

The Construction of Epistolary Identity in a Gentry's Communication Network of the Seventeenth Century: The Case of Jane Lady Cornwallis Bacon

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Abstract

There has recently been increasing scholarly interest in early modern correspondence and specifically also in women's letter writing and reading. Starting from the late Middle Ages familiar responsibilities and domestic obligations led many women to write to their absent husbands or other relatives to exchange health news and inform them about family affairs. It is however in the early modern period that corresponding with relatives and friends became a widespread social practice ranging from official to familiar and personal correspondence; in this period female literacy increased thus allowing growing numbers of women to write and read their own letters. A growing number of female voices can thus be heard depicting early modern social life. The article focuses on a neglected aspect of women's correspondence: it investigates not the sender's epistolary identity, but that of the recipient through the analysis of the personal correspondence of Lady Cornwallis Bacon. The main theme of the article is to show how the epistolary identity of an early modern gentlewoman was constructed by her correspondents. It is assumed that modes of communicating information and achieving a specific goal through letters varied not only according to the relationship connecting the correspondents but also the purpose and content of letters.

Keywords: Discursive Identity, Jane Cornwallis Bacon, Women's Epistolarity

1. *Introduction*

Letters were a central part of everyday life in early modern Europe. They were not just a key medium of business and government but also a central form of communication in a world of growing contacts in which they fulfilled multiple functions. In this period, the letter as genre straddles the private/public divide as familiar letters were also passed around groups. Yet the dialogic relationship between sender and recipient is essential to epistolary discourse since, in the seventeenth century as today, a letter is written by one individual and addressed to another. Together they construct an epistolary world in which their physical and psychological separation is overcome by linguistic proximity expressed by the use of 'I/You' pronouns and the fiction of the effective presence of

the audience. In short, early modern familiar epistolary discourse is not just a form of self-presentation as in humanist letters meant for publication (on this point see Van Houdt *et al.*, 2002), but primarily an exchange in which epistolary space is defined by the shared world of the sender and addressee underlying their dialogic relationship. In no other genre do readers figure so prominently within the world of the narrative and in the generation of the text. The epistolary form is unique in making the reader almost as important an agent in the narrative as the writer (on this point see Altman 1982, chapter three: 'The weight of the reader'). Letters allowed both correspondents a space in which to negotiate identities based on the attribution of reciprocal discursive roles. In this context, the construction of the epistolary persona of the recipient is as important as the process of identity-making of the sender.

There has recently been a growing and substantial scholarly interest in both the epistolary genre since the late Middle Ages and women's use of correspondence.¹ Late medieval and early modern women wrote practical, concrete letters to family, friends, members of their larger communities, and strangers, thus making their many voices heard within epistolary networks (Couchman and Crabb, eds, 2005, 3). The present article also deals with the use of letters by early modern women, but it has a slightly different focus as it examines a neglected aspect of female correspondence: it investigates the construction of the discursive identity of a gentlewoman as perceived by her correspondents, both male and female. The collection comprising the personal correspondence of Jane Lady Cornwallis Bacon is mostly composed of letters addressed to this gentlewoman by family members and friends. This correspondence, which is a typical collection of familiar letters, is useful for illustrating how epistolary communication worked in an early modern gentry network. Yet to fully understand the meaning of the letter exchange to seventeenth-century men and women it is perhaps helpful first to delineate the context of letter writing and reading in early modern England.

2. Letter Writing and Reading in Early Modern England

Nowadays writing or reading a letter typically points to a private activity in addition to evoking an absence: it is written by an individual in the absence of the addressee and the content is commonly known only by the correspondents. This was not the situation in medieval and early modern society. In surviving late medieval familiar/mercantile letters such as, for instance, the Cely Papers, the conveyance of news was one of the main functions. Mercantile and gentry correspondents exchanged information about family affairs but also kept a network of people informed about financial and political events (Del Lungo Camiciotti 2010). In early modern England, letters are still instruments for disseminating news, though a crucial change occurred in the late fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. Letters became the key medium of communication in a

