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The Discourse of Letters in Eighteenth-Century Britain

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From Script to Print: Eighteenth-Century Letters in Public

Recent critical interest in eighteenth-century book history and print culture has underscored the extent to which scribal culture—broadly defined as the continued use of manuscript writing for composition, communication, and textual exchange—remained a vital and dynamic medium well after the advent of print. Scholars such as Harold Love have further refined this picture through the concept of scribal publication: the deliberate circulation of handwritten texts among select readers, often within elite or professional networks, as a parallel—and at times preferable—mode of dissemination alongside print. While influential accounts such as Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* emphasize the role of print in shaping modern distinctions between public and private life, more recent scholarship has complicated this binary by foregrounding the ongoing relevance of manuscript practices within a culture increasingly defined by print (McDowell; Johns; McKenzie). These studies suggest that scribal publication did not simply persist in spite of print but actively shaped the cultural logic of the public sphere, blurring rather than reinforcing the boundaries between private and public expression in the early modern and eighteenth-century periods.

Building on this body of work, scholars have continued to examine how eighteenth-century writers employed manuscript for both personal and professional purposes. Love's foundational study, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England*, for instance, demonstrates that forms such as newsletters, poetry, and music were routinely produced and circulated in manuscript well into the print era, challenging earlier assumptions that print

rapidly displaced scribal publication. Periodicals and newsletters, in particular, shed light on eighteenth-century perceptions of manuscript and print not as oppositional technologies but as complementary modes of textual transmission. Among the various genres that register this interplay, the letter emerges as a particularly revealing site for examining the shifting boundaries between private and public, script and print. While familiar letters have often been associated with the private and intimate sphere of personal exchange, the epistolary form—as it appears in periodicals, printed miscellanies, and narrative fiction—regularly occupies the space of print and public circulation. Moreover, manuscript letters, familiar correspondence, and epistolary writing as a literary mode each carry distinct formal and cultural valences and should not be treated as interchangeable. This essay examines how letters moved between private manuscript and public print across eighteenth-century genres.

Present-day critical assumptions often treat letters as inherently private: handwritten, familiar, and intended solely for personal correspondence (Smith 180). In contrast, letters in the eighteenth century operated simultaneously as manuscript and print genres—a duality that, in many ways, persists today. Personal correspondences, whether real or fictional, were frequently copied by professional scriptoria or by individual readers and compilers for circulation within coteries or broader literary communities (Love 124–25). These manuscript transmissions often served as precursors to print publication, designed to instruct, entertain, or morally edify a wider public. In this context, the printed letter should not be viewed simply as a disclosure of private content but rather as a deliberately crafted textual form shaped by an awareness of its potential for public readership.

This dual status is evident in both prescriptive and literary uses of the epistolary form. Collections such as *The Complete Letter-Writer* offered readers model epistles explicitly intended for emulation and publication, while many literary works adopted the appearance and conventions of letter-writing for rhetorical or aesthetic purposes (Van Hensbergen 508).

Letters circulated widely across genres, bridging fiction and nonfiction and becoming one of the most prevalent forms in eighteenth-century print culture. Periodicals such as *The Spectator* and *The Tatler* regularly featured letters, some purportedly submitted by readers, others fictional, used to simulate a lively exchange of views. Verse epistles, such as Alexander Pope's *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, employed the structure and tone of a personal letter to engage public literary and political debates. Epistolary novels, from Aphra Behn's *Love-Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister* to Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, used letters to frame narrative, authorize voice, and structure plot. Religious and political writings likewise adopted the epistolary form for public dissemination, as in Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. The history of eighteenth-century letters was thus bound up with the development of other literary genres, in which the letter form was visibly appropriated, parodied, and converted into other forms of literature.

Arguably the dominant form in eighteenth-century poetry, the verse epistle developed in conscious imitation of the letter, importing the epistolary mode into poetic practice (Altman 199). While some verse letters were indeed addressed to specific individuals and circulated privately in manuscript, many were later published—sometimes with minimal revision, sometimes reimagined entirely for print. In either case, both manuscript and print circulation complicate the assumption that these texts were strictly private; even when addressed to an individual, verse epistles often gesture toward a broader readership and participate in public discourse.

