



Joseph Wright of Derby, *A Girl reading a Letter by candlelight, with a Young Man looking over her shoulder*, c. 1762-63. Reproduced by permission of Lt. Col. R. S. Nelthorpe. Photo courtesy John Webb, London.

Epistolary Bodies



GENDER AND GENRE IN
THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY
REPUBLIC OF LETTERS

ELIZABETH
HECKENDORN COOK



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1996

STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Stanford, California



*The Eighteenth-Century Epistolary Body
and the Public Sphere*

Letter and Contract: The Body of Writing

If the rhetorical structure of the letter always makes us ask, “Who writes, and to whom?”, the eighteenth-century letter-narrative provokes a more specific question: “What does it mean to write from the crossroads of public and private, manuscript and print, at this particular historical moment?”

In his essay “What Is an Author?” Michel Foucault makes an assertion about the forms I explore in this study that suggests some provisional responses.

The author’s name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and a culture. It has no legal status, nor is it located in the fiction of the work; rather, it is located in the break that founds a certain discursive construct and its very particular mode of being. As a result, we could say that in a civilization like our own there are a certain number of discourses that are endowed with the “author function,” while others are deprived of it. A private letter may well have a signer—it does not have an author; a contract may well have a guarantor—it does not have an author. . . . The author function is therefore characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society.¹

Foucault's essay is intended to serve as "an introduction to the historical analysis of discourse," an analysis sensitive to transformations in both the "author function" and in the narratives legitimated by that function.² The eighteenth-century epistolary fictions examined here, however, make it necessary to reconsider Foucault's claim that letters and contracts are among discourses lacking the "author function." The *Lettres persanes*, *Clarissa*, *Fanni Butlerd*, and *Letters from an American Farmer* challenge both Foucault's historical chronology and his taxonomy of the author function. In the first two-thirds of the eighteenth century, I argue here, a "discursive set" existed that coordinated the concept of authorship with both of the written forms that Foucault claims exclude it "in a civilization like our own."

Not coincidentally, Foucault's categorization of modern discourses matches the conventional division of human experience into separate orders of public and private, a division that was consolidated and naturalized in the course of the eighteenth century. Against the swarm of public print forms that proliferated in the early decades of the century, the letter became an emblem of the private; while keeping its actual function as an agent of the public exchange of knowledge, it took on the general connotations it still holds for us today, intimately identified with the body, especially a female body, and the somatic terrain of the emotions, as well as with the thematic material of love, marriage, and the family. In the same period, the contract became the representative instrument of that other great aspect of the private, the range of economic activities we still call "private enterprise."³ In general, literary critics are only now beginning to analyze more attentively the connections between on the one hand the capitalist economic system, formalized by the late-seventeenth-century financial revolution, and on the other the nuclear family, affirmed by eighteenth-century culture: the two major divisions of the domain of the private acknowledged by the Enlightenment.

As a result of being at last so thoroughly identified with the private order, the cultural history of both letter and contract has rarely been acknowledged or explored. It is often assumed that

they have always been the private, "authorless" discourses Foucault describes, transparent forms that signify only constatively. In the eighteenth century, however, on the cusp between manuscript and print cultures, both these forms came into prominence in the cultural imagination. Functioning symbolically as well as semantically, they operated not to reflect a preexisting subjectivity but rather to produce and organize it in various ways. In so doing, they also delineate the modern historical trajectory of the metaphor of the Republic of Letters and of the citizen-critic who inhabits that republic. The *Lettres persanes* (1721) uses the polyphonic epistolary form to train its readers in the new critical activities proper to subjects of the Republic of Letters. In *Clarissa* (1747-48), Richardson co-opts and reconstructs Montesquieu's public sphere of letters as a "quasi public" modeled on the affective relations of the private family. Where Richardson's novel exploits the ideology of the private, *Fanni Butlerd* (1757) exposes its crippling effects and transforms voyeuristic readers of private letters into parties to a (feminist) literary contract. Near the end of the century, the *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) mourns the collapse of the public sphere that made such a contract theoretically possible. In each case, the forms of letter and contract not only define the boundaries of authorship but also construe their readers in very specific ways in relation to the categories of public and private.

In response to Foucault's definition of authorship, then, we can draw two counterconclusions for the study of eighteenth-century epistolarity. First, the eighteenth century was in important ways *not* "a civilization like our own," and the real historical and cultural differences should not be flattened out when we read texts from the period. Second, those discursive modes haunting the borders or margins of established literary taxonomies, such as the epistolary narrative, constitute the richest terrain for the exploration of such differences.

The epistolary genre was central to the construction and definition of the categories of public and private that we have inherited from Enlightenment social and political traditions, and to the construction and definition of the bodies held properly to in-

habit those categories. However, in part because an ideological investment in the existence of a gendered private order continued to deepen in the post-Enlightenment period, the critical histories of the narratives I examine here have consistently returned them to the realm of the private from which their characters strive, in different ways, to free themselves. This critical relocation persisted even though, in each case, the narrative of *epistolarity* that accompanies the epistolary narrative clearly claims its place in the Enlightenment public sphere.⁴ In order to elude the hermeneutic cul-de-sac produced by this ideological effect, eighteenth-century epistolary fictions must be read both through and against that Enlightenment cultural framework. By expanding formalist models of epistolarity in the directions to which Foucault points, examining such specific institutions of eighteenth-century print culture as the author function, the literary public sphere, and the ideal of the citizen-critic, we can begin to recover the full epistolary body of the Enlightenment Republic of Letters.