world of extended contacts – contacts thinned out by distance through business, travel and other forms of separation (Brant 2006, 1). While mercantile correspondence continued the medieval tradition of mixing personal and public elements well into the modern period (Del Lungo Camiciotti 2012), gentry correspondence acquired different functions over time. In the early modern period, personal letters in gentry's networks began to be used for a variety of purposes related to the establishment and maintenance of social ties. This change was due to various socio-historical factors affecting the culture of epistolarity. One of the main ones is the fact that, in comparison with the late Middle Ages, a growing number of people wrote their own letters: letters were increasingly autographs. Despite this, all letters still had both a public and private component: they were typically composed in private or by means of a trustworthy secretary or servant, but their transmission was always mediated by a third party of some sort (Schneider 2005, 71). Many seventeenth-century paintings representing the activity of writing or reading a letter show more than one person involved and, in the representations of letter writing, a witness is often present, presumably the messenger waiting for the written communication he has to dispatch. Moreover the bearer of the letter was an important participant in the epistolary network as he could be entrusted by the sender with an oral message thus further blurring the boundaries between private and public communication (Schneider 2005).

Another important factor of change is the social meaning of correspondence in early modern Europe. As Fitzmaurice writes (2002, 4) 'The letter – its writing, reading, keeping, endorsing and sending – apparently permeated every aspect of English life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries'. Its centrality to seventeenth-century culture is also demonstrated by the fact that both writing and reading letters was a favourite theme in contemporary Dutch painting representing everyday bourgeois life (Todorov 1997). The letter became the kind of document most commonly written by literate adults because it was used for multiple purposes both in the public and the private spheres. Official and diplomatic letters were the principal means of transmitting political news (Brownlees 2012), but also personal² letters could have the function of keeping family members and friends informed of events, both domestic and international. A novel element in early modern English correspondence is that familiar letters, though primarily concerned with the management of family business, were also used for social purposes as in other European countries. In this period epistolary discourse seems increasingly to serve the function of creating an epistolary world where correspondents express proximity by exchanging information relevant to the shared epistolary space and construct an empathetic relationship to strengthen their family or social bond.³

Early modern personal letters are first person texts that, in addition to showing a process of sender identity-making, may be very you-oriented in that they allow writers to construct their addressees as epistolary personae in rela-

tion to the function of the main message contained in letters. Senders may use their linguistic resources to position themselves in relation to their interlocutors in the texts thus constructing an epistolary relationship where the identity of both correspondents may depend not only on their social roles, but also on the specific communicative situation. There is in fact an important difference from modern personal letters expressing sentiments of friendliness and closeness. In the seventeenth century, despite the growing social importance of epistolary exchange, the main point of writing a personal letter to a family member or friend remained that of advancing a specific practical purpose, of influencing its reader and persuading her/him to adopt some course of action.

In order to establish how Lady Jane's correspondents perceived her, it is helpful to understand the role played by women in epistolary discourse as both senders and recipients of written messages. The culture of epistolarity in early modern England was one in which the circulation and communication of information took place in communities based on political and domestic business, mutual interest, and intimate circumstances (Schneider 2005, 27). In this context, it is gentlewomen rather than their husbands that cultivated a network of patronage contacts between kin, courtiers and local gentry. In addition, rising female literacy had an influence not only on the practice of letter writing but also on familiar epistolary style in that it promoted greater confidentiality and led to more intimate and private communications (Daybell 2001, 7). So letters written by or addressed to women could work to foster social and even political links in addition to managing family relations. Moreover, not only noblewomen could play an active role in family and political life (Couchman and Crabb, eds, 2005), but also masterful women from the mercantile and gentry elites could wield some sort of authoritativeness in communities wider than the familiar ones. This is certainly the case of Jane Lady Cornwallis Bacon whose familial responsibilities and obligations imposed by marriage and motherhood authorised her to operate beyond the confines of her household.

3. Data and Method

This article analyses the letters received by Lady Cornwallis Bacon from 1613 to 1644 (only four letters in the collection are written by Lady Cornwallis Bacon). They form a portion of a large mass of manuscript papers that had been found among the family archives and were edited anonymously in 1842 by Richard Griffin Neville, third Baron Baybrooke, who had married Jane Cornwallis, second and last Marquess Cornwallis. The total collection of Cornwallis Bacon papers numbers over six hundred items, including letters, sermon notes, and poems. Lord Baybrooke published only two hundred, so there are many still unpublished, though the recent edition by Moody augmented the original through the addition of a further forty-eight letters (Moody 2003, 12). The present analysis was conducted on the letters edited by Moody, which can be considered a representa-

tive corpus as the editor in her choice of letters to be included 'wanted to ensure a suitable balance of family and friends' (Moody 2003, 12).⁴

