding of the historical permutations of public culture and media. It has been well documented that the integration of reader’s letters in seventeenth and eighteenth-century periodicals creates a textual community. As Kathryn Shevelow explains:

The periodical presented itself as a forum for social interaction, textually expressed, which imitated extratextual structures of social relationship, both egalitarian and hierarchical. Within the periodical, readers interacted both with each other and with the authoritative voices of the editors. The probability that the great majority of the periodicals’ readers never picked up the pen to write to the periodical—and the possibility, given this period’s educational procedures, that some of those readers might not know how to write—does not negate the rhetorical function of a textual “community” created through the projection of the reader as a potential correspondent and participant.155

The periodical simulates community through presenting, in textual form, a serial, continuous interaction between readers, and between reader and editor. Yet what is the shape of that community, and what kind of communicative structure does the periodical manifest through the

back and forth of correspondents? If, as Clifford Siskin and William Warner argue, the “Enlightenment is an event in the history of mediation,” then what does the specific formation of the Spectator’s letters taken together, as one of the “new genres and formats” that emerged during this period to mediate people’s knowledge of others and others’ minds, reveal about early eighteenth-century public communication? In this chapter, I will begin to answer these questions by discussing the role of Mr. Spectator in relation to the letters, arguing against the conventional view of Mr. Spectator as a social reformer and arbiter of taste. Next, I will examine the shape of the letter exchanges, showing that they exhibit an ethos of what I call “outward sociability”—a disorganized social network that continuously expands in irregular directions. I will conclude with a comparison of the Spectator’s epistolary network and the social vision of Mr. Spectator’s Club.

II. Mr. Spectator, Empty Node

Like much of eighteenth-century writing, the Spectator revels in an almost irreverent playfulness that blurs the lines between fact and fiction, between what is spoken in seriousness and what is spoken in jest. The tone is set with Mr. Spectator’s self-introduction in the first issue, where he announces his resolution to “Print [himself] out, if possible, before [he] dies”; it is a pity, he writes, that “so many useful Discoveries which [he has] made, should be in the Possession of a Silent Man.” Mr. Spectator assures his readers he is the right man for the job by discussing his birth, his education, his travels around the world, his London experiences, etc.,

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and indeed, he seems to possess the right qualifications for an endeavor of this kind. But in doing so, he also paints a humorous, ironic, self-portrait. He tells us that his mother dreamed of being “brought to Bed of a Judge” during her pregnancy, then explains, “The Gravity of my Behaviour at my very first Appearance in the World, and all the Time that I sucked, seemed to favour my Mother’s Dream.” He was a “very sullen Youth,” distinguished “by a most profound Silence,” having spoken barely a hundred words in eight years at the university. He characterizes himself as “an odd unaccountable Fellow”: “on purpose to take the Measure of a Pyramid,” his eccentricities led him to Egypt where, having “set [himself] right in that Particular, [he] returned to [his] Native Country with great Satisfaction.” In London, he roamed around the various pockets of the city, blending in with the crowd, sometimes being mistaken for a “Merchant upon the Exchange” or “a Jew in the Assembly of Stock-jobbers.” He appears to take pride in his lack of one stable social identity, saying,

Thus I live in the World, rather as a Spectator of Mankind, than as one of the Species; by which means I have made my self a Speculative Statesman, Soldier, Merchant, and Artizan, without ever medling with any Practical Part in Life. I am very well versed in the Theory of an Husband, or a Father, and can discern the Errors in the Economy, Business, and Diversion of others, better than those who are engaged in them; as Standers-by discover Blots, which are apt to escape those who are in the Game. I never espoused any Party with Violence, and am resolved to observe an exact Neutrality between the Whigs and Tories, unless I shall be forc’d to declare myself by the Hostilities of either side. In

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158 “One may be tempted to respect his list of perfect credentials; they assure a subscriber that this paper will explore all kinds of knowledge. But the credentials are so perfect that they are also good for a laugh. The reader is forced to see how fictitious this personage is, too.” Albert Furtwangler, “The Making of Mr. Spectator,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 38.1 (March 1977): 31.
short, I have acted in all the parts of my Life as a Looker-on, which is the Character I intend to preserve in this Paper.\textsuperscript{159}

In fact, Mr. Spectator cuts quite a silly figure. He is a man who does nothing and speaks to no one—who has theories abundant and no real experience, but takes pride in his apparent “neutrality.” In his complete inactivity and pure passivity as “Looker-on,” he appears very far from the controlling presence that some readings have suggested.

Of course, the hermeneutics of suspicion tells us that ideology is most powerful when it is invisible. Attempting to bridge the discrepancy between critics’ insistence on Mr. Spectator as a promoter of Augustan values and his self-described oddities, Anthony Pollock writes, “The most ideological efficacious aspect of the spectatorial project turns out to be its containment of readers’ political judgment about public antagonisms by transforming that judgment into a matter of private aesthetic response.”\textsuperscript{160} Pollock notes the discrepancy between critics’ insistence on Mr. Spectator as a promoter of Augustan values (“decorum, good sense, politeness”) and Mr. Spectator’s unconventional oddities: “his behaviors and inclinations are hardly those of the stable social hero.”\textsuperscript{161} Like critics before him, however, Pollock still insists upon Mr. Spectator’s disciplinary role as a social reformer, arguing that the Spectator develops “an influential, aesthetic model of English publicness that theoretically assuages the violence it cannot practically prevent.”\textsuperscript{162} From this perspective, Mr. Spectator’s inactivity and passivity models for readers the proper kind of “private aesthetic response” with which they needed in order to face social disorder or conflict in an increasingly complicated world.

\textsuperscript{159} In Bond, \textit{The Spectator}, vol. I, 1-5.
\textsuperscript{160} Anthony Pollock, “Neutering Addison and Steele: Aesthetic Failure and the Spectatorial Public Sphere,” \textit{ELH} 74.3 (Fall 2007): 727.
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 708.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 709.
Pollock is the rare critic who acknowledges the existence of chaotic social elements in the *Spectator*.\textsuperscript{163} Despite received opinion, *Spectator* does not often live up to its reputation as a sensible, serious daily paper. Literary scholars’ privileging of the essay form over that of the letter,\textsuperscript{164} as well as their concern with Addison and Steele’s authorial presence or Mr. Spectator’s authority,\textsuperscript{165} have produced an image of a paper whose comic elements are subsumed under “a self-contained order.”\textsuperscript{166} Yet the general tone of the Spectator is silly and boisterous, and its logic irregular. In many of the papers, Mr. Spectator takes delight in simply cataloging the diverse inhabitants of eighteenth-century London, without passing judgment of any kind. One paper focuses on that which he witnesses on a day at the coffeehouse (he tells us, he has “nothing else to do but make observations”);\textsuperscript{167} another describes the interesting characters he meets on a twenty-four hour stroll through London.\textsuperscript{168} He discusses the various clubs and people of London, but these, similarly, are not what a serious reader might expect: the clubs have such revealing names like the Ugly Club, Amorous Club, Hebdomadal Club (for dull fellows), Lazy Club, etc., and the people are not individuals, but types: Blanks (those who have no original thought), Starers or Oglers, Butts (of jokes), Liars, Jilts (both male and female), the Henpeckt, etc. In this sense, the *Spectator* is a satire of eighteenth-century London, with many of the papers containing

\textsuperscript{163} To be fair, Erin Mackie does so, too. She argues that Addison and Steele “do not so much repress or expel the objects of their criticism as appropriate and transform them.” Erin Mackie, *The Commerce of Everyday Life*, 3.


\textsuperscript{165} Thus, though Greg Polly discusses the significance of the *Spectator*’s letters, he concludes that readers’ letters are ultimately subsumed under “the collective and representative nature of Mr. Spectator’s character” (118). Greg Polly, “A Leviathan of Letters,” in *The Spectator: Emerging Discourses*, ed. Donald J. Newman. (Newark: U of Delaware P, 2005), 118.

\textsuperscript{166} Ketcham, 23.

\textsuperscript{167} No. 49, in Bond, *The Spectator*, vol. I, 208.

\textsuperscript{168} No. 454, ibid., vol. IV, 98-103.
social caricatures. Importantly, though such discussions certainly fall under the categories of satire and caricature, the tone is not characterized by derision or condemnation, but appears to revel in the joy and freedom of heteroglossia. Mr. Spectator’s neutrality and passivity appear to be preconditions for the playful, irregular social interaction presented through the printed correspondence; his non-participation affords the delineation and assemblage of multiple social positions. His neutral position is one with which all readers may identify, but the persistent polyphony of voices also compels readers to discard that momentary (and pretended) neutrality to imagine themselves, in their own individual social roles, as participating in the orchestra of voices that comprises English society.

Different from conventional wisdom, Mr. Spectator often does not have the final word. His essays and observations are interspersed with readers’ letters, which contain readers’ self-introductions, observations, and critiques or refutations of Mr. Spectator’s previously stated views. In fact, the chattiness of his correspondents frequently drowns out Mr. Spectator’s voice. In his role as spectator and his lack of social identity, he at times fades into the background so as to become pure medium: a platform on which public conversation takes place. Moreover, Mr. Spectator is never presented as omniscient: often readers’ letters will amend what has previously

169 Mr. Spectator declares, “It is not Lais or Silenus, but the Harlot and the Drunkard, whom I shall endeavour to expose; and shall consider the Crime as it appears in a Species, not as it is circumstanced in an Individual.” The Spectator, no. 16, in Bond, vol. I, 72.

170 John Richetti argues that the Spectator presents a “monological world” where the members of Mr. Spectator’s Club are mere “devices for delivering ideas” that contrast with Mr. Spectator’s “moderate rationality,” and what appear to be dialogues are only “one-sided conversations.” Again, though, shifting the focus away from Mr. Spectator’s essays and towards the arrangement of polyphonic epistolary voices in the papers produces a vibrant social world that allows for more disorder and haphazardness than prior scholarship acknowledges. I will return to a discussion of the Club. John Richetti, “Ideas and Voices: The New Novel in Eighteenth-Century England.” Eighteenth-Century Fiction 12.2-3 (2000): 334.

171 William Kinsley states in passing that “one of the functions of the Spectator is to serve as a kind of public bulletin board, means of communication between individuals.” The statement is made in the context of an examination of the significance of being published on ephemeral folio half-sheets. Surprisingly, he is the only critic to my knowledge who has mentioned this role of the papers. This chapter will expand on this idea. See William Kinsley, “Meaning and Format: Mr. Spectator and His Folio Half-Sheets,” ELH 34.4 (December 1967): 492.
been printed. Though some arguments are conducted in respectful terms, e.g., R. B.’s letter in *Spectator* 53,\(^{172}\) others are not quite as cordial. In *Spectator* 79, an issue devote to letters from female readers, M. T. declares defiantly, “I have a mind to put off entering into Matrimony till another Winter is over my Head, which, (whatever, musty Sir, you may think of the Matter) I design to pass away in hearing Music, going to Plays, Visiting, and all other Satisfactions,” while adding in a postscript, “My Lover does not know I like him, therefore having no Engagements upon me, I think to stay and know whether I may not like any one else better.” To which, Mr. Spectator replies condescendingly that the young woman does not know her own mind, and will end up taking “the worst Man she ever liked in her Life.”\(^ {173}\) Yet the discussion does not end here; in *Spectator* 276, a reader named “Francis Courtly” reprimands Mr. Spectator’s moral judgment of young women: “I hope you have Philosophy enough to be capable of bearing the Mention of your Faults. Your Papers which regard the fallen Part of the Fair Sex, are, I think, written with an Indelicacy, which makes them unworthy to be inserted in the Writings of a Moralist who knows the World.”\(^ {174}\) Her letter is left unanswered.

Some readers’ complaints are not only unaccompanied with a reply by Mr. Spectator, but also given legitimacy and supported by other readers’ letters. In *Spectator* 140, a young lady named Parthenope protests: “*Mr. Spectator*, I must needs tell you there are several of your Papers I do not much like. You are often so Nice there is no enduring you, and so Learned there is no understanding you. What have you to do with our Petticoats?”\(^ {175}\) Her letter refers to discussions in earlier issues about the contemporary fad of large petticoats. But Parthenope is mistaken, for


\(^{174}\) Ibid., vol. II, 574.

\(^{175}\) Ibid., vol. II, 53.
in each of the instances (no. 127, 129), the petticoat was brought up not by Mr. Spectator, but by his correspondents.176 In this way, different readers’ opinions are brought into play without reaching a conclusion. Mr. Spectator does not print a response to Parthenope; but the problem of the petticoat appears again a few issues later in Spectator 145 where, following a prefatorial note by Mr. Spectator declaring, “If the following Enormities are not amended upon the first Mention, I desire further Notice from my Correspondents,” a female reader complains that Mr. Spectator fails to critique men’s fashion trends as he does women’s, accusing him of being “partial to [his] own Sex”: “I and several others of your Female Readers, have conformed our selves to your Rules, even to our very Dress. There is not one of us but has reduced our outward Petticoat to its ancient Sizable Circumference. . . . But we find you Men secretly approve our Practice, by imitating our Pyramidal Form. The Skirt of your fashionable Coats forms as large a Circumference as our Petticoats.”177 The letter not only complains about the sizable skirts of male coats, but also the “partiality” which Mr. Spectator displays by remaining silent on men’s fashion trends. Again, this letter is left unanswered.

When readers mention social injustices, Mr. Spectator still retains his passive position. One correspondent, Philanthropos, praises his reforming efforts: “You have been pleased, out of a Concern for the Good of your Countrymen, to act under the Character of SPECTATOR not only the Part of a Looker-on, but an Overseer of their Actions; and whenever such Enormities as this infest the Town, we immediately fly to you for Redress.”178 Here Mr. Spectator is described not only as “Looker-on” but also “Overseer.” However, it might be more fitting to describe him as mediator: rather than pass judgment from a morally superior position, Mr. Spectator functions

177 Ibid., vol. II, 71, 74.
178 Ibid., vol. III, 188.
as a communication node that connects and redistributes information within a fluid epistolary network. Though readers “fly to [him] for Redress,” the most he does to address those “Enormities” is print their letters. In the aforementioned Spectator 145, for example, one letter writer complains about the overbearing public behavior of a young man: “Mr. Spectator, Here's a young Gentleman that sings Opera-Tunes or Whistles in a full House. Pray let him know that he has no Right to act here as if he were in an empty Room.” Another letter in the issue, written collectively by “a company of young Women,” requests that Mr. Spectator relay a message to an old, wealthy bachelor who has been courting them all: “Now what I’ll desire of you is to acquaint him, by Printing this, that if he does not marry one of us very suddenly, we have all agreed, the next time he pretends to be merry, to affront him, and use him like a Clown as he is.”

Faced with these applications about social misbehavior, Mr. Spectator only acts as a silent intermediary. In other words, the letters speak for themselves, and though addressing Mr. Spectator, the letter-writers actually bypass Mr. Spectator to speak to one another. Mr. Spectator’s neutrality and passivity thus impel readers to take social action, including the very act of writing more letters for circulation.

Readers do not only address letters to Mr. Spectator; they also address letters to each other. Mr. Spectator’s position as mediator instead of arbiter is most apparent in these moments. In Spectator 24, he prints a letter from “Will Fashion”:

Good Sir,

You and I were press'd against each other last Winter in a Crowd, in which uneasy Posture we suffer'd together for almost Half an Hour. I thank you for all your Civilities ever since, in being of my Acquaintance wherever you meet me. But the other Day you

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179 Ibid., vol. II, 73-74.
pulled off your Hat to me in the Park, when I was walking with my Mistress: She did not like your Air, and said she wonder'd what strange Fellows I was acquainted with. Dear Sir, consider it is as much as my Life is Worth, if she should think we were intimate; therefore I earnestly intreat you for the Future to take no Manner of Notice of,

Sir, Your obliged humble Servant.\textsuperscript{180}

It is unclear whether the gentleman referred to in this letter might be Mr. Spectator, but it seems more likely that this is a letter intended for a stranger or passing acquaintance. The letter writer uses the textual space provided by the Spectator as a public bulletin board. Because the addressee is nameless, any reader of the periodical may imagine himself as the intended recipient of this letter, or may recall an experience when he was “press’d against” another in a crowd. Thus our hypothetical reader would have been both in the position of the letter-writer and in the position of the recipient. In this way, the Spectator recreates a multiplicity of social experiences and relationships, allowing its readers to envision themselves in different social positions. Joseph Chaves reads the Spectator as an exercise in navigating the presence of strangers in urban life, writing that the periodical imagines “viable forms of sociable interaction among conversants who met without the support of sustained personal acquaintance, common social status or shared social conventions.”\textsuperscript{181} To this, I add that the printed letters in the Spectator are generally letters from strangers on the problem of strangers. Since early modern letters primarily served as documents of introduction or recommendation, the Spectator’s letters together produce a dynamic aggregation of society: with each letter, a new individual is introduced into the extant

\textsuperscript{180} Ibid., vol. I, 102-103.

conversation in the capacity of an identifiable social role, and a new social relation enters into a communicative structure which is constantly in the process of expansion.

III. An Expanding Network

In *Spectator* 428, Mr. Spectator reflects upon his inclusion of readers’ letters in the papers: “It is an impertinent and unreasonable Fault in Conversation, for one Man to take up all the Discourse.” Alluding to the art of conversation as a social practice that requires skill and politeness, Mr. Spectator imagines a dialogic relationship between himself and his readers. The *Spectator* is not a solitary endeavor, nor does Mr. Spectator claim sole authorship. Instead, he positions himself as one participant, among many, in an ongoing conversation. He recounts the view of one such interlocutor: “Besides, said one whom I overheard the other Day, why must this Paper turn altogether upon Topicks of Learning and Morality? Why should it pretend only to Wit, Humour, or the like? Things which are useful only to amuse Men of Literature and superior Education.” To avoid monopolizing the conversation and make the papers appeal to as wide a range of readers as possible, Mr. Spectator determines to “enlarge the Plan of [his] Speculations.” To this end, he requests letters from “all Persons of all Orders, and each Sex.” The result, he describes with excitement, would be:

[A] great Harvest of new Circumstances, Persons, and Things from this Proposal; and a World, which many think they are well acquainted with, discovered as wholly new. This sort of Intelligence will give a lively Image of the Chain and mutual Dependence of

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182 Ibid., vol. IV, 4.
Humane Society, take off impertinent Prejudices, enlarge the Minds of those, whose Views are confin’d to their own Circumstances.\(^1\)

Here is a fascination with novelty and the social value of “enlarging” individual perspectives by showing what was previously unknown or hidden. Mr. Spectator’s open invitation for reader contributions, as well as his resolve that the periodical should not focus exclusively on gentlemanly topics, suggest a commitment to an expanding textual community.

The purported aim to delineate “a lively Image of the Chain and mutual Dependence of Humane Society” evokes the great chain of being, i.e., the Platonian idea of the universe as composed of ordered, interdependent, hierarchical links that stretch from heaven to earth. However, instead of a static, vertical structure, Mr. Spectator’s conversational “Chain” of letters presents a horizontal network that, with the addition of each new participant, haphazardly expands outward. In \textit{Tatler} 153, Addison reformulates the chain of being in modern, humanistic terms: comparing society to a picture where “all the painters of the age” are joined “in a concert of music,” he writes, “Each of them plays upon such a particular instrument as is the most suitable to his character, and expresses that style and manner of painting which is peculiar to him.” He goes on to imagine, in order, each “character and division” in this orchestra: the drums, which “domineer in public assemblies . . . [without] any wit, humour, or good breeding”; the lute, the shallow men “of the most fashionable education and refined breeding”; violins, the disagreeable sounds that “distinguish themselves by the flourishes of imagination, sharpness of repartee, glances of satire, and bear away the upper part in every concert”; the bass-viol, “men of

\(^1\) Ibid., vol. IV, 6-7.
rough sense, and unpolished parts . . . [who] sometimes break out with an agreeable bluntness, unexpected wit, and surly pleasantry”; and so on.\textsuperscript{184}

These are not flattering sketches: Addison presents each conversationalist as flawed, while joining together to achieve social harmony. Such an impulse to define and situate each conversationalist is characteristic of the way the \textit{Spectator} produces heteroglossia through readers’ letters. The letters constitute an order in their carnivalistic disorder: the exchange between heterogeneous correspondents, across multiple issues of the \textit{Spectator}, maps a messy and unpredictable relational network between readers, writers, and (imagined or implied) characters. Mr. Spectator is a neutral platform—a placeholder—on which correspondents convene, and whose position readers and writers easily occupy and then desert. Since there always remains the possibility of new participants joining in the ongoing conversation, this is a model of public communication that aims towards inclusion—and yet, it is \textit{not} a democratic, universally open and free public forum. Rather, the order of letters presents a world in which social rank and relations are foregrounded as necessary and important.

Each reader’s letter adds a new layer of social relations onto the originally presented network of persons, not only in the addition of a new voice and personality, but in their presentation of new social categories for the reader’s consideration. In \textit{Spectator} 20, after admitting that as a “spectator” he daily offends “By the Eyes,” Mr. Spectator prints a letter by a woman who bemoans, “Ever since the SPECTATOR appear'd, have I remarked a kind of Men, whom I choose to call \textit{Starers}, that without any Regard to Time, Place, or Modesty, disturb a large Company with their impertinent Eyes.” She requests that Mr. Spectator admonish a particular “Starer” who disturbs her church service by standing “upon a Hassock,” causing

“Blushing, Confusion, and Vexation” among the largely female congregation. In response, Mr. Spectator notes (from personal experience, we may surmise), “a Starer is not usually a Person to be convinced by the Reason of the thing; and a Fellow that is capable of showing an impudent Front before a whole Congregation, and can bear being a publick Spectacle, is not so easily rebuked as to amend by Admonitions.” He promises that if, after a week, the Starer does not “at least stand upon his own Legs only,” one of his friends will “take an Hassock opposite to him, and stare against him in Defence of the Ladies.” There is a tongue-in-cheek quality, even absurdity to the exchange (should the Starer feel justified in staring so long as he stands on the ground and not on a footstool?). However, Mr. Spectator appears to make his remarks in all sincerity: he ends the issue with a reproof to those who are impudent, and concludes with the remonstration, “nothing can attone for the want of Modesty, without which Beauty is ungraceful, and Wit detestable.”

But the discussion of Starers is only temporarily suspended. Spectator 46 includes a letter by a man who names himself the “Ogling Master,” promising to “teach the Church Ogle in the Morning, and the Play-house Ogle by Candle-light.” He requests that Mr. Spectator advertise his book, The Compleat Ogler, by printing his letter; Mr. Spectator happily obliges. A week later, in Spectator 53, a letter by a “reformed Starer” appears in print. Like the young lady who accuses Mr. Spectator of criticizing the large petticoat fad while ignoring men’s fashionable coats, the reformed Starer brings to Mr. Spectator’s attention a female “Peeper” whom he had encountered during Sunday service: “When the Service began, I had not Room to kneel at the Confession, but as I stood kept my eyes from wandring as well as I was able, till one of the

187 Ibid., vol. I, 199.
young Ladies, who is a Peeper, resolved to bring down my Looks, and fix my Devotion on her self.” In this way, the circle of inclusivity expands: first Starers are condemned, then they are given a voice and their opinions given consideration, and then a new character, the Peeper, is brought into play.

The topic of Starers appears a final time, in a letter from “Abraham Spy,” who proposes “a convenient Mechanical Way, which may easily prevent or correct Staring, by an Optical Contrivance of new Perspective-Glasses. . . . A Person may, by the Help of this Invention, take a View of another without the Impertinence of Staring; at the same Time it shall not be possible to know whom or what he is looking at.” This is a tongue-in-cheek advertisement for binoculars. But Abraham Spy begins his letter by reminding readers that Mr. Spectator had, in previous papers, hoped “to correct the Offences committed by Starers,” and refers to Mr. Spectator’s statement that “a Starer is not usually a Person to be convinced by Reason of the Thing.” Thus his letter continues the previous conversation, in which diverse participants had joined in at various junctures. During this process, Mr. Spectator fades into the background. He does not attempt to silence the Ogler, reformed Starer, or Abraham Spy: he does not even publish replies to their letters. The letters stand alone, and so the letters—and their authors—are given a legitimate place within the textual space of the Spectator. Together, they create a complicated relational network that faces outward and continuously expands.

