Publicity, Privacy, and the Power of Fiction in the Gunning Letters

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IN THIS article I examine a nexus of letters by and about the novelist Susannah Minifie Gunning and her daughter that circulated in England in 1791 and 1792, while Londoners were denouncing Helen Maria Williams's *Letter Written in France in the Summer 1790, to a Friend in England* (1791) and Jane Austen had perhaps begun to conceive her early, unpublished epistolary novel, posthumously titled *Lady Susan* (1871). The letters and accompanying texts carry out a trial in print—dubbed the "Gunninghiad" by Horace Walpole—of the mother, daughter, and eventually the father, General Gunning, for allegedly inventing the daughter's engagement to the Marquis of Blandford. This trial is counterbalanced by that of General Gunning for adultery that took place in 1792. The corpus includes a published "open letter" by Mrs Gunning to the Duke of Argyll; a response by her cousin, Mr Bowen; an apology for the life and conduct of General Gunning; reviews of these publications in newspapers; letters by others (for example, Walpole) commenting on the letters and the affair; and some of Gunning's epistolary fictions before and after the fact. Disentangling the Gordian knot of accusations and counter-accusations will contribute a chapter to our understanding of this prolific author of epistolary fiction in the period, as well as throwing light on the complex relationships between public and private, fictional and genuine in this era, and on how the instrument of correspondence lies at

Eighteenth-Century Fiction 20, no. 1 (Fall 2007) © ECF 0840-6286

the crux of the tensions and complicities between these spheres. I begin with a review of Susannah Gunning's literary career before the marriage crisis, relate her novels to the instrumentalization of sentiment in the period, and examine the role of correspondence in the sentimentalized public sphere, before proceeding to the Gunninghiad itself.

Susannah Gunning's Novels of Sentiment

Though none of her novels has yet been re-edited in a modern edition, the works and life of Susannah Minifie Gunning (1740?–1800) continue to draw the attention of scholars of the eighteenth-century English novel. The most extensive analysis is by Janet Todd, who pairs Minifie (who co-authored with her sister, Margaret) with Frances Brooke under the rubric of the "fantasy of sensibility" typical of the novels of the 1760s and 1770s. In the Minifie novels, "men instantly respond to the female gesture or 'motion' and 'involuntarily' drop down on their knees at displays of femininity, now far more powerful than the imagined heroics of the demanding heroines of Charlotte Lennox's Arabella. Samuel Richardson's Clarissa had achieved this devotion but only when she was dying or dead; the Minifie heroines are 'soul-inspiring' at first glance and the heroine of *Coombe Wood* is given devotion without any effort beyond a posture of distress."[1] Though Richardson's epistolary novel *Clarissa*, whose virtuous heroine is raped and chooses self-willed death over marriage or prosecution, had appeared in 1748, it remained a touchstone for discussions of both sentiment and rakish behaviour in the period under discussion. Betty Schellenberg's catalogue of those passages of the Minifie novels chosen for citation by the *Critical Review* contradicts Todd's finding—the original Clarissean deathbed scene has been preserved: "the passages chosen as 'best' are almost always extremely pathetic scenes of wronged young women on their deathbeds; where 'humour' is favored, it is of the sort that exposes the social faults of the card-playing widow, or the selfish bachelor."[2]

1 Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angellica* (London: Virago Press, 1989), 185.

2 Betty A. Schellenberg, *The Professionalization of Women Writers in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 130. Schellenberg also couples the Minifies as writers, but with Edward Kimber,

The increasing use of and value accorded to sentimentality in the eighteenth century, as Patricia Meyer Spacks has argued, bears an intimate relation to developing notions of privacy, which in turn had ramifications in law and policy. To give one example, in their detailed account of the sensational trial of the Perreau brothers for forgery in 1775, Donna T. Andrew and Randall McGowen argue that the brothers were inserted into the framework of sentimental fiction:

> Throughout their accounts [of how they had been duped in their innocence by an evil accomplice] the brothers employed a sentimental idiom that was common parlance in their day. They were both, in their own accounts, sentimental heroes ... Their claims resonated with some of the most familiar literary themes of the day. For a generation, a familiar plot of plays and novels concerned the danger innocence faced when confronted with the machinations of an evil individual more skilled in the ways of a corrupt society ... Often these seducers put forth wild schemes that no one could penetrate until the last moment. The authorities, inattentive or captivated by appearances themselves, too easily collaborated in the oppression. From *Jonathan Wild* and *Tom Jones* to *The Vicar of Wakefield*, this trope had been a staple of popular fiction ... In the accounts offered by the Perreaus, as well as in the situation they faced after their trials, life seemed to imitate art.[3]

To prove this assertion—which raises the question of how the brothers were ever convicted in defiance of sentimental plots supposedly burned in the brains of jurors—the authors rely less on specific textual borrowings used at the trial or its surrounding publicity than on the citations of other studies that make parallel findings, such as Laura Korobkin's *Criminal Conversations* and Stefanie Hammer's *Sublime Crime*.[4]

who similarly wrote "harmless but mediocre and forgettable" fiction (127), though Kimber was a London professional, and the Minifies were Somerset amateurs.

3 Donna T. Andrew and Randall McGowen, *The Perreaus and Mrs Rudd: Forgery and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century London* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 47–48.

4 Laura H. Korobkin, *Criminal Conversations: Sentimentality and Nineteenth-Century Legal Stories of Adultery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Stefanie Barbe Hammer, *The Sublime Crime* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994).

While the deployment of sentiment might seem to allow women a greater role in the public sphere, their increased access to power was frequently foreclosed in fiction: if the sentiment displayed in fiction had power, the power of sentiment was often exposed as fictional. Thus, for April London, the Minifies' 1783 novel, *Coombe Wood*, typifies the paradoxes of the relation between women and property in the period. At the end of that novel, the heroine briefly possesses the estate of the title before passing it to Lord Edwin in marriage: "That moment represents her inherent and independent virtue as most perfectly realized at the point of its eclipse; recurrently in sentimental and gothic novels women secure their titles to property only when the redefinition of the heroine through marriage is imminent."[5] Thus, the subversive aspect of the novel may lie not so much in the plot as in the publication—that is, the bringing into the public sphere—of women's private communication, as April Alliston claims for Sophia Lee's *The Recess* (1783–85), an early Gothic novel composed of letters and memoirs: "By publishing epistolary critiques in the spirit of those that historical women were sending each other, novels of women's correspondence radically changed the status of these critical acts of communication between women from strictly private to publicly private. Literariness thus lends the critique considerably greater force."[6] Alliston's reading is based on acquaintance with correspondence between "real" women of the period that reveals uneasiness with the gentry's patriarchal culture, but which could not intervene as long as it was locked into a circuit of private exchange. From this perspective, the letter to the Duke of Argyll represented a step up in Gunning's career, from the fictional to the "real," and concomitantly from the private to the public.[7]

5 April London, *Women and Property in the Eighteenth-Century English Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 221n28.