Published Letters and Public Sphere Theory

Eighteenth-century epistolary fictions allow us to examine the Enlightenment ideal of a Republic of Letters precisely because the letter-narrative exposes the private body to publication.⁵ The letter-narrative is formally and thematically concerned with competing definitions of subjectivity: it puts into play the tension between the private individual, identified with a specifically gendered, classed body that necessarily commits it to specific forms of self-interest, and the public person, divested of self-interest, discursively constituted, and functionally disembodied. This is the citizen-critic who is the proper subject of the Republic of Letters.

Jürgen Habermas's groundbreaking sociological work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) defined the invention of a certain kind of publicness as the central event of Enlightenment.⁶ If the private spaces of the conjugal family and of commodity exchange (the market) are opposed to the public terrain of the court and the modern state, then the "public sphere" (as

Private Realm		Sphere of Public Authority
Civil society (realm of commodity exchange and social labor)	Public sphere in the political realm Public sphere in the world of letters (clubs, press)	State (realm of the "police")
Conjugal family's internal space (bourgeois intellectuals)	(market of culture products) "Town"	Court (courtly-noble society)

Habermas's *Öffentlichkeit* has been translated) refers to a social space that is independent of *both* the private and the public categories of human experience, as illustrated in the table reproduced here from *Structural Transformation*.⁷

As Habermas describes it, the public sphere itself develops out of and remains structurally related to the realm of the private, but the crucial distinction between the two lies in his definition of the public sphere as a zone in which participants leave behind that self-interestedness that necessarily enters into their consideration of matters of production and reproduction. Private individuals come together in the public sphere as citizens employing disinterested reason to consider matters of public concern. The innovativeness, and indeed the optimism, of Habermas's model stands out against other theories of modern publicness. For example, Hannah Arendt claims that the classical distinction between public and private is corrupted by the rise of what she calls the "social," the realm of "housekeeping," as she also tendentiously terms it.⁸ The current revaluation of so-called women's work would require us to rethink Arendt's dismissive assessment of this category of experience even had Habermas not mapped out the radical inversion of values that distinguishes classical notions of public and private from those of the Enlightenment. In the Greek model, the private stands as the space of deprivation, against which the public represents the space of freedom for the self. In contrast, in early modern Europe the idea began to take hold that only in the private realm of the affectively organized family did one evolve an "authentic" subjectivity.

Now the privileges of privacy were to be defended against the encroachment of the state.

For Habermas, then, the public sphere existed in eighteenth-century Europe as a conceptual space in which reasoning individuals, abstracted from their private interests, arrived at a consensus on public affairs through their discussions, letters, speeches, books, and essays. This free, rational, and disinterested consensus effectively counterbalanced the growing influence of state- and class-based institutions and of conflicting private interest groups until its dissolution under the pressures of market capitalism in the latter part of the nineteenth century.⁹

Habermas does not acknowledge, however, that while the Enlightenment public sphere was ostensibly accessible to every literate human being, it functionally excluded subjects who were not white upper-class males. Here the limitations of *Structural Transformation* can be addressed by incorporating into public sphere theory the central insight of feminist criticism that these categories of human experience were constituted as gendered even as they evolved. Eighteenth-century epistolary fictions, formally and thematically preoccupied with the gendered private body as they are, necessitate the revision of Habermas's model on these grounds.¹⁰

Of particular importance to literary studies is Habermas's argument that the spread of literacy and the informal practice of amateur literary and art criticism in the salons, coffeehouses, and reading societies of Enlightenment Europe prepared the grounds for the forms of political critique that led to full civic engagement: the Republic of Letters made possible the political republics of the late eighteenth century.¹¹ Especially in the last decade, critics have begun to explore the extent to which eighteenth-century literature was conscious of its intimate relation to the structures, conventions, and material bases of the public sphere, to the political contexts of liberalism and nationalism as these evolved in the course of the century, and to the new forms of subjectivity, including both the citizen-critic and the private individual, that inhabited these spaces.

From this perspective, however, a problem arises with Habermas's description of the historical trajectory of the public sphere.

Although Habermas does not consistently do so, it is both legitimate and essential to distinguish between the public sphere in the world of letters and the public sphere in the political realm. Habermas's failure to distinguish between these two is the more striking in that his own analysis brilliantly shows that precisely this conflation is the foundation of liberal ideology. The emphasis of *Structural Transformation* is in general on the political, whereas my study is focused on the literary; as a result, the two projects propose different chronologies of the public sphere. For Habermas, between the 1770s and the 1870s, "civil society as the private sphere [was] emancipated from the directives of public authority to such an extent that at that time the *political* public sphere could attain its full development in the bourgeois constitutional state," particularly in British parliamentarianism.¹² In contrast, I focus here on the transnational ideal of a *literary* public sphere, formulated in part in epistolary fictions between the 1720s and the 1770s. I am of course concerned with the political resonances implicit in the metaphor of the Republic of Letters, and the last chapter of this work examines the rupture between literary and political public spheres in revolutionary America, but my study remains bounded by the Enlightenment ideal of the public sphere, which could not be accommodated by the nationalist cultures that increasingly shaped political states from around 1775.

