

EVE TAVOR BANNET
University of Oklahoma

Abstract: This essay shows how Charlotte Smith used embedded letters and their framing narratives to convey a detailed, complex, and critical analysis of the dynamics of traditional English society that could not be more openly expressed in 1793. Special attention is paid to the initial encapsulating letter, and to Smith's treatment of clandestine and unseen letters.

In *The Old Manor House* (1793), Charlotte Smith associates letters with Britain's ancient regime. Though Orlando spends the second half the novel in America, there are no letters from America—only a single letter of news from England to inform him of what has happened at the manor during his absence. The letters embedded in this third-person narrative are implanted in English social life, where they embody characteristic aspects of ancient regime society in characteristic epistolary forms. There are letters of command, petition, and reproach, which address English society's foundation in primogeniture, land and inherited wealth, the prerogatives of patriarchy, the abject dependence of ladies without fortunes on husbands and brothers for support, and the dependence of impoverished gentlemen-farmers on their brothers in trade. There are letters of challenge (to duels) that address gentlemen's deployment of the honor code to mark their social superiority and exclude non-gentlemen from their midst. There is gossip about unseen letters, which traces the limits of individual privacy and freedom. And there are secret letters that reveal the conditions under which agency and a small measure of power are available to those subject to others in a traditional hierarchical society where obedience has been declared the duty of all inferiors and where parents, guardians, and counselors play selfish, self-interested, as well as cruelly authoritarian roles. A radical and revolutionary, Smith used the letters embedded in her narrative to indicate why the whole of ancient regime society had to be cast off.

When Sir Walter Scott described Smith as the most "eminent" of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century women novelists, and praised *The Old Manor House* as her "chef d'oeuvre," he highlighted this first half of the novel, particularly as it centered on Mrs. Rayland's letter.¹ This seems surprising only because—except in the case of Aphra Behn, Jane Austen, and Anthony Trollope—we have found so many ways of interpreting even novels that are positively *studded* with embedded letters as if they were not really there. These range from treating embedded letters as intrinsic elements of the narrative that are, in Stephen J. Hicks's words, "both psychologically revealing and also plot furthering," to treating them as the drivers of "postal plots," as Laura Rottunno calls them.² We tend to assume that the meaning of the letters embedded in a narrative text is so straightforward, their function so uniform, and their presence so marginal to the real business at hand, that we do not need to give them the same close attention and discriminating critical awareness that we give letters in an epistolary novel.³ We have the narrative after all. My principal goal in the close and detailed reading of letters in *The Old Manor House* that follows is to show that embedded letters could be used in diverse and complex ways even in the same text; that reading a narrative through its embedded letters not only enriches but often changes our understanding of the text; and that figuring out what a novelist was doing with the letters embedded in her text is more interesting than one might expect. Smith's embedded letters convey to what Fielding called

the “sagacious reader” detailed critiques of British ancient regime society that in 1793 could not be more openly expressed.

The first fully transcribed letter in volume 1, which occupies all of chapters 7 and 8, is that which Scott singled out. It is the letter that Mrs. Rayland writes in response to Mr. Somerive's solicitation of her opinion on his daughter's impending marriage and on the opportunity that now presents itself of putting his son, Orlando, to work in the wine trade with his wife's brother, Mr. Woodford. This is what I call an *encapsulating letter*. Encapsulating letters often appear at or near the beginning of novels to supply what Henry James would call its *donnée*: while performing an instrumental function in the present, encapsulating letters epitomize relationships, summarize situations and/or highlight issues rooted in the past that the narrative is about to develop, and indicate implicit or explicit expectations of the immediate or more distant future that elliptically foreshadow the narrative course of events. As we will see below, Mrs. Rayland's letter encapsulates the principal problems with expectations, in the sense of “prospects of inheriting wealth and property,” and serves as the focal point for multiple scenes that introduce us to the expectations of the principal characters, who characterize themselves by their responses to her letter, as the Bennett family in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* will do at the reading of Mr. Collins's letter. While epitomizing relationships that are rooted in the past and indicating a range of prospects for the future, this first letter injects a sudden shock of brutal worldly realism into a narrative that has so far described the anachronistic and solipsistic society at the manor, where Orlando has been conducting an ideal, but secret and forbidden, love affair with the orphaned Cinderella character, Monimia, while endeavoring to ingratiate himself with Mrs. Rayland in hopes of becoming her heir. Displacement of stark realities from the narrative to the letter enable Smith to also use it to reveal, and eventually puncture, the wishful thinking and self-deceptive illusions of those inside and outside the manor who depend upon Mrs. Rayland.