6 April Alliston, *Virtue's Faults: Correspondences in Eighteenth-Century British and French Women's Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 186.

7 Underlying Alliston's argument is the thesis of Jürgen Habermas in *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), first published in German in 1962, that the early modern period saw a transformation of the public sphere in which the middle classes gained a political and representational foothold by "publicizing the private," a process for which letters and diaries are crucial forms. My article explores the problem of the public/private distinction and demonstrates how the power

The force that carries her writing "up a level," as in the case of the Perreaus, is its literary use of the publicly private form of the letter—its *letterariness*—as we shall see.

Fiction and Faith, Publicity and Privacy

To understand better the force of the literary and its relation to the letter in the period, let us turn once again to *Clarissa*'s fictionality as understood by the novel's author, Samuel Richardson: "Will you, good Sir, allow me to mention, that I could wish that the Air of Genuineness had been kept up, tho' I want not the letters to be thought genuine; only so far kept up, I mean, as that they should not be prefatically owned not to be genuine: and this for fear of weakening their Influence where any of them are aimed to be exemplary; as well as to avoid hurting that kind of Historical Faith which Fiction itself is generally read with, tho' we know it to be Fiction."[8] The passage does significant rhetorical work in carving out a unique epistemological status for fictional letters, which in Richardson's terms exist somewhere between genuineness and fictionality. This status, Richardson tells us, is a prerequisite for texts to be exemplary. The passage also provides an important historical clue as to how published letters were read in the second half of the eighteenth century: with a grain of salt. On the one hand, publication induces doubt rather than a feeling of facticity—handwriting cannot be used to verify authenticity. On the other hand, readers seem to have been willing to apply "Historical Faith" to any kind of published letters. In Peter V. Conroy's modern formulation, "By adopting the epistolary format, the novel took upon itself that particular way of rendering the outside world that the letter had already conditioned the reading public to accept as normal. To the extent that fictitious novels followed the same conventions and satisfied the same expectations as did real letters, they qualified as authentic and enjoyed the same 'real' status as the true letters they

of literature derives from its interstitial situation between public and private. Michael McKeon's *The Secret History of Domesticity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005) amounts to an extensive documentation of how the Habermasian transformation is carried out in early modern England.

8 Samuel Richardson to William Warburton, 19 April 1748, in *Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson*, ed. John Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 85.

resembled in format and content."[9] It is not surprising, then, that investigations of epistolarity by Elizabeth Cook, Mary Favret, and Nicola Watson move back and forth between genuine and fictional letters, or that they also consider texts that are hard to place in either camp, such as the *Letter Written in France* by Helen Maria Williams, which depends for its authenticity on the presence of the author in France and on its display of certain signs of reporting by a "correspondent," but which also constructs heart-tugging fictions and uses theatrical metaphors, as do those of Mrs Gunning.[10]

Published letters in the eighteenth century do not obey the simple dichotomy between "natural" and "fictive" discourse that Barbara Herrnstein Smith subjected them to. At one point in her influential study, *On the Margins of Discourse*, Smith contrasted two different ways in which a text can be apprehended: as a personal letter found in an attic trunk and as a poem published in a magazine. Certain similarities will occur in our reading of the two items, such as our need to supply context in order to make sense of the text. However, whereas our contextualizations of the poem would not be falsifiable, "we would recognize ... that if the letter was a natural utterance, composed as a historical act and regarded as a historical event, some of its meanings were historically determinate, at least theoretically locatable in the historical universe."[11] Unfortunately, Smith does not discuss how we should evaluate a (say, confessional) poem found in a trunk, or an open letter published in a magazine. Presumably, it is the location and address of the discourse that determines whether it belongs to nature or to artifice. Smith's natural/fictive distinction thus depends upon the separation between private and public modes of experience which, as Michael McKeon argues, is both produced by and becomes a key characteristic of modernity.[12]

9 Peter V. Conroy, "Real Fiction: Authenticity in the French Epistolary Novel," *Romanic Review* 72, no. 4 (1981): 413.

10 See Elizabeth H. Cook, *Epistolary Bodies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Mary Favret, *Romantic Correspondence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and Nicola J. Watson, *Revolution and the Form of the British Novel 1790–1825* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

11 Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *On the Margins of Discourse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 140.

12 McKeon, xix.

However, the discourses surrounding the Gunning case may cause us to question what "separation" between private and public can actually mean in practice.

An examination of the Richardson quotation reveals that letters may be historical events without being historically determinate. Accounting for a text as historical act means accounting for the history of reading practices that may complicate our very notion of "historical." The second shortcoming of Smith's analysis is its assumption that texts are autonomous. My analysis of the Gunning case shows how difficult it is to extricate any single letter from a nexus of texts that includes both natural and fictive discourses.

Jacques Derrida is well known for his interrogation of dichotomized thinking such as Smith's in favour of more paradoxical and indeterminate formulations such as Richardson's. In his extended meditation on the epistemology of the letter form, *La Carte postale*, Derrida has identified a source of the letter's inherent amphibologies by claiming that "the letter, the epistle ... is not a genre but all genres, literature itself."[13] Derrida means by this that the letter is the primeval sign of the very rupture that makes writing necessary. From the classical period onward, the letter was defined as "sermo amicorum absentium," the discourse of absent friends. Thus, the letter simultaneously unites (by substituting for speech and vision) and comes between (by always signifying the absence from each other of) writer and reader. Every genre of literature re-enacts this fundamental rupture that necessitates writing; hence every genre, but most fundamentally the letter, enters a parlous chain of relays and delivery mechanisms that separate the subject from his or her discourse, making its veracity relative to the particular context in which it is subsequently found.

If the letter was the original technology for greatly expanding the social sphere in numbers of participants and in geographical space, the combination of this "old" technology with the new one of print publication in the early modern period created new possibilities and helped in forming the public sphere. An example is John Dunton's newspaper *Athenian Mercury* (1691–

[13] Jacques Derrida, *The Postal Card*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 48.

97), which published queries from readers along with answers by its staff of writers. Dunton's idea epitomizes the public sphere as theorized by Jürgen Habermas, a neutral, classless ground on which ideas could be debated on their intrinsic merits: "Dunton found in the impersonality of print the perfect medium for the kind of exchange he wished to foster; an exchange in which both parties remain, by their own desire, ignorant of each other. In pursuing this project both readers and writers gained a new kind of self-understanding; they were made aware of the possibility of new kinds of community based in new modes of communication. The *Mercury* opened the way to the marketplace of print as it became coextensive with the public sphere, where participation in a social collectivity did not need to be reinforced by the sphere of face-to-face relations."[14] There were, however, costs associated with relying on printed letters for information and for the expansion of one's social network. Traditional means of verification, such as seals, watermarks, and handwriting could no longer be used to verify authenticity. The anonymity of the published letters in the *Athenian Mercury*, for example, led to the suspicion that they were inventions of those who answered them. If the "lettre perfide," the false, deceptive, or deflective letter, had long been part of amorous discourse and the literature of gallantry, its proliferation in print created epistemological minefields. It is my hypothesis that the Gunning affair was not the repetition of a timeless motif of forged letters, but rather that it reflected the epistemological interest and insecurity developed by a century of the relatively new technology of published letters from "ordinary" people. The increased "faith" that accrued to novels through the "naturalness" of the letter form was linked to scepticism about published letters that characterized themselves as "genuine."