Other important differences not discussed by Habermas between the public sphere of letters and the political public sphere appear when public sphere theory is reread from a feminist perspective, as I have already suggested. At the simplest level, one difference is evident in the fact that many individuals who did claim access to a literary public sphere were excluded from the political public sphere under British parliamentarianism and American and French constitutionalism. The full rights of citizenship institutionalized by the Bill of Rights or the Declaration of the Rights of Man were generally limited to white property-owning males and invoked a far less inclusive notion of citizenship than did the model of open access to the domain of reason implicit in the Enlightenment metaphor of the public sphere.

The elision of sex and class in Habermas's early formulation of

the public sphere explains the insistence here on the body in print culture. Consider again the example of Lady Bradshaigh's *Clarissa*, described in the Introduction, which simultaneously invokes and resists the model of the citizen-critic's disembodied disinterestedness. Here the gendered private body and its desires, literalized by Bradshaigh's scrawl, are insistently held before our eyes against the publicity and the corporealization implicit in the printed text. The extended, marginalized letter that is Bradshaigh's impassioned critique makes present by analogy the private letters of *Clarissa*, Lovelace, the Harlowes, Belford, and Anna that are understood to lie behind the published book and to sustain its public form. Other eighteenth-century letter-narratives manifest the same oscillation between private and public, script and print, which is also implicitly an oscillation between a corporealized, gendered writing subject and the disembodied voice of the citizen-critic.

The eighteenth-century epistolary novel played an important part in the reconfiguration and redefinition of concepts of private and public, for it represents the paradoxical intersection of these apparently opposed orders. Consisting of personal letters, very often those of women, that are brought into the public sphere of print culture, epistolary narratives are necessarily concerned with determining the boundaries of public and private—and with questions of gender and corporealization that are inextricably involved in this definition. Indeed, as I'll argue, the oscillation exemplified in Bradshaigh's *Clarissa* is formally as well as thematically inherent in the genre at this historical moment, in which broad social redefinitions of bodies and subjectivities, and of the spaces that these properly inhabit, are evolving with and against each other in the context of the institutions and material bases of print culture.¹³ The modern body-subject, as we might call it—that notion of the self as represented and bounded by the body and what it does and makes—is brought into play in epistolary narratives in particularly rich and complicated ways. Inflecting these are the concepts of public and private, bound up with liberal political theory as it evolved in this period, and such associated notions as publicity, publication, privacy, privilege, and privation. The ways in which

eighteenth-century letter narratives deploy this constellation of concepts maps out the definition, contestation, and eventual collapse of the Enlightenment ideal of the public sphere; in this sense, the epistolary narrative is the central cultural form of Enlightenment.¹⁴

Cultural Contexts: The Father and the Contract

The death of the Father would deprive literature of many of its pleasures. If there is no longer a Father, why tell stories?

—Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

I have seen the morals of my time, and I have published these letters.

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*

The modern outlines of the cultural categories of public and private took shape in the eighteenth century. The concept of publicness is necessarily defined against the complementary notion of the private; like all oppositional pairs, public and private make up a cultural system, a connotational network that with the rise of print culture began to implicate such related ideas as publication and publicity. Among the philosophical and political theories and the sociological and technological developments that affected how these categories were understood, the accelerating growth of print culture around the beginning of the century is especially significant. This is because the Enlightenment ideal of a public sphere was supported by a discursive network of publications: letters, speeches, sermons, treatises, engravings, political cartoons, books, broadsheets, and essays, all widely circulated in print. Together these made up the visible manifestation of the eighteenth-century Republic of Letters.

In what follows, I connect the ideas of public and private implicit in the metaphor of the Republic of Letters with one of the important myths of liberal political theory, a narrative about the origins of the civil state that was most clearly articulated in Great Britain near the end of the seventeenth century, although it had

widespread European currency. This myth exposes a key difference between earlier notions of the public/private dichotomy and the predominant eighteenth-century model—a difference having to do with a changing sense of the cultural authority of the father.

The narrative goes something like this. For centuries, Western political theory assumed an analogy between paternal authority and that of the ruler and assimilated all power relations to this model. This conventional analogy was strengthened in seventeenth-century absolutist political theory, which assigned to the ruler a power over his subjects as innate and as complete as that of the patriarchal father over his child. Since paternal and political power were analogous, the Father-King was understood to be divinely ordained to rule both as political authority and as head of the family constituted by his people.

In direct opposition to this idea, Enlightenment contractarian theory denied the patriarchal justification of political power.¹⁵ As opposed to the assumption of continuity implicit in patriarchal political theory, which imagined no transformation of the basic structure of authority from the origins of mankind to the present, the story of civil origins told by contractarian theory assumed a foundational discontinuity. According to this narrative, the civil state brought into being by the social contract originated in a rupture of the father's patriarchal authority (through his death or replacement). In the ensuing structural reconfiguration, his sons entered into relatively egalitarian contractual relations with one another as brothers. Locke, for example, acknowledges that while patriarchal rule was undoubtedly the general form of government in earliest times, when the "natural" and customary rule of the father was tacitly accepted by members of an extended family, nonetheless a social contract and the civil society that is its product emerged when patriarchal authority was disrupted, by death or otherwise: "But when either the Father died, and left his next Heir for want of Age, Wisdom, Courage, or any other Qualities, less fit for Rule: or where several Families met, and consented to continue together: There, 'tis not to be doubted, but they used their natural

freedom, to set up him, whom they judged the ablest, and most likely to Rule well over them."¹⁶