The Spectator often includes arguments or debates, whether between Mr. Spectator and a reader, or between multiple readers. However, instead of reaching resolution, discussions remain open-ended, layered, and non-committal. The letters comprise a site for dialogue that seems less concerned with closure than the process of bringing together, and making visible, different

participants with various, conflicting interests and perspectives. For example, *Spectator* 8 introduces the subject of the midnight masque through two letters from readers and a brief comment by Mr. Spectator. The first letter is conventionally moralizing: the letter-writer introduces himself as “one of the Directors of the Society for the Reformation of Manners,” declaring his intent to give Mr. Spectator “Information of a certain irregular Assembly” of which “the Persons it is composed of are Criminals too considerable for the Animadversions of our Society.” He calls the masque “lawless” and “libidinous,” and condemns it as a “Society wonderfully contriv’d for the Advancement of Cuckoldom.” The second letter, from a young lawyer who shares his experience of attending the masque, partly enforces the message of the first but also diverges from it. The young man confesses to having mistaken a prostitute for “a Woman of the first Quality” at the masque, warning “others not to fall into the like.” However, this second letter does not serve merely didactic purposes: it also describes in detail the excitement of the masque and the young lawyer’s seduction of the lady, presenting a tale whose tone echoes the popular amatory fiction of the period. Moreover, the letter writer does not express remorse or regret, but seems satisfied with simply making his story available to others. This second letter subtly adds to the message of the first, and yet, by providing the perspective of a masque attender, legitimizes his experience. In this way, the second letter balances out the first letter writer’s forceful accusation that members of the masque are “Criminals.”

Following the second letter, Mr. Spectator comments, “I design to visit the next Masquerade my self . . . and till then shall suspend my Judgment of the Midnight Entertainment.” At this point, if Mr. Spectator is to be the authoritative voice of the paper, we may expect him to report his observations of the masque in a subsequent issue. Instead, the

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subject reappears only a week later, in *Spectator* 14, where a letter signed by the “Undertaker of the Masquerade” appears. However, rather than defending the masque against accusations of indecency, the undertaker is concerned with a different issue altogether: masquerade decorum. He addresses Mr. Spectator: “I cannot tell whether you were one of the Company or not last *Tuesday*, but . . . I desire you would . . . please to admonish the Town . . . that it is a kind of acting to go in Masquerade, and a Man should be able to say or do things proper for the Dress in which he appears.” He berates those participants who had not remained in characters befitting their costumes: “a Nymph . . . had not a Word to say but in the pert Stile of the Pit Bawdry,” “a Man in the Habit of a Philosopher was speechless,” “A Judge . . . danced a Minuet, with a Quaker for his Partner,” “A Turk drank . . . two Bottles of Wine, and a Jew [ate] half a Ham of Bacon.” This letter is the last of the discussion; Mr. Spectator never mentions the masque again, much less present his judgment. The three letters, from three correspondents, are interspersed among essays and letters dealing with various unrelated subjects, and spread out across two separate (and discontinuous) issues of the *Spectator*. There is no discernable order to their arrangement, nor do the three letters, strictly speaking, engage with each other. In fact, though the letter-writers do not agree or disagree; it may be more apt to say that they speak across one another.

While today’s “letters to the editor” tend to be written to refute, defend, or solidify a political position, and to persuade the public with regard to the validity of a particular point of view, the letters in the *Spectator* seem only to seek to amplify readers’ views of the world in which they live. With the addition of each letter, the reader’s understanding of the masque

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increases incrementally, but each letter’s perspective is limited, and together they do not constitute a complete picture nor reach a conclusive point.

Often the reader is made aware of each correspondent’s unique perspective by his or her pseudonymous signature. Mr. Spectator’s correspondents have type-names: Abraham Thrifty, Anthony Gape, Aurelia Careless, Bob Harmless, Martha Busie, T. Meanwell, Penance Cruel, etc. What matters in the printing of letters seems to be more the visibility of the social categories to which each letter writer belongs, than the contents of the letters. Though there is admittedly a didactic purpose, the ultimate effect is the endless expansion of the definition of what is considered to be a legitimate voice: who has prerogative to speak in this public forum? The Spectator’s answer seems to be most anyone, provided that they disclose upfront who and what they are, and where they stand in the extant network of relations. The letters form a textual world, and characters (or letter-writers) make repeat appearances. Every reader that writes a letter to Mr. Spectator seems aware that he or she is joining in an ongoing conversation. Spectator 473 concludes with a bare message from Bob Short: “Sir, Having a little Time upon my Hands, I could not think of bestowing it better, than in writing an Epistle to the SPECTATOR, which I now do, and am, Sir, Your humble Servant.”

The joke is that a man fittingly named “Short” penned this short, random letter; there is also a point being made here about letter etiquette, as well as readers’ eagerness to join the conversation. Two weeks later, another brief epistle appears:

Mr. SPECTATOR,

I only say, that it is impossible for me to say how much I am

Yours,
Robin Shorter

P.S. I shall think it a little hard, if you do not take as much notice of this Epistle, as you have of the ingenious Mr. Short’s. I am not afraid to let the World see which is the Deeper Man of the two. 194

This second letter is just as meaningless as the first; the competition between the two men is a tease. But Robin Shorter’s letter does one important thing: it references the first and reminds readers of the existence of Bob Short. Thus each letter does the work of enlarging the complex, fluid discursive network of the Spectator.

Because the letters together produce an ongoing conversation, there always remains the possibility of new participants joining in. Moreover, consensus is rarely reached. The Spectator may present a public discourse that is “politically tranquil,” 195 but it is socially vibrant and notable for the loud, animated energy produced by the inclusion of diverse voices and positions made possible with the printing of readers’ letters. If, as Cowan argues, Addison and Steele were engaged in a fierce political battle, “a product of the bitterly partisan, but oligarchic nevertheless, political culture of Queen Anne’s reign,” 196 then it might be possible to read the diverse picture of English society in the Spectator, which was exhibited through the use of letters to give “the people” a voice, as a struggle for representation: the ability of the Whigs to represent English society instead of the Tory party. The expansive sociability of the letters aims toward inclusion. The wider the circle of inclusion, the more legitimate Addison and Steele’s Whiggish project.

IV. An Alternative to the Social Vision of the Club

194 No. 485, ibid., vol. IV, 222.
195 Ibid., 350.
196 Ibid., 359.
It may be advisable to compare the community created by *Spectator*’s letters with Mr. Spectator’s Club. In *Spectator* 34, the Club is introduced as a microcosm of polite society. Mr. Spectator writes, “The Club of which I am a Member, is very luckily compos’d of such Persons as are engag’d in different Ways of Life and deputed as it were out of the most conspicuous Classes of Mankind. . . . My Readers too have the Satisfaction to find, that there is no Rank or Degree among them who have not their Representative in this Club.” Each member of the Club is presented categorically, i.e., in terms of a social role and function: like Mr. Spectator’s readers, their names are allegorical. They include a Tory country gentleman (Sir Roger de Coverley), an unnamed “Member of the Inner-Temple,” a retired military captain (Captain Sentry), a gallant (Will Honeycomb), a clergyman, and a Whig merchant (Sir Andrew Freeport). The representative diversity of members depicts a static, neatly ordered society, where individuals are envisioned as belonging to clearly defined groups, based on social markers like age, profession, political party, etc. As critics have noted, the Club includes only “gentlemen of wealth and privilege,” suggesting the same for the *Spectator*’s primary readership: the fact that eighteenth-century “London was dominated, not by the bourgeoisie, but by the nobility and gentry who together made up the English aristocracy” compromises Habermas’s theory of the public sphere as well as his argument about the key role of the periodical in the historical formation of public culture. Some critics view the social diversity of the club as a model for its readership. Chaves argues,

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199 Admittedly, its “social diversity” is limited to male members of the leisured class. But my point is that there is a serious investment in having representatives from different social or professional categories.
[T]he invitation to identify (and then disidentify) with a particular member of the club is also, implicitly, an invitation to recognize ourselves as doing so among a number of other readers. Ultimately, the club is a means of entering into a form of mutual complaisance, or self-effacement with the Spectator’s mixed, anonymous readership as a whole.\textsuperscript{200}

The club provides an example for how readers might relate themselves to both Mr. Spectator and each other. However, the “mutual complaisance” or “self-effacement” which Chaves speaks of is not apparent. In fact, the Spectator’s readership, though mixed, is not anonymous. Readers eagerly write in to express their experiences and opinions about the issues in the paper; they proudly sign their names to their letters—and the signatures are as important as the content of the correspondence, if not more so.

Jon P. Klancher argues that the eighteenth-century periodical occupied a “paradoxical” place in the transition from a homogeneous readership fostered by patronage to an anonymous, commercial marketplace of heterogeneous readers: “Like the coffeehouse, the periodical assembled men from disparate social ‘ranks,’ writers with their patrons and potential readers, publishers with their suppliers, politicians with their critics.”\textsuperscript{201} The paradox is that despite this diverse—and almost modern—composition of the periodical’s potential readers, the very concept of a literary public sphere, which periodicals like the Spectator cultivated, originated in aristocratic court circles:

In fact, [the periodical] helped preserve the most characteristic experience of the older aristocratic “literary public” and its shared rhetorical architecture. . . . Classical rhetoric and its trivium of high, middle, and low styles depended upon the homogeneity of its

\textsuperscript{200} Chaves, 303.

public. . . . The eighteenth-century periodical now seems most remarkable for having extended into the new cultural marketplace such older relationships between readers and writers. Only now, these face-to-face relations would regulate an expanding cultural economy whose sense of order they must somehow provide.\(^{202}\)

Klancher states that by forming “a serial, continuous relationship between mutually identifiable readers and writers over time,” periodicals preserved “a more traditional rhetorical contact between readers and writers, [constructing] a knowable community of discourse that united its members.”\(^{203}\) He compares the polite society of characters that converge in *The Spectator* to Shaftesbury’s “private society,” which was modeled after the classical *polis*. Klancher thus continues the Habermasian argument that eighteenth-century periodicals create a textual space for Enlightened, rational discourse: “a communal, democratic exchange” inside the text that contrasts with “a hierarchically ranked world” outside the text.\(^{204}\) While Klancher’s description of the periodical’s formation of its textual community is illuminating, his assertion that the periodical represents “the public sphere as a space without social differences” is complicated by the *Spectator’s* letters.\(^{205}\)

I would argue that a periodical like the *Spectator’s* commitment to the exchange of ideas is grounded upon the assumption that the members of its community are *equal but different*: equal as discoursing beings, but different as social actors. Social role (and by extension, rank) provide the means by which readers and writers are identifiable, and it is in fact this diversity of its textual community that marks the periodical’s outward sociability as well as its self-presumed

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\(^{203}\) Ibid., 20.

\(^{204}\) Ibid., 23.

\(^{205}\) Ibid., 24.
intellectual expansiveness. Its communicative structure emphasizes *relationality* between persons rather than equality or sameness. In the Habermasian imagination, critical-rational debate takes place between individuals with particular social affiliations, who speak from different and opposite positions, but with the purpose of ultimately approximating truth or universality. Instead, the letter exchanges in the *Spectator* constitute amorphous dialogues that are overlapping and in a continuous state of flux, creating an unstructured network that does not achieve equilibrium, but expands irregularly with the addition of each new participant. If they constitute a social network, it is a network that simulates the essential contingency of social life, where real human interactions or conversations are often haphazard, sometimes awkward, and nearly always defy containment or control.

Rather than a “public sphere,” the *Spectator*’s network of letters constitutes an open, public assembly, where people of different ranks and positions are visible to one another. As such, the *Spectator*’s epistolary network seems to lack investment in the abstract idea of “critical-rational debates” between equal individuals. Rather, they constitute a public gathering, where the co-existence of different persons—as well as their permission to express diverse viewpoints, based on the particulars of their social stations—is itself a political and ethical undertaking. Together the letters display a vast and layered network, in which the relations between correspondents are clearly articulated in social terms. The participants in this epistolary network are not anonymous or faceless—their individuality subsumed under a “universal rationality,” as implied by public sphere theory. Every member of this network of correspondence occupies a clearly defined social, political, or moral position. This communicative structure underscores the values of participation, dialogue, and suspension of judgment. Through the printed correspondence, readers are invited to come together and
collectively imagine the infinite outward expansion of this textual community, including an ongoing redefinition of who, or what, belongs.

The assemblage of letters and voices in the *Spectator* may appear to model a public forum that fits Habermas’s description as “in principle inclusive”:

However exclusive the public might be in any given instance, it could never close itself off entirely and become consolidated as a clique; for it always understood and found itself immerse within a more inclusive public of all private people, persons who—insofar as they were propertied and educated—as readers, listeners, and spectators could avail themselves via the market of the objects that were subject to discussion. The issues discussed became “general” not merely in their significance, but also in their accessibility: everyone had to be able to participate.206

Readers’ letters in the *Spectator* produce a ceaseless parade of characters and voices from all walks of a complicated social world, seemingly fitting Habermas’s characterization of the public sphere. On the one hand, the irregular juxtaposition of diverse voices has a radically flattening effect, rendering each individual perspective, however nonsensical, as legitimate as the next. If the “public use of reason” is the only criterion for partaking in the critical-rational debate of the public sphere, no such condition limits a person’s entrance into the *Spectator*’s textual community.207 On the other hand, participation in the public sphere hinges on “the parity of ‘common humanity,’” i.e., all who participate in critical-rational debate must be equal, rational individuals, transcending the particularities of their social stations.208 In contrast, the *Spectator* does not exhibit such an investment in the ideal of universal equality or enlightened rationality.

206 Habermas, 37.
207 Ibid., 27.
208 Ibid., 36.
As potentially inclusive the *Spectator*’s textual community, the assemblage of letters suggest that its membership is socially defined: every reader enters Mr. Spectator’s circle of correspondents not as a rational individual equal to the next, understood abstractly, but in his or her specific social role (including rank and class, but also gender and age, as well as miscellaneous identifiers like “cuckold” or “starer”), and as occupying a particular place in the social world thus presented.

To understand better the *Spectator*’s communicative structure, it might be useful to look at a few of its hypertexts that were published in the first two decades of the eighteenth century. The term “hypertext” bears meaning in two different contexts. It was invented by Ted Nelson, who wrote in 1965, in the *Proceedings to the National Conference of the Association of Computer Machinery*, “Let me introduce the word ‘hypertext’ to mean a body of written or pictorial material interconnected in such a complex way that it could not conveniently be presented or represented on paper.” Simply put, the term refers to any text accessible through a hyperlink—the World Wide Web is the most famous of hypertexts, and foregrounds the nonlinear and interconnected relationship between digital texts. The second context, more immediately relevant to the field of literary studies, is that of structuralism. In his 1982 book *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, the French narratologist Gérard Genette uses the term “hypertext” to refer to a specific kind of intertextuality. He defines hypertextuality as “any relationship uniting a text B [the hypertext] to an earlier text A [the hypotext], upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary.” Under Genette’s definition, a hypertext is a text that explicitly responds to the *Spectator*, to the point of making apparent that intertextual relationship in their respective titles. However, the first meaning of the word “hypertext,” in its
foregrounding of the nonlinear, interconnected, and ever expanding network of texts, is also suggestive of my reading of letters in the *Spectator*.

Three titles are particularly useful for our consideration: *The infernal congress: or, news from below. Being a letter from Dick Estcourt, the late famous comedian, to the Spectator* (1713); *Serpentes avibus geminentur, tigribus agni*.209 Several preparatory instances of Mr. Castleton's way of writing produc'd against the intricate representation of him in the foresaid *Spectator* (1715); and the four volume *Original and genuine letters sent to the Tatler and Spectator, during the time those works were publishing. None of which have been before printed* (1725). All three were printed in response to the *Spectator*, shortly after it had discontinued publication first in 1712, then in 1714.

All three aforementioned texts engage the *Spectator*, or Mr. Spectator himself, in an ongoing conversation. The first, *The infernal congress*, is a fictional, first-person account of Richard Estcourt’s journey to the underworld after his death. Estcourt was a famous comic actor and a personal friend of Richard Steele; the *Spectator*’s readers, immersed in London culture as they were, would of course have known him. But they would also have known him because he had appeared in the *Spectator* as a correspondent and a friend of Sir Roger. In no. 264, Mr. Spectator introduces two letters:

> I have an Inclination to print the following Letters; for that I have heard the Author of them has some where or other seen me, and by an excellent Faculty in Mimickry my Correspondents tell me he can assume my Air, and give my Taciturnity a Slyness which diverts more than any Thing I could say if I were present. . . . He has carried his Skill in Imitation so far, as to have forged a Letter from my Friend Sir Roger in such a manner,

\[\text{209} \text{“Serpents may couple with birds, lambs with tigers” (Horace, Art of Poetry).}\]
that any one but I who am thoroughly acquainted with him, would have taken it for genuine.\textsuperscript{210}

He goes on to print two letters, one by Estcourt, and the second, a “forged” letter by Sir Roger. Of course, in this scenario both Mr. Spectator and Sir Roger are fictional characters: though it is not apparent the purpose of these letters—they seem more like an inside joke than anything else, the entire ploy seems to be an advertisement for Estcourt’s performances. When upon Estcourt’s death in 1712 Steele devoted an entire issue of \textit{The Spectator} to a touching eulogy for him, readers would have been familiar with the man to a degree deeper than the average theatergoer.\textsuperscript{211} In this sense, the 555 issues of the \textit{Spectator} are in actuality an ongoing conversation between the citizens of London, and this conversation extends beyond the \textit{Spectator} itself, not just in the coffeehouses, but in other textual as well as physical spaces.

The author of \textit{The infernal congress} takes issue with Steele’s exuberant praise of Estcourt’s character and announces in the preface his intention “not to reflect on those who claim by their Decease the most favourable Scrutiny of their Actions, but by shewing Vice in its Native Dress of Shame and Contempt, to deter the Living from imitating the Deceased Patrons of it.” Yet apart from the preface, the work is not didactic but seems to aim to entertain: the fictional Estcourt’s picaresque adventures are extremely diverting, as he is guided through his journey by an Italian abbot who died of the pox and encounters historical figures like Machiavelli. In this way, the author of \textit{The infernal congress} provides a different account of Estcourt. One might imagine this intertextuality as modeled on that of a lively conversation, where participants take turns telling interesting anecdotes on a single topic.

\textsuperscript{210}Bond, \textit{The Spectator}, vol. II, 528-29.
\textsuperscript{211}Ibid., vol. IV, 154-58.
The second text in this group, *Several preparatory instances of Mr. Castleton's way of writing*, similarly seeks to refute what was printed in *The Spectator*—not directly or argumentatively, but simply by presenting examples of the said Mr. Castleton’s writing. The third, *Original and genuine letters sent to the Tatler and Spectator*, is a collection of nearly 400 authentic readers’ letters that, the editor claims, never made their way into the periodical papers. Therefore we can know that there was wide interest in reading these letters, and they were not simply filler in the original papers. All three of these hypertexts position themselves with regard to *The Spectator* as the continuation of a conversation that began with Mr. Spectator’s printed words; by doing so, they suggest that the conversation can be carried on further, either in print or face-to-face, in the coffeehouses, in a private home, or on the street.

This is especially interesting when we compare these early hypertexts with *The Spectator*’s hypertexts from later in the eighteenth century, after it had achieved canonical status in book form. *The Spectator*’s hypertexts from the mid and late eighteenth centuries are mainly collections of essays or narratives that serve explicitly didactic purposes. Examples of titles include *Thirty-Six curious histories, fables, and allegories; Taken from the Spectator and Guardian; Peculiarly Adapted to Form young Minds to a Love of Virtue, and an Abhorrence of Vice* (1752) and *A collection from the Spectator, Tatler, Guardian, Mr Pope, Mr Dryden, from Mr. Rollin's Method of teaching and studying the belles lettres, and his Universal history. For the benefit of English schools* (1761). As is obvious from the titles, these later hypertexts are presented as close-ended and suggest an understanding of *The Spectator* as a *magnum opus*, not to be questioned or engaged with in conversation.

The difference between these two groups of hypertexts is related to the publication history of *The Spectator*. It was originally printed six times a week, from March 1, 1711 through
December 6, 1712, on single sheets of foolscap folio, in double columns on both sides, and with advertisements at the end. The book edition, printed in portable octavo volumes, went through numerous reprints and was widely read throughout the eighteenth century. It includes 635 issues in chronological order and usually consists of eight volumes. The issues are always placed in chronological order, with the date and issue number of each issue intact, but the advertisements removed. Each volume was dedicated to an eminent person (lords, dukes, ambassadors, etc.) with the exception of the eighth volume, published in 1715, which consists of the second series (nos. 556-635, published three times a week from June to December 1714) and includes a prefatory dedication to “William Honeycomb, Esq.”—that is, the (fictional) reformed rake in Mr. Spectator's circle of friends. The frontispieces to the early editions appear to be generic, inexpensive designs: either a pair of cupids or floral patterns.

In subsequent editions, oval portraits increasingly replace the floral patterns as frontispieces, perhaps to emphasize the authorial figures of Addison and Steele. Illustrations also become more elaborate. Beginning in the 1740s, efforts to standardize or edit the text become apparent. The 1744 edition, printed for “J. and R. Tonson in the Strand,” appears to be the first to include English translations for the Latin phrases that appear at the beginning of each issue. The 1745 edition, published in Glasgow, announces in the title that it is "carefully corrected," and includes a dedicatory page, signed by “the editors,” to a Glaswegian college president. The London edition circa 1750, is the first to include a full-page illustration: a group of six men, presumably representative of Mr. Spectator’s Club, sitting around a small table, apparently in intimate conversation. This book history reveals the transformation of The Spectator from a series of periodical papers to which readers were invited to engage with on a day-to-day basis, to what is essentially a monograph to be studied and from which to learn. To understand the
published letters in the *Spectator*, it is necessary to remember that the periodical papers were published daily, on folio half-sheets, which made possible the interactive and dynamic relationship between readers and text.