The fully transcribed letters embedded in novels were conventionally framed with a narrative describing the circumstances in which they were written, transmitted, and read. The framing narratives describe such things as the occasions for the letter, the writers' motives and designs in writing them as they did, the circumstances in which it they were received, and the ways in which they were read. Here Smith expanded the framing narrative to cover several scenes that record numerous conversations about Mrs. Rayland's letter, and the conflicting opinions and focalized reflections of the several characters involved in soliciting, writing, reading, and responding to it. Expanding the framing narrative in this way served two functions. The first was to “magnify” this letter. Subsequent letters of command, reproach, or petition, which are more rapidly or cursorily situated, tend to blend into the narrative alongside features of the everyday, such as descriptions of interactions, locations, and movement from place to place. Presenting Mrs. Rayland's letter as the focal point of several scenes in which characters converse about it in the course of two long chapters makes it stand out. It pulls her letter into the foreground, as Scott might say, and indicates its importance. The second function of Smith's expanded narrative frame is to exploit contemporary recognition that the importance of a letter lay less in what it actually said than in what other characters expected of it and understood it to mean. We now think of letters as we do of documents, or discuss them like works of art in New Critical theory, as essentially autonomous texts. Eighteenth-century writers thought of letters in more transactional terms: conceived as “written conversation” and “silent speech” or, as we might say, as “speech acts,” letters were communications that inhabited situations they were designed to address and relationships they were designed to maintain, clarify, alter, or otherwise impact. What mattered empirically about a letter was therefore less what it said than how it affected current situations and interpersonal relationships, and this in turn

depended on how what it said was understood or misunderstood, reacted to, and acted upon or not, by those immediately concerned. The scenes of conversation surrounding Mrs. Rayland's letter are therefore not extrinsic to it. They are as much part of her letter as its words, for they are what give her letter its empirical function, meanings, significance, and effects. Smith could exploit this to show how widely these differed from character to character. Narrators often used their framing narratives to guide novel-readers' understandings and interpretations of letters and of the writers and readers involved. But rather than telling us what to make of Mrs. Rayland's letter, Smith put novel-readers in play by leaving us to make our own reflections and draw our own conclusions about the letter, the situation, and the characters both from our own independent reading of the letter, and from the judgments we make about characters' readings and expectations of it.

Though summarized rather than transcribed, the letter Mr. Somerive writes to solicit Mrs. Rayland's opinion about Orlando's future is given a double prefatory frame. Typically, when double prefatory frames are used, what I call the "inner" frame describes the writer's motives for writing the letter and the immediate circumstances of writing and transmission, while the "outer" frame conveys material needed by an intra- or extra-diegetic reader to understand what necessitated the letter or to follow the scene of epistolary communication in a more informed manner than they otherwise could. Here the outer frame, which takes up most of chapter 7, consists of Orlando's long narrative during a clandestine meeting with his beloved Monimia about what has transpired at his parents' house since his uncle Woodford's arrival. Having just successfully arranged an advantageous marriage for Orlando's sister despite her lack of fortune, Woodford has insisted that Orlando's future, too, must be settled. Orlando's eye-witness narrative repeats and comments on conversations with his father in which this "bustling" uncle "declaims against the folly of my dreaming away my time waiting for a legacy from Mrs. Rayland; which after all, said he, the whimsical old woman may not give him."⁴ Instead, Woodford offers to take Orlando back to London to teach him the wine trade and make him financially independent. Mr. Somerive agrees that this was "a very desirable plan if Mrs. Rayland did not intend to better provide for" Orlando and that "it was certainly time to know whether she had or had not any such intentions in his favour" (1:167). They decide accordingly to put Orlando's Expectations to the test by writing to ask Mrs. Rayland's opinion of his sister's marriage "by way of compliment" and her opinion of Orlando's opportunity to go into business "by way of sounding her intentions" (1:156) towards him. Orlando "foresees nothing but vexation" proceeding from this letter, and fears that his uncle, who "seldom fails of carrying his point," will succeed in removing him from the manor and thus from Monimia.

In the inner prefatory frame, the narrator describes how "the letter which Orlando so dreaded was written, after great precautions in choosing the words" (1:167) and was sent by a servant at noon the same day. The letter says "that as Orlando was now of an age for which it was necessary to think of his future establishment, thoughts were entertained of putting him into business with his uncle; but that nothing would be concluded upon without the entire approbation of Mrs. Rayland, to whose notice and protection he was so much obliged" (1:167-68). This summarizes what novel-readers should have gleaned from Orlando's long narrative about his father and uncle's conversation, and sets the letter's purpose clearly before us. The narrator now gives Mr. Somerive an additional motive for writing, which distinguishes him from Mr. Woodward, who desires only to benefit his nephew and himself by securing a successor capable of continuing his business after his death. Somerive wants to ascertain Orlando's prospects of inheriting from Mrs. Rayland because—having failed to prevent his eldest son from gambling away sums he had set aside for his daughter's dowry and Orlando's education, and having foreseen that Philip would soon gamble away the rest of his small estate—Mr. Somerive is looking to Orlando to support his

mother and sisters after his death. The letter's prefatory narratives thus demonstrate his father's and uncle's conflicting stakes and expectations of Orlando's future course.

