

Sundry Letters, Worldly Goods: The Lisle Letters and Renaissance Studies

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- 36 For a different attempt to reconcile “individual” and “corporatist” needs or desires see Nederman, “Knowledge, Consent, and Political Representation,” esp. 30–33.
- 37 Gewirth, *Marsilius*, 2:439.
- 38 It is significant here that Marsilius makes no reference to sin as a cause of evil desires. Despite his frequent reliance on Augustinian doctrines to emphasize that the goal of human societies is to preserve “civil happiness” or peace (e.g., 1.1.7, 1.19.2), and despite one reference to original sin (1.6.2), Marsilius’s view of human nature is more Aristotelian than Augustinian. His understanding of desire is fundamentally physico-biological, not theological (see Gewirth, 1:56–63).
- 39 Kretzmann, *Cambridge History*, 596, 611–12.
- 40 John Randall, in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. Ernst Cassirer et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 264.
- 41 John of Jandun, cited in Gewirth, *Marsilius*, 2:438 n. 17.
- 42 E. Troilo, “L’Averroismo di Marsilio da Padova,” in *Marsilio da Padova: Studi raccolti nel VI centenario della morte*, ed. A. Checchini and N. Bobbio (Padua, 1942), 64–69; B. Nardi, “La filosofia del medio evo nel pensiero di Giovanni Gentile,” *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana* 26 (1947): 224; and Nardi, *Sigieri di Brabante nel pensiero del rinascimento italiano* (Rome: Edizioni Italiane, 1945), 46–47. Gewirth, 2:435–37, describes some of the corporate aspects of Marsilius’s republicanism, noting how he differs from the Averroists Siger and John of Jandun in his more “practical, voluntarist” application of the doctrine of the unity of the will to the political world.
- 43 It should be noted that Marsilius may be using “soul” here in the Aristotelian sense, not the Christian sense known to canon and civil lawyers. For Aristotle, the soul was the form of the body, and hence could logically predate the body’s actual existence (*De Anima* 2:2; Gewirth, *Marsilius*, 1:100).
- 44 The mutuality, interdependence, and specialization of labor among parts that the body analogy suggests are elegantly illustrated and developed in one translator’s gloss on the *Defensor*. All of the parts of the *città*, according to a Florentine translation of 1363, benefit from each part’s action and exercise of its function: “As the eye sees for the ears . . . and also for the foot and for the whole body, and the ear hears for the eye, for the foot and for the whole body . . . and similarly with the other members” [siccome l’occhio vede per l’orecchie . . . e altresì per lo pié e per tutto ’l corpo, e l’orecchie . . . ode per l’occhio, per lo pié e per tutto il corpo . . . e così delli altri membri] (*Defensor Pacis nella traduzione in volgare fiorentino del 1363*, ed. C. Pincin [Turin: Fondazione Luigi Einaudi, 1966], 1.2.3, p. 17). See also 1.5.1, p. 24, of this translation.

To write is to produce a mark that will constitute a kind of machine that is in turn productive, that my future disappearance in principle will not prevent from functioning and from yielding, and yielding itself to, reading and writing.

—Derrida, “Signature Event Context”

Professors in fields like English are putting aside their ponderings of prosody in Tennyson and their ruminations on post-structuralism and deconstruction to take up subjects like race relations, biotechnology, sexual equality and the future of higher education. . . . Even liberal academicians see . . . a rejection of what they describe as conditions of academic life in the 1980s—the high degree of specialization, the insider jargon and the fascination with theoretical approaches like deconstruction.

. . . “When I was coming up, it was the cool thing to be a theorist,” said . . . a 35-year-old assistant professor of English.

—*New York Times*, 9 August 1994

Perhaps no texts of the sixteenth century record more graphically the circulation of goods in early modern England than the Lisle correspondence. The letters are a tissue of things—rings and chains of gold, frontlets, partlets, lettuce bonnets and hose, goshawks, sakers, mastiffs and little spaniels, wine, herring, coats and kirtles, velvet caps and gowns, shoes and slippers, knives, feathers, pots, parakeets, smocks and needlecases, dottrels and linnets, fat quails and little melons, crimson damask, tawny damask and fine holland, beds and bolsters, hangings and coverlets, holy water from Avignon, a live seal,

the tip of a unicorn's horn.¹ They testify to the myriad ways in which objects circulated in early modern Europe—in trade within and among emerging nation-states, but also as wage payment, love tokens, charms, gifts and bribes, domestic necessities, status markers, exotic tokens, gastronomic delicacies, the ritual surround of birth, marriage, and death. They tell us a great deal about a certain world of goods, their quantity and function in households and polities, notions of ownership, the interrelationship of material culture and social relations.²

