
Cutting Edge Courtship in Eighteenth-Century London

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Abstract

In 1759, an anonymous twenty-two year-old woman placed an advertisement for a husband in the *London Daily Advertiser* that inspired an unusual sequel: a pamphlet purporting to collect her responses. Exploring the context of this woman's actions and the letters themselves reveals attitudes regarding matrimony and the dangers of virtual social networks that feel surprisingly contemporary.

Keywords

marriage, dating, courtship, Sarah Scott, Samuel Richardson, epistolary novels

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Cutting Edge Courtship in Eighteenth-Century London

A twenty-two-year-old woman, identified only as “B.L.,” announces her wish to marry in the most public forum available. Dozens of suitors offer themselves as potential life partners, competing not only for the company of her “far from disagreeable Person,” but for a small fortune. While this sounds like the premise for a reality television program—perhaps one you’ve already seen—it is instead a summary of *London Courtship; Or a new Road to Matrimony*, a pamphlet published in 1759. In less than fifty pages, *London Courtship* reprints forty-seven responses to the following notice from the May 8, 1759 edition of the *London Daily Advertiser*:

A Maiden Lady of about 22 Year of Age, is inclinable to alter her Condition; and though she flatters herself that she is far from being disagreeable in Person, yet she has never had one tolerable Proposal made to her on the Score of Matrimony: She therefore takes this publick Method of declaring she is weary of single Life, and desirous of an agreeable Companion: Her Fortune is no more than 500l. and consequently she is not vain enough to expect any Proposals from a Gentleman of good Fortune. A good honest Tradesman, well settled in Business, is the utmost her Ambition soars to: He must be neither clownish nor foppish, his Age must not exceed thirty, and he must be affable and good-natured. Any Letter which the Lady may receive, seeming to promise Satisfaction, will be duly answered, and an Interview granted on Condition that the Gentleman will promise Secrecy upon Oath. (2)

London Courtship, the sequel inspired by this advertisement, prompts a flurry of questions. This essay, by giving some context for *London Courtship*’s production and contents, demonstrates the way a slim pamphlet can expose deep public discomfort with recent innovations in courtship and matrimony. The pamphlet implicitly critiques newspaper advertising as a virtual social network in the wake of the Hardwicke Marriage Act of 1753. In *London Courtship* domestic economic operations enter the virtual public marketplace of the newspaper as an element of the public sphere traced by Jürgen Habermas and elaborated by many others, particularly Michael McKeon (43-56; 110-122). The pamphlet allows distinctly private subjects to merge into a broader public subjectivity. The personal nature of this use of print, first in the advertisement, then in the responses published in the pamphlet challenges Habermas’ conviction that letters are somehow separate from the public sphere.¹ *London Courtship*’s ultimately skeptical view of the possibilities for brokering domestic harmony in a virtual public space gestures at

broader cultural anxieties around new venues and regulations for courtship and matrimony.