After a formal reading of Mr. Somerive's letter, Mrs. Rayland informs the servant who brought it that she will respond in writing at her leisure. The reception narrative then turns to a conversation with her maid, Lennard, in which Mrs. Rayland "vents her spleen and expresses her dislike of all persons in trade" and vows to abandon Orlando if he "gets these buying and selling notions into his head and chooses that his mother's low origins should continue to be remembered" (1:169). She likes having a handsome and charming young man about her, but has a longstanding dislike of persons in trade.

This conversation underlines a point already indicated in the prefatory narrative. It shows again that a letter was not just a private bilateral exchange between one writer and one addressee. Eighteenth-century letters inhabited a multilateral web of relationships, both at their point of origin and at their destination where they were often read aloud to members of the household-family and friends, and discussed.⁵ If it did not always take a family and friends to write a letter, it frequently took a family and friends to read one. Smith's presentation of Mr. Somerive's letter in these terms fields this feature of contemporary epistolary culture to indicate that Orlando's father was treating the decision about his future as a decision to be made by Orlando's family and "friends" (in the contemporary sense of patrons) rather than as a decision that it was his duty and prerogative as Orlando's father to make. This verifies a point Mrs. Rayland will make in her letter and is further substantiated by Somerive's reaction to it. But it also acts as a foil for Mrs. Rayland's untrammelled indifference to other people's views. She has just demonstrated her prerogative and her autonomy in her conversation with Lennard by making judgments and pronouncements about the letter that brook no contradiction. And where Somerive depended on his brother-in-law to help him draft his letter, she will write hers alone.

This lends a touch of gentle mockery to the second reception narrative, which Smith inserted between the arrival of Somerive's letter and Mrs. Rayland's answer, for this supplementary scene alters the answer that Mrs. Rayland was preparing to give it after her conversation with Lennard. Rightly foreseeing the effect that his father and uncle's collaborative letter will have upon Mrs. Rayland, Orlando comes to see her. Though initially received with "repulsive formality," he manages to regain Mrs. Rayland's favor by confessing not only that he has no wish to go into trade, but that he prefers to "stay at home" at Rayland Hall where he can be near her and use her library to "qualify myself for one of the liberal professions against the time when my father can find an opportunity to place me in one" (1:176). Finding that they agree he should remain at Rayland Hall rather than go into trade, Orlando extracts a promise from Mrs. Rayland to "express her sentiments on this matter to his father" to prevent him from pressing the matter any further. Here, then, a little comically, Mrs. Rayland, all unawares, imbibes sentiments from a social inferior that she imagines are all her own; and deflection of the letter's agency results from Orlando's unexpected intervention between cup and lip, reception and reply. Smith addresses the impact of noncorrespondents on the agency of a letter, to demonstrate how, by unexpectedly inserting themselves into an epistolary correspondence, third parties could unexpectedly change reactions to a letter and with them, the expected course of events, even when dealing with autocratic persons like Mrs. Rayland, who were impatient of contradiction or control.

Mrs. Rayland's fully transcribed letter, which follows, is prefaced by the narrator's mildly satirical account of its writing: "having called for her writing materials which seldom saw the sun, and being placed in form at her rose-wood writing box, lined with green velvet and mounted in silver, [Mrs. Rayland] produced at the end of four hours the following letter, piquing herself on

spelling as her father had spelt, and disdainning those idle novelties by which a few superficial letters are saved” (1:177-78). Mrs. Rayland’s wealth, her old-fashioned ceremoniousness, her expectation of always being served, her aristocratic family pride and pretentiousness, and the absurd anachronism of her conduct, are all economically rendered here. We can also expect to find them illustrated in her letter:

Raylande Hall, 12th day of September A.D. 1776

Sir, my kinsman,

I have received youre letter, and am oblidged by youre taking the troubbel to informe me of youre family affaires, to the wich I am a sinceer goode wisher. In respecte to youre daughter Philippa must begge to be excused from giving my oppinon, not having the pleasure to knowe the gentleman, and being from my retired life no judge of the personnes charractere, who are remote and in bisness, as I understand this personne is; wherefore I can onelye there upon saie, that doubtlesse you, being as you are a goode and carefuller father, will take due care and precaution that youre daughter shall not, by her marriage, be exposed to the mischances of becoming reduced by bankruptcies and other accidents, whereby peopel in trade are of times grate sufferers. –But your care herein for your daughter’s securitye is not to be questioned. Furthermore, respecting youre youngest sonne, Mr. Orlando, he is very certaintelye at youre disposal also, and you are, it may tbe, the most competent judge of that which is fitting to be done for his future goode and advantage. I wish him very well; he seeming to me to be a sober, promising, and well-conditioned youthe; and such a one as, were I his nearer relation, I shoulde thinke a pitye to put to a trade. I am at present always glad of his companie at the Hall, and willing to give anye little encouragement to his desire of learning in the liberal sciences fitting for a gentleman, the wich his entring on a shoppe or warehouse would distroye and put an ende to. However that maye bee, I saie again, that you, being his father, are to be sure the propperest personne to determine for him, and he is dutiefullie inclined, and willing to obey you. Yet by the discourse I have had with him there-upoone, it doth not appeare that the youthe himself is inclined to become a dealer, as you purpose.