The Lisle letters also offer an unparalleled account of a moment crucial to sixteenth-century English political history, the breach with Rome, the so-called Cromwellian revolution in government, the dissolution of the monasteries, the downfall of Cardinal Pole, and finally, of Thomas Cromwell himself.³ We apparently owe the preservation of the letters to the fact that Arthur Plantagenet, Lord Lisle, an illegitimate son of Edward IV and thus cousin to Pole, was implicated in the conflict surrounding the cardinal, imprisoned in the Tower, and his papers impounded. The letters, some three thousand in number, record the public and domestic life of Lisle and his second wife, Honor Grenville, widow of Sir John Basset of Devonshire, during the seven years from 1533–40 they spent living in Calais, governing that busy English port town on behalf of Henry VIII. The Lisles' epistolary companions are many—the king, Cromwell, Archbishop Cranmer, Sir Thomas Elyot, Thomas Culpepper, Sir William Fitzwilliam, earl of Southampton, Thomas Howard, earl of Surrey, Honor Lisle's Basset children and stepchildren, Lisle's children by his first wife, patrons, clients, Calais functionaries, French neighbors, women friends of Lady Lisle's, tutors and churchmen, stewards and agents, most notably John Hussee, "my Lord Lisle's man" in London.⁴ Political and social historians have long used the letters piecemeal, but in literary studies they have been largely ignored.⁵

In Muriel St. Clare Byrne's scrupulous six-volume edition, the letters are presented chronologically; in her one-volume abridged edition, they are divided into categories: everyday life; politics and religion; educating, placing, and marrying the children; property and law; the court; Calais. The letters can, of course, also be classified according to epistolary genres: descriptive, laudatory, hortatory, consolatory, etc. But a more powerful link than chronology, or any narrative, be it of religion, politics, law, property, or children, or any genre, be it deliberative, suasive or judicial, are the innumerable, miscellaneous objects that make their rounds among the correspondents and their various dependents. Objects divide up the world of the letters—to name them is to classify, to establish familiar possession, to produce property. To

"read" the Lisle letters is to begin to perceive a syntax of the object and to reflect upon subject/object relations in early modern Europe.

Renaissance studies is stocked with essays, articles, and books about goods and their circulation—studies of early commodity culture, of patronage and clientage, of portraits and miniatures, maps, books, tobacco and spices, clothing and jewelry, mostly of a vaguely materialist or Foucauldian sort, in which no intricacy or uncertainty obscures what Derrida describes, in his reading of Nietzsche's umbrella, as the seemingly flat intelligibility of objects.⁶ Recent work in the Renaissance addresses the early modern encounter with material culture *historically*; typically such work begins by making the obligatory antifoundationalist moves but, having disclaimed history as fact and ground, goes on to dispense summarily with the object. Things are fully readable, mere idioms for expressing the more serious allegory about gender, colonialism, or the nation-state toward which the critic hastens.⁷ Objects in the Lisle letters invite such readings, and in fact seem—because of the relative generic distance of the correspondence from literariness and their role as historical witness or testimony—to demand to be read in terms of exchange with all its ideological freight—anthropological, materialist, feminist. But I want to argue that prevailing hermeneutic practices of reading in Renaissance studies occlude the textuality of the Lisle letters as surely as the editorial procedures of categorization and chronology or their scattered deployment by empirically minded historians. Instead of considering the letters historically, or in terms of ideologies of exchange or circulation, I want perversely *to look into* the object and thereby to consider quite a different theoretical problem, the philosophical and linguistic problem of the object as it is enacted in the letters and in the complex of meanings the word *letter* summons with its often cited pun on *l'être*, or being.