Figure 2: Frontispiece to *The Spectator*, London edition, circa 1750. Available from: *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online.*
V. Rank and Order

Thus the letters exchanges in the *Spectator* provide a different picture of society from the one that Mr. Spectator, by introducing the members of his Club, initially presents to his readers. The club appears to be a microcosm of eighteenth-century polite society: the diversity of members underscores Mr. Spectator’s impartiality, but also depicts a neatly ordered public sphere, where society begins as a whole entity and social members are envisioned as belonging to clearly defined groups, based on their age, profession, politics, and other characteristics. In the Habermasian imagination, rational dialogue or polite conversation happens between individuals with different social affiliations, who speak from different and opposite positions, with the purpose of finally approximating truth or universality through rational dialogue. In contrast, the arrangement of published letters in the *Spectator* expands irregularly, with no apparent logic, to create a vibrant world filled with interesting characters. The effect is almost like fiction or drama, and the papers have a make-believe quality to them. The issues cannot be read alone—except perhaps for the ones that contain Mr. Spectator’s famous essays, and even then not quite, as they follow each other sequentially and Mr. Spectator often returns to a topic he had previously treated. For example, following the essays on the pleasures of the imagination (no. 411-21), two other issues (no. 477 and 489) deal with the same topic, but they are letters from readers, and they extend what Mr. Spectator had previously written. What is interesting is that these two later issues were most likely written by Addison—both were signed with Addison’s customary initial “C.” However, in choosing to publish these discourses on a topic he had previously treated under the guise of a correspondent, Addison adds two new voices to the discussion. He is then able to create the appearance of a vibrant dialogue and dynamic social world—and in doing so, effectively invite all readers to join in the conversation.
Often the reader is made to be aware of each correspondent’s unique perspective by his or her signature. “Barnaby Brittle” writes in with the revelation that he had recognized in his wife “the mare with a flowing mane” (a vain woman) mentioned in an earlier issue.\textsuperscript{212} The “mare with a flowing mane” was found in what Mr. Spectator identifies as “the Oldest Satyr that is now extant, and which he reprints in its entirety.”\textsuperscript{213} This “Satyr” contains other female stereotypes such as the “Swine” (a woman who is “a Slut in her house and a Glutton at her Table”) and the “Cat” (women “who are of a melancholy, forward, unamiable Nature), but also more positive ones like the “Bee” (who is “altogether faultless and unblameable”). The misogyny of this particular issue is obvious, but it is worth noting that Mr. Spectator presents the whole discourse as written by a famous ancient poet, and not only apologizes for the original author’s “Want of Delicacy,” but also adds that these labels affect “only some of the lower part of the Sex, and not those who have been refined by a Polite Education, which was not so common in the Age of this Poet.” In no. 211, Barnaby Brittle’s letter is printed together with two others: that of “Melissa,” who self-identifies as a “Bee” and complains:

[I]t is my Misfortune to be married to a Drone, who lives upon what I get, without bringing any thing into the common Stock. Now, Sir, as on the one hand I take care not to behave myself towards him like a Wasp, so likewise I would not have him look upon me as an Humble-Bee.\textsuperscript{214}

The other is Josiah Henpeck’s letter, in which he asks for a clarification of “the Humour of the Cat,” then adds, “You must know I am married to a Grimalkin.”\textsuperscript{215} With each letter, the social

\textsuperscript{212} Ibid., vol. II, 327.
\textsuperscript{213} Ibid., vol. II, 319-20.
\textsuperscript{214} Ibid., vol. II, 326-27.
\textsuperscript{215} Ibid., vol. II, 327.
horizon of the reader is expanded in ways beyond the original catalogue of female types and unimaginable by Mr. Spectator when he first advanced the topic in no. 209: Melissa’s letter suggests variations on the original type of the “Bee” (Drone, Wasp, Humble-Bee), while Josiah Henpeck’s letter suggests the existence of a type called the Grimalkin (a cat). Each letter adds a new layer of social relations onto the originally presented network of persons, not only in the addition of a new voice and personality, but in their presentation of new social categories for the reader to consider.

Given the self-explanatory names of Mr. Spectator’s correspondents, what matters in the printing of letters seems to be more the individuals who wrote them instead of the opinions that were expressed in them. The published letters have the effect of introducing the Spectator’s readers to people of all walks of life, and in their diverse social roles and identities. The outward sociability of published letters in the Spectator is moreover manifested in the way that the periodical papers may be read as serial fiction, only this is serial fiction that presents itself as based on reality. There are moments when the letters almost read like an eighteenth-century version of reality television. In issue 282, a woman named Jenny Simper writes a letter protesting the Christmas decorations in her Church:

[O]ur Clerk, who was once a Gardener, has this Christmas so over-deckt the Church with Greens, that he has quite spoilt my Prospect, insomuch that I have scarce seen the young Baronet I dress at these three Weeks, though we have both been very constant at our Devotions, and don't sit above three Pews off. She complains that the church now looks “more like a Green-house than a Place of Worship,” and demands of Mr. Spectator, “unless you’ll give Orders for removing these Greens, I shall

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216 Of course, the name of Josiah Henpeck is itself revealing.
217 Ibid., vol. II, 600.
grow a very awkward Creature at Church, and soon have little else to do there but to say my Prayers.” Of course, Mr. Spectator has no authority to give orders of any kind; besides, this is an obvious satire about churchgoers who forget their faith. The reader may laugh innocently at poor Jenny’s predicament, but two issues later, on Christmas day, the clerk, who signs his letter Francis Sternhold, gives his version of the story:

I am Clerk of the Parish from whence Mrs. Simper sends her Complaint, in your Yesterday's Spectator. I must beg of you to publish this as a publick Admonition to the aforesaid Mrs. Simper, otherwise all my honest Care in the Disposition of the Greens in the Church will have no Effect. . . . I must absolutely deny, that 'tis out of any Affection I retain for my old Employment that I have placed my Greens so liberally about the Church, but out of a particular Spleen I conceived against Mrs. Simper (and others of the same Sisterhood) some time ago.  

He remonstrates Mrs. Simper for “curtsying to Sir Anthony” in an “affected and indecent . . . manner,” for rising and smiling and curtsying “to one at the lower End of the Church in the midst of a Gloria Patri,” and for “rolling her Eyes around about in such a Manner, as plainly shewed, however she was moved, it was not towards an Heavenly Object.” He complains that he was the only person present who attended the prayer book, and explains that he came up with a scheme to “put a Stop to this growing Mischief.” Reading the two letters together, the reader may easily envision him or herself in the position of either Jenny Simper or Francis Sternhold. The letters comprise an exercise for the imagination.  

218 Ibid., vol. III, 8.
219 There are many letters that, read together, form a kind of serial fiction: the formation of the Ugly Club in no. 17, 32, 48, and 78; letters on Mrs. Clark in no. 324 and 328; the letter by Matilda Mohair in no. 492 and those responding to Mrs. Mohair’s letter in no. 496; letters relating to the new fashion hoods in no. 271, 272, 273; letters on Mr. Freeman’s wife in no. 212 and 216; the conversations around John Trott in no. 296, 308, 314, and 376.
like fiction, with the unfolding of each letter, the reader’s understanding of the situation becomes fuller and more complex.

Sometimes the published letters in the *Spectator* read like mini novellas. Each of the four letters printed in no. 402, for example, seem to be perfect plotlines for a sentimental novel or play. Mr. Spectator begins the issue by stating, “I shall give you two or three Letters; the Writers of which can have no Recourse to any legal Power for Redress, and seem to have written rather to vent their Sorrow than to receive Consolation.”

Again, Mr. Spectator does not seek to change the world in any way through action. His correspondents likewise do not seek redress; they seem content only to have their stories be heard. In this way, the social horizon of the reader is expanded even further; with each new letter, new characters enter the textual world of the *Spectator*.

To thus read the *Spectator* is to pay attention to how its letters help expand but also contract the textual world which is created. Mr. Spectator’s correspondents are not merely rhetorical devices to help him introduce social issues and problems into the periodical papers. Rather, they are treated as real (but fictional) persons. In no. 377, he prints a tongue-in-cheek “Bill of Mortality” for some of his previous correspondents. In no. 405, he sadly reports the death of Signior Nicolini, whom loyal readers would have remembered from the earliest issues. Each character that appears in the Spectator papers, whether as a correspondent or mentioned in passing, and whether real or fictional, is part of a complex social network. Moreover, as Addison and Steele begin to prepare for the end of the *Spectator*, letters become the most important mechanism for the departure of its main characters. Letters are used to announce the fate of all

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221 Ibid., vol. III, 417.
members of Mr. Spectator’s Club. And finally, in the very last issue, with the unfolding of one last letter, another new character is given a voice as the textual world of the Spectator expands once more with the farewell letter of its author, Richard Steele.

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222 No. 513, letter from the Clergyman; No. 517, letter on Sir Roger’s death; No. 530, letter on Will’s marriage; No. 541, the Templar’s farewell essay; No. 544, the Captain’s letter; No. 549, Andrew Freeport’s letter.
CHAPTER THREE
Swift’s Drapier and the Making of His Community

I. The Pseudonymous Political Letter

As print became an increasingly dominant culture, authors became more sophisticated in the ways in which they engaged with their mass reading public. This chapter explores a mode of public letters, popular in the eighteenth century, whose author assumes a fictional persona or pseudonym to address the civic community to which they envision themselves a part. In the process of doing so, they also participate in the active creation and shaping of such communities. Some examples include John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon’s Cato’s Letters (1720-23); Jonathan Swift’s Drapier’s Letters, published as a series of seven pamphlets (1724-25); Benjamin Franklin’s Dogood Papers (1722), a total of fifteen letters printed in The New-England Courant under the pseudonym Mrs. Silence Dogood; John Dickinson’s Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania (1767-68); The Letters of Junius, a series of letters printed by the London newspaper The Public Advertiser between 1769 and 1772; and, perhaps the most well known and oft-anthologized, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s Letters from an American Farmer (1782).

These are for the most part polemic texts, written for the purpose of swaying the reader with regard to public debates about current topics.

As apparent from their titles, these letters, like readers’ letters in the Spectator, present their writers categorically. They explicitly position the letter writer in concretely delineated social roles and thus appear to insist on the importance of defining socially those who take part in public discourse. Swift’s M. B. Drapier (“draper,” or cloth merchant, in French; M. B. may

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stand for Brutus Marcus, the Roman statesman who assassinated Julius Caesar in the name of liberty) is a middle-class tradesman; Franklin’s Mrs. Silence Dogood, whose name must be understood allegorically, is a country minister’s widow; a farmer in colonial America is presumably a landlord and the master of a modest household; the names Cato and Junius (derived from the illustrious Roman Lucius Junius Brutus) point to the author’s commitment to republican principles and champion for liberty. Such public letters define their letter writers in terms of their social roles and positions. Moreover, these letters usually include a formal self-introduction by the letter writer, as a gesture of “making acquaintance” with the reader; recall that the letters in the Spectator almost always provide the reader with a shorthand—even if only allegorically hinted through letter writer’s signature or assigned name—to locate where this individual fits into the intricate puzzle of society and the extant (social, moral, or economic) hierarchy.

Following the conventions of the Tatler and Spectator, the public letters of the pseudonymous tradition tend to blend fiction and reality in the course of discussing social and political issues.²²⁴ Like the periodical papers, there is no discernible effort to approach narrative verisimilitude: these texts display little interest in exploring the characters that are their authors’ mouthpieces, and the characters presented are flat types instead of round individuals. This has led to critical judgments like Ronald Paulson’s on Swift’s political satires: “sometimes the fiction is merely a decorative fringe upon an argumentative progression.”²²⁵ In contrast to such a view, I will argue that for these polemic texts, the fiction is often integral to the argumentation; thus the existence of fictional elements is both important and unimportant. On the one hand, the

²²⁴ Hence, for example, some critics assert that Franklin wrote his Dogood Papers in imitation of Addison and Steele. See George F. Horner, “Franklin’s Dogood Papers Re-Examined,” Studies in Philology 37.3 (1940): 501-23.
backstories for these fictional letter-writers and the fictional worlds in which they reside are not merely narrative conceits, but rather, I hope to show, play an integral part in the work that these texts do, e.g., presenting their political and ethical values. On the other hand, the fictional personae are certainly flat characters—delineated only categorically as a social type—because their narrative function primarily lies in their ability to represent a certain social group rather than their literary value.

In a way, these texts also present epistolary networks much like the one articulated through the Spectator’s letters in the way they seek to define, in social terms, the specific positions of every correspondent—and thus make visible, or provide a catalogue of sorts, of the diverse pockets comprising the social world which the text engages with, aims to represent, and on behalf of which the text speaks. However, unlike the irregular expansions of the Spectator’s epistolary network, perhaps due to their political agendas, these letters are careful to imagine communities that display a logical order, and whose shared common interests are not only explicitly discussed within the letters but also, more importantly, founded upon the presented social order. I argue, then, that the rhetorical form of such letters envisions the heterogeneous social identities of their correspondents to collectively assemble under a common political interest: thus public letters become useful for articulating a collective identity—particularly in situations when such an identity is fragile, lacking in consensus, or still in the process of formation. Through the use of epistolary address, the reader is positioned as a member of the established community, whether she is directly interpellated through epistolary address, or witnesses the interpellation of others within the community to which she also belongs.

In this chapter, I will discuss Jonathan Swift’s Drapier’s Letters. I argue that the Swift’s political arguments hinge upon the imagination of an interconnected communal entity, conceived
of in aggregate terms, in which the letter writer occupies a distinct position whose social function is well defined. As such, the text imagines the reading public as a larger social structure comprising various subgroups, each with a distinctly defined social identity. In other words, the reading public is presented not as a monolithic entity, but an *aggregate community*: the product of the assemblage of smaller and local social groups. Using the form of the public letter to present his political ideas to the Irish reading public, Swift not only articulates the concerns and interests of each distinctly defined subgroup, but also subsumes the individual concerns and interests under a common interest and identity, in effect creating a sense of a larger community to which his readers, despite their explicitly stated differences, inherently belong. The heterogeneity of the subgroups to which each correspondent belongs does not impede the envisioning of a shared interest, but is in fact central to its articulation. In this way, Swift’s letters define and assert a separate, “subaltern,” community that is distinct from that of the English. Thus his choice to write political arguments under a fictional personal or pseudonym should not be read as simply a matter of convenience or literary convention, but as an integral part of the political and ethical project which he advocates through the publication of these letters: the form of such public letters is central to the political arguments which they contain.

Such public letters manifests a cultural impulse to imagine society as comprising multiple sets of functionally differentiated social relationships. Historically, this is comparable to the impulse of eighteenth-century men to organize themselves into voluntary associations where members share interests or hobbies, based on their social rank or occupations. Historians have noted the popularity of clubs and societies in this period: as Peter Clark remarks in his seminal
study, clubs and societies are “one of the most distinctive social and cultural institutions of Georgian Britain.” These voluntary associations appeared in diverse forms, including:

- street clubs, patronized by the leading inhabitants of a particular district,
- clubs devoted to hobbies, everything from rose-growing to cruel sports and idiosyncratic sex,
- innumerable masonic and quasi-masonic societies catering to the male delight in secret rituals and dressing-up,
- box clubs, which poorer men joined to provide themselves with a modicum of insurance,
- clubs devoted to party politics or food,
- discussion clubs where blue-chinned autodidacts pondered the mysteries of science and philosophy,
- and more genteel associations where responsible citizens met to dine well and discuss the local poor.

This description of the clubs and societies that played a vital role in eighteenth-century English society may bring to mind the letters in the Spectator, whose rhetorical form, I argue in my previous chapter, produce the communicative structure of network by making use of the social identities of clubs and distinct characters in order to exhibit the various positions of individual letter writers. These “were not open societies in which various ranks and professions could meet on an equal footing . . . [but] were quite unsurprisingly restricted to members who shared interests and prejudices.” In other words, a society organized by the logic of clubs presumes that each distinct social sphere has a special function and place in the overall community. Sociologically speaking, this may be read as the expression of a new social order that is in the process of replacing an older feudal order: as Clark explains, eighteenth-century clubs and societies are “the expression of a dynamic, increasingly urban society in which the traditional

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structures of corporate and communal life were either absent or inappropriate for the full range of contemporary conditions and aspirations.”

The rhetorical structures of the political letters I examine in this chapter follow this logic, and in contrast to the formless assemblages of letters in the *Spectator*, display an insistence that all these distinct social spheres are interconnected, fitting together, like pieces of a puzzle, to create a community which shares a common interest. These letters show that what may appear to be individual specialized interests necessarily influence one another and cooperate together. The historical phenomenon of eighteenth-century clubs and societies also reflects this way of thinking about the organization of society, as “[i]creasingly . . . national society itself was viewed as an untidy aggregation of voluntary societies.” It is not merely enough, then, as the *Spectator* does, to acknowledge and make visible the co-existence of distinct and sometimes contradictory social spheres; rather, for Swift, who writes on behalf of a disenfranchised Irish people struggling to find its own identity, it is important to show that individuals with different social roles and preoccupations may come together to form a greater community whose interest is distinct from that of the English hegemony. Swift’s letters thus articulates a collective identity that acts as the driving engine for his political views.

Though both the present chapter and my final chapter focus on public letters that envision the reader as belonging to a societal whole, these texts conceive of the reading public in different ways. While Swift letters produce an aggregate vision of the reading public—as an entity comprising disparate and heterogeneous subgroups and specialized interests, the “open letters” I discuss in the next chapter position the reader within a totalizing “public,” where every member of this “public” is imagined to be an equal individual—with no difference. The contrast between


230 Clark, 5.
the two modes is similar to the distinction that Linda Colley draws between two kinds of
eighteenth-century voluntary associations: specialized clubs devoted to hobbies, special interests,
or idiosyncrasies, like the ones I previously discussed, and “patriotic societies” which emerged in
the latter half of the century, arising from anxieties about national identity in the aftermath of the
Jacobite risings. The patriotic societies reflect a new social consciousness about the greater
collective group in which all individuals belong: the nation, or, “public.” Colley explains,

Then, as now, the average British men’s club was both democratic and rigidly exclusive,
treating its own members but shutting out the rest of the public from its business. By
contrast, the declared business of the patriotic societies was the public. They looked
deliberately outwards—to the reformation of the nation state.\textsuperscript{231}

The shaping of communities that I read in Swift’s public letters do not look “deliberately
outwards” in the same sense as do Colley’s patriotic societies (and the public letters I examine in
my next chapter) because they do not seek to be universally encompassing: unlike the “open
letters” of my next chapter, these letters clearly delineate the conditions under which one may
claim membership in the communities which they address, and in the process of doing so,
assume that the conditions are different for every individual. Using the fictional persona of the
letter writer along with narrative elements to map out relationships with each distinct
correspondent, they produce an idea of community not based on an imagined identity, but one
that is sketched out in concrete, aggregate terms, through each act of epistolary address.
Moreover, the articulation of this community constitutes a collective identity that is distinct from
(though not necessarily excluding) the culturally and politically dominant identity of
Englishness.

\textsuperscript{231} Colley, 89-90.
I use the term “aggregate community” to indicate a social world with a common interest shared by its members, understood as individuals occupying different social roles and functions. An aggregate community is defined by its structured connectedness; its members are intricately linked to one another in concrete, practical ways, leading to a state of mutual cooperation and trust. Thus the idea of community I read in these letters is conceptually different from Benedict Anderson’s influential account of nation states as “imagined communities” organized through the mechanism of “print-capitalism.” Anderson describes such imagined communities as producing “a deep, horizontal comradeship” which works to blur the social distinctions and inequalities within the nation state. In contrast, the printed epistolary form allows Swift to emphasize the existence of internal social distinctions and inequalities while still producing a sense of collective identity.\(^{232}\) My working definition of community, then, is closer to that of the sociologist Anthony P. Cohen, who defines it as a symbolic field. Cohen argues that a community is made when:

members of a group of people \(a\) have something in common with each other, which \(b\) distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other putative groups.

“Community” thus seems to imply simultaneously both similarity and difference. The word thus expresses a relational idea: the opposition of one community to others or to other social entities.\(^{233}\)

Cohen’s account of community includes two central concepts. First, he stresses the role of boundary, i.e., symbolic lines between one community and another that “encapsulates the identity of the community” and is “called into being by the exigencies of social interaction.” In other words, “Boundaries are marked because communities interact in some way or other with


entities from which they are, or wish to be, distinguished.” My reading of Swift’s public letters will show that his articulation of community is prompted by the need to declare and define publicly, for the social group in which his readers belong, a distinct common identity that is different from that of the English.

Secondly, and more importantly for my analyses of the rhetorical form of these public letters, Cohen stresses the aggregate nature of community. From this view, rather than thinking of community as an integrating mechanism, it should be regarded instead as an aggregating device. In this approach, then, the “commonality” which is found in community need not be a uniformity. It does not clone behavior or ideas. It is a commonality of forms (ways of behaving) whose content (meanings) may vary considerably among its members. The triumph of community is to so contain this variety that its inherent discordance does not subvert the apparent coherence which is expressed by its boundaries.235

This is an account of community that attends to the social differences that exist with any articulation of collective identity, thus contesting the often presumed egalitarianism of the idea of community: as Cohen explains, “every community generates multitudinous means of making evaluative distinctions among its members, means of differentiating among them which, although they may lurk beneath the structural surface, are powerful components in local social life.”236 This understanding of community also downplays its ideological and political formation: community as based on and forming one’s sense of identity. Instead, this view emphasizes the provisional nature of community: as arising out of specific circumstances, for pragmatic

234 Cohen, 12.
236 Cohen, 33.
purposes. In the following sections, I will show how, through multiple layers of epistolary address, Swift envisions community in such concretely aggregate terms.

II. Community as Aggregate through Epistolary Address

Swift’s *Drapier’s Letters* was written to protest a political problem affecting the Irish community: a royal patent that George I had granted to the iron merchant William Wood, in the summer of 1722, for the minting of copper half-pence coinage in Ireland. The Irish Parliament had not been consulted on the subject, and it was widely rumored that Wood had obtained the patent through bribing the King’s mistress, the Duchess of Kendal. Some accounts estimated that the patent gave Wood the right to coin at least five times as much copper money as was necessary; others believed that the copper content of Wood’s halfpence was greatly debased. Despite the general outcry in Ireland, Wood continued minting his coins and shipping them to Irish ports through 1723. In late 1723, the Irish Houses of Parliament presented reports to the King accusing Wood of fraud, and requesting that no further coinage be imported. The next year, the King finally ordered a Committee to inquire into the matter, though no other action was taken to address the Irish protests.

When Swift composed the *Drapier’s Letters* in early 1724, it seemed unlikely that Wood’s half-pence could be stopped from importation. Instead of further appealing to the authorities, Swift’s Drapier speaks directly to the people, advocating a boycott of Wood’s coins. He shrewdly unites the people of Ireland under a common cause by presenting a sequence of concrete, epistolary relationships between the Drapier and distinct individuals or groups of individuals that, over the course of the letters’ publication, gradually aggregate into a community that shares a common interest. In the letters, the persona of the Drapier, like that of Mr. Spectator, acts as a neutral linkage between readers from different social positions. Unlike Mr. Spectator, however, the Drapier is not a passive observer and commentator. He does not only engage aesthetically with the social world, but partakes in it actively and pragmatically: the Drapier is not an idle philosopher, but a practical tradesman.

Positioning himself not as the Dean of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, but a middle-class Irish tradesman, Swift is able to claim to speak “the plain story of the fact” by appealing to the fictional Drapier’s personal and practical experiences. In the words of one critic, “the *persona* makes the argument concrete.” The force of Swift’s arguments relies on the Drapier’s social and economic role as well as his “middling position” in the social hierarchy, manifested in his ability to connect with and speak to the different strata of society through epistolary discourse. William Bragg Ewald explains that the socio-economic status of an average draper in early eighteenth-century Ireland is significant:

> Although many Catholics were engaged in the Ulster linen business, it is still more than likely that a draper would be, like most other middle class tradesmen, a Protestant, since

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no Catholics were admitted into the trade guilds. . . Swift is perhaps wise in choosing a draper, who could conceivably be an Anglo-Irishman and whose livelihood might depend upon English trade, as a spokesman for the Irish cause. Finally, an eighteenth century reader would have been ready to accept the idea that the Drapier was reasonably prosperous.239

The drapier is not a fictional character in the sense that readers are invited to imagine a vivid fictional world in which he resides; rather, he serves a primarily polemical function—his character is important only in so far as it relates to the political arguments he makes and provides the reader with an image of the social world in which they themselves live. As Edward W. Rosenheim remarks, in this sense the Drapier’s Letters is not a satire but a “literary polemic” because it lacks “the palpable but vital fiction which transforms polemic into satire and in which ingenious falsehood is indispensable to the disclosure of truth”; the persona of the Drapier is neither a vital device in achieving the persuasive end of the document nor the kind of fictional creation upon whose identification as a fiction the power of satire depends. . . . What is more important is that, even if we were to grant the strategic importance of the persona, the effectiveness of this assumed personality lies not in its being recognized as a fictional pose but in its being accepted as genuine.240

In other words, despite the facetiousness of the Drapier’s mask—Swift’s authorship was never a complete secret and the first letter contains hints about its true author—the Drapier’s arguments only work if readers accept him as a real person who lives in their world, and who faces the same

real-world problems that they themselves also face. At the same time, however, there is an ironic tone to the Drapier’s voice that suggests a sense of play-acting—that hints at the idea that his arguments present an exaggerated fiction or, put another way, a dramatic version of the truth. It is as if the persona of the Drapier allows Swift to hold up a slightly distorted mirror facing his Irish readers, saying, “this is your life, and this is the community to which you should belong; thus this is the action you should take.”