When published, these poems typically retain the fiction of private address. The verse epistle is commonly directed to a named addressee on a particular occasion, creating the impression that the poem is a personal communication overheard by a larger audience. The reader is positioned as an eavesdropper, invited to observe what appears to be an intimate

exchange. This staged intimacy is evident in the opening lines of Pope's *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*:

> SHUT, shut the door, good *John*! fatigu'd I said,
>
> Tye up the knocker, say I'm sick, I'm dead,
>
> The Dog-star rages! nay 'tis past a doubt,
>
> All *Bedlam*, or *Parnassus*, is let out:
>
> Fire in their eye, and Papers in their hand,
>
> They rave, recite, and madden round the land. (lines 1–6)

The poet calls upon "good John" to close the door, invoking a domestic setting that implies withdrawal from the chaotic world outside. The reference to "Bedlam" and "Parnassus" collapses the realms of madness and poetry, implicitly linking Pope's public literary environment to disorder. Yet even as the poem claims retreat, it performs a highly public gesture: by invoking the private space of correspondence, Pope dramatizes his own vulnerability, framing his moral and literary critique as a response to external pressures. The rhetorical address to Arbuthnot thus serves less as a conduit for private exchange than as a framing device for public argument.

The illusion of private dialogue also governs the body of the *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, particularly in moments where Pope explicitly seeks Arbuthnot's guidance:

> Friend to my Life, (which did not you prolong,
>
> The World had wanted many an idle Song)
>
> What *Drop* or *Nostrum* can this Plague remove?
>
> Or which must end me, a Fool's Wrath or Love? (27–30)

Pope adopts the familiar posture of the letter-writer appealing to a confidant for advice. Yet the theatricality of the diction—"Plague," "*Nostrum*," and the melodramatic alternatives of "Wrath" or "Love"—suggests a stylized performance of distress. The epistolary frame allows

Pope to position himself rhetorically as both victim and critic while using Arbuthnot's imagined sympathy as a device through which to heighten his satirical posture.

Like his favored classical model, Horace, Pope composed many epistles—verse letters directed ostensibly to particular individuals yet written with a broader audience in mind. While Horace's epistles circulated in manuscript and would not have been printed in his own time, their literary form and rhetorical sophistication nonetheless presuppose a readership beyond the named addressee. Pope adapts this Horatian model to an eighteenth-century context shaped by both manuscript and print cultures and reflects directly on the movement from private composition to public dissemination in his *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*. There, Pope presents his turn to print not as an act of vanity or self-assertion but as a response to the social encouragement that prompted him to embrace publication as a means of broader circulation:

> But why then publish? *Granville* the polite,
> And knowing *Walsh*, would tell me I could write;
> Well-natur'd *Garth* inflam'd with early praise,
> And *Congreve* lov'd, and *Swift* endur'd my Lays . . . (130–33)

This moment of rhetorical self-positioning is crucial: Pope does not offer a general account of his emergence as a published poet but instead frames his turn to print as a direct response to the judgment and encouragement of a literary coterie—an endorsement that prompted him to follow the logic of expanded circulation and bring his verse, initially composed for manuscript exchange, into print.

The widespread use of the epistolary style in eighteenth-century verse challenges the modern assumption that letters—and poetry more broadly—were primarily private or personal forms. Verse epistles, even when not explicitly intended for print, frequently adopt a critical and argumentative posture rather than one of emotional self-disclosure. Far from

being purely subjective expressions, they often function as public interventions, engaging moral, philosophical, or literary concerns through the framework of personal address.