What is an object? From the Latin *objecta*, a plural, things objected, charges, accusations, but since the fourteenth century, from the scholastic usage of the Latin *objectum*, something thrown before or presented to the mind or thought; an object is something put in the way so as to interrupt or obstruct, an obstacle; something placed before the eyes, an individual thing seen or perceived, a material thing; something which on being seen excites a particular emotion; that to which action, thought, or feeling is directed, the thing or person to which something is done, or upon or about which something acts or operates; a thing or being of which one thinks or has cognition, as correlative, so the definition goes, to the thinking or knowing *subject*; a substantive word, phrase or clause, immediately dependent on, or "governed by" a verb. In the letters, objects function in all these senses and more. Occasion

ally, they appear simply as a letter's pretext: the Lises' agent in London, John Hussec, for example, often reports on the status of orders for goods, usually sartorial, on his difficulties obtaining credit, and on his need for cash payment to particular London tradesmen; or in a letter dated 26 March 1535, an English neighbor of Lisle's property at Umberleigh recounts the tale of a poached deer and in so doing reveals the significance of game to the domestic economy of an early-sixteenth-century neighborhood.

But more frequently, objects enter the letters obliquely, as the complimentary close—commodity versions of our “looking forward to hearing from you” or “sincerely yours,” designed to ensure the correspondent's goodwill, continued service or new favors. For all the discussion of the constitution of a government bureaucracy under Cromwell, the Lisle letters and their account of the circulation of objects witness a polity constituted along kinship rather than bureaucratic lines, in which preferment and property depend on cognate and affinal relations, dependents, and the coded gift-exchanges those relations entail. Louis Montrose defines this system of prestation as “a tacitly coercive and vitally interested process predicated on the fiction that it is free and disinterested.”⁸ For Montrose, the operative force of “fiction” seems to be to describe social relations among agents as givers and receivers engaged in a conscious charade.

Leaving aside at least for now the fact that the Lisle letters are sometimes shamelessly frank about the purposes of gift giving, I wish to argue that the fiction that a gift was “free and disinterested” is produced and maintained in the letters not by agency or some intentional performance, but through linguistic and epistolary structures. The early letters, for example, are concerned at length with an ongoing dispute between a local Calais family, the Whethills, and Lord Lisle, over the preferment of a Whethill son for a “room” or position as “spear,” a member of the retinue. As the words *room* and *spear* indicate, such offices are reified, made into things that can be handed out or assigned, struggled over and won. Hussee is continually petitioning Lisle's nephew the king and Cromwell on Lisle's behalf, or soliciting those close to the secretary (Cromwell) about the dispute. At the end of a lengthy letter reporting Cromwell's displeasure at hearing that Lord Lisle has reputedly threatened to disobey the king's command to govern Calais, to give up his “room and wait upon the King in England” should Whethill have a post, Hussee shifts his epistolary ground:

Also I showed Mr. Secretary that you would send him a mewed hawk that should be special good, and he thanked your lordship for

that, with all others. Further he would fain have a little spaniel . . .
if your lordship may get any proper one I would you did send him.
(2:260)

Three days later, at the end of an even longer account of Lisle's business and interests at court, Hussee closes, “I would God there might be some pretty dog found for Mr. Secretary, for it would be highly esteemed, as God knoweth, who preserve your lordship with my lady to your most humble heart's desire” (2:260a). Interjected—that is, thrown in the way of, obstructing as an objection, the formulaic close to Hussee's letter in which he wishes his master and mistress good fortune—is the pretty dog. The antecedent of the relative pronoun *who* is certainly God, but the syntax allows for an uncertainty that shifts the meaning of the closing formula to betray how the circulation of gifts operated for an early-sixteenth-century elite. Both “Mr. Secretary” and the “pretty dog” displace God, become plausible subjects of the verb *preserve*, become, that is, Lord and Lady Lisle's preservers, a slippage in anaphoric reference that produces equivalences not only between God and Cromwell but among God, Cromwell, and the “pretty dog” itself.

At moments of particular concern, difficulty, or crisis in the Lises' negotiations for preferment and property, objects occupy another epistolary space—not the valedictory but virtually the salutation—as in the interchange St. Clare Byrne calls “a contribution of quails.” Sir John Russell writes a brief note to Lord Lisle that initiates the sequence: “Right honourable and my singular good lord, I heartily commend me unto you. My lord, the King commanded me to write to you for some fat quails, for the Queen is very desirous to eat some. . . . send some with as much speed as may be possibly; but they must be very fat” (4:878). This sequence of letters recounts the Lises' efforts to place their daughters in the queen's service and witnesses the political economy of the gift on which the early modern period relied.