Contractarian theory's disruptive narrative of the origins of civil society has crucial implications for the Enlightenment model of public and private that concerns us here, for it implies the decentering of the paternal role—or, to use Barthes's phrase, the death of the Father. Because the patriarchal Father-King structurally united the domains of government and the family, the dislocation of this figure meant that the political (public) and domestic (private) spheres once conjoined by the body of the patriarch split apart into differentiated domains of human experience, each of which had now to be separately regulated. The fiction of the social contract addresses only the *public* domain: the contract organizes the political relations of the brothers and produces the civil state, but it does not govern the private domain of the family. Enlightenment political theory provided no comparable fiction to order the family's relations, which were understood to be affectively rather than politically grounded.¹⁷ As a result, the emergent domain of private experience, no longer controlled by a larger, unifying social structure, could now be perceived as dangerously unregulated.

In direct contradiction to Barthes's (perhaps ironic) suggestion that narrative is pointless in the absence of the Father, I propose that in fact the telling of stories became much more important after the demise of the authority structures implicit in a patriarchal epistemology. In the extended cultural transition of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the institutions of print culture generally and individual works of literature in particular can be understood as efforts to explain and compensate for the effects of the death of the Father. In particular, the question of how to harness what were now seen as the private energies and appetites of individual men and women was answered not by political theorists but by writers of fiction: the novel, and particularly the epistolary novel, developed as a direct response to a new anxiety about the private at the very heart of the Enlightenment. The private sphere of affective relations required an ordering principle analogous to

the social contract that ordered the public, civic domain. Just as the social contract produced citizens of political republics, then, the literary contract of the epistolary novel invented and regulated the post-patriarchal private subject as a citizen of the Republic of Letters.

The Epistolary Contract: Eighteenth-Century Letters

Genres are essentially literary *institutions* or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact.

—Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*

What was the “proper use” of an epistolary narrative in the eighteenth century? The claim I make about the cultural role of letter-fictions will be more readily accepted if both the epistemological status and something of the discursive range of the letter in eighteenth-century writing are established—if, that is, we specify some aspects of the contract in which Enlightenment readers understood themselves to be participating as they read an epistolary narrative.

The letter as such carried two contradictory sets of connotations in this period. On the one hand, it was considered the most direct, sincere, and transparent form of written communication, a notion expressed in the title of Thomas Forde’s early letter-collection *Foenestra in pectore, or, Familiar Letters* (Window in the breast, or . . . ; 1660). The same idea is exploited in Lovelace’s phony etymology of *correspondence*: “writing from the heart (without the fetters prescribed by method or study).” It also appears in Dr. Johnson’s often-cited remark that “a man’s letters . . . are only the mirror of his breast.” But the letter was simultaneously recognized as the most playful and potentially deceptive of forms, as a stage for rhetorical trickery, the “calm and deliberate performance” that Johnson, reviewing the scandal over the publication of Pope’s correspondence, describes in his *Life of Pope* (1779).¹⁸

True to this epistemological ambiguity, in the eighteenth century the letter-form was used in every kind of writing, from sci-

entific treatises to novels, from conduct books to political essays, as well as in exchanges between ordinary people facilitated by the development of postal institutions across Europe.¹⁹ The ways in which the letter saturated Enlightenment culture make it clear that studies of eighteenth-century epistolarity must begin by rejecting an anachronistic distinction between literatures of fact and fiction.²⁰ While this dichotomy has become a basic principle of our textual taxonomies, a brief examination of various published uses of the letter in the eighteenth century shows no consistent distinction between “real” and “fictional” letters. Aside from the epistolary novel *per se*, there were poetical epistles, letters on botany, and monthly newsletters on literature, fashion, and business conditions. Such periodicals as the *Gentleman’s Magazine* and Henry Fielding’s *Covent-Garden Journal* might be largely made up of letters, often generated by the editor to evoke the impression of a community of readers.²¹ There were travel letters, letter-writing manuals, and letters “from the dead to the living.” There were editions of the letters of classical authors and of a few modern political and literary figures, though it was not yet considered acceptable to publish one’s own correspondence during one’s life.²² Particularly toward the end of the century, letters became identified with a radical political agenda; published letters appeared under such titles as “An Open Letter to the People of England,” and anonymous unpublished letters threatened landlords with fire and destruction.²³

The implications of what I’ve characterized as the letter-form’s ontological ambiguity become clearer when we consider this form’s importance in Enlightenment scientific discourse. The letter’s contemporary connotations of directness, transparency, and sociability made it arguably the crucial genre of the New Science, for where the tendency of classical and Renaissance natural philosophy had been to devise elaborate universal systems that had to be explained in book-length treatises, the empirical New Science emphasized the proposition and affirmation of limited hypotheses and specific facts. The letter encouraged the swift dissemination of discrete chunks of information such as accounts of individual experiments. Letters could be easily transmitted across national borders, escaping

the kinds of censorship imposed on full-length books; they could be rapidly translated into the variety of national languages in which the New Science was now being discussed; and they could be swiftly and inexpensively printed and widely distributed.²⁴

Furthermore, the letter-form encouraged the participation of nonspecialists in scientific endeavors. The correspondence columns of general-interest journals often contained letters on natural history observations or mathematical questions, and submissions to *Philosophical Transactions*, the journal of the Royal Society, appeared as letters. Under the rubric of epistolary sociability, the correspondence published by these journals composed a scientific community that linked rural subscribers with city dwellers and amateurs with experts.