Heartilie recommending you in my prayers to the Disposer of all goode giftes, and hoping he will directe you in all things for the well-doing of your family, I remaine,

Sir, my kinsman,

youre well wisher

and humbel servant,

GRACE RAYLANDE (1:169-71)

Mrs. Rayland’s spelling is archaic and phonetic; by 1788, the spread of standardized orthography had made words spelled as they sounded the mark of the vulgar and uneducated. On a superficial reading, Mrs. Rayland’s spelling made her letter ridiculous and detracted from its authority. While Mr. Somerive, his daughter’s fiancé, Mr. Fitz-Owen, Mr. Woodford, Philip, and Orlando are sitting over their after-dinner wine, Mrs. Rayland’s letter reaches Somerive, and is accordingly ridiculed and dismissed. Philip reads Mrs. Rayland’s letter aloud to the company with “comments serving to turn to ridicule the writer, and the sentiments it contained.” Offended by the letter’s “contempt for shopkeepers,” the two merchants, Mr. Woodford and Mr. Fitz-Owen, “agree the opinion of such an old crone was not worth consulting” (1:181). These reactions underwrite the narrator’s gentle mockery and suggest that novel-readers can afford to be equally dismissive. But Orlando concludes from watching Mr. Somerive’s face that Mrs. Rayland’s letter has done all he hoped by “turning the fluctuating and undecided opinion of his father in his direction” (1:181).

The second reception narrative consists of Mr. Somerive’s consultation with his wife about how to answer the letter, a conversation that Orlando is invited to hear. Mrs. Somerive, whose

“heart is half-broken at parting with her daughter” and who is unwilling to part with her son as well, “puts the most favorable construction on every expression that related to him” and “*flatters* herself from the purport of the letter, that the affluent fortune of Mrs. Rayland would at last center with Orlando.” She therefore argues that “nothing would be so imprudent as to think of removing him” from the manor and agrees with her husband that he should write to Mrs. Rayland that very evening, “leaving the fate of Orlando wholly at her disposal” (1:183). Orlando is, of course, delighted at this outcome, which leaves everything unchanged; and he and Monimia “both now indulged in hope” (1:184) that they would remain together and one day find the means to marry.

Considered as a yardstick of characters’ readings of it, Mrs. Rayland’s letter belies the Somerives’ understanding of its purport as “*flattering*” to their wishes. It shows that if Mr. Somerive’s goal in consulting Mrs. Rayland was to “sound her intentions” with regard to Orlando, his letter to her has signally failed to elicit the desired information. Despite her favorable description of Orlando’s character, Mrs. Rayland’s letter commits her to nothing, except to being “at present” glad of his company at the hall and willing to give “a littel encouragement” to his “desire of learning in the liberal sciences” in her library. Instead of offering to do something for him herself, she “heartily recommends” Mr. Somerive and his family for bounty to “the [divine] Disposer of all goode Giftes.” Even more to the point, Mrs. Rayland repeats in every other sentence—and three times in the short section relating to Orlando—that his children’s future is their father’s responsibility: Mr. Somerive is “the most competent judge of that which is fitting to be done for his [Orlando’s] future good and advantage;” his father is “the properest person to determine for him” (1:179, 180). Conduct books on the relative duties said the same.

Attached to Orlando yet reluctant to commit to making him her heir, Mrs. Rayland composes an ambiguous letter that supports its encapsulating functions. Indeed, her letter itself epitomizes the problem arising from the situation rooted in the past that has become an issue in the present: the uncertainty of Orlando’s Expectations. Mrs. Rayland identifies and addresses this situation—that Orlando has domiciled himself at the manor to ingratiate himself with her in hopes of becoming her heir—by inviting him to continue in that situation. Her letter also elliptically foreshadows the future narrative course of events by agreeing with Orlando’s father and uncle that what has to be decided is what is “fitting to be done for his future goode.” Her letter indicates three options for the future: Orlando could go on waiting around hoping his Expectations are good; he could embark on a profession that will enable him to make his own way in the world; or he could inherit a legacy. The novel shows Orlando successively experiencing all three options. And though concluding with his return to England as heir to Mrs. Rayland’s property and wealth gives the novel a happy ending, it does not settle the question of what is most fitting or likely to guarantee Orlando’s “future good.” As a soldier, Orlando has a good chance of getting killed; and as the third of the available options, Orlando’s chances of inheriting are one in three, all of which returns us to the uncertainty or chanciness of Expectations.