Patricia Fumerton argues that child exchange in the sixteenth century, particularly during Elizabeth's reign, epitomizes gift giving and the circulation of gifts. Children, she claims after Ariès, were trivial, expendable, “essentially inhuman” (36). Her argument proceeds first by rehearsing Marcel Mauss's anthropological model of Kula gift giving and then proceeds to “historical” examples from Elizabeth's reign to demonstrate that child giving was similarly “generous” and “free”; the Lisle letters belie both claims: the letters represent both Lord and Lady Lisle as not only emotionally attached to their children but working continually not to give them away so much as scrambling to *place* them. Fumerton supports her claim that children were

“precious toys” and child giving was “*ornamental*” (her italics) by citing Sir Humphrey Radcliffe’s gift of his child to Elizabeth on New Year’s Day, 1561; he “brought forward his daughter Mary and laughingly presented her as a New Year’s gift. Elizabeth, being in high good humour, replied graciously that she would take Mary to be one of her Maids of Honour.” From this piece of “evidence,” Fumerton concludes, “Radcliffe’s child was thus added to the disjointed pile of personalized and inventive New Year’s gifts given to Elizabeth.” But this passage cannot be adduced merely as evidence; it needs to be *read*. Radcliffe seems to have discovered a novel way of placing his child and fulfilling familial ambitions precisely by making of her a gift. He manages to win Elizabeth’s favor by this unconventional means, its heterodoxy marked by the adverb *laughingly*, and by the shrewd observation that Radcliffe “brings forward” his daughter when he sees the queen “in high good humour.”

In Russell’s letter to the Lises, their daughters’ advancement depends on a bizarre quid pro quo in which the queen’s desire for quail and Russell’s admonitions that they “be very fat, or else they are not worth thanks,” defer, but ultimately ensure, the placement of one of the girls in the queen’s service. A letter from Hussee to Lady Lisle dated 17 July 1537 testifies to what might be termed a Henrician gift grammar:

Madam, upon Thursday last the Queen being at dinner, my Lady Rutland and my Lady Sussex being waiters on her Grace, her Grace chanced, eating of the quails, to common of your ladyship and of your daughters; so that such communication was uttered by the said ij ladies that her Grace made grant to have one of your daughters; and the matter is thus concluded that your ladyship shall send them both over, for her Grace will first see them and know their manners, fashions and conditions, and take which of them shall like her Grace best; and they must be sent over about vj weeks hence, and your ladyship shall not need to do much cost on them till time you know which of them her Grace will have. (4:887)

The quails interrupt the syntax; they are objects interjected in the predicate, but that linguistic interference, that deferral of another object (“to common of your ladyship and of your daughters”) becomes not an obstacle but the very vehicle of preferment. Quails and daughters—the queen will have both. The daughters are rendered desirable to the queen through a displacement of Anne’s desire for quail. The queen “commons of” and eventually consumes them; the word *common* indicates a complex of meanings that demonstrates

how persons become objects of circulation in the letters. *Common* meant to belong to more than one, to be public, to unite one’s interests with those of others, and in its verbal form, as in this passage, not only to tell or report, but as a transitive, to impart or share—one may common gifts, persons, things; and finally, the verb *common* meant to have intercourse in all the many senses that word now has, conversational and sexual.

Though commoning of the Lises’ daughters and a letter like Sir Francis Bryan’s to Lord Lisle saying that he knows “ye have sufficient of courtezans to furnish and accomplish my desires” (1:66a) might suggest that such equivalences between persons and things are gender specific—that is, established between women and goods, and might seem therefore to foster a feminist analysis of the traffic-in-women sort—in fact the letters are *indifferent*. Men and male children are as frequently rendered objects of exchange. Thomas Warley writes to Lady Lisle, “[P]leaseth it your ladyship to understand that here is a priest . . . these *properties* [my italics] he hath: he writes a very fair secretary hand and text hand and Roman, and singeth surely, and playeth very cunningly on the organs; and he is very cunning in drawing of knots in gardens, and well seen in graffing and keeping of cocomers and other yerbes” (2:245). Persons are objects that have enumerated properties and that are procured like the articles of clothing, domestic houseware, etc. Hussee is continually searching out, ordering, and sending to Calais. Though sex, status, degree, and age may in part account for the objectification of persons, neither rank nor age nor sex necessarily delivers one from object status. All sorts of persons—men and women, young and old, high and low—are objects negotiable and grammatical: they are procured, sent, commoned, presented, taken, had.