It is a critical commonplace that through the mouthpiece of the Drapier, Swift rhetorically constructs a collective Irish identity in the process of urging the people to oppose Wood’s halfpence. As an early commentator writes,

At the sound of the DRAPIER’S TRUMPET, a spirit arose among the people. . . . Every person of every rank, party, and denomination, was convinced that the admission of Wood’s copper must prove fatal to the Commonwealth. The papist, the fanatic, the Tory, the Whig, all listed themselves volunteers under the banners of M. B. Drapier, and were all equally zealous to serve the Common cause.

241 The reference to the Proposal [A Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufactures, which Swift published in 1720] is an acknowledgement that he himself is the author, and the farcical arithmetic of Wood’s patent is a deliberately characteristic Swiftian trademark—indeed rather riskily so, for the tone in these passages carried an unmistakable note of condescension towards his role, and the ostensible audience…Swift wanted his face to be visible behind the Mask to anybody sufficiently intelligent; for as soon as it is obvious that the Drapier is a mask, a level of ironic implication comes into focus.” See Mark Kinkead-Weekes, “The Dean and the Drapier,” in Swift Revisited, ed., Denis Donoghue (Cork: The Mercier Press, 1967), 48.

242 Readers as early as Walter Scott have commented that the Drapier’s statements about the speciousness of Wood’s character as well as the inferiority of the value of Wood’s coins are probably overly exaggerated. It is not clear whether the hyperbole is for argument’s sake, i.e., whether we should take these statements as satire, or whether Swift himself actually believed in the truth of the Drapier’s claims. See Walter Scott, ed., The Works of Jonathan Swift: Containing Additional Letters, Tracts, and Poems, Not Hitherto Published, Volume I, (London: Bickers & Son, 1883), 268-69.

243 “Almost everyone who writes on Swift and the Drapier’s Letters notes that Swift united the people of Ireland in a successful effort to defeat the halfpence.” See Wanda J. Creaser, Shifting Identities in the Life and Writings of Jonathan Swift (Ph.D. dissertation, Arizona State University, 2000), 17.

In this vein, most critics of the *Drapier’s Letters* emphasize the central role of the fourth letter, “A Letter to the Whole People of Ireland,” in which the Drapier addresses the Irish nation as a whole.\(^{245}\) My interest, however, lies in how Swift *builds up to* this collective Irish identity through printing *a series of letters* that demonstrate to the individual pockets of society how a single issue affects them differently yet equally: in other words, the Drapier does not seem to take for granted the existence of an *a priori* Irish identity or sense of community. By addressing each of his letters to a different social group, he appeals singularly to every reader by delineating how the specific conditions of the social positions which they occupy will be influenced by Wood’s patent; his arguments proceed by stressing that every person, according to their social role, has a different part to play in defending the common cause of their community. In this way, the Drapier’s letters reflect the social structure of his community, producing a particular shape for this community through the shape of his text.

The first letter, titled “To the Shop-keepers, Tradesmen, Farmers, and Common People of Ireland,” begins with the address “brethren, friends, countrymen and fellow-subjects.”\(^ {246}\) Though such denominations do suggest a common, pseudo-nationalist, identity, the Drapier imagines his readers first as occupying a specific position within a social network, and then as a part of a collective identity. Herein lies the significance of Swift’s choice of the letter genre: the letter is a concrete form of address and in each of his letters, the Drapier modifies his language and tone to suit the particular social group or individual whom he addresses.

\(^{245}\) As Paul J. deGategno and R. Jay Stubblefield have noted, “Readers and critics alike consider this pamphlet the most provocative of the series, and it is the one that often represents *The Drapier’s Letters* in modern anthologies and other collections of 18th-century prose.” Paul J. deGategno and R. Jay Stubblefield, *Critical Companion to Jonathan Swift: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work* (New York: Facts on File, 2006), 81. See also, for example, Carl R. Woodring’s essay on the fourth letter, in which he foregrounds its role in “mov[ing] a variegated audience to diverse actions.” See Woodring, “The Aims, Audience, and Structure of the Drapier’s Fourth Letter,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 17.1 (1956): 53.

\(^{246}\) Swift, 13.
LETTER
TO THE
SHOP-KEEPERS, TRADESMEN, FARMERS, and COMMON PEOPLE
of IRELAND, Concerning the BRASS HALF-PENCE Coined by Mr. WOODS,
with a DESIGN to have them PASS in this KINGDOM.

By M. B. Dropier.

To the Tradesmen, Shop-keepers, Farmers, and Common People in General, of the Kingdom of IRELAND.

Brethren, Friends, Countrymen and Fellow-Subjects,

What I intend now to say to you is, next to your Duty to God, and the Care of your Salvation, of the greatest Concern to your Fates, and your Children, your Bread and Clothing, and every other Necessity of Life entirely depend upon it. Therefore I do most earnestly exhort you as Men, as Christians, as Patriots, and as Lovers of your Country, to read this Paper with the utmost Attention, or get it read to you by others; and if you may at the least Expendence, I have ordered the Printer to sell it at the lowest Rates.

It is a great Fault among you, that when a Person writes with so little Intention than to do you Good, you will not be at the Pains to Read his Advice: One Copy of this Paper may have a Damnation of your Souls, whilst it will be less than a Farthing a Piece. It is your Folly that you have no common or general Interest in your Views, not even the Welfare among you, neither do you know or enquire of care who are your Friends, or who are your Enemies.

About three Years ago, a little Book was written, to advise all People to wear the Manifoldest of the Poor Dear Country: It had no other Design, than to get the MAJESTIES SEAL for a great Sum of Good Money, to be sent to this poor Country, and that all the Nobility and Gentlemen could not obtain the least Favor, and let us make our own Half-Penny, as we used to. Now I will make that Matter very Plain. We are at a great Distance from the King's Court, and have no Body there to sollicite for us, although a great Number of Lords and Esquires, whose Estates are here, and are our Countrymen, spend all their Livings and Fortune, in repairing to that Court. But this Book Mr. WOODS was able to send it, for his Interest; he was an English Man and had GREAT FRIENDS, and it was sent very well, so as to give Money to those that would speak to others, that could speak to the King, and could tell a Fair Story. And his Majesty, and perhaps the greatest Lords, who advised him, might think it was for our Country's God; and so, as the Lawyers proposed it, the King was deceived in his Grant, which often happens in all Beings. And I am sure, if his Majesty knew that such a Patent, if it should be Effected according to the Desire of Mr. WOODS, would utterly Ruin this Kingdom, which hath given such great Proofs of it's Loyalty, he would immediately recall it.

Perhaps you will wonder how such an ordinary Fellow as this Mr. WOODS could have so much Interest as to get such Majesties's Seal for a great Sum of Good Money, to be sent to this poor Country, and that all the Nobility and Gentlemen could not obtain the least Favor, and let us make our own Half-Penny, as we used to. Now I will make that Matter very Plain. We are at a great Distance from the King's Court, and have no Body there to sollicite for us, although a great Number of Lords and Esquires, whose Estates are here, and are our Countrymen, spend all their Livings and Fortune, in repairing to that Court. But this Book Mr. WOODS was able to send it, for his Interest; he was an English Man and had GREAT FRIENDS, and it was sent very well, so as to give Money to those that would speak to others, that could speak to the King, and could tell a Fair Story. And his Majesty, and perhaps the great Lords, who advised him, might think it was for our Country's God; and so, as the Lawyers proposed it, the King was deceived in his Grant, which often happens in all Beings. And I am sure, if his Majesty knew that such a Patent, if it should be Effected according to the Desire of Mr. WOODS, would utterly Ruin this Kingdom, which hath given such great Proofs of it's Loyalty, he would immediately recall it.

Figure 4. First page of “A Letter to the Shop-keepers, Tradesmen, Farmers, and Common People of Ireland,” 1724. Available from Eighteenth-Century Collections Online.
Each letter in the sequence, besides articulating the different facets of a single political argument, also demonstrates a different type of concrete, social relationship: the Drapier speaks separately to his social equals, inferiors, and superiors; he also speaks to particular individuals, modifying his arguments according to his change of addressee. Besides the fourth letter, which as aforementioned addresses “the Whole People of Ireland,” all other letters in the sequence address specific individuals or group of individuals within the Irish community: “To the Shopkeepers, etc.,” “To Mr. Harding the Printer,” “To the Nobility and Gentry of the Kingdom of Ireland,” “A Letter to the Lord Chancellor Midleton,” “A Letter to the Right Honourable the Lord Viscount Molesworth,” and “An Humble Address to Both Houses of Parliament.”

The community thus presented is an aggregate, where public interest is the responsibility of every person, but wherein each individual also has a distinct, particular role to play with regard to the common cause. At the same time, the Drapier underscores that the common interest that unites all the different sectors of his community is distinct from that of the English.

The Drapier’s rhetorical strategy is important because the solidarity of Ireland was not a given when Swift published these letters. Kinkead-Weekes notes that though Swift was successful in rousing the people to speak out and take action against Wood’s coinage, the unification of Irish society was only temporary—and remained an ideal rather than a reality: “The idea of an nation proved ephemeral as the Irish relapsed into former positions and interests, factions and apathy. . . . The real fascination of the Drapier’s Letters is that we watch the creation of a dramatic fiction. There was acted out in historical Dublin a masquerade; at its center a Mask which could be what Swift himself could not, and could speak for what did not yet exist,

247 Though the letters were written in this order, the letters to Midleton and the houses of the Irish Parliament were not published until George Faulkner’s 1735 collected edition of Swift’s Works. Here I will focus on the other five letters, i.e., those that operated as published discourse in Dublin, in the time leading up to the King’s repeal of Wood’s patent.
...the ‘whole People of Ireland.’” 

The Drapier’s Letters is a pragmatic move, arising out of contingent circumstances rather than motivated by any political ideology.

Indeed, as a member of the Anglo-Irish ruling class who viewed his appointment to the Deanery of St. Patrick’s Cathedral as a political disappointment, Swift was ambivalent about his own “Irishness.” From this view, the invention of a fictional persona may be read as Swift’s attempt to grapple with the problem of representation in one of his earliest writings about the Irish condition. As Sean Moore explains, “there was debate in the 1720s over who was to represent Ireland, and it affected the arts inasmuch as the pamphlet controversies accompanying it competed to invent the Irish public, producing a literary imagination of what Ireland, or at least the Anglo-Irish subject, should be.”

In the Drapier’s Letters, the aggregation of the Irish community is presented as a product of the Drapier’s rhetorical moves—through addressing the various levels of society separately—rather than a state of unity that exists ontologically. This is to say that the Drapier’s Letters is an attempt to mobilize the Irish people rather than to represent or define their identity. The idea of community that it produces is one that is the result of the contingent alliance of disparate social groups and their partial interests.

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248 Kinkead-Weekes, 42-43.
251 Thus my reading of the Drapier’s Letters also attends to the “postcolonial problem.” As Carole Fabricant asks: how might we understand “Swift’s ‘representation’ of Ireland without falling into the trap of letting his enormous symbolic presence and rhetorical power silence, or render invisible, the rest of his aggrieved countrymen”? See Carole Fabricant, “Speaking for the Irish Nation: The Drapier, the Bishop, and the Problems of Colonial Representation” ELH 66.2 (1999): 349. In recent years, Swift scholars have increasingly underscored his Irishness. While traditional scholarship tends to read him as an English writer (e.g., Temple Scott, in the introduction to his 1903 edition of Swift’s prose works, writes that “Swift was an Irishman by accident”), recent studies have emphasized the importance of Swift’s Irish writings in order to read him as a colonial subject, thus revising his image as a canonical Augustan satirist belonging to the Neoclassical tradition. For a discussion of these recent efforts, see Carole Fabricant and Robert Mahony, “Introduction,” Swift’s Irish Writings: Selected Prose and Poetry
This rhetorical strategy, then, is perhaps also in part Swift’s way to deal with the insurmountable fractures, based primarily on religious division, that exist in Irish society. The *Drapier’s Letters* not only unite the people of Ireland, but also envision a way to imagine a division (or, put differently, organization) of society that allows for cooperation between the different social groups—and social interests—that do exist. Thus, though the letters clearly conceive of a commonality to the Irish people, they also classify Irish society into distinct socioeconomic strata, and endeavor to speak individually to each social group—sometimes collectively, and sometimes through a representative individual—before speaking to the whole.

Moreover, if the Irish community, with all its nooks and crannies, is the Drapier’s primary audience, the *Drapier’s Letters* also envisions a secondary audience in Swift’s English readers. Like the readers of the familiar letter collections I discussed in chapter one, this English audience is rhetorically positioned outside the community that the letters produce. The Drapier often refers to an us-them dichotomy—comparing the Irish to the English in order to assert that the English government should treat the two as equals. On the one hand, through the Drapier’s direct epistolary addresses, his Irish readers are called upon individually and each included within the aggregate community that is created in letters. On the other hand, though his English readers are positioned as outsiders or bystanders, they are also spoken to, albeit obliquely, as a secondary audience, to whom the Drapier not only emphasizes that his attacks on Wood are not

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252 This is a view of society similar to that of functionalist theories. The most classic account is that of the sociologist Émile Durkheim. As Anthony Cohen explains, the functionalist approach is concerned primarily “with solidarity, with the contrivance of bonds that could link indissolubly the members of society. The ideal form [Durkheim] proposes for an economically differentiated society is one modeled on the division of labor, in which different functions are harnessed in a productive whole. The points of difference which divide people are transformed instead into the linchpins of interdependency which unite them.” See Cohen, 20, and Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York: Free Press, 1997).
indictments of the king, but also argues that Ireland should not be treated as an inferior, “depending kingdom.”

III. The Drapier’s Rhetorical Moves

The Drapier’s letters produce an aggregate view of the community that he aims to mobilize. One of the ways in which Swift accomplishes this task is through manifold appellations. Written before the King had ordered an inquiry and titled *A Letter to the Shop-keepers, Tradesmen, Farmers, and Common-People of Ireland*, the first letter begins with a second set of epistolary address: “brethren, friends, countrymen, and fellow-subjects.” In place of a formal self-introduction, the Drapier states his name simply, and begins with a direct appeal to his readers—assuming that they need no further information about his character. His message must be read with the understanding that he is a tradesman and belonging to those “common people” to whom he intends the letter. He thus addresses himself to his social equals, writing with a spirit of shared fellowship and a sense of confidence:

> What I intend now to say to you is, next to your duty to God, and the care of your salvation, of the greatest concern to yourselves, and your children, your bread and clothing, and every common necessary of life entirely depends upon it. Therefore I do most earnestly exhort you as men, as Christians, as parents, and as lovers of your country, to read this paper with the upmost attention, or get it read to you by others; which that you may do at the less expense, I have ordered the printer to sell it at the lowest rate.\(^\text{254}\)

As public discourse, this first letter makes a few subtle moves. As it is explicitly addressed to a specific group of individuals, the draper underscores his camaraderie with his readers, suggesting

\(^{253}\) Swift, 113.

\(^{254}\) Swift, 13.
that they belong to the same social group and thus share common interests. He also points to certain characteristics of this social group, i.e., that not all of them are literate or may not be able to afford the expense of reading materials. Yet, the very proposal that those who cannot read should get the letter read to them by others suggests that the draper envisions an audience beyond the scope of those whom the letter specifically addresses. In other words, though the letter certainly envisions a common national identity that transcends social rank (“brethren, friends, countrymen, and fellow-subjects”), its rhetorical form also creates a distinction between those who will be immediately affected by the issues that he proceeds to describe (the common-people), and those whom, perhaps due to their social status, wealth, or connections, may not be immediately affected.

Because here he addresses himself specifically to his social equals or inferiors, the Drapier begins with a reprimanding, even accusatory, tone: “It is your folly that you have no common or general interest in your view, not even the wisest among you, neither do you know or enquire, or care who are your friends, or who are your enemies.”255 He then emphasizes that his method of argumentation will be particularly suited to his audience: he will present only “the plain story of the fact,” seek to “make that matter very plain,” and even when referencing a legal treatise on the issue, examine only “the plain meaning of the words.”256 Rather than making complicated philosophical arguments, he puts matters into simple economic terms. He tells his shopkeeper reader that Wood’s half-pence is so overvalued, “the brazier would not give you above a penny of good money for a shilling of his”; what’s more, “if a hatter sells a dozen of hats for five shillings a-piece, which amounts to three pounds, and receives the payments in Mr.

255 Swift, 13.
256 Swift, 14, 15, 22.
Wood’s coin, he really receives only the value of five shillings.” To an audience whose lives are rooted in economic realities, he shows that the arithmetic simply does not work.

The Drapier then includes his reader as part of a vast community of “the common-people” whose lives will be influenced by Wood’s half-pence, and imagines the outcome in vividly dramatic terms:

And this is the difficulty you will be under. . . . For the common soldier when he goes to the market or alehouse will offer this money and if it be refused, perhaps he will swagger and hector, and threaten to beat the butcher or alewife, or take the goods by force, and throw them the bad halfpence. . . . For suppose you go to an alehouse with that base money, and the landlord gives you a quart for four of these half-pence, what must the victualler do? His brewer will not be paid in that coin, or if the brewer should be such a fool, the farmers will not take it from them for their bere [barley]. . . . [A]nd the ‘squire their landlord will never be so bewitched to take such trash for his land, so that it must certainly stop somewhere or other, and wherever it stops it is the same thing, and we are all undone.

The reader is directly addressed to as “you,” as one among the “common-people” whose livelihood is entangled in a network of both economic and social relations. The imagined scenarios underscore the interconnectedness of society through economic exchange; as the argument goes, when one element in the system fails, the whole system collapses. Here is an intricate social and economic network at work, between the soldier, butcher, alewife, landlord, victualer, brewer, farmer, and, most importantly, the Drapier’s addressee—“you,” the reader.

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257 Swift, 15.
258 Swift, 17.
Thus, rather than making an argument that encompasses the whole of Irish society, the Drapier’s arguments are specific to each social group he singles out. In this way, the fictional persona of the Drapier is not a mere formality for writing a political letter: it is a specific position from which Swift proceeds to make arguments, and in this first letter Swift references the material problems which a draper (or any tradesman) may encounter. Moreover, the consequences of Wood’s half-pence are not only serious but also ridiculous. Continuing his discussion of the grim realities of money and survival, the Drapier’s tone turns to a gossipy whisper:

They say ‘Squire Conolly [the speaker of the Irish House of Commons] has sixteen thousands pounds a year, now if he sends for his rent to town, as it is likely he does, he must have two hundred and forty horses to bring up his half-year’s rent, and two or three great cellars in his house for stowage. But what the bankers will do I cannot tell. For I am assured, that some great bankers keep by them forty thousands pounds in ready cash to answer all payments, which sum, in Mr. Wood’s money, would require twelve hundred horses to carry it.259

The images of a gentleman landowner requiring some two hundred horses to carry six month’s rent, or twelve hundred horses carrying a single banker’s cash reserves, are certainly exaggerated and deliberately comical; this is a familiar strategy of Swiftian satire. Yet the Drapier also uses the examples of the squire and the banker to urge his readers to consider how Wood’s half-pence will affect all sectors of society similarly, but in different ways. Just as Swift himself adopts the persona of a common tradesman, his readers are temporarily placed in the shoes of individuals leading utterly different lives. The brief exercise has the effect of expanding the imaginative

259 Swift, 18.
capacity of the Drapier’s readers, and demonstrating the possibility of cooperation across social sectors on this particular issue.

The Drapier then returns to the social circle in which his readers are presumed to reside. He makes an example of his own circumstances—and as he does so, implies that his readers should imitate his actions:

For my own part, I am already resolved what to do; I have a pretty good shop of Irish stuffs and silks, and instead of taking Mr. Wood’s bad copper, I intend to truck with my neighbors the butchers, and bakers, and brewers, and the rest, goods for goods, and the little gold and silver I have, I will keep by me like my heart’s blood till better times, or till I am just ready to starve.  

Swift describes the Drapier’s plans with remarkable specificity. The course of action is in fact rather radical: what the Drapier intends to do and also suggests that his readers do, by boycotting currency approved by the king, is a rejection of royal authority. Yet, within the context of his even-toned letter to fellow businesspeople, the boycotting of Wood’s “bad copper” appears as only a matter of course, and the only sensible course of action.

In warning of the dire consequences of allowing Wood’s copper to circulate as coinage, the Drapier further envisions a scenario where, due to farmers’ inability to pay their rent in sterling silver (as required by law), the Irish “gentlemen of estates” will begin to farm their own land and eventually begin to conduct their own trade. If this were to happen:

The farmers must rob or beg, or leave their country. The shopkeepers in this and every other town, must break and starve: For it is the landed man that maintains the merchant, and shopkeeper, and handicraftsman. But when the ‘squire turns farmer and merchant

\[260\] Swift, 18.
himself, all the good money he gets from abroad, he will hoard up or send for England, and keep some poor tailor or weaver and the like in this own house, who will be glad to get bread at any rate.\textsuperscript{261}

No farmer, shopkeeper, merchant, nor craftsman can hope to remain safe. The final remark about “some poor tailor or weaver” refers to, of course, the Drapier himself, and in this way he envisions his own—and his readers’—hypothetic, despondent, futures. The insistence on listing every possible reader’s social role, rather than relying on a totalizing moniker, is revealing. Rather than striving to convince his readers with an abstract political argument about the collective fate of Ireland, the Drapier speaks to each reader realistically, and with individual attention. He seeks to be comprehensive, appealing in the letter’s conclusion to those who are “the poor sort of tradesmen,” and finally asserting that Wood’s copper has such insidious consequences it will ruin even the beggars of Ireland.\textsuperscript{262} Even when the Drapier unites all his readers against a common enemy, he argues in aggregate terms, proclaiming, “It would be very hard if all Ireland should be put into one scale, and this sorry fellow into the other, that Mr. Wood should weigh down this whole kingdom.”\textsuperscript{263} In other words, the Drapier protests against the injustice that one man’s interest should be placed above the \textit{summation} of all the interests of the various parties of Ireland.

The Drapier’s first letter was published in April of 1724. The printer, with whom Swift had previously worked, was John Harding, also the printer of the \textit{Dublin Weekly News-Letter}, a newspaper that had campaigned against Wood’s patent. When, in August of 1724, a London newspaper published some contents of the Committee of Inquiry’s report, Harding reprinted

\textsuperscript{261} Swift, 20.  
\textsuperscript{262} Swift, 25.  
\textsuperscript{263} Swift, 20-21.
parts in his newspaper. The report recommended certain concessions: Wood would reduce the amount of coinage he produced, and each individual had only to accept a limited amount of Wood’s half-pence at any one transaction. Yet the concessions were not enough to appease the concerns of the public, and Swift wrote a second, more agitated, letter, titled *A Letter to Mr. Harding the Printer, Upon Occasion of a Paragraph in His News-Paper of Aug. 1st. Relating to Mr. Wood’s Half-pence*, where the Drapier refutes point by point the Committee’s report—including the Committee’s assurance that Sir Isaac Newton had tested Wood’s metal and found it to comply with the terms stated in his contract.