Lady Jane was born about 1581, daughter of Hercules Meautys, of West Ham, Essex, descendant from an ancient French family that had come from Normandy with Henry VII. She grew up in the court circle becoming lady-in-waiting to Lucy, Countess of Bedford, and subsequently woman-of-the-bedchamber to Ann of Denmark in 1603. Five years later she became second wife to Sir William Cornwallis, of Brome, Suffolk, who died in 1611, leaving her a young but rich widow with a child just one year old. The control of the family estate was hers, as was the wardship of her infant son. Being young and richly endowed, Lady Jane found herself the object of attention for would-be suitors. By early 1613 negotiations had begun for a union with Nathaniel Bacon, youngest son of a prosperous and well connected family (Moody 2003, 17).

The letters she received chart family relations and friendships, setting these within a pattern of interweaving private and public affairs. As can be seen in the table below, the edited collection includes letters by her husband, several in-laws (mother-in-law, brother-in-law, sisters-in-law, daughter-in-law), her mother, a brother, a cousin, two of her sons, five women friends, two male friends, her household chaplain, a letter by Charles I and two letters by Queen Henrietta Maria. In brief, they offer a wide spectrum of familiar and social ties which well represents an early modern gentry epistolary network.

Nuclear family and kin members

Second husband	32
Sons	19 + 6
Mother	2
Brother	18
Cousin	30
Mother-in-law	6
Mother in law of Lady Jane's son	1
Brother-in-law	5
Sisters-in-law	33+5
Daughter-in-law	17

Friends and acquaintances

5 Women friends	52
2 Male friends	6
Household chaplain and private chaplain	3
King and Queen	3
2 acquaintances	5

In investigating the construction of Lady Jane's epistolary identity, special attention will be given to terms and phrases of address and closure as they identify and give respect to the social role and status of the sender and receiver, placing

both within institutionalised social relations (Palander-Collin 2010, 657). Address terms and phrases are helpful as a key to interpreting social and affective relations in dialogues between characters in plays (Mazzon 2009); in more general terms they are efficacious indicators in historical studies (Taavitsainen and Jucker, eds, 2003), including of course those of letters (Nevala 2003, 2004).

According to Nevala (2004), who makes use of the concepts of distance and power by Brown and Levinson (1987), given the hierarchical structure of early modern England, the factors that most influence the choice of both forms of direct address and terms of reference reflecting politeness strategies are social distance and relative power relations.⁵ This is certainly true. However, it is here assumed that a third factor may also influence the composition of letters: the specific purpose the writer has in mind and his/her related persuasive aim as the subject matter of most letters is closely linked to some practical purpose. In addition, the content of the letter may be an indicator of gender differences. The topics dealt with in the correspondence cover a wide spectrum: they range from personal and domestic matters, such as Lady Jane's health and confinements, the marriage of her eldest son, the debts incurred by her brother, or a lawsuit to protect her inheritance, to covering events in London and the effects of uncertainty abroad (Moody 2003, 16). Yet topics such as marriage negotiations and domestic events seem to be preferred by female correspondents, while the circulation of political news is more to the fore in male letters.

The analysis of letters allows one to focus on identity as performed rather than as prior to language, as dynamic rather than fixed, as culturally and historically located, as constructed in interaction with other people, as continuously remade, and as contradictory and situational. The practice of letter writing as a form of narration involves the 'doing' of identity and the construction of different identity versions (Benwell and Stokoe 2006, 138). However, the analysis of one-sided correspondence raises a significant issue. The letters addressed to Lady Jane survive without their companions and so present a singular perspective: because of this they are not particularly suitable to explore the dialogic and interactional aspects of a genre which has often been defined as near to conversation. Yet they are rich in stance markers that allow the exploration of the senders' construction of their image of the addressee and illustrate the multiplicity of relationships among correspondents. In particular the formality *vs* colloquiality aspect seems to be a function of the role assumed by the sender of the letter, which can vary not only according to the relative social status and relationship bonding her/him to Lady Jane, but also, as already indicated, according to the purpose of the letter.

4. *The Correspondents and the Correspondence*

The first seventeen letters relate to the matrimonial negotiations for Lady Jane's union with Nathaniel Bacon. This group of letters includes those written by

Lady Jane, Anne Lady Bacon, her future mother-in-law, and the mediator between the two sides, the Rector Mr Parr.