Objects, then, are called upon to witness what must be concealed, what cannot be spoken, what cannot be seen, and the letters employ various linguistic structures to distance objects from their meaning as bribes; they produce textual effects that make of the bribe a hermeneutic problem, a problem of reading. The *OED* dates the first usage of the word *bribe* in our sense of a reward given to induce someone to act in the interest of the giver to 1535, that is, at the very moment of the Lisle correspondence, at the moment in which a bureaucratic notion of public office begins to displace an aristocratic code of obligation and dependence.¹⁰ In the Lisle letters this syntax of exchange and substitution produces the gift as indistinguishable from the bribe in its instrumentality. A hogshhead of wine, a goshawk, a little spaniel, a monkey, a gold ring; objects mask the bribe, the special favor, the fear of punishment. But at the same time, the naming of objects calls out or witnesses what is concealed, what cannot be acknowledged.

In a letter dated 18 May 1535, to Lady Lisle, for example, objects witness a certain Lady Ryngeley's fear of her husband's infidelity, a fear that cannot be directly expressed but which is witnessed in the circulation of objects and in relations of metonymic equivalence set up between objects and persons.

Madam, please it to you to be advertised that I received your bedes of coral with a heart of gold, which was to me a great comfort, I knowing that you loved them so well, for you were wont to wear them about your arm. And madam, by him that I love best, and your ladyship next, I send you your said token again; which bringer of your said token I heartily pray your ladyship to cherish and make much of now in my absence, called Master Marshal by name. (2:390)

Lady Ryngeley writes to thank Honor Lisle for sending "your bedes of coral with a heart of gold," which she declares are "a great comfort, I knowing that you loved them so well." But in the same letter we learn that Lady Ryngeley returns the beads, which were evidently not a gift but a token of comfort, of Lady Lisle's heart that, in the form of the necklace "goes out to" her friend Lady Ryngeley, fearful of her husband's faithlessness. That lady returns the beads via her husband, "which bringer of your said token I heartily pray your ladyship to cherish and make much of now in my absence." The word *token* confounds the distinction between object and word; a token is defined in the *OED* as a mark or sign, evidence, a trace or vestige, a signal, a word or material object employed to authenticate a person or message, something given as an expression of affection or as a memorial, or to signify—we say betoken—a right or privilege. In Elizabethan England, a *token* could be issued by a private person or by tradesmen short of small coin as a medium of exchange. Lady Ryngeley returns Lady Lisle's token of friendship by way of the husband whom she describes as "him that I love best." This equivocal exchange generates in turn an entreaty secured by a gift from Lady Ryngeley to Lady Lisle that, unlike the necklace, is not returned.

And I put you, Madam, in trust to see that my Lady Banester have not all the love away, I being not present there; wherefore I pray you, madam, to be a mean in it, and that I be not all forgotten in Calais. Madam, I have sent your ladyship a ring of gold, with a flat stone, a diamond. (2:390)

The absent Lady Ryngeley is made present in Calais through the gift of a ring, token of love and of marriage, but for all its emotional freight, also a bribe. Ornament, gift, bribe, love token, matrimonial sign: the object—the ring—produces meaning through its embeddedness in social relations. This epistolary performance traces not only Lady Ryngeley's friendship with Honor Lisle, her deferential status vis-à-vis that lady, her anxiety about her marriage and about Lady Banester, but a whole host of other forms of social relations among women, between households, between mistress and servant, etc. The letter epitomizes the circulation of objects in the letters: exchange without issue or end, endless circulation.

But this character of the object, its motion, its power both to witness and to conceal, is nowhere more forcefully demonstrated than in the series of letters exchanged during the months of Honor Lisle's pregnancy. Though the Lisles' both had children from former marriages, they never had children of their own. Honor Grenville was still in her early forties when she married Lisle and hoped to bear a male heir. The earliest mention in the letters of this much-desired event is a note from Hussee to Lord Lisle dated 27 November 1536: "I pray God send her ladyship a good and fortunate hour, and therewith a son, if it be his pleasure, that that name survive and spring anew" (3:786). Therewith follows a continual commotion to assemble, borrow, or buy the objects necessary for such a birth: a special bed and rich pane of ermines bordered with cloth of gold and a sheet of lawn to cover the same, i or ij fine-paned sheets and a travers, vj pieces of tapestry, vj pieces of carpet, caps of ermine, nightgowns called waistcoats of white satin or damask edged with ermine, Lucca velvet, silk and gold, a cradle ready trimmed, a cloth of state, pieces of arras, a font from Canterbury. These objects call forth the anticipated event, witness the child hidden in its mother's womb, name what as yet cannot bear the name Plantagenet, give presence to what is as yet absent. But when Honor Lisle "took her chamber" in June, no child arrived; in late August, Hussee writes encouragingly of what turns out to be a pseudocyesis, "Your ladyship is not the first woman of honour that hath overshot or mistaken your time" (4, 893). The Lisles' desired son and heir remains only a longing in the letters, a longing witnessed materially by the innumerable objects that constitute birth in a sixteenth-century aristocratic household.