The Gunninghiad

The "direct testimony" of the "Gunninghiad" consists of seven published texts:

1. Susannah Gunning, *A Letter From Mrs Gunning, Addressed to His Grace the Duke of Argyll* (1791)

14 Urmi Bhowmik, "Facts and Norms in the Marketplace of Print: John Dunton's *Athenian Mercury*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 36, no. 3 (2003): 350.

2. *Friendly Letter to the Marquis of Lorn, on the Subject of Mrs Gunning's Pamphlet* (1791)
3. Essex Bowen, *A Statement of Facts, in Answer to Mrs Gunning's Letter, Addressed to His Grace the Duke of Argyll* (1791)
4. *A Narrative of the Incidents which form the mystery, in the family of General Gunning* (1791)
5. *The Trial of Major General Gunning, etc.* (1792)
6. *An Apology for the Life of General G——* (1792)
7. Susannah Gunning, *Anecdotes of the Delborough Family* (1792)

Notably, as Pam Perkins has pointed out, the absence of any contribution by Elizabeth Gunning, the daughter, one of the prime suspects in the case, allows her multiple identities to be constructed by the literary devices of others.[15] To move down the list is to experience increasing fictionalization of the "real" events of the scandal. The first three texts conduct a trial in the public sphere of the guilt or innocence of Mrs Gunning and her daughter, or alternatively, of the Bowens and possibly General Gunning. Texts four and five, while conducting a trial of General Gunning on a matter not directly related, comment on the former matter and provide clues for its interpretations. Text six, a novel, uses some of the incidents and motifs of the Gunning affair to construct its plot, and was widely rumoured to be a disguised recounting of the incident. These texts connect with a variety of others, including newspaper commentary, private letters, and the considerable oral gossip that is now unrecoverable, but which the *Apology* describes as: "The matter now became the chit-chat and theme of scandal of every fashionable tea-table in town. It was canvassed by persons of every description; sarcasms made their appearance as periodically as the newspapers of the day."[16] Rather than summarize these texts one by one, I will show the ways in which they interact with and contradict one another in interpretive and literary contestation.

According to Susannah Gunning's published defence of her own and her daughter's conduct, when the letter supposedly

15 See Pam Perkins, "The Fictional Identities of Elizabeth Gunning," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 83–98.

16 *An Apology for the Life of Major General G——* (London: Ridgway, 1792), 81–82.

authored by the Duke of Marlborough arrived at the Gunnings' London home on the evening of 5 February 1791, the mother could already feel that something was not quite right about it: "I told [my husband and daughter] *some tricks* had certainly been played with the *letter*, and pointed out to their observation, that the coronet was *reversed* in the sealing it, and *that* instead of St James's, it was written on the direction St James's Place."[17] The content of the suspicious letter was a response to a narrative (not preserved) written by the Gunnings' daughter, Elizabeth, who claimed to have received several letters of courtship from the Duke of Marlborough's son, George Spencer-Churchill, the Marquis of Blandford, but to have eschewed him in favour of Lord Lorn. The suspect response from Marlborough upheld the honour and veracity of Miss Gunning, and regretted the lightness and inconstancy of Lord Blandford's temperament that had foiled the match. Whether Mrs Gunning, as she asserts, first called attention to the suspicious nature of the letters or whether it was through some other means, another son of Marlborough's was asked to read the letter, who noted that the hand did not resemble his father's in the least. The Gunnings' groom had played the Hermes-like role of messenger and trickster in this case: having carried a letter from General Gunning to the Duke asking for clarification of the hiatus in his son's courtship of the Gunning daughter, he had returned with an apparent forgery of the Duke's reply. Upon cross-examination, the groom owned that he had never arrived at Blenheim, and had brought back a letter that Miss Gunning had given him to deliver to her parents. (Thus, the detail of the wrong address is important, since it makes little sense for the daughter to mistake the address to her own house.) Daughter and mother together denied the groom's accusation, and claimed that relatives of the Gunnings, the Bowens, perhaps in collaboration with General Gunning, had been responsible for all the forgeries. The fateful letter ended Mrs Gunning's cherished marriage schemes for her daughter and caused General Gunning to turn both wife and daughter out of the house, never to return. General Gunning began an adulterous

17 Susannah Gunning, *A Letter From Mrs Gunning, Addressed to His Grace the Duke of Argyll* (London: Ridgway, 1791), 26. References are to this edition.

affair with a Mrs Duberly, and was convicted in court of the same. He died in Italy in 1797.

The pressures of "raising a family" were no doubt very much in play in the Blandford-Gunning fiasco. In Edward Solly's interpretation, "Mrs Gunning, with the grand marriages of her husband's sisters ever before her, was very anxious that her daughter should do likewise, and marry a duke."[18] The parents had been trying to arrange the marriage to Blandford, but Elizabeth had also been flirting with Lord Lorn; one plausible theory has her forging the letters from Blandford in order to spur Lorn's desires. Walpole reports hearing of the engagement in a letter dated 9 August 1790.[19] General Gunning was descended from an aristocratic family, and had risen to the rank of lieutenant-general due to his bravery at the battle of Bunker Hill. His beautiful sisters had both married notoriously well, one of them to John Campbell the Duke of Argyll, to whom Mrs Gunning addresses her letter.[20] Gunning himself had married Susannah Minifie of Somersetshire on 8 August 1768. The Minifie family was obscure and provincial, but Susannah was in the public eye due to her co-authorship of three novels, mentioned at the beginning of this article.[21]

On 19 March 1791, the *Morning Post* wrote of the Gunning case: "This Transaction we are led to regard as of much Importance not merely from the general Curiosity which it has excited,—nor even from the Rank of the high parties who are implicated or concerned, but from the singularity of a case, in which, if Guilt be

18 Edward Solly, "The Gunning Mystery," *Notes and Queries*, 6th series, 7 (1883): 48.

19 Horace Walpole to the Hon. H.S. Conway, 9 August 1790, in *The Letters of Horace Walpole*, ed. Peter Cunningham, 9 vols. (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1906), 9:250. References are to this edition.

20 The Gunning sisters were famous in their day, and the objects of much poetry, for twinned beauty that gained them entrance to high society and eventually large fortunes. For more on their notorious beauty, see Robert W. Jones, *Gender and the Formation of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 117–52.