In advertising her availability for marriage, B.L. exposes unintended consequences of The Hardwicke Marriage Act of 1753. By specifying who was under the legal protection of parents or guardians, the act implicitly allows B.L.'s entry into the matrimonial market without the interference or protection of her family. This act, named for Lord Chancellor Hardwicke and not enforced until 1754, was drafted primarily to end clandestine marriages—marriages conducted at irregular hours and locations, without a license or the calling of banns. The act firmly established civil marriage in England by superseding earlier traditions, specifying that marriage, as a contractual exchange of property, was emphatically the business of the state.² As Vlasta Vranjes notes, the act's major deviation from canon law was that any union transacted between parties under the age of twenty could be voided by their parents.³ According to the strictures of the Marriage Act, as a woman past her twenty-first year B.L. could set her own terms and work without intermediaries (Gillis 140). While there are certainly other means with which her family might control her, there are no legal mechanisms to prevent B.L. from offering her own hand. B.L. underlines her intent to find a “companion” by specifying personal qualities, not assets, hinting at aspirations toward a companionate marriage model.⁴ When she mentions that she has yet to receive a “tolerable proposal,” she conjures a series of suitors who were either too old or insufficiently affable. Though there is nothing new in women having some say in mate selection during this period, B.L. operates here without mention of any intermediaries or greater authority. Furthermore, she specifies standards tied more to personality than personal wealth. Though a potential wife might reasonably inquire about the keeping of domestic servants or a carriage, B.L. never entertains the possibility that her ad will draw anyone for whom £500 is not a significant sum. Her economic specifications begin and end with “well-settled in business,” far vaguer than the litany of property terms often worked out between the father and suitor in the course of a genteel courtship. Based on these standards, B.L. seems motivated at least as much by hopes for love as money.⁵ Her modest marital ambitions cast B.L. as both pragmatic and mature, while her allusion to earlier frustrations introduces the possibility that, at twenty-two, she is eager to act as an independent broker of her services for the very first time. In accessing the social network of the newspaper B.L. takes a public role in marketing her domestic virtues, virtues that were becoming more and more a part of something, according to McKeon, not distinct, but excluded from the public domain (132). B.L. escorts herself to the virtual marriage market, acting completely in accordance with the law as laid out by the Marriage Act, but with the custom and comfort of her times.

London Courtship, like many epistolary texts of its period, challenges the reader seeking authenticity. While the original notice can be readily retrieved from the *Daily Advertiser*, verifying the responses presents far more difficulties. A few lines at the bottom of the title page state that “If any Person should entertain any Doubt that these Letters are really original he may receive full Satisfaction by calling at the Publisher’s”—hardly a comfort so many years later, and apparently little comfort at the time they were printed. The *Monthly Review* curtly dismisses *London Courtship* as a “wretched specimen of the lowest kind of Author-craft” (“Monthly Catalogue” 157). This, *London Courtship*’s sole notice, pans *London Courtship* so concisely that the reviewer never explains if he objects more to the pamphlet’s premise or its execution, but given the period and a bit more familiarity with the contents, surely both were to blame. The use of the singular in referring to the text and its source reveals the anonymous critic’s assumption that *London Courtship* is not a compilation but the invention of a single mind. Not only is the critic unmoved by the publisher’s reassurance on the title page, he seems actively offended, as if this flavor of fraudulence is somehow less appetizing than other varieties of fake letters. As Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook explains in *Epistolary Bodies*, the eighteenth-century English letter’s veneer of sociability and directness made it an ideal vehicle for everything from philosophical and scientific musings to mundane household advice, even if the letters came from fictional personae (17-20). Cook uses the example of *The Storm* (1704), in which Daniel Defoe freely mixes genuine letters describing the squall with his own fabricated reports, but there are literally hundreds of examples of the “false letter” as a pretext for truth, a fictional occasion for factual reportage (18). Among early periodicals like *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* invented letters manufactured a sense of a community while providing a context for the application of whatever advice a writer had on hand, creating a readily inhabitable character in an accessible situation, signified by the coffee shop listed as the site of its composition.⁶ *London Courtship* likely follows Defoe’s model—a mix of genuine and invented responses.

An individual with the ability to invent the sheer variety of writing styles within its forty-eight pages relies less on craft than mania. I will analyze the contents of selected letters in more detail below, but offer this indecipherable sentence, the first from the twenty-fourth letter in the collection, as evidence that at least some of these missives are genuine:

As Celibacy is so much Profess’d with that Sex whose Place it is to prompt and endeavor to support the most Laudable Engagements which out [sic] parents by example as shrewd us By the Mutual

Pledges of each others Love—So often seen butt [sic] nevet [sic] felt butt by those whose happy Lots it is to meet in the sweet embraces of honourable Love We must rather Impute it to the Dullness of their Minds the many aspersions so frequently us'd by the insensibility and Stupidness of Customs the Giddy fopperies and mistaken smartness of Young fellows which a Loose Course of Life often addicts them to than any real Objection this can possibly have to the more Settled happiness which infallibly is a friend in the due Direction of their Life. (27-8)