These letters are rather businesslike and show that Lady Jane was quite competent in managing her own financial interests. A letter by Lady Bacon to Mr Parr in replying to the request of settling as much as they could afford on their youngest son, the suitor of Lady Jane, makes use of a commercial analogy, likening Lady Jane to an expensive acquisition:

[1] And although the jewel laid before us be never so rich, if we be not able to buy it we must be content to forbear it. We must not lay out all our stock upon one purchase, having so many others to provide for. (Letter 11, 1613, in Moody 2003, 69-70)

As can be expected, these letters are rather formal as they focus on the business of making the match in the context of seventeenth-century modes of settling the union in a gentry community. The letters by Mr Parr and Lady Bacon show that Lady Jane is perceived by both her would-be mother-in-law and the mediator in very practical terms. Only the letters by the future husband, Nathaniel Bacon, are more intimate as their primary aim is to conduct a courtship. He addresses her as 'Sweet Madam' and later, when his proposal had been accepted as 'Sweet Heart', while the endorsement is obviously more formal: 'To his best respected/ To his noble friend the Lady Bacon, at Brome, give these'. His letters contain numerous expressions that indicate his warm affection for his wife and how he enjoyed receiving her letters when she was away. See for instance, a letter written to his wife while she was staying in London:

[2] Sweet Heart, In some haste and few words I do return you many thanks for your letter received by Mr Bailiff, together with the news, but especially for the abundance of your love therein professed; which I desire you to believe is so welcome unto me that the meditation thereof must be unto me my chiefest comfort in this your absence, and that my best endeavours shall always aim at some means to my poor power both to requite and deserve it. Our children with myself are in health (God be thanked), with the rest of your friends. I wish you good success with your business, and in the meantime content both with the place and the proceedings. Excuse my shortness, being commanded by the day and time; and entertain the best prayers of him who is always Yours, Nathaniel Bacon (Letter 66, 1624, in Moody 2003, 115-116)

Nathaniel's letters, when written from home, give Lady Jane information about the health of family members and friends and depict the situation at home, while, when he is absent from home, they also report news both domestic and international. Nathaniel's letters from home generally report domestic events and have a reference to the children's well-being and state of health, as if he needed to reassure his wife that although she was away from home they were developing satisfactorily under his supervision. The closing section is normally devoted to the expression of closeness and intimacy as, for instance, in the following letter:

[3] For the business, although the success has not yet satisfied my desires, yet it has so far equalled my expectation that I cannot but be fully persuaded of your most great care and diligence, whereby it has attained this present estate. [...] Little news I can write; only the marriage of my niece Gawdy, and the death of Pearse and Frank Wodehouse.

Myself and the children are in perfect health, God be thanked; the which I shall daily wish and pray to you and Fred, *with my best endeavours to be so much myself, that I may fully persuade you that my great happiness shall always consist in being*

Your Nathaniel Bacon (Letter 65, 1624, in Moody 2003, 115)⁶

On the whole, Nathaniel's letters always bear witness to the warmth of their relationship as husband and wife. His letters seem to have the predominant function of closing the gap, represented by geographical distance, by keeping in touch with a beloved wife. This is reflected in the use of address terms and the language of intimacy mostly used in the closures of the letters. We can say that the language employed in writing these letters reflects the growing informality in family relations in the early modern period observed by Stone (1977) and Burke (2000). While in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries relations between spouses in rich families were often fairly remote, in a considerable number of cases, some degree of affection, or at least a good working partnership developed after the marriage. This seems to be the case of Nathaniel and Jane Bacon whose marriage was obviously a happy one as far as we can see from the letters the husband wrote when he or she were absent from home. In these letters Lady Jane emerges as a loved and respected wife and their epistolary relation as based less on authority and more on affection and practical cooperation.