21 Biographical details are from Stanley Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, eds., *British Authors before 1800* (New York: Wilson, 1952), 239–40. The three novels published before 1768 are *The Histories of Lady Frances S—— and Lady Caroline S——* (London: Dodsley, 1763), *Family Pictures* (London: Nicoll and Durham, 1764), and *The Picture* (London: Johnson, 1766).

ultimately proved, it must appear that the most potent affections of the heart, and the most forcible Relations of human Nature have been either violated or suppressed." Either a daughter had deceived both father and mother, daughter and mother had conspired to deceive father and husband, or cousins who had been cared for (the Bowens) now were conspiring with General Gunning to ruin mother and daughter. All three theories agreed that forged letters written in the name of Blandford and Marlborough had been used in order to mime a love relationship that otherwise did not exist. The first two scenarios had the daughter novelizing her romance with the Duke of Blandford in a series of forged letters, perhaps with the help of her mother, who was an epistolary novelist, in order to inspire jealousy in the true object of her love, Lord Lorn. The *Apology* follows this line, nuancing it with the collusion of General Gunning in the matter, and his "confession" that his ejection of wife and daughter was only in "*seeming* rage."[22] The third hypothesis, presented in Mrs Gunning's letter, accused Mr and Mrs Bowen as forgers pretending to be the Duke for reasons that even Mrs Gunning could not fathom or explain in her lengthy epistolary defence.

Actually, Mrs Gunning's letter to the Duke of Argyll has little to offer in terms of motive or explanation of how the supposed plot against her and her daughter was carried out. Instead, its rhetorical labour is spent on atmosphere, sentiment, and semiotics: Gunning practises an epistolary Gothic, where villains are waiting to intercept and forge communications at every turn. How had Mrs Gunning learned to distrust the mail? Perhaps indeed *Clarissa*, whose heroine is held *incommunicada* by her suitor and duped with forged letters, provided a model. Gunning paints her own situation as not much different from Clarissa's since, for example, "no letter, since last May, has come to me either by the post or by a stage-coach ... but what has been cut across the seal, with a hot knife, before I got them [*sic*]" (30). One is tempted to read Gunning's position against that of a character like Clarissa whose correspondence is tampered with, and in turn to read both against a cultural backdrop of "censored sentiments," to use Barbara Zaczek's

22 *An Apology for the Life of Major General G——*, 83.

formulation.[23] Gunning uses this Clarissa-like passivity, Todd argues, in shaping the appeal of her *Letter to the Duke of Argyll*: "Realising that she had a largely female fiction audience to call on, Susannah Gunning abolishes the risqué woman and the straightforwardly powerful writer altogether and capitalises the mother. Energy, suppressed power and spiritedness fall before self-pity and passivity. Yet she is as fully aware of actively using female strategies as her predecessors, for she, like them, is going to market in and for herself."[24] In accordance with one of the strategies for circumventing the bars and baffles, and anticipating the form of safekeeping used by the Minister in Edgar Allen Poe's "Purloined Letter," Gunning publicizes the private. She writes not a private, familiar letter to her husband's brother-in-law, the Duke of Argyll, but a two-hundred-plus-page open letter, a book in fact—and a novel to some.

That *Clarissa* is very much in the minds of all participants in the Gunninghiad is shown most forcefully in General Gunning's *Apology*, a piece of philosophical erotic fiction. The author begins with a recounting of his early, dissolute years, in which the reading of two sets of letters played a role in his ability to develop his personality of seducer:

> My library chiefly consisted of such books as tend to vitiate the mind, and debauch the understanding. *L——d C——d's Letters* and *C——a H——w* were generally my morning's amusement. From the former I learnt all the ARCANA and inexpressible refinements of a man of intrigue, and from the latter all the principles and practice of *an accomplished v——n*. The spirit of *L——ss* took possession of my bosom; a congeniality of sentiment and coincidence of desires made me in love with his character, and I could not help admiring a picture which bore so strong a resemblance to myself ... As *Alexander* [the Great] endeavoured to form himself on the model of Achilles, so I pursued the more pleasing though not less arduous task of imitating *the divine Loveless*.[25]

23 See Barbara Maria Zaczek, *Censored Sentiments: Letters and Censorship in Epistolary Novels and Conduct Material* (Newark: Delaware University Press, 1997).

24 Todd, *The Sign of Angellica*, 191.

25 *An Apology for the Life of Major General G——*, 8–9.

The passage shows that the performative power of the sentimental feminine, whose model is Clarissa, has a nemesis that is no less dependent on literary models. Letters, whether by genuine, living individuals such as Lord Chesterfield, or by fictive ones such as Lovelace, have the capacity to educate. In General Gunning's case, they educate in the art of intrigue and seduction. Richardson, who took such care to control the meanings of the circulating letters of his fictions (not always succeeding, of course), had died three decades earlier and did not have to read this passage, whose language is perhaps indicative of how *Clarissa*'s impact changed with the next generation of readers. *The Letters of Lord Chesterfield* had been a publishing event in 1774, going through eight editions within a year. Chesterfield, of course, was no rake like Lovelace; his letters advise his son "repetitively and exhaustively, about how to impress and influence the people around him."[26] The letters of Lovelace and Chesterfield both deliver insight into the constructed and hypocritical nature of social relations, and the theme of persuasion, indeed of seduction in the broader sense.

One notes as well in this passage the supplanting of public persona by private personality, as the genres of epic and romance, populated by epigones of heroism such as Achilles and Alexander, are replaced with epistolary fiction and its anti-heroes. While General Gunning's library and the general dissolution of his early years are at the limits of credulity, the results move far past them: "Gunning" claims (29–30) to have seduced two Duchesses, fourteen Countesses, four Viscountesses, and seven Baronesses, to name only the top echelons, and to have fathered 115 illegitimate children, whose ranks and occupations are also named (33). Much of the following text consists of seduction and adultery stories typical of the softer erotic literature of the period.

Mrs Gunning's published letter concerns a series of private letters; in addition, her "authentic" letter concerns a series of fictional letters. She notes paradoxically that only public channels of communication can guarantee the necessary privacy of communication: "I would have preferred addressing this letter to you at your own house, but from *sad* experience, which I have

26 Ann C. Dean, "Authorship, Print, and Public in Chesterfield's Letters to His Son," *Studies in English Literature* 45, no. 3 (2005): 691.

purchased at a very *high price*, I was but too sure that any thing written by me, or by *General Gunning*'s daughter, would not have found its way to your Grace's hands, without a *prior* inspection; and if, as it is *very likely* would have been the case, *my* ideas had not suited with those of the *Inspector*'s, not without *alterations*. I do not, my Lord Duke, mean to make *this* assertion the subject of *publick* scrutiny or *publick* enquiry" (1–2). This last statement is striking, couched as it is in the context of an open, published letter. Gunning attempts to reconstruct the conditions of the private letter through this public one. The only way to avoid interception of her letter—and for Mrs Gunning interception of a letter inevitably means tampering and subsequent misinterpretation of it—is to make it available to all. Gunning's strategy is a striking example of the "paradox of privacy," as noted by Patricia Marsden Gillis, whose epitome in this period is the epistolary novel, represented as the publication of private correspondence in order to set the record straight.[27] Yet Mrs Gunning's statement also conceals another motive and another strategy: in one sense, the letter is not to the Duke of Argyll at all, who is already on her side and does not need persuasion, but to Gunning's husband and to the Bowens, who are also the only ones to respond to it.