This, to me, seems to be the hastily typeset work of a sincere, singular mind. More a sentimental word cluster than a diagramable sentence, if this prose is not the work of a suitor reaching beyond his grasp of formal English, than it would take an algorithm, not a hack, to generate it. The idiosyncrasies of capitalization, spelling, and grammar have an internal consistency distinct from, for example, the first sentence of letter nineteen:

After Reading your Genrouse advertisement in tuesday's Paper it appearing to me all to gather verely a gerable I that Proposess to be your Canddate is to Busness a Linnen Draper well settld free from all Encumbrancess aged 28 years and I ame Vaine Enough to think in Case you Honour me with an Interview that you'll have no Dislick Either to my Parson or Character &c. (23)

Letter nineteen evinces the conversational tone and phonetic spelling that one might expect from a literate but not literary tradesman. In his unpretentious account of himself, the ignorance of regular punctuation and spelling does not prevent him from imparting basic information. The diversity of writing styles found within *London Courtship* counters the reviewer's implication that it is the work of a single author, but he does not dismiss the pamphlet solely on the basis of its obscure provenance.

The source of the critic's disgust with *London Courtship* should be attributed not to its lack of authenticity, but to some immorality inherent in its purpose. From the seventeenth century on, published letters were fundamentally didactic texts. Correspondents, real and imagined, sought guidance, using the letter as a place to wonder if the Athenian Society could explain the difference between the pope and the antichrist or if upper-class women (according to Samuel Richardson) should stop outsourcing breastfeeding. Collections of letters delivered more practical skills as well and were often composed and used as models for personal correspondence. *Pamela* germinated in Samuel Richardson's *Familiar Letters*,

and many numbers of the *Spectator* and the *Tatler* consist of fictional letters meant to inspire actual letters. Letter writing manuals sold well throughout the eighteenth century, but there is little evidence that *London Courtship* was produced for this purpose (Bannet, *Empire* 20). *London Courtship* fails as a guide for producing successful responses to matrimonial ads because so many of the responses are dreadful, and the few promising missives engage very specifically with the content of the ad, making them unwieldy as models. In fact, some of the responses collected in *London Courtship* suggest that those who would answer such notices need far more guidance than a letter-writing manual could ever provide. Still, there may have been a market for such a manual.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, notices like B.L.'s were hardly novel. In his history of personal advertising, *Classified*, H. G. Cocks draws most of his eighteenth-century examples from an anonymously compiled scrapbook housed in the British Library containing matrimonial advertisements dating back to 1740, yet the practice started even earlier. Cocks asserts that matrimonial advertising began in the 1690s, its growth paralleling the expansion of print in the eighteenth-century (67). As early as 1695, John Houghton, editor of the early English periodical *Collection for the Improvement of Husbandry and Trade*, not only ran matrimonial advertisements but took them seriously enough to add commentary guaranteeing the quality and sincerity of the advertisers.⁷ By 1710, all fifty-three official newspapers in England ran matrimonial advertisements ("The Heart is a Lonely Hunter"). In 1777 the practice was common enough to provide the premise and title for Sarah Gardner's play, *The Matrimonial Advertisement or, a Bold Stroke for a Husband* (Grundy 17). By then, the ads were so pervasive that a woman critiqued the ubiquity of matrimonial advertisements—calling them "too general"—within her own matrimonial advertisement (Cocks 68).

Setting aside external evidence, *London Courtship: Or a new Road to Matrimony* contains subtle suggestions that undermine the "new road" promised in its subtitle, implying that B.L.'s efforts were less than pioneering. A respondent identifying himself as "S.Y." writes, "The unequal chance the fair Sex have in choosing for themselves, is a sufficient excuse for the method you have taken, and therefore nobody that will give themselves leave to think impartially can disapprove of it" (9). S.Y. implies here that his broadmindedness runs contrary to existing prejudices against women who advertise their desire for a husband. That advertising in the paper might be a kind of last resort is clear from the letter preceding S.Y.'s. A man identified as "A.B" displays very little confidence, opening his letter by declaring, "It should be an indispensable rule in life to contract our desires to our present condition" (6). Nothing augurs more hope for a satisfactory union than diminished expectations on both sides.