Though in this letter the Drapier sometimes speaks to “the public,” Swift makes the rhetorical choice of explicitly addressing his letter to “Mr. Harding the Printer.” Much like Mr. Spectator in the *Spectator* papers, Mr. Harding the Printer is here appointed the position of medium—a platform for the exchange of ideas and the announcement of public messages. Thus, after some remarks dealing with the contents of the Committee’s report as printed in Harding’s newsletter, the Drapier explains: “Though my letter be directed to you, Mr. Harding, yet I intend it for all my countrymen.”264 It is a strange strategy: why not speak directly to the public, if that is indeed the Drapier’s intended audience? There seems to be an issue of social decorum here; the Drapier cannot presume to know all of his countrymen, and therefore he does not address them directly. He could speak familiarly and directly to his readers in the first letter because there he limited his recipients to those who belonged to the same social stratum. Here, because the Drapier now addresses all of Irish society, he uses Harding to speak indirectly to his intended audience: what social function does a printer provide if not to create a space, both literal and

264 Swift, 41.
virtual, where men from all corners of society can temporarily come together, without risk of disrupting the extant social order?

The Drapier’s assignment of Harding as the internal addressee also fits the rhetorical focus of this letter. He begins in a roundabout way, writing, “Sir, In your Newsletter of the 1st instant there is a paragraph . . . relating to Wood’s half-pence. . . . I take that paragraph to be, in a great measure, an imposition on the public. . . . I cannot but observe from that paragraph that this public enemy of ours, not satisfied to ruin us with his trash, takes every occasion to treat this kingdom with the upmost contempt.” 265 Interestingly, he limits his topic to the “paragraph” about Wood’s half-pence. And, he is most indignant about the “contempt” for Ireland that Wood displays in his defense. In other words, in contrast to the first letter, where the Drapier was concerned about the courses of action that the common people should take (i.e., what should be done), here, in a letter to a printer, he fittingly focuses on the discursive aspects of the problem, i.e., what has been said, and what should be said. The letter is itself a conglomeration of multiple voices and viewpoints about Wood’s half-pence: besides the perspectives of Wood and the Committee of Inquiry, the Drapier also recounts the voices of the “few betrayers of their country”—those Irish “confederates with Wood” who defended his coinage. Against these few “betrayers” he presents himself as representing the majority of Ireland, explaining, “I am no inconsiderable Shopkeeper in this Town. I have discoursed with several of my own, and other Trades; with many Gentlemen both of City and Country; and also, with great Numbers of Farmers, Cottagers, and Labourers.” 266 Thus the letter provides a weighing of voices, positing that of the Drapier and those with whom he has conversed, against Wood (who is called, alternately, “this little impudent hardwareman,” “this little arbitrary mock-monarch,” and “this

265 Swift, 33.
266 Swift, 34.
wretch”) and his “confederates.” Each of Wood’s proposals and the Drapier’s rebuttals are presented in turn, as if rehearsing the debates of a courtroom in front of the reader’s eyes.

The Drapier follows his rehearsal of the debate with a complicated rhetorical move that serves to explain why Harding should be assigned the internal addressee of this letter: “I will conclude with humbly offering one proposal, which, if it were put in practice, would blow up this destructive project at once. Let some skillful judicious pen draw up an advertisement to the following purpose. That . . .” 267 He then presents one such advertisement and petition, where the facts of the matter are first summarized—the circumstances of Wood’s patent, the reasons for opposition, and the actions already taken by the House of Commons, then a resolve declared. In this way, the “I” of the letter multiplies into the imagined collective “we” of the petition:

Therefore we whose names are underwritten, being persons of considerable estates in this kingdom, and residers therein, do unanimously resolve and declare that we will never receive, one farthing or halfpenny of the said Wood’s coining, and that we will direct all our tenants to refuse the said coin from any person whatsoever; Of which that they may not be ignorant, we have sent them a copy of this advertisement, to be read to them by our stewards, receivers, etc. 268

The petition in effect adds another voice to the conglomeration of viewpoints that have previously been presented in the letter. Of course, no names actually follow this hypothetical petition; the Drapier is simply providing a template for what an effective petition might look like: he goes on to write, “I could wish, that a paper of this nature might be drawn up, and signed by two or three hundred principal gentlemen of this kingdom, and printed copies thereof sent to

267 Swift, 42-43.
268 Swift, 43.
their several tenants.”\textsuperscript{269} Because he describes himself as “no inconsiderable Shopkeeper in this town,” the reader may readily envision the Drapier as one such petitioner—as modeling for all “persons of considerable estates in this kingdom” the appropriate action to take.

Thus different social groups are urged to take different action in the Drapier’s Letters. Whereas in the first letter the Drapier had asked the common people to reject Wood’s coins during their daily transactions, he now requests that the landowners, i.e., those who are free to act as citizens and participate in public affairs, openly announce their resolution to do so in print. His explicit addressee, the printer, is assigned yet another role in this complicated social drama. Returning to the semi-personal mode of discourse with which he began the letter, the Drapier reprimands Harding in his concluding paragraph:

I must tell you in particular, Mr. Harding, that you are much to blame. Several hundred persons have enquired at your house for my ‘Letter to the Shopkeepers, etc.’ and you had none to sell them. Pray keep yourself provided with that letter, and with this; you have got very well by the former, but I did not then write for your sake, any more than I do now. Pray advertise both in every newspaper, and let it not be your fault or mine, if our countrymen will not take warning. I desire you likewise to sell them as cheap as you can.\textsuperscript{270}

Each person influenced by the issue, then, has a different social function to fulfill. The Drapier suggests that only when all do their respective parts may Wood’s coinage be defeated.

In the third letter, the Drapier escalates his call to action by singling out yet another social group: “the Nobility and Gentry of the Kingdom of Ireland.” Here the Drapier not only emphasizes the disparity in rank and situation between himself and his addressees, but also

\textsuperscript{269} Swift, 43-44.

\textsuperscript{270} Swift, 44.
discreetly reminds the Anglo-Irish gentry of their duty to society. Unlike the first letter, where he begins directly to the point and speaks to his addressees as equal, or the second letter, where the Drapier speaks confidently as a citizen concerned with public affairs, here he begins, as befitting his relative social position, with an explanation for his letter—almost a humble supplication: “Having already written two letters to people of my own level, and conditions, and having now very pressing occasion for writing a third; I thought I could not more properly address it than to your lordships and worships.”

He then offers an apology and a defense for presuming to address the lords and ladies of Ireland directly, and publicly:

This (may it please your lordships and worships) may seem a strange way of discoursing in an illiterate shopkeeper. I have endeavored (although without the help of books) to improve that small portion of reason which God hath pleased to give me, and when reason plainly appears before me, I cannot turn away my head from it. Thus for instance, if any lawyer should tell me that such a point were law, from which many gross palpable absurdities must follow, I would not, I could not believe him.

Here again the Drapier shifts his representation of his socio-economic situation. Of course, it is quite improbable that “an illiterate shopkeeper” should have composed these political pamphlets: recall that in the first letter he had distinguished himself from his illiterate readers. Yet Swift’s strategy here is to appeal to persons of status by arguing that the real facts of the situation are so simple that even an uneducated man can understand them. A few pages later, he refers to himself as “a poor ignorant shopkeeper, utterly unskilled in law,” and invokes the power of “plain

[^271]: Swift, 59.
[^272]: Swift, 60.
reason, unassisted by art, cunning or eloquence.” Assuming this humble position, he then provokes his upper-class readers’ indignation—and their egos—with a series of pounding rhetorical questions:

Were not the people of Ireland born as free as those of England? How have they forfeited their freedom? Is not their Parliament as fair a representative of the people as that of England? And hath not their Privy-council as great or a greater share in the administration of public affairs? Are they not subjects of the same King? Does not the same sun shine on them? And have they not the same God for their protector? Am I a freeman in England, and do I become a slave in six hours by crossing the Channel?

Whereas in the first letter the Drapier had discussed the economic realities of the common person’s daily lives and in the second letter he had spoken as a free and public citizen, now he appeals, somewhat slyly, to the Anglo-Irish ruling class’s sense of dignity and pride. The final pages of the letter include repeated overtures that make explicit the Drapier’s humble social position with regard to his audience: “I must beg leave to caution your lordships and worships in one particular. . . . I must now desire your lordships and worships that you give great allowance for this long undigested paper. . . . I will conclude with my humble desire and request. . . . That your lordships and worships would please to order a declaration to be drawn up,” etc. He concludes with a final request that his audience follow the advice of his previous letter, to draw up a public declaration announcing their intention to boycott Wood’s copper coins. The Drapier then ends the letter with a courteous signature: “I am with the greatest respect, (May it please your lordships and worships) Your most dutiful and obedient servant, M. B.”

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273 Swift, 64.
274 Swift, 67.
Now, after three letters that not only demonstrate the respective duties of three distinct sectors of Irish society, but also publicly perform the appropriate manners in which the different social classes should address one another, the Drapier has laid the groundwork for the tour de force of the series: the fourth letter, titled *A Letter to the Whole People of Ireland*, published on October 13, 1724. The letter begins with the address, “My dear countrymen,” and concludes with the signature, “I am, my dear countrymen, Your loving fellow-subject, fellow-sufferer and humble servant. M. B.” The emphasis on the fellowship of suffering serves to unite the Irish people as a whole; whereas the previous letters spoke to the Protestants in Ireland—the business owners, farmers, landowners, and nobility, here the Drapier enlarges the circle of his rhetorical reach to include all those who suffer under English rule in Ireland, including the disenfranchised Catholic population. Indeed, the letter’s final plea that the Irish “be left to possess our brogues and potatoes in peace” refers directly to the native Catholics, who were closely associated with brogues and potatoes in the popular imagination. As Fabricant argues,

The internal logic of the Fourth Letter demands that “the Whole People of Ireland” include the Catholic population, even though existing political conditions demanded that the latter be excluded. . . . The Drapier cannot explicitly incorporate the Catholics into this expanded conception of nationhood, but in a sense he does sneak them in through a

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275 By this time, Swift’s authorship of the *Drapier’s Letters* had become a well-known fact. Two weeks after the publication of the fourth letter, on October 27, 1724, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland issued a formal proclamation ordering the discovery of the Drapier’s identity. Alongside the proclamation, this Biblical verse was widely circulated: “And the people said unto Saul, shall Jonathan die, who had wrought this great salvation in Israel? God forbid: as the Lord liveth there shall not one hair of his head fall to the ground; for he hath wrought with God this day: So the people rescued Jonathan that he died not.” See Scott, 96.

276 See Fabricant and Mohany, xxi.
series of displacements in which religious divisions are replaced by class differences that are at least somewhat more assimilable into a national ideal.\textsuperscript{277}

The Catholic population does seem to be at the foremost of the Drapier’s mind in this letter, as he begins by addressing a rumor, spread by Wood in London, that “the Papists in Ireland have entered into an association against his coin.”\textsuperscript{278} To this, the Drapier responds sardonically, “they [the Papists] never once offered to stir in the matter.” He goes on to explain that Wood’s rumor attempts to “[stigmatize] in a lump under the name of ‘Papists’” the many different groups that are central to the functioning of Irish society: “the Two Houses of Parliament, the Privy-council, the great number of corporations, the lord mayor and aldermen of Dublin, the grand juries, and principal gentlemen of several counties.”\textsuperscript{279} Thus, against Wood’s attempt to depict the Irish people as one “lump,” with one (intending to be disparaging) identity, the Drapier asserts that theirs is a well-stratified community, where every person properly fulfills their social role.

Within the argumentation of this letter, the Drapier considers, in turn, two conceptions of the community on behalf of whom he speaks: the Irish nation as one collective society and the Irish people as the conglomeration of disparate social groups. The two ideas are presented as simultaneously valid. Following the initial address, “My dear countrymen,” within the first two paragraphs he describes the Irish as “A people long used to hardships . . . [who] look upon themselves as creatures at mercy,” “a kingdom [which has been subjected to] that poverty and lowness of spirit,” and a “kingdom so firmly united in a point of great importance”\textsuperscript{280}—thus including all Irishmen, regardless of their status under English rule, under his opening

\textsuperscript{277} Fabricant, “Speaking for the Irish Nation,” 357.
\textsuperscript{278} Swift, 101.
\textsuperscript{279} Swift, 102.
\textsuperscript{280} Swift, 101. My emphasis.
appellation. He also insists, however, on the specificity of the Irish community’s composition: in criticizing the representation of Wood’s patent in London newspapers by “newsmongers,” he pointedly mentions a London paper published in Dublin by “some obscure printer (and probably with no good design.”\textsuperscript{281} This “obscure printer” is, of course, in direct contrast to the named printer Mr. Harding, whom the Drapier had addressed in the second letter and whose reputation was well established within the community to whom the Drapier speaks. In other words, the Drapier does not envision an abstract umbrella of “Irishness” that envelops his addressees; this is a community structured by concrete social relationships and individual interactions rooted in everyday life.

Instead of a common national identity, what unites the occupants of Ireland is a common interest. The Drapier sarcastically remarks that when Wood’s patent is enacted, a “jolly crew” will be sent from England, “of lords and squires, and pensioners of both sexes, and officers civil and military.” Once these individuals have arrived in Ireland, they will live together with the present occupants “as merry and sociable as beggars.”\textsuperscript{282} All living on the land will be united in poverty, regardless of their origin, occupation, or status. As the Drapier goes on to state, “money is neither Whig nor Tory, neither of town nor country party.”\textsuperscript{283} Money—or self-interest—will unite “people of all ranks, parties and denominations,” so that

There is one comfortable circumstance in this universal opposition to Mr. Wood, that the people sent over hither from England to fill up our vacancies ecclesiastical, civil and

\textsuperscript{281} Swift, 101.
\textsuperscript{282} Swift, 108.
\textsuperscript{283} Swift, 108.
military, are all on our side: Money, the great divider of the world, hath by a strange revolution, been the great uniter of a most divided people.\textsuperscript{284} Money, so powerful that it brings even the English in Ireland to the Drapier’s side, is the common thread that connects people of different affiliations in Ireland. Indeed, the Drapier, reasons that “the true English people of Ireland” will first refuse Wood’s half-pence, though “the Irish will do so too whenever they are asked.”\textsuperscript{285} From this line of argumentation, the pre-recognition of the fundamentally fragmented state of Irish society is an integral part of the Drapier’s effort to unite his people.

Instead of arguing that the Irish are beholden to a common national identity, the Drapier stresses their direct allegiance to George I. This idea comprises his case that Ireland is neither subordinate to, nor dependent upon, England:

\begin{quote}
I M. B. Drapier . . . I declare, next under God, I depend only on the King my sovereign, and on the laws of my own country, and I am so far from depending upon the people of England, that if they should ever rebel against my sovereign (which God forbid) I would be ready at the first command from His Majesty to take arms against them.\textsuperscript{286}
\end{quote}

By implication, each individual person living in Ireland is a direct subject of the King. The obligation to the King, which the Drapier presents as an unquestionable duty of the highest order, sits uneasily with the idea of a common Irish national identity. In the course of his reasoning the Drapier certainly posits “we” against “them”—as when, speaking of the English, he states, “We have indeed obliged ourselves to have the same king with them, and consequently they are

\textsuperscript{284} Swift, 111.
\textsuperscript{285} Swift, 119.
\textsuperscript{286} Swift, 114.
oblighed to have the same king with us,” or, “They look upon us as a sort of savage Irish.” 287 Yet the distinction between the two groups is made not in order to reveal their differences, but to make an argument for their essential sameness and equality. Only thus can the Drapier finally tell his reader, “by the laws of God, of Nature, of Nations, and of your own country, you are and ought to be as free a people as your brethren in England.” 288

I will consider one last letter in the series, the “Letter to the Right Honourable the Lord Viscount Molesworth,” which Swift wrote during the climax of the Wood controversy. 289 Though published and intended for the reading public, the Drapier explicitly addresses this letter to specific individuals—first Harding the printer, in a prefatory note, then Lord Molesworth. His arguments for freedom of speech as well as opposition to Wood’s patent are couched within the terms of the personal relationships that he has with the two men. These relationships must be understood in two senses. The first is founded on the particular experiences that the Drapier shares with the two men, and which he references in the letter, i.e., the previous relationship between the individuals M. B. Drapier and John Harding, and that between M. B. Drapier and Robert Molesworth. The second is their social meaning: the relationship between a Drapier and a Printer, and that between a Drapier and a member of the Irish nobility. Together, they remind the reader of the Drapier’s letters that they are part of an audience that is a complex social network, comprised of different social actors.

287 Swift, 113, 116.
288 Swift, 115.
289 Though chronologically the sixth letter that Swift wrote, after a private letter to the Lord Chancellor Middleton in October 1724, this letter to Molesworth was the fifth letter published, in December 1724. It is also the last one published as a pamphlet sheet. The Middleton letter was only published in 1735, in Faulkner’s collected edition of Swift’s works. In the volume, it is signed “J. S.,” whereas all other letters are printed as “By M. B. Drapier.” The final, seventh, letter, is addressed to “Both Houses of Parliament,” and also published in the Faulkner edition.
Molesworth was a member of both the English and Irish Parliaments, and an ally of the Drapier’s cause. In late 1724 it was becoming clear that Prime Minister Robert Walpole and the Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland, John Carteret, would soon agree on the cancellation of the patent. Still, Swift deemed this final public letter necessary, as a safeguard that the two men would not shift course; eight months after the letter’s publication, Wood’s patent was abolished. The letter has also often been read as a celebration of Harding’s release from prison. Though by this time Swift’s authorship was an open secret, he follows through on the fictional persona of the Drapier. A brief note titled “Directions to the Printer” prefaces the letter. Here Drapier apologizes to Harding for causing his imprisonment:

My custom is to dictate to a ‘prentice who can write in a feigned hand, and what is written we send to your house by a blackguard boy. And you will be my witness that I always desired you by a letter to take some good advice before you ventured to print. I am told indeed, that you did accordingly consult several very able persons, and even some who afterwards appeared against you: To which I can only answer, that you must either change your advisers, or determine to print nothing that comes from a Drapier.

He then requests Harding to not only deliver this letter to Molesworth but also print it, thus providing a justification for why this letter, primarily a defense of his motives for speaking publicly on Wood’s patent and ostensibly a private message for the Viscount, should be published as a pamphlet: “I desire you will send the enclosed letter [to Lord Molesworth]. but I would have it sent printed for the convenience of his Lordship’s reading, because this counterfeit hand of my ‘prentice is not very legible.”

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290 Oliver W. Ferguson, Jonathan Swift and Ireland (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1962), 128.
291 Swift, 160.
This letter, belatedly, serves as the Drapier’s formal self-introduction to his readers. It is also the letter in which Swift most revels in developing the Drapier’s fictional character. Like Mr. Spectator, the Drapier offers a narrative of his life, beginning with his education, “at a free school where [he] acquired some little knowledge in the Latin tongue,” and employment: first serving an “apprenticeship in London,” then setting up his own shop successfully. He states that he had learned to write, and reason logically, during his time in London, and proceeds to ironically remark,

This I will venture to say, that the boldest and most obnoxious words I ever delivered, would in England have only exposed me as a stupid fool, who went to prove that the sun shone in a clear summer’s day; and I have witnesses ready to depose that your lordship hath said and writ fifty times worse, and what is still an aggravation, with infinitely more wit and learning, and stronger arguments, so that as politics run, I do not know a person of more exceptionable principles than yourself; and if ever I shall be discovered, I think you will be bound in honour to pay my fine and support me in prison; or else I may chance to inform against you by way of reprisal.

Earlier in the letter the Drapier mentions a past encounter with Molesworth, reminiscing that the Viscount had once visited his shop and purchased some cloth. In claiming a personal acquaintance, he is able to justify this direct appeal to the nobleman. In this roundabout way, the Drapier defends the innate right of any man to express his opinion about public issues. In fact, that a shopkeeper should be induced to publish on the matter proves the blatant egregiousness of Wood’s patent: “The provocation must needs have been great, which could stir up an obscure

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292 Swift, 163.
293 Swift, 168.
indolent Drapier to become an author.\textsuperscript{294} In the same moment that he becomes a published author of letters, the Drapier enacts the formation of the community to which he claims himself a part, and in the process, articulates a common identity for his readers.

\textsuperscript{294} Swift, 170.
CHAPTER FOUR

Writing Privately, Publicly: the “Public” in Burke’s and Williams’s Open Letters

I. Open Letters, the Public, and Natural Feeling

The use of letters as public discourse in eighteenth-century England culminated in the Revolution Controversy, with many polemical works on the French revolution taking the form of “open letters.” These are letters written for the public that present themselves as private correspondence, wherein the letter writer addresses a friend who stands in for the actual reader. Thus the author accomplishes the seemingly impossible task of speaking directly and intimately to every individual member of a wide, heterogeneous reading audience. In this chapter, I will examine two of the earliest and most influential public responses to the French revolution: Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and Helen Maria Williams’s *Letters Written in France*, both published in November 1790.

What we know as the open letter seems to have fully emerged in its current form during the political debates of this period; it is surely not a coincidence that the earliest example in the *OED* is dated 1798. Both Burke’s and Williams’s open letters appeal to their reader-audience as a “public” with authority distinct from that of the state, in a vein similar to Habermas’s argument about the public sphere. And yet, these texts do not fit the ideal of critical-rational debate that is central to the Habermasian concept. Instead, by using the open letter, Burke and Williams seek to persuade their readers through appealing to the power of natural feelings and constructing their audience as a totalizing entity. Only thus can the single addressee of the letter stand in for a wide and heterogeneous readership. Though Burke and Williams stand on opposite ends of the political spectrum, their rhetorical strategies are oddly similar. They do not present themselves as
engaging in a debate comprising multiple extant views: rather, theirs is shown as the only possible view. Moreover, crucial to this strategy is the fact that they speak directly and intimately to each reader by presuming that every individual member of the public is equal to one another. Different from Swift’s Drapier, then, Burke’s and Williams’s open letters seek to erase the social distinctions of rank and status to make their political arguments.

Habermas’s definition of the public sphere “as the sphere of private people come together as a public” serves as a starting point for understanding how the open letter works.\(^{295}\) As Michael McKeon explains:

Habermas’s thesis depends entirely on the idea that what’s new about the public sphere is that it is a virtual space, a discursive realm of imagined collectivity where people “come together” in a sense far different from their traditional assembly in the *agora*, the public square, the meeting hall. . . . For Habermas, the indispensable means by which the public sphere coalesces as a virtual place are the public post, print culture, the periodical essay, and the like. But a moment’s reflection will suggest that the virtualization of the public sphere also depends on a reconceptualization of the faculty of the imagination as capable not only of fantasy and error but also of a remarkably powerful and productive sort of human solidarity.\(^{296}\)

Three key points stand out from McKeon’s parsing of Habermas’s concept—and the same are important for my argument about the open letter. First, the public sphere is only an idea: a virtual space, manifesting as “a discursive realm of imagined collectivity,” rather than actually existing in material places or historical practices of public communication—though, of course,

\(^{295}\) Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans., Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1989), 27.

\(^{296}\) Michael McKeon, “Parsing Habermas’s ‘Bourgeois Public Sphere,’” *Criticism* 46.2 (2004): 276.
Habermas’s discussions of eighteenth-century salons and coffeehouses appear to belie this fact and have given rise to much contestation. Bracketing the question of whether the public sphere ever really existed as a historical social space, it exists at the very least as a communicative structure in the open letter, which presumes a “public” made accessible through the mechanism of print: universally inclusive and comprising private persons who are understood to be equal, atomic individuals.

Second, McKeon notes that the “coming together” of people in the public sphere is qualitatively different from “their traditional assembly.” As I argued in chapter two, contrary to Habermas’s reading of the periodical, the assemblage of letters in the Spectator represents a network where each participant is only visible and distinguishable by his or her social role. Different from the open letter’s creation of a single public, the Spectator’s epistolary exchanges produce a vision of a social network in flux. Both modes of the public letter attend to the problem of speaking to stranger readers. However, the periodical’s letters revel in the quirks and idiosyncrasies of people, demonstrating the possibility of strangers existing together despite differences in social rank and status, while the open letter operates according to an ethos of direct communication between individuals who are understood to be “human beings,” all equal and fundamentally the same.