We might say that this letter's publicity is used not as a platform for rational discussion in the Habermasian public sphere, but rather as a weapon for the rehearsal of emotional affect. To borrow from Mary Jacobus a characterization of William Godwin's publication of the intimate correspondence between Mary Wollstonecraft and Gilbert Imlay, which stretched from 1793 to 1795, Mrs Gunning's letter presents "an intra-psychic realm that can no longer be adequately described by the terms 'public' or 'private.' Paradoxically, the letter becomes the site for the emergence of what Habermas calls 'the literary' precisely at the point where it coincides with published indiscretion."[28] Similarly, Mrs Gunning's letter deals first and foremost with her feelings of paranoia and betrayal, to the detriment of its narrative

27 See Patricia Marsden Gillis, *The Paradox of Privacy* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1984). Here again, *Clarissa* can be considered a model.

28 Mary Jacobus, "Intimate Connections: Scandalous Memoirs and Epistolary Indiscretion," in *Women, Writing, and the Public Sphere 1700–1830*, ed. Elizabeth Eger, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 277.

coherence, though my focus in this article is on epistemological and social insecurity rather than on depth psychology.

The Fiction of Guilt

As Todd summarizes, in Mrs Gunning's *Letter* paradoxically "the appearance of fiction is heightened by those realistic elements that gave factuality to fiction in the eighteenth century."[29] These elements include memoranda, perspectivism, and of course letters as both documents and movers of the plot. The same documentary, confessional, and epistolary resources used by the Minifies to become widely read fiction writers, which Mrs Gunning possesses practice and skill in mobilizing, are now depleted of the facticity she needs to make her case persuasive. Somehow "Mrs Gunning must avoid letting her narrative acquire the illusionary nature of fiction which often emerges from the multiple clashing accounts, for it prevents an entire surrender to the story. She wants the help of fiction, but she needs to control its effect; she is after all selling not only the work but herself."[30] Evidence from the other texts of the Gunninghiad shows that she did not succeed in denovelizing her *Letter*.

Essex Bowen, implicitly accused by Mrs Gunning of having engineered the letter forgery that touched off the scandal, seemed to sense the power of "letterature" in Mrs Gunning's writing, for in his own counter-publication he deliberately chose a title that would place his words within a genre distinct from both the novel and the letter. His publication would be instead a "Statement of Facts, in Answer to Mrs Gunning's Letter, Addressed to His Grace the Duke of Argyll." Bowen's title places facts in implicit opposition to letters, which through Gunning's status as a novelist are continually identified with fiction. Bowen suspected that Gunning might have become sensitized to the duplicity of letters through her own indulgences in epistolary fiction. He invokes Gunning's reputation as a novelist and banishes her open letter to the realm of fiction by reminding his readers that he has "never aspired to become an author, much less to enter into a literary

29 Todd, "Marketing the Self: Mary Carleton, Miss F and Susannah Gunning," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 217 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1983), 104.

30 Todd, "Marketing the Self," 104.

dispute with a lady."[31] Bowen no doubt is using the term "literary" in its most basic meaning: this is in fact a "letterary" dispute. Bowen's disclaimers are themselves rhetorical and ambiguous. He leaves it to his readers to decide whether he does not wish to engage with women in such a dispute because he feels inferior, or because he feels superior, or because it is unseemly, since as Ruth Perry points out, cross-gender correspondence in the eighteenth century was as suspect as unsupervised personal contact, and was thought to lead to "mind-rape," exemplified once again by Lovelace's letters to Clarissa.[32] Even the presumably fictitious General Gunning's *Apology* may shed some light on this ambiguity, when he draws a similarly literary contrast between his own narrative style and that of his wife: "Mrs G—— may plume herself upon the chastity of her diction, and the novelty of her style, which is certainly well calculated to set off a bad cause; but I hope I shall not be less credited in a *round unvarnished tale*, that cannot boast the aid of such brilliant ornaments."[33] Unlike Bowen, who declines to enter the fray, "Gunning" acknowledges that he is in a literary contest, and he wishes to recoup his recognized disadvantage with strong generic distinctions. His account of his family's troubles, which takes up ten printed pages (76–85), is a tale told in what traditional rhetoric calls the "slender" style, pure plot without ornament. Readers might associate such tales or yarns with adventure, including military exploits, placing General Gunning in his element and lending his voice authenticity. His adversary, on the other hand, is awarded style (and ornament) points, without mention of the ability to construct plot, thus echoing critics' views of her novels.

Bowen leaves it unclear whether the unseemliness of "letterary" debate with a lady derives from inappropriate intercourse between the two genders, or from the inappropriateness of one or the other gender engaging in literary pursuits. Yet Bowen's title cannot prevent the author from being drawn into the web of epistolary indirection, since his text answers a letter

31 Essex Bowen, *A Statement of Facts, in Answer to Mrs Gunning's Letter, Addressed to His Grace the Duke of Argyll* (London: J. Debrett, 1791), v.

32 Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel* (New York: AMS Press, 1980), 129–36.

33 *An Apology for the Life of Major General G——*, 86.

addressed not to him, but to the Duke of Argyll. In answering this letter, Bowen's text itself becomes, willy-nilly, a point on several of the inevitable triangles created by correspondence. Perhaps the best guess for the implications of Bowen's statement is that he wishes to undermine Gunning's claims made in her open letter by associating that letter with her epistolary fiction, hence making the open letter fictional by association. The *London Chronicle* did not hesitate to determine guilt by association in this way, noting that Mrs Gunning "is perfectly conversant in Novels and consequently fertile in the contrivance of new incidents and unexpected situations."[34] To return to Herrnstein Smith's point, the historical determinacy of that letter found in the trunk accrues not from its form, but from its unpublished, "overheard" status. Walpole, in two letters to his friend Agnes Berry, also notes both the irony of all this happening to an epistolary novelist, and its eerie resemblance to the recurring theme of all of Gunning's novels: "the 'Gunninghiad' is completed—not by a marriage, like other novels of the Minifies [but by exile]" (13 February 1791, *Letters* 9:284). And later, "It is lost time for people to write novels, who can compose such a romance as these good folks have invented" (18 February 1791, *Letters* 9:291). Susannah Gunning's novels all centred on romantic involvement between characters of unequal class, and were distinguished by the nearly total incoherence of their plots. In her letter to the duke, however, Gunning is at pains to disassociate herself from the charge of novelism. She tries to extricate herself by truthfully denying the authorship of a single novel: "*Why* have the *combined plotters*, for none but the *tools* of mischief would have so *meanly* employed themselves, amongst their other *ridiculous insertions* in the *news-papers* accused *me* of Novel writing; particularly of a book called Waltham-Abbey; which is made up *they say* of *tricks*, of *strategem*, and of *forged letters*" (89). Since all of her novels appeared anonymously, and since she co-wrote several with her sister, Gunning is safe in denying authorship of them. Besides the use of the rhetorical question to avoid direct denial, Gunning also declares her innocence by synecdoche—"I have not written this novel; therefore, you should believe that I have written no novels at all"—even though she had written and published one called

34 *London Chronicle* 69, no. 10 (February 1791): 181.