Upon a hasty reading, Mrs. Rayland’s letter can otherwise be dismissed, as the other characters dismiss it, as another absurdly old-fashioned expression of her inveterate hatred for trade and for the nouveau riche East India officials and transatlantic merchants who were, like her neighbor Mr. Stockton, buying up country estates and rivalling the aristocracy in splendor and idleness, licentiousness and display. But a closer look shows that her letter is as sensible, practical, and realistic in its way as Mr. Woodford’s bustling observations. Mrs. Rayland makes three very sound points about trade. Her advice to Mr. Somerive to “take care that his daughter by her marriage will not be exposed to the mischances of becoming reduced by bankruptcies and other accidents of persons in trade” (1:178-79) addressed a very real issue during the latter part of the eighteenth

century, when announcements of bankruptcies filled the newspapers, even as it reflected Smith's own bitter experience as the daughter and wife of bankrupt merchants. This advice also echoes reservations about his sister's over-hasty marriage that Orlando had expressed to Monimia in his prefatory narrative. Mrs. Rayland's second point is that unlike the "learning in the liberal sciences fitting for a gentleman," which Orlando is pursuing in her library, "entering on a shoppe or warehouse would distroye and put an ende" (1:179) to his gentility. As a tradesman and "dealer" he would be a gentleman no more. Her last point is that she learned in conversation with Orlando that, though willing to obey his father and do his duty, he has no desire to become a merchant. In other words, his opinion to the future proposed for him ought to be consulted.

The letter—which not coincidentally took Mrs. Rayland's four hours to write—is also a politely veiled indictment of Mr. Somerive's performance as a father. Its three pieces of advice about trade allude to specific paternal responsibilities and intimate where Mr. Somerive has abdicated his proper paternal role. As we know from Orlando's prefatory narrative, Mr. Somerive has not done due diligence himself by investigating his daughter's potential husband or acting to secure Orlando's future, relying instead on the actions of his brother-in-law and the judgment of his wife. Even now, instead of accepting that he is himself "the properest person to determine for him," Mr. Somerive seizes on the slenderest excuse to "leave [Orlando's] future fate wholly at [Mrs. Rayland's] disposal." A gentleman-farmer himself despite his marriage to a tradesman's daughter, he has neglected to weigh the social consequences for Orlando of going into trade instead of into one of the genteel professions. The prey of "fluctuating and undecided opinions," he has failed to apply rational analysis and practical good sense to the problem of Orlando's future, which his indulgence of his eldest son's misconduct has done more than anything else to create. And though present at all the conversations about his future that Orlando recounted in the prefatory narrative, as well as at his parents' deliberations, Orlando has nowhere reported that his father, mother, or uncle have ever consulted him about his preferences or wishes. His father expects that, unlike his "bad" son, Philip, his "good" son Orlando will demonstrate his filial duty by having no will of his own and obeying his father's every wish without a murmur.

Far from "not being worth consulting," then, the "opinions" expressed in Mrs. Rayland's letter expose the self-deceptive illusions of all the other characters engaged in soliciting and reacting to it, along with those of the classes of people they represent. Judged by the yardstick of the letter, Woodford and Fitz-Owen demonstrate willful mercantile blindness to the social and economic downsides of commercial life. Set against Mr. Woodford's readiness to act, which is the immediate cause and subject of the letter, Mr. Somerive and Mrs. Rayland display their prerogative to use their authoritarian power in lazy, ineffectual, and entirely self-serving ways, which indicate how little concrete help or support is to be expected of either of them; while Orlando's dogged pursuit of professional studies despite his father's lack of the money and patronage necessary to place him in one of the learned professions takes on the appearance of wishful, not to say magical, thinking. Judged by Mrs. Rayland's noncommittal letter, the Somerives also demonstrate their blindness to the evils of inherited money when this required a gentleman to waste his youth trading his beauty and attentions for the uncertain gift of an old woman's wealth, and their acceptance of the evils of primogeniture, which made permissible the sacrifice of younger siblings' lives and futures to the whims of "thoughtlessly" spendthrift first-born sons like Philip.

At the conclusion of these epistolary scenes, Orlando is exultant and for good reason. He has "carried his point" with Mrs. Rayland (1:177) and used her to carry his point against his father, as well as against Mr. Woodford, a man who "seldom fails of carrying his point." And he has done so without allowing any of them to suspect that he was engaged in the affair. In the process, he has

demonstrated what he told Monimia in his prefatory narrative: that he “understands [Mrs. Rayland] perfectly” (1:160). Orlando knows how to please her by “appearing grateful without being servile” (1:184), how to pay her the kinds of attentions she likes, and how to placate and manage her even in her most dangerous moods. Orlando has also demonstrated throughout his narrative that he also “understands perfectly” how to present himself to his father and uncle—preserving a respectful silence when they converse, deferring to his elders and offering overt filial obedience, while knowingly engaged in conduct with Monimia that is anathema to them. This corresponds to the broader pattern of his conduct. To Monimia, Orlando is variously lover, consoler, protector, teacher, and friend; and to each of Mrs. Rayland’s servants, he acts a different part. With Lennard, Mrs. Rayland’s powerful maid and Monimia’s aunt, he is respectful and as careful not to infringe on her prerogatives as he is to conceal from her his interest in Monimia and their nightly clandestine meetings. With the downstairs maid, Betty, he acts as a young master ought, commanding and generous with his crowns, while taking care to lock her out of his rooms and ensure he gives her no food for gossip. And so with every other character. “Orlando” is a fluid collection of personae, a shifting collection of selves to suit the successive, ever-changing occasions and relationships in which he is required to manifest a self. Orlando fields a self appropriate for every person, every occasion and his every position relative to others, and uses each to imperceptibly “carry his point,” whatever that may be at the time. Orlando’s versatile assumption of personae enable him to deflect suspicion and construct an array of masks and mirrors to conceal the secret of his relationship with Monimia.