Third, beyond the conventional interpretation of the public sphere as affording rational-critical debate between individuals, McKeon explains that the “virtualization of the public

297 Thus social historians have taken much issue with the historical correctness of the concept, arguing that the bourgeois public sphere was never in fact universally inclusive, on the basis of gender or class. See, for example, Nancy Fraser, “What’s Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender,” New German Critique 35 (1985): 97-131; Joan Landes, Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1988); Geoff Eley, “Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century,” in Habermas and the Public Sphere, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1992), 289-339; Mary P. Ryan, Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880 (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990). Habermas himself says as much, when he addresses the difference between the English, French, and German public spheres. See Habermas, 36-37.
sphere” makes it possible to conceive of “a remarkably powerful and productive sort of human solidarity.” Habermas argues that the public sphere organizes itself through “bourgeois forms of social intercourse, closeness, and a morality played off against courtly convention,”—in other words, a presumed intimacy between individuals that is only possible when they are imagined to be essentially equal in status, or what Habermas calls “the parity of ‘common humanity.’”

Following this framework, I will show that the open letter’s ethos of direct communication operates in light of the assumption about “the parity of common humanity,” a logic by which the “public” is formed.

Scholars studying early Romanticism have located the last decades of the eighteenth century as an important period for the formation of the idea of the public sphere, found primarily in print. As Jon P. Klancher writes in a revision of his earlier dismissal of the Habermasian public sphere as an adequate concept to understand this period, the Romantic age is “‘the golden age of the public sphere’ in view of its rambunctious, far-reaching debates and public performances.” Writers of both radical and conservative leanings display a keen sense of audience, and often appeal to what Janet Todd calls the “quasi-political authority of the reading public.” The poetry and periodicals of this period conceive of literature not only as a virtual

298 Habermas, 35, 36.


public sphere but also “an engine of progress,” and many writers express their commitment to print culture as an institution that was central to the very existence of “British liberty.”

The English debate about the French Revolution took place against this background of writers’ growing recognition of their audience as a cohesive “public.” Like the political tracts of the English Civil War period, many notable contributions to this debate were written in letters. Burke’s *Reflections* was first presented to its readers as a letter: a piece of authentic correspondence with a young Frenchman who requested Burke’s opinion on the events in France. Submitted to print around the same time as Burke’s *Reflections*, Williams’s effusive first-person narrative of the French Revolution also appeared under the guise of letters to an intimate friend. Many of the most prominent British publications in support of the Revolution were written as letters. And, the two most important on the radical side presented themselves as public answers to Burke’s public letter: Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Men in a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke; Occasioned by his Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) and Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man: Being an Answer to Mr. Burke’s Attack on the French Revolution* (1791). Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*, in particular, follows the convention of letter writing in addressing her opponent directly and intimately. In addition, as Mary Favret explains, during this period, “politically charged letters in England and France appeared in innumerable pamphlets sold to the public under the guise of ‘An Open Letter to George III,’ ‘A Letter to a Noble Lord’ or . . . a bold ‘Letter to Citizen Robespierre.’”

Different from the political letters that I discussed in previous chapters, Burke’s and Williams’s letters are *open letters*. The form’s rhetorical conflation of the letter’s addressee and

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302 See Keen, 41-42, 27.
the real reader allows the writer to speak directly and intimately to the members of the public. These letters are important writings on the French Revolution not primarily for their veracity of record (though Williams’s eyewitness accounts were considered credible historical sources into the early decades of the nineteenth century), but because of their extraordinary ability to persuade and move the reader. Thus the critical consensus that “Burke and Williams share an affective approach to the Revolution that ultimately sets sensibility and sympathy above reason as the foundation of moral and political agency.” The emotional appeal of these texts is intimately related to their use of the open letter.

Moreover, Burke’s and Williams’s open letters depart from the earlier convention of political letters, which I discussed in chapter three, by presuming not only intimacy between author and reader, but also equality among readers. Within the text’s rhetorical structure, social rank and distinction lack significance, and a single individual may symbolically stand in for the public. Burke, in particular, was experimenting with a new way to use the letter for political writing. Before writing Reflections, he often used the genre of “letter to a prominent person”:

[A] form of public epistolary address which was a popular form of journalistic and political discourse between the late seventeenth and the early nineteenth centuries. Such letters provided writers outside the ‘inner circle’ of parliamentary decision-making with a means, albeit conventional, of seeking patronage or of calling the attention of an influential figure to a matter of political concern.


In place of this traditional, stratified understanding of society, *Reflections* displays an understanding of “a new, large, politicized, and socially inclusive constituency of readers: a public.” Of course, this wide inclusivity, as well as the text’s erasure of social distinction, runs counter to Burke’s political conservatism—a point that requires certain argumentative maneuvers, as apparent from my discussion of his treatment of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette in the next section.

The open letter may be compared to that of a printed sermon, in which a pastor speaks collectively, but also individually, to the members of his congregation. In fact, it is tempting to read Burke and Williams’s stances towards their readers as that of proselytizing. Printed sermons, which were popular in England from the first half of the sixteenth century through the eighteenth, were most likely modeled on St. Paul’s epistles to the Christian community. Yet, though they were indeed intended for a mass audience—and they often took the form of letters—a formal distinction between printed sermons and open letters is that the former categorically recognizes, and their rhetorical power often relies upon, a difference between the intended audience (“believers,” if I may) and the general reading audience. In other words, the difference lies in the presumed universality of the open letter’s message.

In thus reading the open letter, I approach the French Revolution as the historical juncture at which the open letter became a powerful form of modern political discourse, discovered to be useful for the affective mobilization of the mass public. The form establishes the modern ideal of direct communication. That Burke and Williams’s opposing responses were published in the

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306 Keane, 200. Keane proceeds to argue, “It is partly in resistance to the idea of the emergence of a broadly politicized public in England as well in France that Burke maintains the fictions of a single addressee in *Reflections.*” As I hope to show in the next section, however, rather than resisting the idea of a “ politicized public,” the rhetorical form of *Reflections* hinges upon an understanding of the public as an entity composed of indefinite individuals who are just like Burke’s single addressee.

same month of the same year is particularly of interest, since this shows that neither one was influenced by the other. In other words, despite their political differences, they serendipitously perform similar epistolary monologues at the same historical moment. Both Reflections and Letters from France derive rhetorical power by proclaiming to convey emotive and interiorized "truths," and presuming to speak to every reader as an equal, “enlightened,” individual. Both texts were also important in establishing the letter—with its “affinity with feeling”—as the preferred mode for “narrating and debating” the French Revolution in England. Though, to be clear, not all public political letters in this period are open letters.

Previous criticism of this period's political letters have generally focused on how the letter, as a malleable “formless form” and conventionally understood as a private and feminine mode of writing, has the potential to complicate the binary divides of public and private, masculine and feminine, political and domestic, etc. The most influential account in this vein is Mary Favret’s Romantic Correspondences, which argues that the idea of letters as a sentimental, feminine, and private genre cloaks its use for revolutionary politics within Romantic writing; as Favret argues, “The letter in Romanticism hints at a correspondence between public and private experience, and that correspondence continually revises—and disrupts—fixed images or narratives. What the individual writes, the masses read; experience is translated from the private to the public domain, and back again.” This mode of criticism has persisted in the extant criticism about Burke’s and Williams’s letters. For example, commenting on Burke’s choice of

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309 See Jane Hodson, “‘The Strongest but Most Undecorated Language’: Mary Robinson’s Rhetorical Strategy in Letter to the Women of England,” Women’s Writing 9.1 (2002): 87-105. Hodson argues that by the 1810s, “the political letter had been severely compromised in the course of the French Revolution debate, and ran the risk of seeming either uncontrolled or insincere.” See Hodson, 92.

310 Favret, 9.
the letter, John Whale writes, “Burke revised his mode of address to produce the famous political letter which is simultaneously public and private in its address, rational and sentimental in its register, and classical and ‘organic’ in its form.”\textsuperscript{311}\n
Favret also argues elsewhere, “the structure of Williams’s \textit{Letters from France} defies any careful separation of interior and exterior, private and public, sentimental and political.”\textsuperscript{312}

The poststructuralist, “de-binarification” argument probes the letter genre’s ability to confuse and dismantle (and take advantage of) the extant cultural distinction between public and private. As my earlier chapters argue, however, since the late seventeenth century, public letters have modeled different ways of imagining relationships with the strangers that make up a public. In other words, with regard to Burke’s and Williams’s letters about the French Revolution, I agree that these texts are both private and public, yet I am also interested in moving beyond the poststructuralist argument about letters.

To do so, I focus on the form of the open letter. The \textit{OED} defines an “open letter” as “a letter addressed to a particular person or persons but intended for a more general readership, as by deliberate publication in a newspaper or journal.” In common usage, an open letter is generally understood to be a letter that is explicitly addressed to one or more individuals, but implicitly intended for a general public:

Open letters . . . have a double character, and it must not only be asked what their intention is with regard to the explicit addressee, but also with regard to the implicit addressees. They deal with sociopolitical issues, often as a protest, an appeal, a


justification, or an affirmation, and they are meant to circulate and have an effect on the public.”

That an open letter concerns public issues and aims to reach a general public thorough a specific addressee seems readily apparent. But how does it do so?

I have argued that any public letter must be understood as a framed text due to the formal distinction that it makes between the text’s internal addressee and the implied reader. Therefore, public letters always constitute a mediated (i.e., indirect) type of discourse. The open letter, however, disguises its mediated nature, modeling direct communication—or, to be more precise—a simulation of direct communication—by having the internal addressee stand in for the implied reader. The open letter is a medium that mediates without seeming to mediate. The author of an open letter uses the form to directly speak to you, the reader. The very modifier “open” implies the display of what belongs within—secrets, private thoughts, genuine feelings—without. Thus the author performs an (seemingly impossible) intimate relationship with the reading public. My readings of Burke’s and Williams’s open letters show that the form presumes a transparent and egalitarian relationship between the individuals involved in the process of communication: an ideal grounded on modernity, where “A society permeated by relations of personalized hierarchy had gone over fully to one based on impersonal equality.”

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315 Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004), 152. The French Revolution is the historical event most often associated with the advent of modernity. For example, in discussing Burke’s counter-revolutionary politics, Katey Castellano writes, “If the French Revolution is a pivotal point in history as the initiator or accelerator of modernity, it is during this period of rapid modernization that the ‘anti-modern’ political position emerges as a site of resistance to industrialization, urbanization, materialism, and utilitarianism.” See Castellano, “Burke’s ‘Revolutionary Book’: Conservative Politics and Revolutionary Aesthetics in the Reflections,” *Romanticism on the Net* 45 (2007): 1.
In her discussion of the political potential of letters in Romantic writing, Favret distinguishes between the secretive letters of the *ancien régime* (the *lettre de cachet*) and political letters propagating the revolutionary cause: “In the struggle over symbols, both pro- and counter-revolutionary groups recognized the value of the letter: the French aristocracy’s *lettre de cachet*, the hidden letter of absolute law, became a symbol of tyranny, in contrast to the “open letter,” symbol of representative government and evidence of a tolerant, equitable system of justice—and of communication.”³¹⁶ Favret’s description of the open letter characterizes it as a democratic genre, underscoring the fact that because an open letter by definition makes itself available to every person, it is an agent of revolutionary change.

It may be said, then, that the open letter became a powerful symbol for pro-revolutionary groups because it models the modern ethos of direct communication. Yet, as I hope to show through a reading of Burke’s *Reflections*, the ideal of direct communication is not exclusively linked to radical politics. In other words, the open letter is an agent of revolutionary change not in terms of political systems, but with regards to cultural ideals about communication—and by extension, how a person may relate or speak to the strangers among whom he or she lives. The open letter presents direct communication as taking place between persons considered first and foremost as individuals, with little regard to their public roles or social rank. In this process, all individuals are treated as private persons, and it is their “humanity” to which the writer of an open letter appeals. Moreover, in both Burke’s and Williams’s open letters, the idea of the conjugal family plays a central role. This is probably because the idea of the conjugal family as the basic unit of society presumes a certain kind of—what Habermas calls “bourgeois”—human subjectivity.

³¹⁶ Favret, 9. Though Favret calls attention to the symbolic importance of the “open letter” to this period, this is the extent to which Favret elaborates upon the idea.
Though my understanding of the meaning of a public sphere largely follows Habermas’s theorization, I do not share his idealization of “rational-critical debate.” Rather, my reading of Burke’s and Williams’s open letters suggests that “rational-critical debate” and the existence of the “public” as an entity (separate from state authority) may be fundamentally contradictory ideas. When Burke and Williams use the open letter to model a new kind of intimate, affective relationship with readers, they mobilize the “public” for their respective political visions. In the process, the specificity of the social position of each individual who makes up this “public” becomes irrelevant. In other words, to address oneself directly to a “public” through a single individual, as one does in an open letter, is to imagine that “public” comprising multiple individuals who are indistinguishable from one another.

It is important to note that the open letter merely simulates direct and unmediated communication; it is still framed discourse. Here Frances Burney’s preface to The Wanderer (1814) may serve as a brief illustration. Though often called a prefatorial dedication to her father, Burney’s preface is an open letter: written ostensibly to her father but really intended for the reading public. Titled “To Doctor Burney,” it is a strange combination of formal and informal writing. The preface begins with the stiff formality of the public address, “To Doctor Burney, FRS [Fellow of the Royal Society] and correspondent to the institute of France,” words typeset apart from the main text by a large blank space. Yet, though Burney forgoes the affectionate address that one might imagine belonging in a personal letter (e.g., “my dear Papa”), she repeatedly addresses her father directly and intimately, as if in fact writing a personal letter. In reminiscing about the self-professed unwitting beginning of her literary career, she confesses: “you, dear Sir, well know [how unconsciously I began].” In declaring that her years in Paris were

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spent peacefully and without political activity, she confides, “To hear this fact thus publicly attested, you, dear Sir, will rejoice; and few, I trust, amongst its readers, will disdain to feel some little sympathy in your satisfaction.” And, as befits a personal letter, Burney repeatedly references private conversation amongst family friends as a matter of fact.

Burney herself sometimes moves seamlessly from the intimate tone of the second-person direct address (“you, dear Sir, will rejoice”) to a third-person statement clearly intended for the eyes of the general public (“few . . . amongst its readers, will disdain to feel some little sympathy in your satisfaction”). In doing so, Burney effectively displaces what she imagines as her father’s paternal sentiments (his satisfaction about her avoidance of political activity) onto each and every one of her readers. This rhetorical displacement onto the public of her father’s “natural feelings” occurs repeatedly throughout the preface. When, towards the end of her “dedication,” Burney writes, “And now, dear Sir, in leaving you to the perusal of these volumes, how many apprehensions would be hushed, might I hope that they would revive in your feelings the partial pleasure with which you cherished their predecessors!”—she addresses herself as much to the general reading public as to her father.

II. “To love the little platoon we belong to . . .”

Burke’s Reflections is best known as one of the key documents, if not the founding text, of the modern conservative movement.³¹⁸ Little discussed, however, is the fact that this seminal text began its life as a private letter. In late 1789, a few months after the fall of the Bastille, a

young French admirer wrote two successive letters to Burke, requesting the statesman’s response to the recent events in France:

Ah! Tell me, you whom I look to as a guide and master, tell me that the events which have taken place have been the necessary consequences of a change which circumstances rendered indispensable! Ah, tell me that I may hope to see my country worthy to enjoy liberty, English liberty!\footnote{319}

The young inquisitor most likely expected a letter of enthusiastic support, since Burke was then well known as a progressive Whig politician: he had defended the American Revolution and openly criticized Britain’s rule in India and Ireland. Although Burke began composing a response almost immediately, he was initially undecided about his position. His early reaction towards the French Revolution seems to have been a mixture of admiration and doubt: writing a letter in August 1789, he muses, “The spirit it is impossible not to admire; but the old Parisian ferocity has broken out in a shocking manner.”\footnote{320} During the twelve months between the Frenchman’s letter and the publication of Reflections, Burke composed his answer slowly and painstakingly. He also collected information on the French Revolution from numerous sources, including from his friends then residing in Paris (including his later opponent, Thomas Paine).\footnote{321}

\footnote{319}The letters are printed in H. V. F. Somerset, “A Burke Discovery,” English 8, no. 46 (1951): 171-78.


\footnote{321}Burke’s critics often mock his hyperbolic portrayal of the events in France, suggesting Burke was misinformed. Yet Burke read French well and received timely updates from his French contacts. J. C. D. Clark notes, “His main opponents in England were not necessarily better informed about French affairs, and often argued from vaguely-conceived abstract principles rather than from knowledge or practical experience of that country.” J. C. D. Clark, “Introduction” to Reflections on the Revolution in France: A Critical Edition (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 45.
By the time it appeared in print in November 1790, Burke’s pamphlet had been greatly anticipated, and it was an immediate best seller.\(^{322}\)

When the text was finally presented to the public, Burke kept the traces of its origin as correspondence. The title page of the first edition reads: *Reflections on the Revolution in France and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to That Event. In a Letter Intended to have been Sent to a Gentleman in Paris.* It appears, then, that Burke deemed this information important; the lengthy title also tells us that the author is as concerned about events in England as he is about events in France. The text begins with a brief note explaining the circumstances of its composition:

> It may not be unnecessary to inform the Reader, that the following Reflections had their origin in a correspondence between the Author and a very young gentleman at Paris, who did him the honor of desiring his opinion upon the important transactions [the French Revolution], which then, and ever since, have so much occupied the attention of all men.\(^{323}\)

Having described the text’s provenance, Burke explains (continuing to refer to himself in the third person) that after having devoted some time to the task,

> [H]e found that what he had undertaken not only far exceeded the measure of a letter, but that its importance required rather a more detailed consideration than at that time he had any leisure to bestow upon it. However, having thrown down his first thoughts in the

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\(^{322}\) For the text’s composition history and reception, see James T. Boulton, “The Publication of Burke’s Reflections and the Subsequent Controversy: A Survey,” in *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke* (London: Routledge, 1963), 75-96, and Clark, 53-68. Clarke quotes a sarcastic commentator of the time: “the moment that Mr. Burke’s pamphlet was announced, Dodsley’s shop was crowded with purchasers; the industry of the printers could scarce satisfy the impatience of the public, and the runners of the booksellers groaned beneath the weight of the Right Honorable Gentleman’s composition.” See Clark, 68.

form of a letter, and indeed when he sat down to write, having intended it for a private letter, he found it difficult to change the form of address, when his sentiments had grown into a greater extent, and had received another direction. A different plan, he is sensible, might be more favorable to a commodious division and distribution of his matter.324

Burke offers this prefatory note as an apology of sorts, for the work appearing in the form of a letter—a genre, he seems to suggest, not suitable for the public discussion of such an important topic. Yet Burke does not (or cannot) erase the text’s epistolary history, no less because, as he says, he “found it difficult to change the form of address,” i.e., the forms of address within the text that are specific to letter writing. It is curious to think about why, while acknowledging the incongruity of his choice of form with his topic, Burke, a skilled rhetorician, nonetheless emphasizes the epistolary nature of this treatise—not only in this prefatorial note, but also, as we shall see, in the body of text.

Unlike Burke’s earlier political writings that take the form of “letter to a prominent person,” Reflections is presented as—well, reflections in a letter. The fact that this is a public letter seems to have caused some anxiety on its author’s part. Within the text Burke sometimes draws attention to the text’s epistolary form and pleads for the reader’s patience. He follows through on the conceit of the letter as intended for his single correspondent, yet often seems to address the general reader instead: “Indulging myself in the freedom of epistolary discourse, I beg leave to throw out my thoughts, and express my feelings, just as they arise in my mind, with very little attention to formal method.”325 Towards the conclusion of his long discourse, he apologizes, “This letter is grown to a great length. . .”326 Despite Burke’s expressions of
reservation and his frequent apologies, the text enjoyed enormous popularity, and the genre was indeed “favorable to a commodious division and distribution of his matter.” In fact, the form of the open letter was so effective that Burke used it again in writing *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* a year later, in 1791.

Early in the text, Burke makes explicit the structure of an open letter, telling his French correspondent, “I wish to communicate more largely, what was at first intended only for your private satisfaction.” The main text of *Reflections* begins with “Dear Sir,” and employs the second-person direct address throughout. Through the frequent uses of “you,” the presumably English reader is constantly reminded that the text is addressed to—and ostensibly written for—a Frenchman. Yet the reader is also directly spoken to, through this internal addressee, as the “you” that the author aims to persuade. Moreover, at the same time, when Burke uses the pronoun “we” or “us”—and he does so frequently—the English reader knows that he or she is without question intended as a member of that collective (and, as Burke presents it, righteous) “we” or “us.” The rhetorical effect of the text, then, relies on the alternating positions in which Burke assumes his readers to occupy: sometimes the “you” that is directly spoken to, sometimes the “you” that stands outside of the presented discourse, and other times the “we” that stands together with the author.

Scholars interested in the rhetorical strategies of *Reflections* have diverged on the opinion of where Burke positions his reader: James T. Boulton argues, “Burke is placing every reader in the position of De Pont [the young Frenchman], addressing each one with urgent directness, and demanding concurrence rather eliciting agreement,” while David McCracken contends that “[Burke’s] strategy is to maneuver his real audience, who ostensibly agree with him and who are

327 Ibid., 154.
characterized as true Englishmen, into a position behind Burke the speaker, to overhear, as it were, their fellow Englishman convey his reflections in letter form across the English Channel. As I have argued and hope to show, however, the affective power of the text derives from its ability to do both—and it is the form of the open letter that allows Burke to create this ambivalence, to alternately place his presumed reader in the different positions: the intended addressee, a neutral reader who observes the presented dialogue, or an Englishman with “natural feelings” just like the author himself.

Burke begins his long discourse with a series of short, dialogic statements that reinforce the epistolary nature of his text. These are worth quoting at length, I believe, because they are revealing of Burke’s rhetorical strategies and the way in which he initially sets up an intimate, direct relationship with his addressee (the Frenchman), and then later redefines the “you” to whom he speaks to include his English readers.

The first paragraph concerns the circumstances of composition. By using intimate address, Burke reminds his readers what follows is solicited response, stressing that he writes neither for fame nor political advancement. In these first lines, through the second person “you,” he sets up a personal relationship with his correspondent. Yet, when Burke considers his reputation, he also speaks directly to the general public. Thus the “you” carries double meaning:

Dear Sir,

You are pleased to call again, and with some earnestness, for my thoughts on the late proceedings in France. I will not give you reason to imagine, that I think my sentiments


of such value as to wish myself to be so solicited about them. They are of too little
consequence to be very anxiously either communicated or withheld. . . . I wrote neither
for nor from any description of men. . . . My errors, if any, are my own. My reputation
alone is to answer for them.

In the next paragraph, Burke declares his main purpose: to critique the events that have
transpired in France. He introduces a concept that will play a key role in the arguments that
follow: “rational liberty.” Here the individual “you” of the first paragraph expands to include the
collective “you” of all French persons. The English reader also moves from the “you” to whom
the letter writer directly speaks, to a position that stands outside of the presented discourse—thus
given the choice between positions:

You see, Sir, by the long letter I have transmitted to you, that, though I do most heartily
wish that France may be animated by a spirit of rational liberty, and that I think you
bound, in all honest policy, to provide a permanent body, in which that spirit may reside,
and an effectual organ, by which it may act, it is my misfortune to entertain great doubts
concerning several material points in your late transactions.

