

“Anne MacVicar Grant and the Social Authorship of Letters: Reconceiving Familiar Correspondence as Manuscript Publication”

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In this paper I propose a revision of the way we conceive of familiar letters and familiar correspondence in the long eighteenth century (and potentially beyond). I suggest that attention to the communal, collaborative scenes of writing within which familiar correspondence was produced and disseminated in this period will enable us to transcend the public/private dichotomy in which the study of eighteenth-century letters has remained trapped for so long.

To make my case, I discuss the closely intertwined epistolary and literary networks of Scottish writer Anne MacVicar Grant (1755-1838). Throughout her Highland life (c.1773-1803), Grant was involved in the manuscript circulation of her poetry and her translations of Gaelic lyric, building a network of literary exchanges often coextensive with her networks of correspondence. Rather than representing separate lines of writerly activity, that is, Grant’s familiar letters and her poems served as conduits for each other and together formed one extensive social network of manuscript circulation.

Grant’s interweaving of the production and dissemination of her letters and lyric thus leads me to propose that Margaret Ezell’s notion of the social authorship of poetry should be extended to the study of eighteenth-century correspondence. By investigating the social authorship of letters, we can begin to recognize the writing and circulation of eighteenth-century familiar letters as a form of manuscript publication. In addition, such an approach will enable us to perceive the publication of letters in manuscript or print as options within a continuum of possible modes of circulation and reception. In this continuum, print publication always appears within the horizon of possibility for eighteenth-century letter writers and readers, but it does not always constitute the desired, privileged endpoint for letters as “literary” productions.