The letters by the two sons contained in the collection tend to have a practical purpose, in addition to exchanging information, and show that formality and distance were still regulating mother/sons relations. The letters by Lady Jane's eldest son Sir Frederick Cornwallis, the only child of Lady Jane and her first husband, begin once he had moved into the court circle. While his mother was busy looking for a suitable match for him (the collection includes letters by her friends at court involved in the matter), he secretly married without his mother's knowledge or consent. In the first letter in the collection he addresses her as 'Madam' and concludes with the very respectful phrase 'So humbly asking your blessing, I am, with the truth of my heart, Your Ladyship's not less dutiful than obliged humble son'. In the following letters he asks for the forgiveness of his indignant mother and addresses her as 'My Dear Mother'. The letters are likewise concluded by very respectful phrases such as 'And now, dear mother, hoping and praying for that happy hour, I rest, and ever shall, Your most obedient son' or 'Your most obedient son till death'. In later letters, after the reconciliation sponsored by the King and Queen, the tone is slightly less formal though it tends to remain apologetic and there is also space for communicating news. Letters written from the Hague contain information about his and his wife's stay in the Hague and finish with phrases such as 'Your most (affectionately)

obedient son'; they may even contain reference to humiliating⁷ gestures as in the letter written before leaving:

[4] My warning is so short that I cannot have time *to come kiss your hands myself*, for I knew not of it until within this hour, and we must go away upon Wednesday. Thus with the presentments of mine and my wife's humble duty and respects to your Ladyship, who desires to be excused for not writing, I rest... (Letter 180, 1631, in Moody 2003, 220-221)

On the whole, the numerous letters by Lady Jane's eldest son use the humiliating discourse of patronage seeking as he was dependent upon financial help from his mother, though they occasionally show his affectionate feelings towards her. Their relationship was thus unequal, the maternal role being characterised by authority and financial power, and Lady Jane's identity as constructed in her son's letters shows traces of the distance still regulating the interpersonal parent/child relation in early modern England.

The letters by Frederick's wife Elizabeth show that her relationship to her mother-in-law became increasingly less formal: her addresses to Lady Jane shift from 'Madam' to 'Dear Madam' to 'Dear Mother', while the closure remains rather respectful 'Your Ladyship's humble and affectionate daughter / Your Ladyship's most affectionate daughter to command'. She often uses a pleading tone as in the following letter: 'Madam, I humbly thank you for your good news of my husband and his bairns, and for your love and favour to us all, which I beseech God to reward you for us all with his saving grace' (Letter 216, 1635/36, Moody 2003, 246-247).

She usually writes with a specific purpose, asking for help about financial problems or asking for news of her children left with Lady Jane in the rural tranquillity of the family estate while the young couple were involved in court life.⁸ Expressions such as 'poor sweet babs' (Letter 202, 1634, Moody 2003, 257-259) to whom she sends her love or 'I should be very glad to see prattling Fred' (Letter 228, 1639, Moody 2003, 257-259) show that the young woman was unhappily separated from her family and came increasingly to rely on Lady Jane. These letters mostly contain information about the health of family members and reference to the state of some family business (mostly money troubles):

[5] Madam, here is your order which I wish may be useful to you, for were it in my power to make it so I am sure it should. Tonight, going up the back stairs I met Mr Lucas coming down, so I took him aside and delivered him your Ladyship's message for the half, which I told him I was to have sent to him the next day had I not so luckily met him. But truly I found that he was not satisfied, for he grumbles a little and said that he thought my lady would not be pleased with that, for my Lord had already done his part all but sealing. I told him again that you said you knew he would not mistrust your payment, and he said no, and I said if he did he had the patent in his hands. (Letter 217, 1636, in Moody 2003, 247-248)

She sometimes reports gossip from the court. In doing this Elizabeth Cornwallis uses the informal tone which seems increasingly to characterise her epistolary relationship with her mother-in-law. Her writing and spelling are unstable (Moody 2003, 27); however, her use of colloquial words (for instance in letter 216, 1636) to ask her mother-in-law to act as a substitute mother to her children indicates the trust and confidence the young woman had in her mother-in-law.

[6] Pray Madam, be pleased to bless and bus the babs for me.⁹ Sir Thomas Stafford presents his service: he is piteously in love, and sometimes he's in hope and sometimes in despair, and what will be his end I know not. (Letter 216, 1636, in Moody 2003, 246-247)

Though Elizabeth's letters are primarily concerned with her isolated situation at court and her troubles over money mostly due to her free-spending husband, they also show that she was linked by an increasingly warm relationship to her mother-in-law, whose identity she constructs as that of a trusted and affectionate motherly figure.