In his essay "Das Ding" ("The Thing"), Heidegger considers the relation of objects to things.¹¹ What, he asks, is the "thingness" of things? How is a particular object disclosed as this or that thing? How do we come to know it as an object? Not, argues Heidegger, through presence, objects as they are

round us—a chair, a pet, a hammer, etc.—but through language. Things are not simply there; their “thingness” must be summoned, called forth in the act of naming. In naming things, the writer/poet goes beyond the “already there,” the material object as presence. Naming—the letter—is the act through which announcement is made of what things “come into the Open as” [*lich-tung*—opening, clearing in a wood or glade].¹² Naming summons the reader/audience in ways not fully accounted for in the reduction of objects to circulation and exchange. In the act of enunciation a large measure of what we term the historical is constituted; the categories of status and degree, of deference relations in early modern England, for example, are produced through our encounter with the repeated “my lord,” “your lordship,” and “my lady,” “your ladyship,” “my singular good lady” of the letters, and in Hussee’s naming of “Mr. Secretary,” or Lady Ryngceley’s “my singular good Lord Deputy.” The proper name, the place-name, uncertainties in anaphoric reference, forms of address, predication—in short, textual effects—constitute what we term and analyze as history. And the histories the letters effect can, of course, never be fully readable; for example, in letters from Lady Lisle’s son James to his mother and from the Oxford scholar John Bekynsaw to Lady Lisle concerning James’s sleeping arrangements while at the university in Paris, there are traces of what may perhaps be, but then again may not be, sexual practices that adumbrate a chapter in the history of early modern sexuality:

He [the rector of the University of Paris] hath with him [James Bassert] 2 children of great houses, of his age, clean boys and prettily learned, and that boy he send ye word he was his servant is a gentleman’s son, put unto him more for love than to serve him, a clean skinned child. These iij lay in one bed big enough for 4 great men. When I came to the Rector and shewed my grudge, he shewed me both the children he lay withal, and the bed, with so honest reasons why he did it that he satisfied my mind fully. (4:1064)

Limned in these lines with their baffling proliferation of masculine pronouns is a history not only of status—“of great houses,” “gentleman’s son”—and of early-sixteenth-century service, but in what Alan Bray has termed the “common bed shared in the public eye,” a shadowing of the complex relay between male friendship and sodomy in early modern Europe.¹³

The rhetoric of the letter prompts us to attend to the inevitable gap between text and what we term history. Between any scriptural “I” and its his-

torical subject there is always a distance foregrounded by epistolarity, and particularly by the material practices of the sixteenth-century letter, the product of many hands, an intercourse that circulates from hand to hand, thereby foregrounding the signature’s insistent declaration of the nonpresence of the signer.¹⁴ The space of the object and the space of the letter are both marked by absence—the physical absence of correspondents from one another; our distance from the Lisles’ lived history; the silence of the object until it is named and put into circulation. The objects procured—bought, borrowed, given as gifts, in preparation for the birth of the Lisle’s putative “son”—call forth what cannot be seen or known, witness the interiority which is the longed for child-son, the son that will “advance the name of the noble Plantagenet” (3:798a), the son that in early modern England is, in Slavoj Žižek’s resonant phrase, “the sublime object of ideology.”¹⁵