Barford Abbey (1768), whose title her detractors (or Gunning?) apparently misremembered, so long ago had it appeared.[35] This novel portrays the romance between an aristocratic young man, Lord Darcey, and a young woman of uncertain origins, Miss Warley, who had been kindly taken in by the neighbouring aristocratic family. In the end, Darcey decides to marry Warley, and it is then discovered that she is the granddaughter of her wards.[36] Is it possible that more than two decades later, Gunning's own daughter was placed in a similar situation, with the Marquis of Blandford the father's choice, and Lord Lorn the companion she longed for? Or was it instead that the mechanisms of this particular epistolary plot were called up by the author in order to explain and contain the daughter's behaviour?

Conventionally, Gunning managed to expand the text of *Barford Abbey* to almost four hundred pages by having the lovers confide, in endless letters to friends of their own sex, their respective doubts over the love of the other and over the conceivable success of their union. Just as conventionally, at the last minute, after Lord Darcey's parents have generously consented to the unequal match, it is revealed that his beloved Miss Warley is really noble. Miss Warley's rise to fortune and nobility copies both Gunning's own, real career, and that of Richardson's *Pamela*—and Gunning does not deny that she had been plotting an analogous rise for her daughter, whether on a real basis or not. According to the anonymous author of *A Narrative of the Incidents which form the Mystery, in the Family of General Gunning*, "the confession [of being a novelist] would have done her no discredit."[37]

35 Susannah Minifie Gunning, *Barford Abbey, A Novel*, 2 vols. (London: Cadell and Payne, 1768).

36 Katherine Sobba Green points to the conflicted message of this resolution as typical of the eighteenth-century transition from patriarchy to companionate marriage ideology: "Gunning's epistolary novel allows her both to position Fanny squarely in the middle of two contending systems of nuptial practice and to encourage reader identification with her heroine's conflicting subject positions." Green, *The Courtship Novel 1740–1820* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 144.

37 *A Narrative of the Incidents which form the Mystery, in the Family of General Gunning. With biographical sketches; and strictures on the "Vindication of Mrs Gunning." Comprising Copies of all the Letters, Affidavits, &c. &c., the whole placed in a new point of view* (London: Taylor, 1791), 42.

In the year following her disgrace, Mrs Gunning published *Anecdotes of the Delborough Family*, for which she felt compelled to provide an "Advertisement" in order to counter reports "that [the novel] is supposed to contain Historical Memoirs of my own family affairs."[38] As proof that it does not, Gunning claims that the first volume was written twenty years ago. Yet those familiar with the details of the Gunninghiad must have been struck by the author's depiction of Lady Selina Dangle. This villain, who conceives a passion for the story's hero, Colonel Fairfax, engages in a number of epistolary machinations to further her own cause and to frustrate the affairs of others. When a Miss Ann Pladlow attracts the attentions of her brother, causing Selina to become concerned with being lowered through marriage, she suggests to her co-conspirator:

> Suppose we write [Miss Pladlow] a letter, and sign it her friend, Anonymous, just to frighten her with the Duke's resentment, and to inform her that George is already married.
>
> Madame Villeroy declared she had no objection whatever to anonymous letters, on the contrary, they might be made very useful on particular occasions, and she had herself condescended more than once, to the office of writing them. (3:56)

These two carry out the plan, although the letter does not come from Anonymous. One evening a servant brings Ann two letters, one with a foreign postmark, the other from London. The first is from her father Dr Pladlow in Rome, but the second is harder to discern: "Well! cry'd Ann, was ever any thing so odd, this is certainly a coronet seal, but so clumsily press'd, that it is almost defaced, and the letter is free too, but the name is so badly written, that I cannot make it out" (3:73). The letter is purportedly from the Duke of Angrave (a name that echoes the Duke of Argyll), but is in actuality a forgery by Lady Selina and Madame Villeroy. It warns Ann to stay away from George: "Audacious wretch! would nothing satisfy thy diabolical ambition, but to connect thy obscurity with the honours of my princely house; shall the daughter of a preaching puppy of a parson lift up her daring eyes to the Duke of Angrave's heir, as a husband fit to couple with her

38 Susannah Minifie Gunning, *Anecdotes of the Delborough Family*, 5 vols. (London: William Lane, 1792), 1:3. References are to this edition.

meanness[?]" (3:75). She takes the letter for true, and decides to go to Rome to throw herself on her father's mercy.

In another incident from the novel, Lady Selina opens (no doubt with a "hot knife") and then reseals her brother's letter: "Now though Lady Selina could not, on the present occasion, profit by [Villeroy's] personal services, yet still she was indebted to her former instructions, for the perfect ease with which she opened, and reclosed the seal on her brother's letter, so delicately nice, that no eye could distinguish it had ever submitted to the operation" (3:123). Selina also anonymously sends announcements of her engagement to Fairfax to a number of newspapers (4:37), hoping that publication of this fiction will turn it into fact. Furthermore, "the facility with which this little finesse was imagined, and the readiness of its execution, may be looked upon as a presumptive proof that it was not her ladyship's first anonymous publication" (4:38). One wishes to make a similar statement about Mrs Gunning, who had enjoyed numerous anonymous publications in her life. Whether the real-life knowledge she revealed in this novel came from being victim or perpetrator of epistolary fraud is less clear.[39]

Frank Gees Black finds the same constant interference of Mrs Gunning's narrators in her epistolary novels that we see in her open letter, which reveals a "certain overconsciousness of form which impresses one as inartistic."[40] That is, overconsciousness of form, concentration on the story *of* the letters rather than the story *in* the letters, when it reappears in Gunning's "genuine" letter to the Duke of Argyll, impresses one as too artistic to support her truth claims. Besides implicitly denying being a novelist, Gunning tries hard to distinguish what she is writing now from what she has written before—even though her present text, too, is delivered in letter form: "I am not writing for fame,

39 Gunning's later *Memoirs of Mary* (1793), which features a heroine who has two suitors turn against her owing to the publication of false letters, is frequently cited as also referring obliquely to the fallout from the affair. B.G. MacCarthy refers to the *Memoirs* as "one of the best of the lesser novels of the period [roughly, 1780–1800] ... Mrs Gunning is a strong-minded writer." MacCarthy, *The Female Pen: Women Writers and Novelists* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 306.