This public orientation reflects broader features of eighteenth-century literary culture. As J. Paul Hunter observes, the boundary between poetry and prose genres—biography, history, philosophical dialogues, sermons—was far less rigid than it is today (11). Poetry was not confined to a narrow set of themes or tones, nor was it marginalized as a merely aesthetic or emotive discourse. On the contrary, verse served as a widely accepted medium of public communication, operating alongside political pamphlets, religious and philosophical treatises, and periodical essays as a vehicle for civic and intellectual engagement. Eighteenth-century poetry thus addressed an expansive range of subjects, from the quotidian to the conceptual, including philosophical, theological, social, and national concerns (15). Pope's *Epistles to Several Persons*, Hunter notes, takes up topics such as architecture, gardening, gender, and the ethics of wealth (30). This discursive breadth characterizes both manuscript and printed verse epistles and further unsettles the modern critical tendency to associate poetry with lyric privacy and personal emotion.

Even when adopting the conventions of familiar address, poets frequently used the epistolary mode to give a public edge to private reflection. They understood themselves to be participants in the public sphere and anticipated responsive, discerning readers who would engage with their ideas, critiques, and positions. As Hunter argues, modern readers—"conditioned by Romantic alienation from the public sphere and by twentieth-century practice that radically privatized feelings"—are inclined to regard poetry as "more for our hearts than our heads" (17). Contemporary expectations emphasize the private, emotional, and lyrical, whereas eighteenth-century verse, by contrast, oriented itself toward "the public, the social, the discursive, and the argumentative" (18). This contrast not only reframes how we read eighteenth-century poetry but also complicates a series of inherited critical

binaries—between script and print, verse and prose, and private feeling and public discourse—all of which the epistolary mode, and the verse epistle in particular, consistently disrupts.

The cultural prominence of epistolarity in eighteenth-century verse extended into other genres as well, particularly travel writing, which similarly adopted the letter form as a means of structuring narrative and mediating experience. As Hunter notes, the prevalence of epistles in poetry was "part of a larger literary and cultural participation in epistolarity and is dependent on the real-life importance of letter-writing at the time" (30). By the same token, travel narratives—enormously popular throughout the eighteenth century—often adopted epistolary form. As Percy G. Adams observes, "[T]he first-person journal or letter, that 'pristine document,' is still the archetypal form for the *récit de voyage*" (164).

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters*, for instance, were composed entirely "in her own autograph" and "copied by her into two small albums" (Montagu, *Complete Letters* xiv). Though resembling familiar letters and adopting their tone, these were not, as her editor makes clear, "the actual letters she sent to her friends and relations"; rather, they were a retrospective compilation "dated, and addressed to people either named or nameless" (xiv–xv). Montagu drew on material from her original correspondence but revised, transposed, and arranged the letters into a more cohesive and polished form. The resulting collection blurs the line between private communication and public authorship, revealing how the epistolary form could be shaped into a travel narrative designed—at least in part—with future readers in mind.

Although ostensibly framed as familiar letters—written for individual, often intimate correspondents—Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters* clearly engage a broader community of actual and anticipated readers. The title page of the first printed edition, from 1763, *Letters of the Right Honourable Lady M——y W——y M——e*, includes the subtitle *Written, during her*

Travels in Europe, Asia and Africa, to Persons of Distinction, Men of Letters, etc. in Different Parts of Europe, signaling a public orientation far beyond the private sphere suggested by the epistolary form.

The prefatory materials accompanying the 1763 edition reinforce this orientation. Although the volume was published posthumously, its preface, attributed to "A Lady" and dated 1724, is a slightly modified version of a text written by Mary Astell, a prominent feminist pamphleteer and friend of Montagu. This text originally appeared in the manuscript version of the letters under the heading "To the Reader," composed in 1725 after Montagu had lent Astell the letter-book in the previous year. In this paratext, Astell addresses both male and female audiences but appeals especially to women to recognize and defend Montagu's intellectual authority:

> let her own sex, at least, do her justice, lay aside diabolical Envy, and its *Brother* Malice, with all their accursed company, sly whispering, cruel back-biting, spiteful detraction, and the rest of that hideous crew. . . . Let the men malign one another, if they think fit, and strive to pull down merit when they cannot equal it. (ix–x)