By reading the Lisle letters rhetorically, in terms of how textual effects constitute history, ideology, politics, I wish to address on the one hand, the recent forgetting in Renaissance criticism of poststructuralist critiques of the dream of a transparent, referential, fully gratifying language accessible to interpretation, and on the other, the remembering, or what might be better termed, the return, of the critical repressed of an old positivist historicism. Historical work in Renaissance studies these days is too often only a hermeneutics of ideological suspicion, whether the allegory is about gender, sexuality, colonialism, race, nationhood, or status and degree. For both ideological critique and archival description, history is once again a ground; texts can be fully read, explicated, understood, guaranteed.¹⁶ The troubling uncertainties posed by antidescriptivist and what for want of a better term I have called “poststructuralist” critiques of language and meaning have not so much dropped out of our protocols and practices as they have lost what might be termed “canonical purchase.” Books and essays engaged by rhetoric, by the textual and linguistic economies of the early modern period, continue to be written and published, but seldom read. Seldom read, infrequently bought, underreviewed, rarely assigned; in short, no longer the coin of the realm, no longer the cultural capital of professional Renaissance studies. Students at both the undergraduate and graduate level are only intermittently trained in rhetoric in the widest sense: “reading” of text or image seems no longer pertinent to professional literacy, a feature of the sociology of the profession too frequently ignored. Perhaps the return of neopositivist performances of archival discovery and description is a kind of fin de siècle nostalgia. But perhaps the oppositions produced for public consumption and displayed in my epigraph from the *Times* should give pause—presumed oppositions *between*

prosody, poststructuralism, deconstruction on the one hand, and race, gender, technology, and the production of cultural capital or education on the other.

But the supposed opposition between the political and the rhetorical, figured as “deconstruction” or “poststructuralism” in the article from the *Times*, must not be discounted as merely caricature, a feature of popular cultural representations of the academy. In his recent homage to Bourdieu, John Guillory claims that what he disparagingly refers to as “rhetoricism” is merely the latest form of exclusion from literacy. Though in the professional imaginary, his argument has been for the most part reduced to the book’s first chapter, the important critique of representation as a criterion in canon reform that appeared in *ELH* some eight years ago, almost a third of the book, a chapter nearly one hundred pages long, is devoted to a critique termed “Literature after Theory.”¹⁷ There Guillory condenses the long and complex history of the literary to a solitary figure, to a putative psychoanalytic transference between that man and his students, dubbed “disciples.” The *longue durée* of the literary from Plato to postmodernism is represented as merely a pedagogic scene of transference at Yale. Given Guillory’s larger argument on behalf of the *social*, and his attack on individualism, it is a staggering irony that obscures his important critique of the institution of literature. More importantly, it risks complicity with the contemporary cultural imaginary that opposes the material, the useful, the social to the textual, the philosophical, the rhetorical.¹⁸ The *Times*’s reductive opposition of politics and theory, like the whole notion of the “culture wars,” is a bar to literacy as powerful as any the school has produced; it endangers not so much the institution of “literature” or the study of early modern culture, but critical thinking itself.



Notes

- 1 All references to the letters are from Muriel St. Clare Byrne, *The Lisle Letters*, 6 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) and are noted by volume and letter number. Most of the Lisle letters are in the Public Records Office; a few are in the State Papers of Henry VIII and at the British Museum.
- 2 On the symbolic functions of goods see Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods* (New York: Basic, 1979). On the circulation and meaning of goods in early modern Europe see Lawrence Stone, *Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1529–1642* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); Joan Thirkell, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978); Chandu Mukerji, *From Given Images: Patterns of Modern Materialism* (New York: Columbia

University Press, 1983); Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London: Routledge, 1993).