40 Frank Gees Black, *The Epistolary Novel in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Eugene: University of Oregon Press, 1940), 58.

I write for *more* than *life* or *fame*: my *pen* and my *heart* are employed in the vindication of injured, of *oppressed* innocence; that *Innocent*, my *own*, my *only*, my *beloved* child" (27). "Fame" constitutes a "switch" term here, pointing the reader as much in the direction of saving face as in the direction of literary immortality. Gunning writes not for fame, but to avoid infamy. She also uses her past authorship to verify the nonfictionality, here expressed as colourlessness, of what she is now writing: "Herefore, when *fiction* has guided my pen, my heart has been softened by compassion, and my tears have flowed over distresses of my *own* creating; but *Nature* has appointed me to a task which I am totally incapable of performing—as a mother I cannot hold *her* [Elizabeth's] pencil—the *colours* alone blind me, to lay them *on* is impossible!" (102). Elsewhere, however, Gunning delights in her ability to hide more than she reveals as just one instance of the godlike status of authorship: "I am *now* going to *drop* the curtain, that will for a *certain time* exclude ... two performers [the Bowens] before I *again* expose them on my *little* stage" (81).

Paradoxically but predictably, the more forcefully Mrs Gunning denies that her authorial ego is involved in this production, the more apparent it becomes that she is indeed writing a fiction. A literary theme runs through her letter that undermines the task of suasion she has proposed for herself. Mrs Gunning's open letter, no less than her novels, reveals the inevitable truthfulness of conversation (for those who know how to read its signs) and the inevitable deceptiveness of letters. Faces, bodies, and actions speak volumes, while letters are opaque and deceitful. Another of Mrs Gunning's novels is called *Love at First Sight* (1797), and that title could stand for various of her productions, since in all of her fictions vision and personal contact create and maintain the love affairs, which are then reported to confidantes. (As is conventional of the period, and as Essex Bowen reminds us, hero and heroine rarely exchange letters with each other in Gunning's novels.) In her open letter, Mrs Gunning provides the scene of Mrs Bowen as she appears before the mother to accuse Elizabeth Gunning of forging letters from the latter's pretended lover, but then gives the whole game away with her facial expressions: "I must observe, that I never beheld such *expressions* of *guilt* and *confusion* as overwhelmed the wretch [Mrs Bowen] before me; for though I was by no means

free from agitation, I fixed my eyes on her face" (48–49). Again and again, Mrs Gunning invokes her principles of physiognomy: "I *observed* [Mrs Bowen's] looks, which, contrary to their usual silence, spoke *some sort of* meaning, and which I have since *construed* into the language of *mortification*" (50). Gunning continually dissects the body language of others, attempting to constrain within the framework of her metaphysics of guilt and innocence the twitching and palpitations of life's opacity. But her ability to dissect the gestures and expressions of others is merely the obverse of her own lack of privacy, in line with the relationship between sentimentality and privacy pointed out by Spacks: "The connection between sensibility and privacy depends on the general eighteenth-century conviction that sensibility entails display on the body of the heart's deepest feelings ... Although the word privacy does not recur in discussions of sensibility, those discussions frequently betray anxiety about what sensibility conceals as well as what it reveals. Concealment constitutes both the individual appeal and the social danger of psychological privacy."[41]

Although Mrs Gunning has denied a charge of writing forged letters in a nonexistent novel, she has no compunctions about writing fictitious letters to her daughter in order to test Mrs Bowen. Gunning pretends to reprimand her daughter in a letter (never "sent") that is really intended for Mrs Bowen. Mrs Gunning "wrote such a letter to [my daughter] as I most certainly *should* have written without any *finesse* whatever, had she *really* deviated from the *paths* of *delicacy* and *truth*" (61): in other words a fictional letter, a "seemingly severe letter" (62). She then reads the letter to Mrs Bowen as a hook, to call forth those changes in her countenance that Gunning is so adept at reading. In contrast to Bowen, whose gestures and expressions are easily interpretable signs of the state of her soul, Gunning is a skilled and disinterested actor: "She *saw* me writing and afterwards I read to *her the letter* ... without a *tear* of *disappointment*, or a *sigh* of *anguish*; I am not at all conscious that I did not go through the whole task with exactly the same *indifference*, as I should have *written* a ballad or *read* a paragraph in the news papers concerning the national

41 Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Privacy: Concealing the Eighteenth-Century Self* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 11.

debt" (63). Curiously, Mrs Gunning here attributes the same "indifferent" emotional content to two distinct genres with rather different degrees of mimetic attention to reality. Mrs Bowen does not fail to exhibit the expected signs: "had I not found her out *before*, her mind on *this occasion* would have appeared to me in all the colouring of *deformity* and *malice*" (62). Furthermore, a letter written to Mrs Bowen after confabulation between mother and daughter is "couched in terms through which she could not see how *well* I knew her, and *how much* I despised her" (65). Opacity rather than transparency becomes the hallmark of epistolary communication, a development very much in line with the emergence of "literature" in the early modern period. Michel Foucault's description of the Marquis de Sade's writings describes equally well Mrs Gunning's sentimental performance in her *Letter*: "languages which are constantly drawn out of themselves by the overwhelming, the unspeakable, by thrills, stupefaction, ecstasy, dumbness, pure violence, wordless gestures, and which are calculated with the greatest economy and precision to produce effects ... these languages very strangely represent themselves in a slow, meticulous, and infinitely extendible economy."[42] This analysis of sentimental and Gothic discourse suggests a reason beyond mere incompetence or hysteria for the lack of a storyline in Mrs Gunning's letter. The refusal to come to a point makes a point, providing a space for a style that is in itself a statement about the world.

