



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  
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*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.<sup>1</sup>