- 3 For an important account of the Henrician court see David Starkey, *The Reign of Henry VIII: Personalities and Politics* (New York: Franklyn Watts, 1986); on the Tudor household see his “The Age of the Household: Politics, Society, and the Arts c.1350–c.1550,” in *The Latter Middle Ages in England*, ed. Stephen Metcalf (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1981), 225–90.
- 4 Only four percent of Honor Lisle’s letters are preserved, but from references in other letters to letters received from her, we know during those seven years she must have “written” some six hundred fifty; some four to five hundred are addressed to her, and another two hundred from Hussee to the household were handled by Lady Lisle. None are in her hand, though she does sign her letters. St. Clare Byrne claims the letters represent the most comprehensive account of a noble lady of the sixteenth century.
- 5 Letters as genre and the genres of letters have, of course, received considerable attention; on the English letter, for example, see Katherine Hornbeck, *The Complete Letter Writer in English, 1568–1800, Smith College Studies in Modern Languages*, no. 15 (Northampton, Mass.: Smith College, 1934); and the recent collection of essays, *Dear Sister*, ed. Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wierthaus (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), esp. Diane Watt’s essay, “No Writing for Writing’s Sake”: The Language of Service and Household Rhetoric in the Letters of the Paston Women,” 122–38; on the Renaissance letter more generally see Claudio Guillén, “Notes Toward the Study of the Renaissance Letter,” in *Renaissance Genres*, ed. Barbara Kiefer Lewalski (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986). See also Norman Davis’s work on English prose, particularly “Styles in English Prose of the Late Middle and Early Modern Period—Margaret Paston’s use of <Do>,” *Langue et Littérature* 21 (1961): 55–62.
- 6 See Derrida’s discussion of Nietzsche’s umbrella in Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 128–29.
- 7 Roland Barthes describes how objects in the *Encyclopédie* are rendered “with an unfortunate opacity,” which is an equally useful, and only seemingly contradictory, analysis of the object (“The Plates of the *Encyclopedia*,” *New Critical Essays* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990], from *Le degré zéro de l’écriture suivi de Nouveaux essais critiques* [Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972]).
- 8 Louis Adrian Montrose, “Gifts and Reasons: The Contexts of Peele’s *Araynement of Paris*,” *ELH* 47 (1980): 433–61.
- 9 Fumerton, *Cultural Aesthetics: Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social Ornament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 43.
- 10 According to the *OED*, before 1535 *bribe* is associated with mendicancy, theft, and plunder and seems to have early been associated with “the ‘black mail’ or ‘bakesheesh’ exacted by governors and judges who abused their positions and thus to gifts received or given for corrupt purposes. . . . The sudden and startling change from the Baconian ‘briber,’ who receives doucens, to the modern ‘briber’ who gives them, can be explained only by taking the latter as a separate derivative of the verb in its latest sense” (to influence corruptly, by a reward or consideration, the action of a person). That “sudden and startling change— from receiving to giving—is chronicled in the Lisle letters, precisely by

**"This sight doth shake all that
is man within me": Sexual
Violation and the Rhetoric of
Dissent in *The Cardinal***

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When it was performed in the winter of 1641, *The Cardinal*, James Shirley's play about a weak king manipulated by a malicious prelate, entered into a fierce debate about the power wielded by the Anglican prelacy in both church and state. Shirley's play represents the Cardinal's abuse of power through the rape and murder of his ward, the Duchess Rosaura. Rape and murder, used in the play as sensational shorthand to protest the abuses of this theatrical villain, are not merely the standard fare of tragic drama but also important elements of the political rhetoric of dissent in use among the religious reformers who sought to unseat the bishops of the Anglican Church. This article considers the play within its historical moment in the hope not only that its historical context will help us understand the play but with the conviction that the play itself can help us understand history. When I argue that Shirley's staging of sexual violence contributed to the political discourse of the nation, I have two goals in mind: to illuminate a neglected aspect of seventeenth-century political rhetoric and to call attention to the complicated political dimensions of erotic representation.

The godly party and the press

In 1637, William Laud, archbishop of Canterbury, brought suit in the Court of Star Chamber against John Bastwick, Henry Burton, and William Prynne as seditious libelers for pamphlets in which they attacked state institutions, particularly the Church of England and the bishops who served it. Prynne, the best known of the three, was accused of having (pseudonymously) authored a tract, *Newes from Ipswich* (1636), that appealed to the king to curb his bishops:

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- tracing the circulation of things. I am grateful to Stephen Foley for pointing out this date; for an important perspective on Henrician letters see his *Sir Thomas Wyatt* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1990).
- 11 Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); see also the essay included in that volume, "The Origin of the Work of Art," 72–74.
 - 12 Heidegger, "Origin," 73.
 - 13 See Alan Bray, "Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England," in *Queering the Renaissance*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994), 43. The essay first appeared in a shorter version in *History Workshop Journal* 29 (1990): 1–19; see also Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (1982; London: Gay Men's Press, 1988).
 - 14 On the signature and nonpresence see Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 328; on the letter in the context of early modern letters see Jonathan Goldberg reading Derrida in *Writing Matter: From the Hands of the English Renaissance* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990).
 - 15 See Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989; London: Verso, 1992).
 - 16 Recall Paul Ricoeur's account of hermeneutics as an opposition between interpretation as a "recollection of meaning" and interpretation as "the reduction of the illusions and lies of consciousness" (*Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage [1970; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977]). On the "hermeneutics of suspicion" in relation to recent work in Renaissance studies see Catherine Gallagher, "Marxism and the New Historicism," in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Adam Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1989), 43.
 - 17 Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); and "Canonical and Non-Canonical: A Critique of the Current Debate," *ELH* 54 (1987): 483–527.
 - 18 That opposition belies Guillory's important observation of the way in which "the refusal of the category of the aesthetic fixes the relation between form and content prematurely and far too simply as the irrelevance of form" (280).