Other letters written by women include requests for help by relatives (such as for instance Mary Cornwallis, Countess of Bath, her sister-in-law), or letters from close friends, particularly Lucy, Countess of Bedford, who seems to consider Lady Jane as her main confidante. Lucy, Countess of Bedford, was the favourite lady-in-waiting to Queen Ann and the dominant figure in the circle of female courtiers. In spite of the formality of the address – 'Dear Cornwallis' or 'Dear Madam' – there is in her letters an intimacy and a willingness to share particular anxieties which indicate a relationship based on equal status and reciprocity. See, for instance, the closure to letter 72 (1624) 'For all your kindnesses I can but love you, which I do and ever shall heartily while there is breath in "Your most affectionate and faithful friend"', or a letter in which she offers comfort to her friend:

[7] It is one of my misfortunes, and such a one that I assure you I am very sensible of, to be thus far from you in a time wherein I perceive your love would have made me that to you which I as affectionately desire to be as to have myself the comfort of a friend by me, when any oppression lies heavy on my heart, to whom I might trust my cares, and be sure they should not only be safely lodged, but beget a desire to ease them as far as were possible, or at least advise how to make them lightest... But, for all that, you must not loose courage nor let your kind sensibleness, which is the self-wordingest thing, make you so unkind to yourself and yours as to yield up the strength of your resisting reason, and consent to sink under that melancholy... (Letter 43, 1619, in Moody 2003, 94-96)

The letters by another close friend and cousin Dorothy Lady Randolph are slightly more formal as she addresses Lady Jane as 'My Most Honoured

Lady' and concludes with expressions such as 'Your most (loving,) faithful, and humble servant'. They mostly report the state of marriage negotiations and other family affairs and contain the usual information as to the health of family and friends. The collection contains a few letters by other women friends and a substantial number of letters from Lady Jane's sister-in-law, Anna Lady Meautys. She addresses Lady Jane as '(Most) Dear sister' and closes her letters with expressions such as 'Your most affectionate and truly sister ever to serve you/to be commanded', or 'Your most assured in all true affection' which indicate how she hedged the formal formulae by introducing words that show a more intimate relationship. Her letters usually only report the state of family affairs and not infrequently ask for financial help. In so doing she uses humiliating discourse strategies; for instance she concludes a letter where she asks Lady Jane to intercede on her behalf by writing [8] or another [9] where she reports the request by her husband, Lady Jane's brother:

[8] And so, beseeching you to be an assistance to me in this business, I shall, now and ever, continue Your most affectionate and truly loving sister to be commanded... (Letter 192, 1632, in Moody 2003, 227-228)

[9] Mr Meautys saying often unto me 'Sweet heart, if my sister Bacon fails me I do not know what will become of me and mine', with the tears staring in his eyes. Oh sister! He has had many crosses of late by unjust dealing taking away that which is due unto him. This is his reward for his long service and great pains taken for these unworthy people. (Letter 210, 1635, in Moody 2003, 241-242)

She often pleads her case in humiliating terms or expresses appreciation for help received in similar terms:

[10] I have formerly written unto you of the receipt both of your letters and monies which you was pleased to send us, the sum a hundred pounds that which I will acknowledge myself as ever your most engaged. ... Thus with the recommendation of my unfained affections both to you and all yours, and my blessing to my Hercules, I kiss your hands and rest

Your most truly and ever loving sister to be commanded. (Letter 222, 1636, in Moody 2003, 252-253)

The letters from Lady Jane's daughter-in-law and sister-in-law, the most numerous written by in-laws in the collection, usually beg for favours and both report and ask for health information, particularly of children left with Lady Jane. It seems that it was women that were left to cope with moneylenders and ask for financial help, which they generously received from Lady Jane, who was consequently perceived as a benefactress by the two women. The identity constructed in such letters varies from that of the affectionate family member to that of the generous patron when asking for financial help. In

letters from male correspondents we mostly read of public news in addition to family business and health. For instance in letters from her cousin, Thomas Meautys,¹⁰ who addresses her quite formally as 'My Most excellent Good/ Ever Best Lady and Cousin', Lady Jane receives detailed news from London about domestic political affairs and events abroad.