The secret letters that pass between Orlando and Monimia, whose contents are not disclosed even to novel-readers, shed light on Orlando’s assumption of all these personae by indicating the conditions obtaining in ancient regime society as they appeared from “below.” Like the turret room into which her Aunt Lennard locks Monimia every night, the clandestine letters are signifiers of captivity—they testify to her inability to meet or communicate freely with anyone without her aunt’s consent and to the force used to subject her, unwillingly, to the latter’s will. But like the secret door she discovers behind her bed outside which they are left, these secret letters are also signifiers of evasion and escape—letters enable Monimia to communicate freely with Orlando despite her aunt, give her egress from the misery and solitude of her captive state, and are themselves the fruit of the love and book-learning supplied by Orlando, and denied to her by her aunt. The pattern symbolized by these secret letters is repeated elsewhere. Monimia’s Aunt Lennard has her own forms of subjection and evasion. Trapped at Rayland Hall by the inheritance she hopes to receive at Mrs. Rayland’s death, and subject like the other servants to her mistress’s arbitrary will, Lennard has made a show of complaisance while evading the rigors of her situation by working imperceptibly to gain power over her mistress and by affecting, at every opportunity, to act as lady of the manor in her mistress’s place. Likewise dependent on Mrs. Rayland’s favor, which he, too, courts, the butler has evaded her authority and that of the law by clandestinely lending the manor to smugglers as a safe haven for their goods and, in a parody of Mrs. Rayland’s use of her wealth, by using money thus gained to bribe poor maid-servants with gifts to enter his bed. As Smith indicates, then, passive obedience was a Jacobite myth, and so were such Jacobin binaries as tyrant and helpless victim, oppressor and oppressed. Like Orlando, when he intervenes with Mrs. Rayland to shape her answer to his father’s letter, Monimia, when she enters into a clandestine correspondence with him despite her fear of her aunt—or Lennard, when she strives for ascendancy over her mistress—those subject to the will of others also found means of exercising power and imposing their will. The problem was much more than manifestly selfish, corrupt,

and illicit exercises of autocratic power at the top of this hierarchical society led to clandestinely selfish, corrupt, and illicit exercises of power all the way down the social hierarchy.

The unseen secret letters stand in sharp contrast to the fully transcribed letters that are shared and discussed by everyone who happens to be present. But they are analogical as signifiers of captivity. Smith used the letter that Betty, the maid at the hall, delivers to Orlando early in volume 1 to show that characters were equally entrapped within the spider's web of conversations, opinions, and gossip characteristic of a small community where everyone knows everyone's business. Betty reports the contents of this letter to Monimia while she is confined in her turret room. She also recounts that she went down to speak to John Dickman, Squire Somerive's groom, when she saw him riding up, to discover his business at the hall and received from him a letter for Orlando, which she carried to Orlando herself. Betty took careful note of Orlando's reaction—he "seemed monstrous surprised at it"—and when she went back to the kitchen, she inquired why of John. John told her that "he was ordered to wait for his young master, since Madam Somerive's brother, the London merchant, was come down with some of his family, and the gentleman from some part beyond sea who was to marry Miss Somerive, and the wedding to take place out of hand. And so, as Mr. Phil is gone as always ... the Squire ordered John to fetch Orlando to entertain the Company." Neither Betty nor John had read the sealed letter, but there was clearly no point in sealing letters when their contents and all the circumstances requiring them were known and freely shared among servants. But Betty's curiosity was not yet satisfied; she wanted to know how Orlando was reacting to his father's letter. Having gone to see on the pretext of shutting Orlando's windows, Betty tells Monimia that she thought Orlando returned to his father's home unwillingly because she heard him sigh. Since Orlando was careful to tell her nothing, she had resorted to reading his body language: he sighed, reluctant to go, she thought, because he was unlike other young men in "never caring for company" (1:135-37). With the usual order scrambled, reception narrative, prefatory narrative, and epistolary content are all present in Betty's gossiping narrative to highlight the extent to which Orlando is trapped, hemmed in, and defined by the flow of information and speculation about his letters, and by exchanges of opinions about his attitudes and doings that travel through the community from mouth to mouth. Orlando is literally as well as figuratively trapped by such flows of information, since it is from such gossip that his father hears about his prospective duel and comes to suspect his relationship with Monimia. Neither Orlando locking his door nor Lennard locking Monimia into her turret room prevents them from being sucked into the web of communal observation, speculation, and talk. Betty's gossip about Mr. Somerive's letter thus illustrates both the necessity for clandestine communication in a society such as this and the concomitant difficulty of keeping anything secret there. This also helps us to understand why, in eighteenth-century English, the primary meaning of "private" was "secret," "withdrawn from public view" (*OED*) and thus, as here, "unseen."