The next paragraph moves on to link the events in France to England by mentioning the public
responses of two London patriotic societies. This is another key point in the arguments that will
proceed to follow: that though these groups claim the authority to speak for England as a whole,
our letter writer does not belong to these groups, nor does he agree with their opinions. The
suggestion, built upon the intimacy between letter writer and addressee previously established, is
that his (English) reader should not either. Thus the “you” and “I” of the previous paragraphs are
now posited against a third group of individuals.
You imagined, when you wrote last, that I might possibly be reckoned among the approvers of certain proceedings in France, from the solemn public seal of sanction they have received from two clubs of gentlemen in London, called the Constitutional Society, and the Revolution Society.\footnote{Burke, 145.}

In this way, Burke moves his reader between different positions, depending on the line of argument that he is presently making. Sometimes the reader is addressed as someone whom the letter writer aims to persuade; other times the reader is automatically included as a part of a group to which the letter writer belongs, and posited against those with whom the letter writer disagrees. This rhetorical strategy is employed throughout Burke’s long discourse. A few pages into the letter, Burke asserts, “I flatter myself that I love a manly, moral, regulated liberty.” He then moves from the “I” to the “we,” finally juxtaposing the two with a third “they”:

> When I see the spirit of liberty in action, I see a strong principle at work; and this, for a while, is all I can possibly know of it. The wild gas, the fixed air is plainly broke loose: but we ought to suspend our judgment until the first effervescence is a little subsided, till the liquor is cleared, and until we see something deeper than the agitation of a troubled and frothy surface. I must be tolerably sure, before I venture publicly to congratulate men upon a blessing, that they have really received one. . . . The effect of liberty to individuals is, that they may do what they please: We ought to see what it will please them to do, before we risk congratulations, which may be soon turned into complaints. . . . Considerate people before they declare themselves will observe the use which is made of power; and particularly of so trying a thing as new power in new persons, of whose principles, tempers, and dispositions, they have little or no experience, and in situations
where those who appear the most stirring in the scene may possibly not be the real movers.\textsuperscript{331}

The individual “I” who begins by merely casually asserting his personal opinion transforms into the “we,” a collective pronoun that is presented as representing “considerate people,” i.e., those who judge with prudence and common sense. The proper judgment of this collective “we” is further reinforced with the introduction of the “they,” those who “may do what they please” and “have little or no experience.”

In my view, what matters is not whether Burke uses these pronouns rhetorically or with reference to real groups of individuals, or whether the same pronouns consistently refer to the same people. For example, in the above quoted passage, when Burke writes “Considerate people before they declare themselves,” the “they” actually refers to those with proper judgment, not those who are act rashly. More important, I believe, is that the accumulated use of so many personal pronouns has the effect of confusing and manipulating the reader into finally submitting to agree with the letter writer’s position. In this sense, the comment of one critic that Burke uses the language of sensibility to “seduce his reader into submission to his will” takes on new meaning.\textsuperscript{332}

One of Burke’s main contentions is that contrary to the assertions of its English supporters, the French Revolution does not follow the spirit of the English revolutions of the 1640s and 1688. Thus he endeavors to prove (by way of somewhat convoluted reasoning) that the Glorious Revolution of 1688 did not contradict the principle of hereditary succession by law,

\textsuperscript{331} Ibid., 151-53. My emphases.
\textsuperscript{332} Keane writes with regard to Burke’s use of the language of sensibility, “From its earliest reception, Burke’s Reflections was read as a libertine’s letter in a sentimental envelope, as though, like Sterne’s Yorick, Burke was using sympathy and the immutable reflexes of the body to seduce his reader into submission to his will.” Keane, 202.
i.e., that William of Orange did not ascend the English throne by the people's choice, but through
the rule of inheritance. He then writes,

The dislike I feel to revolutions, the signals for which have so often been given from
pulpits, the spirit of change that is gone abroad; the total contempt which prevails with
you, and may come to prevail with us, of all ancient institutions . . . all these
consideration make it not unadvisable, in my opinion, to call back our attention to the
ture principles of our own domestic laws; that you, my French friend, should begin to
know, and that we should continue to cherish them. We ought not, on either side of the
water, to suffer ourselves to be imposed upon by the counterfeit wares which some
persons, by a double fraud, export to you in illicit bottoms, as raw commodities of British
growth though wholly alien to our soil, in order afterwards to smuggle them back again
into this country, manufactured after the newest Paris fashion of an improved liberty.333

Reading these few sentences, the reader seesaws between the “you” and “we”—between the
positions of the French correspondent and a collective English identity. For the English reader
who agrees with Burke, identification with the English “we” or “us” is only natural. For the
English reader who may possibly agree with Burke’s adversary, he or she is not only directly
spoken to through the use of “you” to persuade, but also constantly reminded that to side with the
“you” is to betray one’s own country—to belong with those suspicious, unknown, and
anonymous “some persons.” Burke aims to persuade by making his “French friend” stand in for
all potential readers, and contrasting the French’s imagined response with the English, “natural,”
way to think, feel, and judge.

333 Burke, 175. My emphases.
The repetition of personal pronouns is central to Burke’s rhetorical strategy. In arguing that the Revolution of 1688 adheres to the rule of inheritance, he moves swiftly from addressing his French friend to speaking directly to his English readers: “If you are desirous of knowing the spirit of our constitution . . . pray look . . . in our histories, in our records, in our acts of parliament, and journals of parliament.”334 Then he moves back again to addressing his French correspondent, and by extension, the French, collectively:

You might, if you pleased, have profited of our example, and have given to your recovered freedom a correspondent dignity. Your privileges . . . Your constitution . . . You might have repaired those walls; you might have built on those old foundations [of your constitution]. . . . You had all these advantages in your ancient states; but you chose to act as if you had never been moulded into civil society, and had every thing to begin anew.

You began ill, because you began by despising every thing that belonged to you. You set up your trade without a capital. . . .335

And so on. Burke uses an almost accusatory tone, as if he were face to face with his correspondent. In addition, here he speaks as much to the French as to his English readers, reminding the latter of the importance of venerating their own ancient institutions, and suggesting a hypothetical situation where England might have followed in France’s steps.

At other times, Burke uses the repetition as well as confusion of personal pronouns to invoke a sense of indignation as well as sense of English solidarity in his readers:

I see that your example is held out to shame us. I know that we are supposed a dull sluggish race, rendered passive by finding our situation tolerable; and prevented by a mediocrity of freedom from ever attaining to its full perfection. Your leaders in France

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334 Ibid., 181. My emphases.
335 Ibid., 185-87. My emphases.
began by affecting to admire, almost to adore, the British constitution; but as they advanced they came to look upon it with a sovereign contempt.\textsuperscript{336}

Here Burke evokes the age-old enmity between England and France: speaking directly to his French correspondent and in effect drawing a line between his correspondent and himself (and his English readers),\textsuperscript{337} he writes, “Formerly your affairs were your own concern only. We felt for them as men; but we kept aloof from them, because we were not citizens of France. But when we see the model held up to ourselves, we must feel as Englishmen, and feeling, we must provide as Englishmen.”\textsuperscript{338} In contrast to Burke’s underscoring of a shared “Englishness” with his readers, many English supporters of the French Revolution express a sense of universal fellowship that transcends national identity: Richard Price writes in 1788, “I have learnt to consider myself more as a citizen of the world than of any particular country, and to such a person every advance that the cause of public liberty makes must be agreeable.”\textsuperscript{339}

As I have considered in chapters one and two, the public letter is a useful form for producing social circles of inclusion and exclusion. The open letter’s ethos of direct communication would seem to presume a public discourse that is universally inclusive. However, Burke’s careful and strategic use of personal pronouns—beginning with the “I-you” dyad, expanding to the plural forms “we” and “you,” then introducing a contrasting third-person “they”—manipulates this “open” form to create distinctions between groups of individuals. Though both Burke and Williams use the form to speak intimately and directly to a mass audience, Burke does so in order to appeal to his readers’ sense of Englishness, based on what he

\textsuperscript{336} Ibid., 213. My emphases.

\textsuperscript{337} A comprehensive history of how the English constructed France as their enemy may be found in Linda Colley, \textit{Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

\textsuperscript{338} Burke, 253. My emphases.

\textsuperscript{339} In a letter to Thomas Jefferson; quoted in Clark, 45.
constructs as “true feeling”: a natural emotional response to events. Williams, in contrast, directly speaks to every one of her readers as an intimate friend, thus creating a vision of global citizenship where every person is equal to the next. Put another way, the appeal to feeling and sensibility is central to both Burke’s and Williams’s use of the open letter. Yet Burke insists on true feeling as rooted in one’s local and immediately perceivable affective relations, while (as my next section will show) Williams repeatedly describes a kind of encompassing feeling and universal human spirit that renders all human beings as “citizens of the world.”

Reflections has often been criticized for its exaggerated dramatizations of the events in France, and the scholarship on Reflections in the context of eighteenth-century ideas about sentimentality is quite extensive. I will not delve into the complicated critiques of Burke’s problematic gender politics here, except to note that a distinction between “true feeling” and “false feeling”—often rendered in gendered terms—is the foundation for Burke’s political arguments as he presumes that only true feeling may lead to true judgment. For Burke, following the Aristotelian rhetorical tradition, feeling and jurisprudence are one and the same: failure in one leads to failure in the other. For example, when Burke criticizes English supporters of the French Revolution for comparing the events in France with the English revolutions of the 1640s and 1688, he writes that those gentlemen had all these events “so much before their eyes, and in


their hearts, that they are constantly confounding all the three together.” The power of his argument derives from its very simplicity, because it is based on the idea of a “natural sentiment” that is available to every person: “Why do I feel so differently from the Reverend Dr. Price, and those of his lay flock, who will choose to adopt the sentiments of his discourse?—For this plain reason—because it is natural I should.”

Burke employs the open letter, with the presumed freedom of epistolary style and the intimate relationship that the genre constructs between author and reader, to address only those who possess “true feeling.” Though the political philosophy of Reflections certainly upholds the status quo, Burke’s letter undermines traditional social hierarchies and ideas about social rank. This is part of Burke’s rhetorical strategy: implying a new world where individuals are only classified according to whether or not they possess true and natural feeling—and therefore true judgment. On the idea that men of all occupations should be allowed to participate in government, Burke writes, “You do not imagine, that I wish to confine power, authority, and distinction to blood, names, and titles. No, Sir. There is no qualification for government, but virtue and wisdom, actual or presumptive.” The only distinction that matters is between those who love a “manly, moral, regulated liberty,” and those who are irrational lovers of abstract principles—“Every thing ought to be open; but not indifferently to every man.” Thus Burke depicts himself as a “plain man” who writes a private letter, in contrast to the philosophes, those “political Men of Letters” who form “a close and marked union” with “the monied interest,” and with regard to whom “A spirit of cabal, intrigue, and proselytism, pervaded all their thoughts, words, and actions.”

342 Burke, 163.
343 Ibid., 243.
344 Ibid., 206, 275, 277.
Burke repeatedly stresses that it is because he speaks as a “plain man,” apart from any specific public office, that his words have the authority to represent the English people. Here again the epistolary form is important because it allows Burke to act as if he were speaking as private citizen to private citizen, individual to individual. In the conclusion to the treatise, he returns to a direct, intimate mode of communication, addressing his French friend in a confidential tone:

I have told you candidly my sentiments. I think they are not likely to alter yours. I do not know that they ought. . . . You are young; you cannot guide, but must follow the fortune of your country. . . . I have little to recommend my opinions, but long observation and much impartiality. They come from one who has been no tool of power, no flatterer of greatness; and who in his last acts does not wish to belie the tenor of his life. They come from one, almost the whole of whose public exertion has been a struggle for the liberty for others.”

Burke suggests that it is because he speaks as an individual and private person that his opinions may be presumed to carry weight. Earlier Burke had argued that men who are “too much confined to professional and faculty habits, and, as it were, inveterate in the recurrent employment of that narrow circle” lack the capacity and “comprehensive connected view” to judge appropriately on public affairs. Burke’s repeated assertions that he writes as a “plain man,” in his “individual and private capacity,” mirrors what Kant calls “the public use of reason,” i.e., “the use anyone makes of it [reason] as a scholar before the entire public of the

345 Ibid., 414.
346 Ibid., 199.
reading world.” Kant contrasts the public use of reason to its private use, “as that use which one makes of his reason in a certain civil post or office which is entrusted to him.”

In fact, an important impetus for Burke’s composition of *Reflections* is his disagreement with Price’s *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*—originally delivered as a sermon to The Society for Commemorating the Glorious Revolution (usually called “The Revolution Society”) in November 1789, and later printed as a political pamphlet. Burke links Price to the “political Men of Letters” against whom he positions himself, writing, “I looked on that sermon as the public declaration of a man much connected with literary caballers, and intriguing philosophers; with political theologians, and theological politicians, both at home and abroad.” Burke criticizes Price’s “pulpit style,” stressing, “politics and the pulpit are terms that have little agreement. . . . Those who quit their proper character, to assume what does not belong to them . . . have nothing of politics but the passions they excite.” After giving the reader a sampling of Price’s overblown dramatics, he argues that Price’s enthusiasm is false feeling because it is grounded in false judgment. Yet, in responding to Price’s sermon with a letter, Burke himself also uses the rhetoric of a preacher, at times verging into the territory of Biblical prophecy. Only, because he writes under the framework of a presumably private letter, his own emotional language appears justified.

Burke’s other major objection is against the Revolution Society’s presumption to act as representative of English opinion in taking on a “public capacity,” thus giving “authoritative

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348 Burke, 156, 157.

sanction” to the events in France. He attacks such “narcissistic tavern societies” for only representing their own narrow, self-serving interests.\textsuperscript{350} Thus Burke writes,

For one, I should be sorry to be thought, directly or indirectly, concerned in their proceedings. I shall certainly take my full share, along with the rest of the world, in my individual and private capacity, in speculating on what has been done, or is doing, on the public stage. . . . I should think it, at least improper and irregular, for me to open a formal public correspondence with the actual government of a foreign nation, without the express authority of the government under which I live.\textsuperscript{351}

Here Burke implicitly contrasts the society’s “formal public correspondence with the actual government of a foreign nation” with his own correspondence, i.e., the letter that the reader is presently reading, which Burke composes in the capacity of a private individual to another private individual. Interestingly, this rhetoric asserts that speaking as an individual has more legitimacy than speaking as a group, perhaps because of the underlying assumption that individuals may be judged according to “who they are; and of what value their opinions may be, from their personal abilities, from their knowledge, their experience, or their lead and authority in this state.”\textsuperscript{352} This is the crux of the Burke’s argument and his use of the open letter: in explicitly claiming to speak for only himself, he may escape accusations of false representation.

\textsuperscript{350} As Ian Newman explains, “Burke’s objections to these London societies is not that they participate in a cacophonous, unregulated public sphere. . . . The problem is not that the public sphere is unregulated, but that it has short-circuited, so that privileged gentlemen gather in taverns, make toasts and draw up resolutions which are quoted in newspapers and published in pamphlets to be quoted back at future meetings, then published again, in an endlessly repeating circuit, which circumvents any broader consensus-building and convinces the club members that their own opinions are held by all. The publications, Burke says, resulting from these meetings, should not be taken as representative of the views of the nation as they represent the narrow perspective of the exclusive, self-serving clubs rather than adequately representing public opinion.” See Ian Newman, “Edmund Burke in the Tavern,”\textit{European Romantic Review} 24.2 (2013): 137.

\textsuperscript{351} Burke, 149.

\textsuperscript{352} Ibid., 150.
Yet, in claiming to speak for only himself, he also claims to speak for all—or at least all that “feel as Englishmen.” As he asserts,

I have no mans’ proxy. I speak only from myself; when I disclaim, as I do with all possible earnestness, all communion with the actors in that triumph, or with the admirers of it. When I assert any thing else, as concerning the people of England, I speak from observation not from authority; but I speak from the experience I have had in a pretty extensive and mixed communication with the inhabitants of this kingdom, of all descriptions and ranks, and after a course of attentive observation, began early in life, and continued for near forty years.  

The private individual’s personal opinion, because it is formed through years of observation and experience, may represent “true English judgment” beyond any opinions made based on abstract reasoning or theoretical principles: “I assure you I do not aim at singularity. I give you opinions which have been accepted amongst us, from very early times to this moment, with a continued and general approbation, and which indeed are so worked into my mind, that I am unable to distinguish what I have learned from others from the results of my own meditation.” Thus the individual is the collective, because the individual forms the collective. And where better to express such “natural” feelings and judgments than in a personal letter, written in the capacity of a private individual, addressed to another private individual?

The framework of a private letter also explains—and seeks to justify—Burke’s melodramatic portrayal of the French royal family’s forced departure from Versailles. He depicts the royal family simultaneously as persons of high quality and a conjugal family, composed of father, mother, and child: “This king . . . and this queen, and their infant children.”

353 Ibid., 248.
354 Ibid., 263.
Marie Antoinette’s escape from the attackers who had entered her bedroom, he calls her a “persecuted woman,” who “had but just time to fly almost naked, and through ways unknown to the murderers had escaped to seek refuge at the feet of a king and husband, not secure of his own life for a moment.” Similarly, the king is a man before he is a prince: “As a man, it became him to feel for his wife and his children . . . as a prince, it became him to feel for the strange and frightful transformation of his civilized subjects.” Thus the king and queen are depicted as mere parents who are concerned for the welfare of their children, and because they are fellow human beings, their suffering becomes more worthy of our indignity. Burke uses the same kind of rhetoric and persuasive tactics as that of which he accuses Price. But because he writes in a letter—and Burke deliberately employs the intimate tone of confession (“I confess to you, Sir”)—his voice is often tentative, as if “writing to the moment.” He appears to be just struggling to put into words his immediate reaction to the events. Thus Burke may justify his overblown language, since this is presumably a private conversation between friends, rather than a public document.

Burke’s open letter embodies the kinds of local, immediate affective relations that he insists are the foundation of society. The ability to communicate directly, openly, and transparently with another individual is presented the basis for all social ties: “To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ

355 Ibid., 232.
356 Ibid., 237.
357 Burke is certainly, and blatantly, self-contradictory. In an oft-quoted passage, he accuses radical discourse of attempting to level society to the point of causing chaos, writing sarcastically, “On this scheme of things, a king is but a man; a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal; and an animal not of the highest order. . . . The murder of a king, or a queen, or a bishop, or a father, are only common homicide.” Yet his own argument also relies on the idea that because the king and queen are first and foremost man and woman, their suffering provokes our sympathy due to a common, shared humanity. He accuses the revolutionaries of unfeeling, or unnatural feeling: as they would have it, he laments, “Humanity and compassion are ridiculed as the fruits of superstition and ignorance. Tenderness to individuals is considered as treason to the public.” See Ibid., 240, 229.
as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country and to mankind.”\textsuperscript{358} As I will show in the next section, Williams’s open letter also embodies a kind of affective bond that, for her, serves as the foundation of all social ties; however, this is a different kind of emotional connection, manifested in a universal love for humanity and resulting in a new vision of human sociability.

III. “The general sympathy which is caught from heart to heart . . .”

Helen Maria Williams’s \textit{Letters Written in France}, despite its completely opposite political views from Burke’s \textit{Reflections}, also relies on the form of the open letter to articulate what Williams presents as “natural feelings” about the events in France. Prior to 1789, Williams was already a well-known champion of liberal causes in England, including the abolitionist movement.\textsuperscript{359} In July 1790 she began a tour of France, and upon her return to England in September 1790, she published a volume of twenty-six letters celebrating recent political developments in France. The popularity of \textit{Letters} made Williams even more of a celebrity.\textsuperscript{360} However, though it was widely read in Williams’s day and through the early nineteenth-century as an important account of the French Revolution, it is only recently, with our growing attention to women’s writing, that \textit{Letters} has been included in the canon of the “English debate,” alongside the usual suspects of Burke, Paine, and Wollstonecraft.

\textsuperscript{358} Ibid., 202. Here Burke refers to the third epistle of Alexander Pope’s \textit{Essay on Man}.

\textsuperscript{359} See Deborah Kennedy, \textit{Helen Maria Williams and the Age of Revolution} (London: Bucknell University Press, 2002).

\textsuperscript{360} Between 1790 and 1819, Williams published eight volumes of letters on her observations of French society in the aftermath of the revolution. My analysis will only focus on the first volume because I am primarily concerned with the text’s rhetorical form, rather than its content. For an analysis of the changes in Williams’s attitude towards the French Revolution in the later volumes, see Georgina Green, \textit{The Majesty of the People}, Chapter 4.
Since the publication of her poem “To Sensibility” in 1786 and William Wordsworth’s “Sonnet on Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress” the following year, Williams has been read as a writer belonging to the sentimental tradition of the eighteenth century. Scholarly discussions of Letters have largely followed this critical tradition. In Letters, Williams combines factual reportage with personal emotions: the text’s commercial success may be accounted for by her use of the language of sensibility and her articulation of what Gary Kelly calls a “feminized politics.” Louise Duckling argues that Williams “exploited her popular image [as a female poet of sensibility] by conflating her own authorial identity with the first-person narrator. . . . [H]er political message is carefully embedded within a highly feminine and personal reportage. The reader is positioned as the recipient of Williams’s letters, whilst the author places herself as the sentimental heroine of the piece.” Unlike Burke’s Reflections, there does not seem to have been a real-life impetus to Williams’s choice of the epistolary form. It was a voluntary, conscious choice, and Williams employed the form skillfully: the guise of the naïve, female observer, writing privately to an intimate friend, must have been a

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362 Kelly, “Feminizing Revolution.”

useful rhetorical strategy for a woman writing publicly on political affairs. The full title of the volume published in 1790 is *Letters Written in France, in the Summer 1790, to a Friend in England; Containing Various Anecdotes Relative to the French Revolution*. In using the conventional “letters to a friend” trope, Williams’s letter volume may seem to follow in the tradition of the “inwardly sociable” letter collections that I discussed in chapter one. However, as Duckling notes, the text itself presents a different structure of communication, where the implied reader is directly spoken to, rather than positioned outside of the presented epistolary exchange. 

No specified addressee exists in Williams’s *Letters*. Each letter is written to an unidentified “friend in England” (whose gender, even, is unspecified), and includes no opening addresses or signatures—except occasionally, a simple adieu. The abrupt ways in which the letters begin and end suggest that the relationship between letter writer and addressee is one that requires no formality. There is no reference to previous epistolary exchange and none of the flatteries of conventional letter writing, except when Williams writes in the first letter, “I shall send you once a week the details which I promised when we parted, though I am well aware how imperfectly I shall be able to describe the images which press upon my mind.”

Throughout the volume, she repeatedly laments her inability to do justice to all she has seen. She stresses that she writes as a naïve first-person witness, transcribing directly and withholding no information: in short, the letters lay open her heart to a close friend. In celebrating post-revolution France, her

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364 Deborah Kennedy notes that Williams’s choice of the genre of letters led to its acceptance by contemporary critics: “Williams’s British reviewers reacted in one of three ways: they either refused to accept that she or another woman was capable of writing on matters touching political affairs; or they accepted that a woman could write on such subjects, but they demanded that her work conform to traditional modes of political and historical discourse; or, finally, they championed the *Letters from France* as a unique and valuable work whose epistolary style and appeal to pathos set it apart—in a positive sense—from standard history.” Deborah Kennedy, “Benevolent Historian: Helen Maria Williams and Her British Readers,” in *Rebellious Hearts: British Women Writers and the French Revolution*, ed. Adriana Craciun and Kari E. Lokke (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 318.

letters also bring to light the atrocities of the ancien regime, which had once lain obscured by the ancient structures of feudalism; in this way, Williams implies that her own open and transparent letters are the modern alternative to those secretive lettres de cachet which were the foundation of the old political systems. France was now, she writes, “a country where iron cages were broken down, where dungeons were thrown open, and where justice was henceforth to shed a clear and steady light, without one dark shade of relief from lettres de cachet.”

In stressing the openness and transparency of her letters, Williams suggests that she writes not to one single individual, but to every individual—or rather, that, she writes to every individual through this one single individual. Her letters model a new kind of affective bond between persons that she envisions as the foundation for the social composition of a post-revolutionary world. For Williams, “natural feeling” is not a matter of proper judgment or jurisprudence; it is, simply, affect: a sort of human—both spiritual and corporeal—connection between people. In Letters, “natural feeling” is presented as the basis for political systems because it is infectious as well as immediately communicable, transferring rapidly from person to person, and eliminating the need for logical reasoning or political arguments. Thus, in her descriptions of the events in France, Williams frequently mentions self-explanatory entities like “universal feeling,” “common sentiments,” and “general happiness”; the affinity for (or lack thereof) this “natural feeling” is presented as so visceral a process that in one of her tales, Williams writes of a villain (a Baron) that “He would have sickened at the sight of general happiness.”