Book-length scientific works used the letter for similar reasons, and here we begin to see how the implied authenticity of the letter-form, reinforced by its documentary function in the New Science, tended to blur the boundaries, not yet firmly established in the early eighteenth century, between fact and fiction. Arthur Young's *The Farmer's Letters to the People of England* (1768) recommended the practical agricultural innovations generated by Enlightenment science through the proto-persona of an educated farmer. Gilbert White's *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* (1789), presented as an orderly series of letters, was actually patched together from a variety of sources: formal essays composed for the Royal Society, entries made over a period of thirty years in White's garden notebooks and natural-history journals, and scraps of actual correspondence dating back to midcentury. Daniel Defoe's *The Storm* (1704), a survey of the effects of the previous year's disastrous tempest, combined real letters from correspondents all over Great Britain with supplementary "letters" written by himself under a variety of pseudonyms to round out the report. Its subtitle makes explicit its documentary claim: *A Collection of the most remarkable casualties and disasters, which happen'd in the late dreadful tempest, both by sea and land, on Friday the twenty-sixth of November, seventeen hundred and three*. However, the lengthy, vehement insistence of its preface on the literal authenticity of the letters suggests that readers were deeply suspicious of that authenticity.

These examples of ontological ambiguity are related to the notorious blurring of fact and fiction in what we would now classify as properly literary epistolary works, such as the early editions of Samuel Richardson's letter-novels. Although the prefatory material of *Pamela* (1740) claims that the text is based on real letters, both the plot and the epistolary form of this novel grew out of an explicitly didactic model-letter manual Richardson was writing. The ontological confusion expands with his later epistolary novels, *Clarissa* (1747-48) and *Sir Charles Grandison* (1754): each of these generated extended written exchanges among Richardson's circle of correspondents, who offered advice on the work in progress, detailed their responses to events and characters in the novel, transcribed into their own correspondence useful moral apothegms distilled from the fictional letters, and occasionally wrote as though they were themselves those characters.²⁵

The letter continued to inhabit an indeterminate space between fact and fiction to the end of the century, and this indeterminacy came to be recognized as a characteristic of the genre. Notoriously, both Rousseau in the second preface to *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) and Choderlos de Laclos in the Publisher's Note and Editor's Preface to *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782) ironize the trope of the "real" letter-collection, completing the genre's ontological destabilization. Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), the focus of Chapter 5, amalgamates a rich mixture of narrative genres, from the documentary travel account to political allegory disguised as authentic natural history observations to historical and ethnographic anecdotes, framed as an exchange of letters between a simple, ill-educated frontier farmer and a rich and cultured European gentleman.

In the face of such generic variety, the question of whether Crèvecoeur's *Letters* is "fact" or "fiction" has little pertinence. Although I do not make precisely the same assertion about *Pamela* or the *Liaisons dangereuses*, I do suggest that viewing the genre as a continuous spectrum that runs from, say, *Selborne* at one end to *Clarissa* and *Julie* at the other will result in a much richer and more historically accurate understanding of it. In short, I am arguing that, contrary to what is implied by the title of one important

modern study of the genre, epistolary narratives are not simply stories “told in letters.”²⁶ Because of their intimate relation to the contexts of print culture, and because of their ontological ambiguity, letter-fictions require a critical apparatus specifically adapted to their formal and thematic idiosyncrasies. In the remainder of this chapter, I define a critical *epistolarity* to take the place of traditional approaches to epistolary literature.

The History of Epistolary Criticism: Problems of Genealogy

The need for such a critical apparatus has not always been recognized. Too often, epistolary criticism has been based on assumptions about the genealogies of letter-narratives that distort their contexts, or on anachronistic premises that ignore the contemporary significance of the form or assimilate it to third-person narrative. Surveys of the eighteenth-century novel, for example, often discuss epistolary narrative only as a kind of subplot or parenthesis in the “development” of prose fiction. For the last three decades, accounts of that development have been heavily influenced by Ian Watt’s *Rise of the Novel* (1957). Declaring the novel of “realism” to be the dominant prose-fiction tradition, Watt traces an evolution from Defoe through Richardson, who holds “the central place in the development of the technique of narrative realism,” on to Austen and so through to the great nineteenth-century novelists. Left to languish as cul-de-sacs of this evolutionary model are not only the “stylistic virtues” of Fielding and those British novelists who follow his “external” approach to character but also, even more sweepingly, all of “French fiction from *La Princesse de Clèves* to *Les Liaisons dangereuses*,” which, according to Watt, “we feel” to be “too stylish to be authentic.”²⁷