The idea that the newspaper is an unsavory venue for finding a mate is clear in one anonymous suitor's claim that "I have never Advertis'd for my Self, nor given any attention upon Many that have been publish'd before" (21). This response suggests that by the 1750s matrimonial ads ran with enough frequency that they were not merely curiosities to be read for their own sake. This suitor's paradoxical assertion that he doesn't pay attention to such ads allows him to escape the stigma attached to placing and responding to them—a stigma that can only exist if the practice is widely known, if not widespread. Thus, while *London Courtship* is an unusual text for collecting responses to a matrimonial advertisement, the advertisements themselves had been part of the periodical culture in England for over half a century, to the extent that persistent clichés of the genre had already emerged.

B.L.'s reasons for risking public scorn are less mysterious. Economic necessity was the engine driving women's choices in marriage during this period. The size of B.L.'s dowry suggests that she comes from diminished gentility. B.L.'s contemporary Sarah Scott was so inspired by the limitations faced by women like herself and B.L. (Scott had a dowry of £1000) that she wove stories of similar plights together into her novel *Millenium Hall* (1762) (Larson 201;204). A single man not in possession of a fortune is also in want of a wife—a wife with a fortune. Scott demonstrates her awareness of this universal truth by casting the suitors of her financially diminished heroines as inappropriately old, immoral, or both. B.L.'s notice crystalizes the struggles familiar to the any consumer of midcentury novels, from Sarah Fielding's *The Adventures of David Simple* (1750) to Charlotte Lennox's *Henrietta* (1758). B.L. accepts this by setting her sights forward and slightly down, seeking hardworking merchants, not dilettantes. For this class of men, B.L.'s appeal would not be limited to her dowry, as a wife can contribute a substantial amount of labor, not only by keeping the house, but the shop and books of a burgeoning business (Stone, *Family* 54). Though a domestic servant would be glad to save a tenth of that sum over a decade's labor, a genteel woman could not support herself on £500. Even in shared lodgings outside of London, a woman of that class would require at least one hundred pounds a year.⁸ Working was hardly an option; the only thing more shameful than being a spinster was earning a living (Hill 54). Outside of marriage, she had two plausible courses of action: she could enter into domestic service as a lady's maid or housekeeper or she could join a household as a companion, a role with more status but no direct payment.⁹ In this context B.L.'s notice exudes an earthy pragmatism (not to say defeatism) rarely associated with the genre of personal advertising. Her modest wishes, real or imagined, endear her to the reader, making the responses that follow that much more terrifying.

If the notice and its circumstances give the reader a rooting interest in B.L., the responses mock any hope for B.L.'s future wedded contentment. One suitor avers his intention to spend all her money as quickly as possible, another reassures her that he is definitely not a murderer, and one potential spouse opens his appeal with the most conventional weapon in any road comic's arsenal, the dick joke (24, 17, 46). Even the more staid candidates inspire little hope for B.L.'s contentment. A forty-year-old clergyman builds very little enthusiasm by suggesting to her that, "if you have Some thoughts of an Hereafter, you may be Conducted with comfort thro' the present Stage" (11). In the context of these candidates, the *Monthly Review*'s skepticism about the source of the letters begins to seem more like wishful thinking; any reader sympathetic to the plight of women like B.L. hopes that at least some of these suitors are fabrications of a single, deadline-driven imagination. Not only do the responses implicitly critique the suitability of B.L.'s entire enterprise, they repurpose the premise of the ad. What begins as B.L.'s clear-eyed assessment of her own prospects in the notice quickly joins the realm of fiction as the pamphlet continues.