In letters from Lady Jane's brother, Sir Thomas Meautys, a career soldier stationed mainly in the Low Countries in the pay of the Prince of Orange, Lady Jane receives news about public events abroad. But the content of his letters, like those of his wife's, is mostly related to family affairs as he often writes to ask for financial help or inquire about the health of his child left with Lady Jane; however the informal tone of his letters shows that he was an affectionate brother. This, for instance, is seen in the letter of condolences written after the death of Lady Jane's husband or in sections of letters keeping her informed about family health:

[11] I am very sorry to understand by your servant that you are not in good health, and the more because I hear that it is an ague that travails you at present. . . . My poor wife I am sure is much distressed for that she has not heard from me never since my coming from her, neither do I know how to send unto her, poor creature! to comfort her. I pray remember my love to my brother Bacon and to all your little ones; and, I pray, entertain the true love of Your ever affectionate brother and servant. (Letter 89, 1625, in Moody 2003, 136-137)

Letters from male friends are less numerous in the collection and, on the whole, show that Lady Jane was addressed with deference. Her brother-in-law, Sir Edmund Bacon, addresses her as 'sister' and closes his letters formally with phrases such as 'Your (very) loving brother, ready to do you service'. The collection includes a few letters from him dealing with family affairs. It also includes a few letters by a friend, Sir Ambrose Randolph, who held important public positions (ambassador, master and comptroller of the posts to the Queen and chamberlain of the Exchequer) and was then able to communicate news to Lady Jane. He formally addresses her as 'Most Honoured Lady' and concludes with phrases such as 'Your Ladyship's most affectionate kinsman to serve you and yours'. The letters by Sir Ambrose's wife, Dorothy, are equally formal as she addresses Lady Jane as 'My most honoured Lady' and concludes with phrases such as 'Your Ladyship's most faithful friend and humble servant'. However, they are more colloquial as, in addition to the usual health information, they report with much detail marriage negotiations in businesslike terms and other wifely topics such as, for instance, the search for a good cook.

[12] I am now, thank God, so well rid of my pain that I am able to give you an account at large of all the business you write about. . . . I went since to visit Mrs Dickson, and the discourse fell upon the old business; but she made answer there was no good to be done for the two elder daughters. . . . I spoke with Mr Chitting about Sir Thomas

Barrington's niece; he seems to think she is worth seven thousand pounds, but he will write to you the particulars. (Letter 142, 1629, in Moody 2003, 191-192)

On the whole, letters by male relatives and friends tend to be more formal and to construct Lady Jane's epistolary identity as that of an authoritative member of their social network, unless they are written with the aim of asking for financial help, in which case they tend to use the humiliating discourse of patronage seeking that expresses distance and unequal social status.

The collection also includes one letter by King Charles I (Letter 163, 1631, Moody 2003, 208) and two letters by Queen Henrietta Maria (Letters 164, 165, 1631, Moody 2003, 208-209). They wrote to effect a reconciliation between Lady Jane and her son Frederick Cornwallis. Frederick's service to King Charles encouraged the monarch to support his choice of a maid of honour to the queen. The letters indicate not only that the royal couple showed a lively interest in the union, but also that Lady Jane was held in high regard at court. The salutation shows formality and respect 'To Our Trusty and [Right] Well Beloved Lady Bacon' and the tone of the letter is appeasing as the sender shows consideration for Lady Jane's position. For instance, in her first letter, the queen tries to persuade the indignant mother by

[13] assuring yourself that the gracious intentions which we carry towards our servant and his wife shall extend themselves in so large a measure, both towards him and towards you (if you will make use of them), as at last your own good nature will acknowledge that your son could not have taken a better course, either for his own advancement or for your satisfaction, than that wherein he is for the present. (Letter 164, 1631, in Moody 2003, 208-209)

In the second letter, following the reconciliation, the queen indicates her pleasure at Lady Jane's finally receiving 'again your son into your favour' (letter 165, 1631) and thanks her for 'the respect that you have showed to our request' (letter 165, 1631). Royal letters construct Lady Jane's identity as that of a greatly respected member of the court circle.

5. *Conclusion*

In the early modern period personal letters are multifunctional documents. The activity of letter writing was necessary for the efficient conduct of routine business, including the management of family business, but not all letters have just a practical purpose and some also express love and friendship. Most letters addressed to Lady Jane are written in the cause of seeking her domestic patronage: they contain appeals asking for help of various kinds and acknowledge that help when received by expressing thanks. But they also express sentiments of proximity and companionship. So the analysis of this collection allows us to explore how the addressee's epistolary identity is constructed through the