Only once Orlando has been compelled to leave Monimia and the hall to earn his living as a soldier—thus only once he has become independent of his parents, of Mrs. Rayland, and of the Hall—does he realize that "there was something humiliating to his ingenious mind in all the arts and prevarications which their clandestine correspondence compelled him to use himself, and to teach the innocent Monimia." Economic independence, together with a liberating independence from his father's tutelage and Mrs. Rayland's whims, relieves Orlando of the need to assume personae, and permits him to see them for what they were. Only now does he consider that his clandestine correspondence with Monimia was forced upon them by the necessity they were under to conform to the inimical demands of parents, relatives, and patrons upon whom they depended for their daily bread. He begins to understand why, to pursue a sincere and honorable love, they had

to fall back on “arts” to enact whatever parts were required of them by their relative duties and relative positions in relation to others, and to resort to “prevarications” to disguise the deception they were practicing upon those in whose power they were. Abject dependence on parents, patrons, and superiors in a profoundly hierarchical culture that celebrated dependence as “the cement of society” was what had produced such false and factitious selves, and all the arts and prevarications, deceptions and disguises, that followed in their train.

Smith used embedded letters in this novel to strike some somewhat surreptitious blows at British ancient regime society, where power was diffused and abused throughout a hierarchical system of dependences that was enforced by financial necessity, mutual surveillance, and brute force. These embedded letters therefore open onto a more complex and nuanced representation of life in England than that supposed by critics who see the Old Manor House as a “feudal” society, Mrs. Rayland as “the type of autocratic and traditional authority,” and Lennard as a symbol of “despotism.”⁶ As Smith demonstrated particularly clearly by adding unseen letters to the epistolary mix, the distribution and diffusion of power based on property and wealth in a culture still inflected by ancient regime structures and values was responsible not only for the abuses of power of those who governed others, but also for the dissembling selves and ingenious, surreptitious methods of evasion devised by those subject to their self-interested tyranny.

Smith used Mrs. Rayland’s initial encapsulating letter not only to raise questions about Expectations in the sense of a man’s “prospects of inheriting property” but also to investigate the workings of expectations in the larger sense of “a belief that something will happen” based on the prospect of things probably happening in the future as they have mostly happened in the past. Written, read, and discussed *in medias res*, Mrs. Rayland’s letter encloses and attracts a range of prospects for Orlando’s future in addition to those that actually play out—as wealthy aristocratic heir, non-genteel merchant, gentleman-professional, son sacrificed to his family’s demands, impoverished husband of a penurious wife—as well as other futures: the prospect of misery and bankruptcy for Orlando’s sister in Ireland, the prospect of Mr. Somerive assuming his proper paternal role, the dangerous prospect of discovery for Orlando and Monimia. The fact that they do not materialize shows that these are merely possible futures. But their inclusion represents the experienced world as a tissue of events and non-events, where every letter and every moment may be shot through with unactualized possibilities. Smith preempted “the poetics of anticipated futurity” that Emily Rohrbach attributes to John Keats, Lord Byron, and Austen’s *Persuasion*: here “the present appears uncertain precisely because the unknown future is part of its conception... Rather than suggesting a linear movement towards a specified end point or goal, the mist of anticipation opens the present up to multiple possibilities.”⁷

Because Mrs. Rayland’s non-committal encapsulating letter itself embodied the uncertainty of Expectations, Smith could also show how the ontological status of Orlando’s expectations changed over time. For much of the novel, Orlando’s expectations of Mrs. Rayland are thwarted and unreal. Her refusal to do anything for Orlando but provide him with the means of joining the British army in the American war makes his prospects of inheriting her wealth and estate illusory, even as it introduces a prospect for his future that was unforeseen before. But during his absence in America, Mrs. Rayland unexpectedly, even whimsically, changes her mind and her will to make Orlando her heir. Expectations that proved illusory before are now unexpectedly justified and empirically real. Perhaps Mr. Somerive’s “fluctuating and undecided opinions” were more reasonable than they seemed. For *The Old Manor House* demonstrates that there is no telling whether expectations will materialize—whether the future will actualize the possibility articulated by Uncle Woodford that this whimsical old woman will *not* give Orlando the expected legacy or that

articulated by his mother that she *will*—by successively presenting both options. Here the fact that expectations that are illusory at one time can become realities at a later date against all odds illuminates something about the nature of possibility. More uncertain than a probability and less random than chance, a possibility is something that may or may not come to pass. Possibilities partake both of the expected and the unexpected, not least because, should it come to pass, a possibility may do so in unexpected ways and when one least expects. When Orlando returns to take up his inheritance of the manor and close the action that Mrs. Rayland's letter began, it is to encounter unexpected obstacles that it was again possible Orlando might not overcome. These once eliminated, Orlando governs the manor in benevolent, non-authoritarian ways that neither he nor anyone else foresaw when his Expectations were initially broached with Mrs. Rayland. Unexpected possibilities emerging from changing circumstances and changing prospects could thus become vehicles for social change.