A respondent identifying himself as "P.S." follows his greeting by recounting his enthusiastic reaction to B.L.'s appeal with remarkable candor:

On Reading the daily paper This morning a Greater thing never offers to my venue For Tho' I Say it Bless'd be God I am a Complete Beginner and to raise my Fortune now is the time and if I have the Good fortune to Gett in your Quarters I will my dear madam Spend as any man in london. (24)

While many of the men have plans for B.L.'s dowry, most put them in terms of their existing assets—they will use her dowry to increase their stock, expand their business, or, in one case, recoup spending on a new home (33). Still, P.S.'s willingness to be so direct about his intentions suggests desperation and degradation on the part of anyone who would respond to such an ad.

In undermining B.L.'s enterprise, *London Courtship* returns throughout to the circumstances that allowed B.L. to embark on this unconventional—but as I note above, not unique—path. At twenty-two, B.L. can negotiate marriage for herself, implicitly central to her appeal for many of the suitors, but particularly for the author of letter twenty-three:

Madam,
On reading the Advertisements of to day I saw that which I have the greatest Means of removing, the greatest Afflictions porr

Mortal Can suffer, for by the Cruelty of Relations have been denied to Marry one who I once thought the only one could make me Happy and unless I am so fortunate as to meet with some agreeable Prudent Companion soon who would Endeavor to make life happy am determined to leave Town very speedily My Profession is far from being genteel and Produces a very Genteel Income which manage with Economy would sufficiently provide (for those Exempt from the follies of Age) a comfortable and Creditable livelihood and which is Certain for my life. My Age Is about 22 and my Person is not disagreeable (but that particularly I shall not describe) and my Temper I believe is not the least of my Merits. (26-7)

The author of this letter, who refers to himself as “P.Q.” when giving directions for her response, seems fairly anodyne, particularly when comparing his missive with the tortured diction and transparent greed that characterize those of his fellow suitors. However, this letter serves to remind the audience of the vulnerability of our heroine. P.Q. opens by explaining how he has been prevented from marrying “the only one could make me Happy” by her relatives, likely her parents. His romance with B.L., should they pursue one, may avoid such obstructions. By empowering parents to void the marriages of their children until the age of twenty-one, the Hardwicke Marriage Act leaves these twenty-two-year-olds suddenly orphaned. This letter emphasizes the extent to which B.L. is friendless in an urban environment by the author’s threat to leave town if he doesn’t find the right companion soon. If B.L. appeals to suitors who have already been rejected by younger women’s parents, then perhaps her project really is doomed, and she is a victim of this unintended consequence of the act, which, by identifying so clearly those who will be under the protection of their relatives, also defines those left to their own devices. If *London Courtship* critiques B.L.’s method of finding a suitor by showcasing truly terrible candidates for matrimony, in placing this missive precisely at the center of B.L.’s catalog of horrors, it also suggests that the limitations of the act might be to blame.

Many of the horrors faced by a twenty-two-year-old single woman require very little historical context to grasp. The “wretched author-craft” of *London Courtship* reveals itself in many missives not only through each letter’s adherence to its own unfathomable syntax and grammar or but also in many of the authors’ flagrant disregard for B.L.’s specifications. The forty-fifth letter exemplifies what is “wretched” in *London Courtship* while also representing the crescendo of vulgarity for the entire collection. It begins with a standard, even formal address, but from there it warms up at a nauseating clip:

Madam,

In Answer to your Advertisement I give you a short discription of, (FIRST) my Person, viz. I'm a well siz'd Man, well put together, thick in proportion, that is well set, Strong Nervous and Muscular, somewhat out of Proportion but not displeasing to a Young Lady whom I Suppose will have no exceptions to that PART. As for my Circumstances they are Sufficient I want a Young One to do the Business of the Night, Having Sufficient to Employ in the Day, I'm good Humoured when Pleased Can be I'll natured when there's Occasion for it, So promise no more than I intend to keep; Now if you like this bluntness WYE SO, If not wee're AS WE WEE'RE, NOW you say in your Advertisement you're far from Disagreeable, I really must Imagine you Frought with all perfections I could run on with the Discription of a Venus but I'm too much in a hurry to impart my Sentiments not doubting but if you're happy enough to have me you'll have no Cause to repent my Subscribing my self.
Yours but not 'till I've seen you,
A.Q.X.Y. (46)