range of ways in which relatives and acquaintances approach her through both the humiliating discourse of patronage seeking and that of intimacy and affection within the epistolary world bonding the two correspondents to one another. Letter writers have multiple roles depending on both their social relationship and situation. They accordingly construct the receiver's identity as a function of their social relationship and the message of the letter. The use of linguistic resources, particularly in the openings and closures of the letters, shows the varying degrees of formality and intimacy enjoyed by Lady Jane throughout her life among her friends and family and illustrate how her epistolary identity, though multifaceted, is on the whole that of a respected and authoritative woman. As Moody writes 'it is certain that she was recognized as a formidable woman as well as kind and generous, and, if anything, sometimes to be feared' (2003, 39). Lady Jane emerges as the authoritative figure in the family network, the giver of favours to correspondents inferior in status and resources, but also as an affectionate and generous mother and grandmother.

The analysis also reveals some gender differences. Letters written by both men and women contain information about health as it was common practice for seventeenth-century correspondents to discourse continually about health matters, their own as well as those of their friends and family. The function of health communication and advice between intimates, however, has less to do with the transmission and exchange of information, and more to do with demonstrating empathy and understanding. As for the transmission of real information, however, there is a difference: letters written by women tend to focus on family events and gossip, while those written by men contain also political news, both domestic and foreign. As to the construction of the epistolary identity of Lady Jane there are no evident gender differences. To sum up, the analysis shows that her identity is a function of the familiar/social relationship bonding her to her correspondents, but also depends in no small proportion on the practical aim of the message, which also influences the rhetorical choices of letter writers.

¹ On letter writing from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern period see Constable 1976, Fitzmaurice 2002, Schneider 2005, Brant 2006, Nevalainen and Tanskanen 2007, Petrucci 2008, Cottone and Chiavetta 2010, Dossena and Del Lungo Camiciotti, eds, 2012; on English vernacular letters see Davis 1967, 1971-1976, Taylor 1980, Sanchez Roura 2001, Richardson 2001. On women's letter writing see Classen 1988, Cherevatuk and Wiethaus 1993, Doglio 1993, Richardson 1997, Zarri 1999, Watt 2004, Daybell 2001, Daybell 2006, Couchman and Crabb 2005.

² According to Palander-Collin (2010) the term 'personal' is to be preferred to the dichotomous pair 'private/public' because early modern English letters typically circulated in a correspondence network containing both public and personal and family news, and might be read aloud in social gatherings. Also according to Brant (2006), the categories of 'personal' and 'social' are much more useful than the categories of 'private' and 'public' with reference to

early modern correspondence as they have the advantage of suggesting a subset relationship: personal is to social as particular to general (Brant 2006, 5). On the dichotomous pair public/private in communication see Brownlees, Del Lungo and Denton, eds, 2010.

³ In this context, it is perhaps worth mentioning the correspondence of Margaret Cavendish (1623-1673), Duchess of Newcastle upon Tyne, whose *Sociable Letters* (Fitzmaurice 2004) offer a remarkable depiction of seventeenth-century social life.

⁴ On the importance of personal letters as historical research data see Nurmi *et al.*, eds, 2009, on their relevance to historical sociolinguistic study see Nevalainen and Tanskanen, eds, 2007.

⁵ The allocation of authority from others and gender related patterns of interaction influence and illuminate family interaction still today, though power seems to be inseparable from connection (Tannen 2003).

⁶ Italics here and in following letters added by the author of the present article.

⁷ Brown and Levinson (1987) call the 'humiliative mode' of politeness the practise of praising the other and depreciating the self and its possession which today is perceived as servile, but which was common in the European regime of civility when hierarchy and an asymmetrical mode of address regulated social relations. On the social norms regulating social hierarchy in early modern England see Bryson 1998, Burke 2000, Postles 2005.

⁸ In the early modern period emotional ties between husbands and wives tended to be weakened by the high rate of mortality and remarriage, while the parent/child relationship, in addition to the high mortality rate, was also affected by the upper-class English practice of sending children away from home either to school or to live with a kin member. This fostered a pattern of extreme deference to parents in the home, which was in full conformity with behaviour norms of society at large (Stone 1977, 172).

⁹ In this letter Elizabeth asks her mother-in-law to bless and box, that is to punish, her babies for her.

¹⁰ Two correspondents are called Thomas Meautys, both close to Lady Jane. A cousin to Lady Jane, a high-ranking civil servant, and Lady Jane's brother Sir Thomas Meautys, a career soldier fighting the war of the Palatinate with a company of English volunteers.

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