This is also what permitted Smith to historicize secret and traditional letter genres by attaching them to ancient regime society, whose characteristic features they documented at a moment when there was, perhaps, still a prospect of their passing away. Expectations that are thwarted and have to be dismissed as illusory can still unexpectedly become realities, against all odds, when one least expects. Despite the Terror in France, there was still a possibility in 1793 that British society might one day be so organized that conventional letter genres, secret letters, and dissimulating selves would disappear, along with the social and economic expectations that cemented the subordination of the many to the few.

Before telegraph superseded epistolary communication in the nineteenth century, letters were an intrinsic and familiar part of everyday day life for people at most ranks. It should not therefore surprise us to find novelists who embedded letters in their narratives subjecting them to the same degree of scrutiny as they did manners, domiciles, oral discourse or clothes, and using them in the same multiplicity of diverse and creative ways.

NOTES

¹ Walter Scott, *The Miscellaneous Prose Works* (Edinburgh: R. Cadell, 1849): 4:63, 66.

² Hicks, "Eliza Haywood's Letter Technique in Three Early Novels (1721-1727)," *Papers on Language and Literature* 34.4 (Fall 1998): 432; Rotunno, *Postal Plots in British Fiction 1840-1898: Readdressing Correspondence in Victorian Culture* (Houndsmills: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2014). See also Catherine J. Golden, *Posting It: The Victorian Revolution in Letter Writing* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009); Kate Thomas, *Postal Pleasures: Sex, Scandal and Victorian Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Karin Koehler, *Thomas Hardy and Victorian Communication: Letters, Telegraphs and Postal Systems* (Houndsmills: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2016).

³ There has been remarkably little scholarship on letters in nonepistolary fiction, and with the exception of some older studies of Aphra Behn's *Love Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister*, Part 2 (1685) and of Jane Austen, most of it is concentrated on nineteenth- or twentieth century texts. See for instance, Simon Sunka, *Mail Orders: The Fiction of Letters in Postmodern Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002); Ann Bower, *Epistolary Responses: The Letter in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Criticism* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997); Diane Cousineau, *Letters and Labyrinths: Women Writing/Cultural Codes* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1997); Shari Benstock, "The Printed Letter in Ulysses," *James Joyce Quarterly* 50.1 (Fall 2012): 167-79; and my note 2 above. For Jane Austen, see for instance, Cheryl Nixon and Louise Penner, "Writing by the Book: Jane Austen's Heroines and the Art of the Letter," *Persuasions On-Line* 26.1 (Winter 2005), and Jenny Davidson's chapter on letters in *Reading Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). For more general views, see Liz Stanley, "The Death of the Letter? Epistolary Intent, Letterness and the Many Ends of Letter Writing," *Cultural Sociology* 9.2

Letters in Charlotte Smith's The Old Manor House

(2015): 240-55; Fay Bound, "Writing the Self? Love and the Letter in England, c. 1660-c. 1760," *Literature and History*, 3rd ser. 11:1 (March 2002): 1-19; Claudine Van Hensbergen, "Towards an Epistolary Discourse: Receiving the Eighteenth-Century Letter," *Literature Compass* 7.7 (July 2010): 508-18; and Robert Adams Day's older but still useful *Told in Letters: Epistolary Fiction before Richardson* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966). For early letters and letter writing, see Susan Fitzmaurice, *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern England* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2002); Rebecca Earle, "Introduction," *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600-1945*, ed. Rebecca Earle (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 1-14; Louise Curran, *Samuel Richardson and the Art of Letter-Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Gary Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern England, 1500-1700* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005); and Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence 1680-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁴ Charlotte Smith, *The Old Manor House*, 2nd ed. (London, 1793), 1:154. Subsequent page references are located in the text.

⁵ For "household-family," see Naomi Tadmor, *Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England: Household, Kinship, Patronage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁶ See, for instance, Carmel Murphy, "Charlotte Smith's *Old Manor House* and the French Revolution Debate," *Romanticism* 20.3 (2014): 277; Deborah Russell, "Domestic Gothic: Genre and Nation in Charlotte Smith's *The Old Manor House*," *Literature Compass* 10.10 (Oct. 2013): 774; Simon Parkes, "'More Dead than Alive: the Return of Not-Orlando in Charlotte Smith's *The Old Manor House*," *European Romanticism Review* 22.6 (Dec. 2011): 765-84. For deception, see Loraine Fletcher, *Charlotte Smith: A Critical Biography* (Houndsmills: Macmillan, 1998).

⁷ Emily Rohrbach, *Modernity's Mist: British Romanticism and the Poetics of Anticipation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 3, 1.