A second prefatory text, the anonymous "Advertisement of the Editor," affirms that the letters "both in point of *matter* and *form*, are, to say no more of them, singularly worthy of the curiosity and attention of all men of taste, and even of all *women of fashion*" (xiv). It also asserts that Montagu had intended a "select collection of her Letters" to be "communicated to the public"—a wish expressed not only to the editor but also to "a few more chosen friends, to whom she gave copies" (xiii–iv). The advertisement justifies publication as a lasting tribute to Montagu's "wit," "judgement," and "real character," affirming both the literary merit and the exemplary stature of the author (xiv). Taken together, these paratexts present the *Embassy Letters* not as private communication but as polished literary productions designed to reach an informed and appreciative audience.

While the *Embassy Letters* preserve the appearance of unidirectional, intimate address, they are more accurately understood as rhetorical performances crafted for wider reception. Though their tone may seem informal or offhand, the letters are carefully structured to shape the reader's response—whether that reader is the named recipient or, as the paratexts suggest, a broader intellectual community. The selection and naming of addressees serve crucial stylistic functions: they help to determine tone, vocabulary, presumed knowledge, and the argumentative posture of each letter. For the reader, they indicate what kind of social script is being enacted. A letter to the Princess of Wales, for instance, adopts a more deferential tone than one addressed to Montagu's sister, Lady Mar; the letters to Pope, by contrast, assume a more personal and playful register. These tonal variations are preserved in the printed version, suggesting that the transition from manuscript to print maintained—rather than effaced—the interpersonal dynamics encoded in the original compositions.

Although Montagu delayed the publication of her letters during her lifetime, this hesitation does not diminish their literary orientation toward eventual public readership. Rather, it highlights the complex interplay of modesty, authorial control, and strategic self-fashioning that shaped women's participation in eighteenth-century print culture. Despite the practical obstacles of publication—lengthy negotiations with printers and booksellers and reputational risk—the option of print was demonstrably available to Montagu. She had published before: her first printed work appeared in Joseph Addison's *Spectator* in 1714, under the pseudonym "Lady President." Nevertheless, Montagu seems to have preferred manuscript circulation, particularly for her early poems, many of which were published without her consent and misattributed. It was not until 1733 that she coauthored *Verses Address'd to the Imitator of the First Satire of the Second Book of Horace* with John, Lord Hervey—a pointed response to Pope's attack on her in his own Horatian satire.

Montagu's ambivalence toward print reflects a broader reluctance among eighteenth-century writers to expose private correspondence to public view. Pope persuaded Swift to allow the publication of some of his letters, though Swift himself remained unequivocal in his belief that they were private, unstudied outpourings of friendship, never intended for print (Williams 120). Similarly, Richardson considered publishing his letters to Dorothy, Lady Bradshaigh, but ultimately decided against it, concerned that a loosely defined public readership might misinterpret the correspondence (Van Hensbergen 509). These instances reflect a central tension in the period: the contrast between the precisely denominated readership of a manuscript letter and the indeterminate, potentially indiscriminate audience of print.

As Michael McKeon argues, the rise of print played a central role in the emergence of the very concept of privacy—a notion that was neither traditional nor customary but instead arose in response to contemporary anxieties about committing manuscript compositions to print (81–82, 84–88). The assumption that letters were inherently private communications is thus historically contingent. In earlier practice, the reading of letters often constituted a communal event: their contents—like scripture, printed news, or various treatises—were frequently read aloud or circulated among friends and family (King 298). The notion of reading, and especially letter-writing, as a private, individual act of consumption only became culturally dominant by the mid–eighteenth century (Rose 66). Letters in the eighteenth century, as this essay has shown, functioned across a spectrum of public and personal uses. They were not solely vehicles of private communication but were at times composed with an eye toward wider circulation. As such, any rigid distinction between public and private is difficult to sustain. The prevalence of epistolary forms across diverse genres in eighteenth-century textual culture invites a reexamination of the commonplace assumption that letters are inherently private, subjective, or sentimental documents.

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