Watt’s teleological model of literary development continues to shape recent studies of the novel, even those that recognize the pitfalls of reading eighteenth-century novels as the imperfect precursors of nineteenth-century works. Michael McKeon’s magisterial *The Origins of the English Novel, 1660–1740* (1987) explicitly positions itself as a revision of Watt’s study, redefining the nature and

function of literary genres dialectically rather than teleologically. Certainly, McKeon’s approach offers a more intricate understanding of the relation between literary works and social contexts than does Watt’s model of simple analogy between philosophical and literary “realisms,” and furthermore it provides an explanation of the naturalization of the novel form that does not rely on a retrospective view from Austen’s parlor window. Although McKeon begins by surveying a wide range of pre-eighteenth-century prose narratives crucial to the formation of the genre, however, the extended close readings making up the latter part of his book are devoted to British authors already certified as canonical by the academic culture industry: after Cervantes, Bunyan, and Swift comes the triad of Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding discussed by Watt. One is left to infer that “the novel” before 1740 was exclusively the product of these writers, for the implications of this selection of authors is not discussed.²⁸

Even as professedly radical a rereading of the diachronic development of the genre as Nancy Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* follows Watt’s canonical lead. The elision that occurs between Armstrong’s title and her subtitle, by means of which “domestic fiction” implicitly comes to stand for “novel,” exemplifies one of the governing critical assumptions about eighteenth-century prose fiction that is problematic in epistolary criticism. Like Watt and McKeon, Armstrong opens her study with a survey of certain extracanonical nonfiction prose forms that help shape the novel—in this case eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conduct books. Again, like Watt’s and McKeon’s, her close readings are devoted to a very traditional group of British authors: Richardson, Austen, and the Brontës. Her chapter on *Pamela* borrows Watt’s title, “The Rise of the Novel,” without distinguishing her own project from the teleological account of the earlier study.

The juxtaposition of extraliterary discourses with canonical fictions—a strategy that New Historicist critics have employed very effectively—can be a way of challenging the authority of a literary canon. It is particularly useful insofar as that authority has

been assumed to derive from an autonomous, ahistorical, and pan-cultural sphere of literary values that has little or nothing to do with social and political contexts. While challenging the principles by which canonical *inclusion* is legitimated, however, such a critical practice often ignores the category of literary works that have been *excluded*. In the case of prose-fiction criticism, the story of the “rise of the novel” still centers almost exclusively on the novels of private life, those drawing on the thematic material of the family, sex, and marriage that is central to what could be called (conflating Watt’s and Armstrong’s terms) the “realist-domestic novel.” Such a reading presents Samuel Richardson as the ancestor of the novel of private life that is at last perfected in the nineteenth century, rather than as one among a group of eighteenth-century authors who explore the thematic and generic possibilities of the epistolary form in the specific cultural contexts of the Enlightenment Republic of Letters. In contrast, the critical perspective proposed by this study takes Richardson as, among other things, Montesquieu’s successor, rather than as merely Austen’s precursor.

Along with retrospective constructions of the genre’s genealogy, traditional epistolary criticism has essentialized its gender. Since the late seventeenth century, when the astounding popularity of the anonymous *Lettres portugaises* (1669) was followed by equally popular vernacular translations of the correspondence of Heloise and Abelard, the epistolary genre has been particularly identified with women and with what are often seen as women’s concerns. The critical valence of the genre so defined is grounded in a complex ideological arrangement that valorizes “authenticity” and “sincerity” in women’s writing, most frequently coded as the ostensibly natural expression of passionate emotion, the model for which can be found in Ovid’s *Heroides* and Heloise’s letters.²⁹ Despite this more or less respectable ancestry, such values are in many ways at odds with the ideology of professional authorship that came into being with the rise of print culture. Thus epistolary works matching this profile were relegated by generations of professional critics to the second ranks of “literature”—or were simply forgotten.

Beginning in the 1970s, however, literary scholars “rediscov-

ered” epistolary fiction and began to work out critical approaches under two different rubrics that took into account its formal and thematic specificities. On the one hand, feminist criticism exposed the cultural construction of the hierarchies of gender and genre that structure letter-narratives and their reception, and reopened the question of sociohistorical contexts; on the other, the attention of deconstructionist criticism to thematizations of textuality in literary works made accessible a crucial preoccupation of eighteenth-century letter-narratives. The salient example is Jacques Derrida’s *La carte postale: de Socrate à Freud et au delà* (1980), an exploration of what might be called the sublime of epistolary poetics. *The Post Card* provides what was for a while the epigraph *de rigueur* for studies of the epistolary genre: “the letter, the epistle, which is not a genre but all genres, literature itself.”³⁰ Appearing on what seems to be the terminal cusp of print culture, Derrida’s monologic epistolary text redeploys every trick in the Scriblerian/Sterneian repertoire of typographical puns, from intrusive footnotes to textual gaps of the “hic multa desiderantur” variety. The letter-writer muses on travel, telephoning, and translation; on the history of postal institutions; and on Poe’s, Freud’s, and Heidegger’s relations to epistolary intercourse. A thinnish subplot even works in the generic motif of the missing love letter. But these allusions remain superficial; Derrida’s real interest is the perverse textual relation between Plato and Socrates at the heart of Western culture that is exposed on the eponymous postcard. As the phrase cited above indicates, Derrida here uses the letter as a trope for all writing. In contrast, my interest is precisely to distinguish the letter from other literary genres—to define its epistolarity—within Enlightenment print culture.