In describing her own experiences and feelings, Williams often speaks of the experiences and feelings of the “multitude”—and she writes as if it should only be natural that these are be one and the same. The personal is therefore the political—or rather, the collective

366 Ibid., 139.
367 Ibid., 139.
and the universal. This new kind of immediate affective bond between persons, only possible in the new, post-revolutionary world, breaks down all ideas of rank and distinction, and replaces the tyranny and oppression that is the result of traditional social hierarchies. At the same time that Williams articulates the centrality of this “natural sympathy” to the formation of post-revolution France, her letter demonstrates this new affective bond in the relationship it displays between the letter writer and her reader.

Like Burke, Williams presents herself as a reluctant political commentator, going so far as to disavow any prior interest in politics: “Did you expect that I should ever dip my pen in politics, who used to take so small an interest in public affairs, that I recollect a gentleman of my acquaintance surprised me not a little, by informing me of the war between the Turks and the Russians, at a time when all the people of Europe, except myself, had been two years in possession of this intelligence?” The fact that she writes only as any ordinary woman (as Burke writes as a “plain man”), however, makes her “love of the French revolution” (a phrase that crops up frequently throughout Letters) so much more authentic and persuasive. Even in the rare instances where Williams applies the conventions of letter writing in Letters, in predicting her addressee’s response and referring to a previous shared knowledge, there is still no specificity to her fictional addressee. Rather, Williams employs the conventions of letter writing to anticipate her implied reader’s reaction and, in this way, preempt her readers’ criticism. One letter begins,

Yesterday I received your letter, in which you accuse me of describing with too much enthusiasm the public rejoicings in France, and prophesy that I shall return to my own country a fierce republican. In answer to these accusations, I shall only observe, that it is

368 Ibid., 109.
very difficult, with common sensibility, to avoid sympathizing in general happiness. My love of the French revolution, is the natural result of this sympathy, and therefore my political creed is entirely an affair of the heart; for I have not been so absurd as to consult my head upon matters of which it is so incapable of judging.\(^{369}\)

She does not presume to persuade her reader using complicated political arguments, Williams asserts. Instead, her “love of the French revolution” is only the “natural result” of a natural “sympathy” for “general happiness.” Judgment upon the French Revolution, then, should be “entirely an affair of the heart.” Indeed, it is a matter decided upon in just “one moment.” And Williams proclaims that this spontaneous judgment, made based on feeling, is truer than the systematic reasoning of any philosopher.\(^{370}\)

Williams’s fictional correspondent—the “you”—stands in for the implied reader. The intimate relationship that the letter establishes between the “I” and the “you” is the basis on which Williams makes her emotional claims on the implied reader. When Williams worries that she has perhaps become too enthusiastic in celebrating the events in France, she appeals to this established intimacy: “When we look back on the ignorance, the superstition, the barbarous persecutions of Gothic times, is it not something to be thankful for, that we exist at this enlightened period. . . . [W]hen, in short, (and you are not one of those who will suspect that I am not all the while a good Englishwoman) when one can witness an event so sublime as the French revolution?”\(^{371}\) The reader will not misunderstand her, she implies, because they are already good friends—and the intimate letter that she presently writes is evidence of their friendship. In a later letter, after recounting the story of her personal friends the du Fossés, she writes, projecting

\(^{369}\) Ibid., 91.

\(^{370}\) Ibid., 140.

\(^{371}\) Ibid., 91. My emphasis.
feelings unto her fictional addressee: “I am glad you think that a friend’s having been persecuted, imprisoned, maimed, and almost murdered under the ancient government of France, is a good excuse for loving the revolution. What, indeed, but friendship, could have led my attention from the annals of imagination to the records of politics; from the poetry to the prose of human life?”³⁷² The friendships not only between the letter writer and the du Fossés, but also between the letter writer and her reader, are the basis for Williams’s vision of a new society, which is built upon immediate affective bonds between individuals. In Letters, friendship is in fact reason enough for political conviction: Williams admits, “in my admiration of the revolution in France, I blend the feelings of private friendship with my sympathy in public blessings.”³⁷³

Like Burke, Williams contrasts the intimate relationship between the letter writer and the hypothetical “you” with the hypothetical position of a “they,” who are unfeeling individuals and not natural members of this post-revolution, bright new world. After describing a visit to the Bastille, Williams writes passionately, “Those who have contemplated the dungeons of the Bastille, without rejoicing in the French revolution, may, for ought I know, be very respectable persons, and very agreeable companions in the hours of prosperity; but, if my heart were sinking with anguish, I should not fly to those persons for consolation.”³⁷⁴ The implication, then, is that you, dear reader, are of course not one of those deplorable persons. Discussing some recent unfavorable English responses to the events in France, Williams laments, “I wish that some of our political critics would speak with less contempt, than they are apt to do, of the new constitution of France, and no longer repeat after one another the trite remark, that the French

³⁷² Ibid., 140. My emphasis.
³⁷³ Ibid., 93.
³⁷⁴ Ibid., 74. My emphases.
have gone too far, because they have gone farther than ourselves.”375 Like Burke, Williams addresses herself directly to an English audience and articulates a kind of “natural feeling” that binds letter writer and reader together. However, while Burke assumes that the capacity for this “natural feeling” is the very definition of Englishness, Williams’s version of “natural feeling” suggests a common humanity that transcends national identities. In fact, in Letters, English identity is sometimes presented as something dangerous or suspect, as that which restricts one from ecstatically joining in the “general happiness” inspired by “natural feeling.” For example, on the subject of slavery, Williams warns, “I trust the period will never come, when England will submit to be taught by another nation the lesson of humanity.”376 Englishness is even sometimes presented as a source of shame, as when Williams confesses, “I always feel a little ashamed of my country, when I pass the spot where the Maid of Orleans was executed, and on which her statue stands, a monument of our disgrace.”377

In Letters, feeling reverberates from individual to individual, without regard to any sense of gender, class, or other markers of social identity. In place of traditional rank and hierarchy, the only social bond that now exists is “that general sympathy which is caught from heart to heart with irresistible energy, fills every eye with tears, and throbs in every bosom.”378 Williams’s letters embody the transmission of affect in a chain reaction: feeling transfers from the crowds participating in public events (the “multitude”), to the letter writer reporting as eyewitness, to the internal addressee of her letters, and finally to the implied reader, i.e., her real audience. After

375 Ibid., 92. My emphasis.
376 Ibid., 84.
377 Ibid., 107.
378 Ibid., 90.
describing a celebratory procession in the streets, where “In an instant every sword was drawn, and every arm lifted up,” Williams reports on the euphoric reaction of the crowd:

At the moment the consecrated banners were displayed, the sun . . . burst forth, while the people lifted their eyes to heaven, and called upon the Deity to look down and witness the sacred engagement into which they entered. A respectful silence was succeeded by the cries, the shouts, the acclamations of the multitude: they wept, they embraced each other, and then dispersed.

The “people,” or “multitude,” act as one; moreover, the spontaneity of their feelings and actions is immediately, and exhilaratingly, infectious. Moving from the tone of a reporter to the intimate voice of epistolary dialogue, Williams collapses the emotional distance created by the use of “they” in the previous passage. She goes on to describe her own reaction to the scene as deriving from feelings that are natural, and, by implication, universal. Addressing her friend directly:

You will not suspect that I was an indifferent witness of such a scene. Oh no! this was not a time in which the distinctions of country were remembered. . . . It required but the common feelings of humanity to become in that moment a citizen of the world. For myself, I acknowledge that my heart caught with enthusiasm the general sympathy; my eyes were filled with tears.

Forgetting her English identity, Williams asserts that the “common feelings of humanity” take precedence over “the distinctions of country.” In an instant, catching “with enthusiasm the general sympathy,” the passive observer becomes an active participant. The tears of the crowd and the tears of the individual are indistinguishable. Then, in the following paragraph, after a brief description of a public dance performed by the French national guard, Williams adds, as if fearful of her friend’s response to this blatant theatricality:
But if you are disposed to think of this gaiety with the contempt of superior gravity, for I will not call it wisdom, recollect that these dancers were the very men whose bravery formed the great epoch of French liberty; the heroes who demolished the towers of the Bastille, and whose fame will descend to the latest posterity.\(^{379}\)

The addressee, then, cannot but submit to the infectiousness of powerful feelings, unless he or she were to admit to being an unfeeling individual and willingly give up membership in this new world. Williams in effect speaks directly to the real reader—you, me, the English reader who has picked up her book to learn about recent events in France—adding to the persuasive power of her account. In this way, the ecstatic feelings of the crowd—the “impetuous feelings of that immense, that exulting multitude”\(^{380}\)—are presented as immediately communicable to others, not through language or argumentation, but due to the mere fact of being a part of that “multitude.”

“Natural feeling” is the basis on which the individual may claim to speak for the public. Using the rhetorical force of the repeated, direct, second person “you,” Williams assures her addressee of the accuracy of her feelings, and, in turn, assures her readers of the accuracy of their feelings: after describing a young man’s petition before the National Assembly, she writes with hyperbole, “If you are not affected by this circumstance, you have read it with very different feelings from whose with which I have written it: but if, on the contrary, you have fallen in love with this young Frenchman, do not imagine your passion is singular, for I am violently in love with him myself.”\(^{381}\) Thus her feelings, and her addressee’s feelings, and her reader’s feelings, are one and the same, and are presented as representative of the public’s feelings.

\(^{379}\) Ibid., 69. My emphases.

\(^{380}\) Ibid., 64.

\(^{381}\) Ibid., 89. My emphases.
Williams speaks not only to each reader directly (as an individual), but also speaks to the general reading public as a group; in other words, the individual reader is automatically imagined to become a part of “that immense, that exulting multitude,” i.e., a part of the new “public” which has come into existence based on shared “impetuous feelings.” This “public” also shares a common history and future:

I think I hear them [future ages] exclaim, “Here the Federation was held! Here an assembled nation devoted themselves to freedom!” I fancy I see the pointing out the spot on which the altar of the country stood. I see them eagerly searching for the place where they have heard it recorded, that the National Assembly were seated! I think of these things, and then repeat to myself with transport, “I was a spectator of the Federation!”382

A failure to feel as the multitude feel, is a failure to participate in the history that is currently happening, and will result in one’s exclusion from the future that is sure to come.

Moreover, this “public” which Williams not only describes, but also makes the reader a part of, has a power and authority that commands immediately, also without the need for recourse to language or argumentation. After her friend du Fossé’s escape from a dungeon in which his tyrannical father (the aforementioned Baron) had imprisoned him, it is the authority of the public that saves him. Thanks to the efforts of “charitable strangers” and “good Samaritans,” he is nursed back to health; it is only “out of respect to the public opinion” and in attempting “to appease the public” that du Fossé’s evil brother begins to visit him. Again the public acts as one agent: “Every one sympathized in the fate of this unfortunate young man, and execrated the tyranny of his unrelenting father.” Public opinion even takes the place of personal conscience: “though he [the Baron] could check the upbraidings of his own conscience, he could not silence

382 Ibid., 109. Emphasis in the original.
the voice of public indignation.” Williams repeatedly writes of the authority of the public as one that replaces the ancient authority of social rank in this new world: du Fossé’s family finally released him because they found it “impossible to silence the murmurs of the public,” and, due to “public clamours,” even allowed him an annual pension thereafter.383

The preeminent authority of the public is represented in scenes where one individual addresses the multitude, in the same way as Williams addresses her audience in Letters. Du Fossé’s suffering catches public interest after he writes open letters to the Parliament of Rouen—letters which Williams explicitly contrasts with the lettres de cachet that the Baron had used to imprison him in the first place. One of the first scenes Williams describes in post-revolution France is the National Assembly, where members of the Assembly take turns addressing the general public: she compares the ease with which she gained access to the Assembly to her “struggles to attain the same situation in Westminster Hall,” and also reports the process by which the “common people” are admitted: “by applying very early in the morning for numbers, which are distributed at the door.”384 Upon the royal family’s forced removal from Versailles, Williams illustrates in detail a scene where Lafayette first appears in front of “the incensed people” to dissuade them from harming the king’s guards, then, before “the multitude,” testify to the king’s submission to the people’s will: “In a few minutes the King appeared, and was received with the loudest acclamations.”385

The public’s rise to authority is accompanied by the obliteration of all rank and distinction, both metaphorically and literally. With regard to the former, Williams emphasizes a universal friendship on which post-revolution France is built: for example, upon their visit to the

383 Ibid., 130-36. My emphasis.
384 Ibid., 81.
385 Ibid., 99-100.
National Assembly, she and her sister gain admission without tickets, despite having “no personal acquaintance with this gentleman [who guards the door], or any claim to his politeness, except that of being foreigners and women.”\textsuperscript{386} Often, at the same time that Williams underscores her foreignness, she forswears it: describing the celebrations at Bastille on July 14, 1790, she writes, “Here the minds of the people took a higher tone of exultation than in the other scenes of festivity. Their mutual congratulations, their reflections on the horror of the past, their sense of present felicity, their cries of ‘Vive la Nation,’ still ring in my ear! I too, though but a sojourner in their land, rejoiced in their happiness, joined the universal voice, and repeated with all my heart and soul, ‘Vive la nation!’”\textsuperscript{387} As Favret remarks, “the distinction of being female and foreign forms a strange bond between the author and the French crowd; in fact, it erases distinctions.”\textsuperscript{388}

With regard to the literal obliteration of rank and distinction, Williams dwells on the French aristocracy’s loss of titles. The young Duke of Orléans is described as “a confirmed friend to the new constitution of France, and willing, with the enthusiasm of a young and ardent mind, to renounce the splendor of his titles for the general good,” whereas the ladies of France, “with those generous affections which belong to the female heart, have gloried in sacrificing titles, fortune, and even the personal ornaments, so dear to female vanity, for the common cause.”\textsuperscript{389} In these accounts, the “general good” and the “common cause” are described as naturally taking precedence over individual identity, titles, or fortunes.

\textsuperscript{386} Ibid., 81.
\textsuperscript{387} Ibid., 72-73.
\textsuperscript{388} Favret, “Spectatrice as Spectacle,” 285.
\textsuperscript{389} Williams, 78-79.
Like Burke’s *Reflections*, Williams’s letters not only produce an understanding of society as fundamentally organized around the idea of a “public” comprising equal individuals, but also, in the process of so doing, highlights the central role of the conjugal family in such a social vision. The natural, affective bonds of the conjugal family replace the rigid social structure of the *ancien regime*. Thus the Baron’s actions are doubly intolerable because he is not only a tyrant, but also an unnatural father—and the latter is suggested to be a more serious offence than the former. Williams repeatedly appeals to her reader’s “natural feelings” in asserting this fact, using the subjunctive tense to good effect: “You will perhaps conclude that his [the Baron’s] hard heart felt at length the relentings of a parent. You will at least suppose . . . It might have been expected . . . Is it not difficult to believe that these suffering were inflicted by a father? A father!—that name which I cannot trace without emotions; which conveys all the ideas of protection, of security, of tenderness.”

In *Letters*, the love between a parent and child is the most natural of feelings, in a similar vein as those spontaneous, “impetuous feelings” which compel the letter writer to love the French revolution. In this way, to agree with the letter writer about the naturalness of parental love is to also agree with her about the naturalness of one’s love for the revolution. Repeatedly appealed to directly, the reader cannot but submit.

Finally, in the new world created by the revolution, the royal family becomes just like any other family. Williams recounts anecdotes, including snippets of conversation, of the royal family in its domestic capacity—in the roles of father, mother, and child. At the same time, she reports that the dauphin “will be educated in the principles of the new constitution, and will be taught to consider himself less a king than a *citizen.*”

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390 Ibid., 124-26.
391 Ibid., 100-101. My emphasis.
distinctions lead to a world where all are equal citizens and together comprise the authoritative “public.” The communicative structure of Williams’s open letter confirms this vision.
CONCLUSION

Musings on the Public Sphere

The concept of the public sphere has been a constant presence in this dissertation—and my title an obvious riff on Habermas’s—so it would certainly be remiss not to address how my argument engages with Habermas’s theory. I hope it is apparent that this dissertation joins ongoing efforts to revise the Habermasean ideal of the public sphere as a virtual space, emerging during the eighteenth century, for the rational exchange of ideas.

Habermas locates the letter as the literary form that was pivotal to the simultaneous emergence of an “intimate sphere of the conjugal family,” where “privatized individuals viewed themselves as independent even from the private sphere of their economic activity—as persons capable of entering into ‘purely human’ relations with one another.” He argues that the popularity of letters in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reflects a developing civil society which is preconditioned on a structural change in the way which its members perceived themselves: as “privatized individuals . . . interested in what was ‘human,’ in self-knowledge, and in empathy.” It is worth noting that Habermas distinguishes between the private sphere and the intimate sphere: the former refers to the sphere of the market, of commercial exchange, while the latter—of which the letter is the paradigmatic genre—refers to the family. In this analysis, the form of the letter expresses an interiorized sphere of human activity that is not only distinct from the public world of politics, but also the private world of commercial and economic activity.

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392 Habermas, 48.
393 Habermas, 50.
This is not to say that Habermas reads the letter as an apolitical genre: quite the contrary. In his analysis, the literary form of the letter represents the emergence of the modern, bourgeois subje

ctivity, or what Habermas calls “the institutionalization of a privateness oriented to an audience”; the ideal public sphere, where “agreement and enlightenment [is sought] through the rational-critical debate of private persons with one another,” springs from the development of such a subjectivity. Thus, on the one hand, letters facilitate self-knowledge and self-expression because they enable one to communicate freely, directly, transparently, and without regard to social rank; on the other hand, only when citizens commit to communicating in public freely, directly, transparently, and without regard to social rank, can the public sphere’s ideal form of “rational-critical debate” be possible.

Rational-critical debate between private citizens within a universally accessible public sphere remains a powerful liberal ideal. Since the publication of the English translation of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1989, Habermas’s public sphere theory has been engaged with, criticized, and revised, most notably by feminist critics and scholars of mass culture. The criticism has mostly centered on questions of inclusivity and exclusivity: whether Habermas’s claims are universally valid (they are not), whether certain groups or subcultures were historically excluded from the idealized public sphere (they most likely were), and whether the historical development of mass media and consumer culture in the nineteenth century really led to the “refeudalization” of society (the jury is still out on this one). Yet Habermas’s idealized conceptualization of the public sphere is rarely questioned as a goal worthy of pursuit. Freedom

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394 Habermas, 43.

and transparency of communication are still deemed among the core values of a democratic society—and the seemingly indisputable principles by which public discourse should ideally operate.

Public letters, viewed as a special form of public discourse, disrupt this framework. Any public letter creates at least one layer of mediation in public communication, and therefore involves at least one extra layer of social meaning, references, and relationships. Both author and reader are inscribed within a textual network of relations between real, imagined, and implied persons: author, letter-writer, addressee, reader, characters, etc. In other words, the varied forms of eighteenth-century public letters reveal the diverse ways in which writers recognized how print media made possible new ways of imagining and performing virtual connections with their stranger readers.

By attending to the rhetorical structures of eighteenth-century public letters, my dissertation attempts to show the historical existence of alternative models other than the idealized form of direct, transparent communication. A better understanding of the work of public letters in the long eighteenth century might inform our thinking about public communication in the current digital revolution. In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner reminds us that the public sphere is mainly a virtual, not physical, space. As his title reveals, Warner is primarily interested in exploring multiple—queer and minor—publics. Yet, while recognizing the coexistence of different kinds of publics, it is still possible to generalize about what a public is—particularly the kind of public that is formed by texts and their circulation. As Warner explains:

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To address a public or to think of oneself as belonging to a public is to be a certain kind of person, to inhabit a certain kind of social world, to have at one’s disposal certain media and genres, to be motivated by a certain normative horizon, and to speak within a certain language ideology.\textsuperscript{397} Warner argues that the notion of a public “enables a reflexivity in the circulation of texts among strangers who become, by virtue of their reflexively circulating discourse, a social entity.”\textsuperscript{398} To read (or author) a published book, to watch (or participate in the production of) a widely released movie, to listen to (or write, or perform) a public speech—all such activities, even when conducted in the privacy of one’s home, render one part of a public.

Publics, then, are really more properly understood as publics of discourse; a public “is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself.” Created through the fact of being addressed, publics constitute, and are constituted by, relations among strangers. These strangers are not exotic others: they are those who already belong to our world, but who we do not know (yet). We know of their existence simply by virtue of living among them. As Warner puts it, “the modern social imaginary does not make sense without strangers.” These strangers are indefinite, and identified only by their inclusion in the discourse that creates the public.

Public speech must be both personal and impersonal, which is to say that it is both addressed to each member of the public personally, but also addressed to the indefinite strangers whom are discursively included in the public. Moreover, publics are characterized by their reflexivity: any public speech must presuppose multiple and varying interlocutors. Warner asserts that this “interactive relation . . . goes far beyond the scale of conversation or discussion to encompass a multigeneric lifeworld organized not just by a relational axis of utterance and response but by

\textsuperscript{397} Warner, 10.
\textsuperscript{398} Warner, 11-12.
potentially infinite axes of citation and characterization.” Public discourse, then, “promises to address anybody. It commits itself in principle to the possible participation of any stranger.”

An open letter constitutes a public in this sense, but it should be noted that Warner’s definition does not effectively apply to the public letters I discuss in my first three chapters because he assumes that public communication must take the form of a direct relationship between one individual (or group) and a self-generated public that is organized around circulated discourse. As I hope to have shown, eighteenth-century public letters produce different structures of communication that model various ways of engaging with a large and heterogeneous reading public. In other words, public sphere theory reveals its modern bias by presuming that effective communication must be unmediated, transparent communication. The idea of the public sphere, though useful for understanding the rhetorical form of the open letter, is inadequate for understanding the alternate models for communication that were produced through public letters during the long eighteenth century.

There are, in fact, many ways to be public. Similar to the eighteenth-century authors I have discussed, we are presently experiencing a media revolution that exponentially increases the complexity of the physical and virtual worlds of which we are a part. As we become evermore connected, our words and ideas easily circulated and exchanged through digital means, the definition of what it means to be “public” will likely continue to evolve. The new modes of communication suggest that rather than choosing to be public or private, perhaps it may be helpful to think in terms of degrees and kinds of publicness. In the past year, at least two news stories have brought into question the ethical demands for transparency, authenticity, and

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399 Warner, 65-124. This is not, by any means, a complete summary of Warner’s theorization of the concept of “public”; I have only cited the ideas that will be relevant to my discussion of the open letter as a structure of publicness. For a succinct exposition of Warner’s thesis, see Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics (abbreviated version),” Quarterly Journal of Speech 88.4 (2002): 413-25.
unmediated access to information considered to be of public interest: Wikileaks’s publication of Hillary Clinton’s private emails during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, and the journalistic attempts to identify the true identity of the Italian novelist Elena Ferrante. The crux of both controversies is whether shades of fictionality are inherent to, and should be allowed to remain a part of, becoming a public person. On a minor scale, social media compels most of us to imagine different versions of ourselves everyday, whether by using an avatar in a discussion forum or creating a profile name on Twitter. In a similar manner, all of the authors under discussion in this dissertation—Cavendish, Howell, the Spectator’s readers, Swift, and yes, even Burke and Williams—employ fictionality to cope with exciting but also perplexing problem of becoming public. Because to be public is always to some extent to be vulnerable, these authors use the letter as a rhetorical strategy to mold their own audience and control where the reader stands in relation to their stance.
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