Sequels

Mrs Gunning's revelry in her mastery of the *lettre perfide* in remarks such as the foregoing undermine the believability of the *Open Letter*. And indeed, the letter seems not to have fulfilled its ostensible purpose of suasion. David Rivers, in remembering a scandal to which he was a contemporary, has this to say about it: "Many foolish and simple anecdotes deform [Gunning's open] letter, and it abounds infinitely more in invective than

42 Michel Foucault, "Language to Infinity," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 60–61.

argument."[43] Walpole was of the same opinion, writing to the Misses Berry that "[the letter] is neither romantic, nor entertaining, nor abusive ... In short, it is a most dull incoherent rhapsody, that gives no account at all of the story that gave origin to her book, and at which no mortal could guess from it" (5 March 1791, *Letters* 9:298). However, the *Morning Post* of 19 March 1791, perhaps influenced by Mrs Gunning's allowing them to quote liberally from her letter before publication, found her account more convincing: "the Narrative of Mrs G. has much of strong and circumstantial evidence in favour of her cause. She speaks as a mother, but it is as a mother awakened into action by the most vivifying sensibility.—She maintains with much energy, the cause of her Daughter, and, as the facts now stand, those who maintain the negative of her assertions, must involve themselves in absurdity and contradiction."[44] Posterity sided with the judgment of Rivers and Walpole, and mostly found the daughter guilty of forgery. Her novelist mother's role is more unclear, but at the very least, she would be guilty of having planted the seed of fictional letter-writing in the mind of her daughter through her own literary success. This seed bore more profitable fruit in the daughter's publication of numerous epistolary novels, starting soon after her banishment, and no doubt a necessary source of income. Like that of her mother, Elizabeth Gunning's own literary output reduces significantly after her marriage in 1803.[45]

Conceivably, the same readership that purchased the *Letter to the Duke of Argyll* also went for the last published work of the Gunnighiad, *The Trial of Major General Gunning, etc.* The contents of the et cetera are revealed on the colophon of this stenographic summary: "Trial between James Duberly, Esq., Plaintiff, and Major General Gunning, Defendant, for Criminal Conversation with the Wife of the Plaintiff. Tried before the Right Hon. Lord Kenyon, and a Special Jury, at Westminster, on Wednesday the

43 David Rivers, *Literary Memoirs of Living Authors of Great Britain*, 2 vols. (London: R. Faulder, 1798; reprint, New York: Garland, 1970), 1:230.

44 On 22 March 1791, the *Morning Post* lorded its "scoop" of the Gunning affair over its rivals: readers were urged to buy the LETTER from which the "*barren* Prints may now make their copious Extracts, at leisure."

45 Novels attributed to Elizabeth Gunning include *Lord Fitzhenry* (1794), *The Packet* (1794), *The Orphans of Snowdon* (1797), and *The Gipsy Countess* (1799).

22nd of February, 1792."[46] The difference between the title page, meant to attract buyers, and the colophon shows the interest excited by Gunning, whose trial for adultery seemed ironic given his outrage at his wife's and daughter's behaviour. The plaintiff, James Duberly, whose name is rightly placed first in the full description of the trial, was clearly unknown to the public and of little interest. Duberly's barrister sought to make use of the defendant's notoriety to drive home General Gunning's perfidy with his friend, Duberly: "This is the man whose principles are so honourable;—this is the man who *ejects* his daughter from some *supposed* incorrectness of conduct;—this is the man whom the plaintiff received into his house, as his friend, and to whom he lent the sum of 2000£" (10). The impetus for these remarks, and seemingly the most convincing evidence of the adultery between General Gunning and Mrs Duberly (which was not denied, the defence trying instead to limit damages on the basis of Duberly's alleged keeping of a mistress, his neglect of his wife, and his knowledge of the intimacy between her and Gunning), was a peculiar letter from Gunning to Duberly, as the latter was trying to determine the whereabouts of his missing spouse:

> Sir,
> In consequence of the unhappy event of yesterday, I received Mrs Duberly *as a sacred deposit,* until the tenderness of her family might be exerted to restore her to her former situation. To that act I was prompted by every sentiment of *punctilio*.—To make this declaration, I have no other motive than the desire of not swerving from those principles which, in the most desperate situations, I have always pointed out as my invariable line of conduct. I shall always acknowledge the obligations I have received from you; and on *one object only* could our friendship have been wrecked. (10)

Even in this cameo General Gunning is concerned, no less than his estranged spouse was in her letter, with the presentation of a self, even where the carapace of sacred deposits, punctilio, and the extreme situations associated with his military record gapes to reveal an inward rottenness.[47] This is the first of three letters

46 *The Trial of Major General Gunning, etc.* (London: Ridgway, 1792), n.p. References are to this edition.

47 The author of *An Apology for the Life of Major General G——* interprets Gunning's "invariable line of conduct" as meaning that he never "avoided

read and then given into evidence at the trial. It is impossible to know how scrupulously they were reproduced for publication. The stenographic account of the trial paraphrases witness testimony and cross-examination, while seeming to give the opening and closing arguments in full. If General Gunning did have control over the emphases, then his propensity to dramatism rivals that of his wife.

The letter preceding the one just quoted, also written by General Gunning, instructs Mrs Gardner to tell Mr Duberly that his wife had been with her, with a P.S. that "If you have already told Duberly that she was not with you, you can now say, that you only said so in order to prevent his being angry" (9). The last, brief letter introduced is by Mrs Duberly to her husband, noting that "Although my heart bleeds for my conduct—though I have injured you in the most tender point, yet so great is my shame, that I cannot, dare not—see you.—Take care, my dear James, of our offspring. Teach them not to despise their mother, and—" (9–10). At this point the prosecutor adds his own words: "Gentlemen, I cannot read the remainder. Indeed, I have not nerves ... Yet, alas! so quick are the transitions when vice has taken possession of the mind, that three days subsequent to the date of this letter, Mrs Duberly was heard to make use of the most bitter exclamations against the man whom she had so recently confessed to have so materially injured" (11). The rhetorical device, found in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* and other legal training manuals, is "hesitation." The inability to continue or to name sends a more powerful message than any specific language could. The prosecutor hopes with this characterization to rebut with the letter the entire basis of the defence.

Spacks has analysed the letters of Walpole in terms that summarize the situation of readers of Gunning's entire epistolary nexus: "Walpole's [letters], because of their concentration on other people's doings, focus attention on the moral problematics shared by oral gossip and the analogous activity of reading correspondence addressed to someone else. The fact of publication, which allows this activity, also legitimates it. The letters, made public, become available to whoever chooses to read

an appeal to the sword, where personal injury had been sustained" (100), in other words never declined to fight a duel.

them; no individual need feel guilty. Yet the experience those letters facilitate duplicates in many respects that of talk about the absent."[48] In other words, our position vis-à-vis Walpole's letters reproduces that of Walpole vis-à-vis Mrs Gunning. We may better understand the paradoxes and tensions between publicity and privacy in the period through analogy with early twenty-first-century concerns: "The inconsistencies of our own historical period—the enormous interest in the sex lives of the rich and famous combined with protectiveness about our e-mail—had their prelude in the late eighteenth century, when scandalous reports of upper-class adulteries abounded in the press while many members of the higher social strata resolutely preserved their concealing decorums."[49] The letter appears in Gunning's story in multifaceted modalities: fictional, open, private, and forged. These categories of the letter do not so much merge into one form in this exchange, as each separate type penetrates and circulates through the others. Although it would seem that a "real" correspondence has taken place, it is equally apparent that a great fiction has been perpetrated on someone, or perhaps on everyone. The epistemological difficulties in sorting out who had forged what relate to the logical difficulties involved in placing any given letter into the category of natural or fictive discourse.

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48 Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 85.

49 Spacks, *Privacy*, 13.