While feminist criticism and deconstruction made epistolary narratives legible again, they sometimes did so by simply inverting the hierarchy of values that formerly marginalized the epistolary novel, producing similarly limited definitions of the genre. Consider the critical history of Montesquieu’s *Lettres persanes* (1721) as a case study. Scholarship on the *Lettres persanes* has perennially focused on the question of genre. For many years, the work was

studied primarily by intellectual historians and students of political philosophy as a kind of warm-up act for the *Esprit des lois* (1748). From this perspective, those letters that set up the project of cultural critique by comparing forms of governments or demystifying the origins of customs and religions had the greatest value. Letters relating to the harem, to the sexual pleasures and frustrations of Usbek, his wives, and his eunuchs, were dismissed as superficial vestiges of contemporary rococo eroticism. This material merely veiled what was assumed to be Montesquieu's serious purpose, a liberal indictment of French absolutism. Even when the harem material was read as political allegory, the subordination of literary form to intellectual content remained the same.

Eventually the *Lettres persanes* was claimed by literary critics, who tended to reverse the emphasis of social scientists by focusing almost exclusively on the harem material. These critics sought a unity in the text that would allow its categorization as a novel, and they found it in the story of the harem's collapse. The other hundred and thirty-odd letters, those on comparative religion, depopulation, Parisian customs, notions of justice, and so forth, become obfuscatory secondary material that simply defers the story of sexual passion at the text's heart.³¹

This way of reading the *Lettres persanes* is intended, of course, to rescue it from a scholarship that subordinates literary form to philosophical content, but it generates its own problems. Specifically, when the epistolary genre is seen as limited to the sentimental epistolary plot of feminine passion, the exclusive identification of women and letters reaffirms essentialist concepts of gender and sexuality, as well as replicating an artificial division of human experience into separate and gendered public and private spheres. Such a confusion of classificatory principles can only further obscure our understanding of the interrelation of gender and genre, and our awareness of the cultural construction of both.³²

As these summaries suggest, the contrasting approaches to the *Lettres persanes* of historians and literary critics share a structural feature: both treat those letters that emanate from and return to the harem as fundamentally different from the letters associated

with the project of cultural critique. The distinction seems to result from assumptions about the gendering of discourses: when the *Lettres persanes* is classified as political philosophy, its novelistic or literary aspects may be ignored on the assumption that a literary genre linked to "feminine" values will not be relevant to a "masculine" political discourse. On the other hand, when the *Lettres persanes* is treated as a forerunner of the "domestic-realist" novel, its satirical and political elements are erased, for the plot of feminine passion is held to belong to a private sphere of human experience that excludes political and philosophical issues.

Thus, as long as gender is assumed to be the primary analytical category for reading the *Lettres persanes*, we will necessarily reproduce variations of the gendered dichotomies that split the text apart unsatisfyingly. In contrast, as the next chapter argues, when the network of issues implicit in eighteenth-century notions of public and private is taken as an organizing principle of the *Lettres persanes*, the legibility and coherence of Montesquieu's text is uncovered on its own terms, and its central importance in a reconstructed epistolary tradition becomes clear. Such a reading, which recognizes that gender is necessarily implicated in other cultural categories, also opens up more generically stable epistolary works, as we will see with *Clarissa*.

Margins and Frames: Print Culture and the Story of the Letters

All margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that,
the shape of fundamental experience is altered. Any structure of
ideas is vulnerable at its margins.
—Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*

Each of the following chapters is devoted to an eighteenth-century letter-narrative that challenges the boundaries of the epistolary genre and reconstructs it in important ways. My investigation of these fictions is shaped by their engagement with the technological and sociological contexts of the Republic of Letters. My central concern with print culture has to do with certain features of contemporary texts that are often overlooked: the ma-

terial that frames the body of the letter-narrative, where the editorial apparatus offers the (fictional or actual) history of the letters' transformation from private documents into published texts.³³ This strategic relocation of editorial frame to textual center works to defamiliarize these products of an earlier, transitional moment of print culture. Thus we read them not only as the private histories of individuals like ourselves, recorded by hand on scraps of paper and then ushered into the public world of print by an authoritative editor, but also, to some extent, as allegories of the Republic of Letters: stories about putting private life into publication that were written before this came to seem the "natural" way of telling stories.

I examine here what these works have in common as eighteenth-century epistolary narratives, linked by the thematics of publication and privacy. To that extent this study is an attempt to rewrite our definition of the genre as a whole through Enlightenment print culture. It is also, however, an examination of the contestations and reformulations of generic boundaries by four particular texts that claim very different relations to the Anglo-European public sphere, each of which represents an important contestation of the Republic of Letters. Thus this study also surveys the transformation of the epistolary genre over the course of the century as the generic contract is rewritten by historical contexts.

On the model of the abandoned lover's epistolary complaint established by the *Heroïdes*, writing a letter can be understood as the attempt to construct a phantasmatic body that in some measure compensates for the writer's absence. In this sense, the body is always central to the letter-narrative. As the following chapters will make clear, that body will be imagined differently, not only for different rhetorical purposes, but also at different historical moments. In this sense, Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* represents a radical construction project: the creation of a masculine citizen-critic from within the symbolic field of early eighteenth-century French absolutism. Bringing together the registers of political power, gender, and publication, Montesquieu seeks to produce simultaneously the discourse of citizenship (the public sphere) and a properly male

subject. The desired result appears in the distinction between a collection of letters and a published book. On the one hand, the Persians' letters describe the collapse of erotic relations; their epistolary strategies fail adequately to represent the absent phallus and instead disseminate only the various figures of lack that haunt the text. On the other hand, as Chapter 2 will make plain, the *Lettres persanes* itself successfully stages an antiabsolutist reconstruction of gender and power relations by helping to define the Enlightenment ideals of the public sphere and of the citizen-critics who inhabit it.

Montesquieu's second preface to the *Lettres persanes*, written 33 years later, makes it clear that the generic identity of the epistolary narrative was redefined by midcentury, following the success of the Richardsonian sentimental epistolary novel. Despite this rewriting of the generic contract, the material institutions of the Republic of Letters—the printing press, the post office, the periodical—remain the necessary contexts of epistolary narrative throughout the century, and so too the tradition of cultural and political critique associated with earlier epistolary narratives like Montesquieu's remains present in sentimental epistolary fictions of feminine passion. My juxtaposition of the picaresque-epistolary *Lettres persanes* with Samuel Richardson's sentimental-epistolary *Clarissa* (1747–48), the focus of Chapter 3, is intended to restore to view the full generic identity of the epistolary novel. Resituating *Clarissa* within the extended generic tradition, we are able to perceive that Richardson transformed and redeployed certain features of an already well-established genre and that he redefined the implications for society and literature of the idea of the Republic of Letters. If Montesquieu's answer to the Enlightenment conflict between private passion and public order is the creation of (male) citizens of the Republic of Letters, Richardson's relation to the democratizing effects of print culture is less straightforward and implies an alternative gendering of the epistolary body.

The uneasy accord between public and private worked out in *Clarissa* is complicated by Richardson's ambivalences, first, about his own relation as a printer and novelist to literary tradition and, second, about what he found to be the exceedingly difficult ques-

tion of women's place in the public sphere. These vexed issues come to the fore in the debate over Clarissa's allegorical "father's house" letter. The Christian heroine's final explanation of her sufferings, "GOD ALMIGHTY WOULD NOT LET ME DEPEND FOR COMFORT UPON ANY BUT HIMSELF," can also be read as Richardson's solution to the dangerous separation of public and private spheres. By means of his manipulation of the relation between epistolary text and editorial frame, a version of patriarchal authority undermined by Montesquieu is reaffirmed in secular novelistic form through the figure of the author-editor who appropriates, fragments, and disseminates private letters as a branch of public morality. Like Clarissa's God, Richardson is reluctant to permit his readers to depend for epistemological and moral certainty upon any but himself.

Marie-Jeanne Riccoboni's *Les Lettres de Mistriss Fanni Butlerd* (1757), to which I turn in Chapter 4, frames similar issues very differently. Drawing explicitly on Enlightenment political theory, as well as implicitly on her own experience as a professional actress, Riccoboni's novel provides an analysis of how the concept of the private enables men's exploitation of women. *Fanni Butlerd* shatters the sentimental epistolary convention according to which the private letters of women are (re)authorized by male editors. In her letters to her aristocratic lover, the young Englishwoman Fanni refuses the agonistic model of sexual relations in which men conquer women and insists on her free decision to give herself to her beloved. In precisely the same way, she refuses the exploitative implications of the sentimental epistolary tradition, from the *Lettres portugaises* to Richardson's novels. After being abandoned by her lover, Fanni transforms herself from private victim to public author by publishing her own letters, first in a newspaper, then as a book.

In so doing, Fanni removes the epistolary tradition from the hermetic privacy of the convent and the boudoir to what the French (and many English) idealized as the wide-open spaces of the English press. Converting a dangerous private passion into the public denunciation of social corruption through the Enlightenment technology of print, Fanni establishes a literary contract between herself and her readers by means of which sympathy of

taste will reform society, producing not only more just and equal relations between the sexes but also model citizen-readers, both male and female, of the novel. In contrast to the *Lettres persanes* and *Clarissa*, both the publication history of this novel and its fictionalized frame imply the possibility of full female citizenship in the Republic of Letters. In this sense, *Fanni Butlerd* is an optimistic—and feminist—parable of the rise of the public sphere in a mass print culture.

Riccoboni's optimism did not, of course, bring about the egalitarian transformation of Anglo-European societies. The ideal of the Republic of Letters came into general question under the political pressures of the 1770s and 1780s, to be generally discredited in the 1790s through its identification with political radicalism.³⁴ Because a founding principle of the public sphere is that of the participants' disinterestedness and non-factionalism, such an identification necessarily meant the end of its emancipatory potential as a cultural concept.

The trajectory of the loss of an Enlightenment faith in correspondence can be traced in Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), which I read in Chapter 5 as a narrative of the decline of the Republic of Letters under the pressures of a developing nationalism that replaces the cosmopolitanism of the older ideal. The politically masculine (but ostensibly disembodied) citizen-critic constructed by Montesquieu, uneasily set aside by Richardson, and triumphantly redefined as female by Riccoboni returns in Crèvecoeur's *Letters* to a problematic corporeality that clashes with the requirements of disembodiment and anonymity necessary to citizenship in the Republic of Letters. The rupture of correspondence at the close of *Letters from an American Farmer* marks not only the end of the Enlightenment ideal of a cosmopolitan civic exchange but also the end of Enlightenment epistolarity.