In the first sentence of the letter, as the capitalization helpfully highlights, the author (who I will refer to hereafter as X.Y.) makes the tantalizing dick joke I mentioned earlier. In case the allusion to sex was too subtle, the second sentence is even bolder; indeed I feel fortunate that X.Y. relies on both upper-case and lower-case letters when he declares, "I want a Young one to do the Business of the Night." Within this brief epistle, the shifts in typography are unsettling not only because of the way X.Y. uses them as a crude tribute to his own anatomy, but also because they indicate his impatience to bring the encounter to its conclusion, one way or another: "WYE SO" or "AS WE WEE'RE." By capitalizing his major asset and B.L.'s choice, X.Y. attempts to hasten the agreement, making his proposal both the most business-like of letters and the most transactional. X.Y. offers B.L. his body and his evenings, with the proviso that she live up to fantasies that he declines to elaborate.

As a proposition, X.Y.'s letter may be the crudest in the collection, but it is not atypical in its content. Like most of the suitors in *London Courtship*, X.Y. replies to B.L. without responding to her. Though it is hard to imagine a fop writing so coarse a response, X.Y. never explicitly addresses his relative fitness based on the given standards. Our maiden lady only asks for age, trade, and personal qualities, none of which are directly addressed, although the letter's content and style

implies a great deal about the author's character. Thus X.Y.'s letter opens with a kind of white lie: he is not, in fact writing an "Answer" so much as he is selling himself for an audience of one, in the same vein as the authentic redemption ads that Jonathan Lamb describes in his article "Crying of Lost Things" (960). His letter functions more as an advertisement for himself than as a genuine response, like a conversation stalled out at two people waving and pointing at themselves. That he aggressively markets himself on the basis of his physical qualities and virility attests to his fundamental misapprehension of the form. Letters accommodate the cataloging of worldly goods and the time and expected size of an inheritance, not physical fitness. When, despite emphasizing his body in his appeal, X.Y. closes his letter insisting on visual evidence of B.L.'s suitability as a mate, he reveals the extent of his confusion about his task. He accounts for his own physical merits, while insisting that hers have yet to be proven, despite the fact that they have proffered roughly the same evidence: words on the page.

The thirteenth letter in the collection, credited to Theady Mulhane, not only insults B.L. by giving her a transparently inappropriate suitor, but pulls her into a semi-fictional web implying that her modest aims reside closer to the realm of fantasy than reality. Mulhane's missive starts with a warm mixture of formality and familiarity before devolving into a casually chilling offer:

Ora My Dear Madam Now,

But I seen your advertisement this Very Day and I am Charm'd with your pretty Method of getting a Sweet hart, it was my good fate you thought of this means to bring me acquainted with you Own D'Self—then my Dear Honey but I am in Love with you already and I would have you think of something better than a tradesman for I am a gentleman as is well Known in the Kingdom of Ireland, and go Rest his Soul my father has Left me 0011. a year and when my Uncle is dead I will keep you a Coach If you will have me now I will tell you that although I was greatly Beloyed and that's all About the Streets of London, I Did Neither Murder or kill Kitty Fisher for She is not dead, and what I doon was in Pure Afection as I have a great Veneration for the Lady's in general, but now my Dear honey I will think of no boddy but your Self, and if I have the good Luck to get you, I will Keep you like a gentlewoman as Long as my Love and Money Last's and then you will Keep me and am your's till I am dead. (17)

Mulhane's tale is perfectly matched by his chosen medium: the dipsomaniacal scribbles of a man who knows that the number he wants has two zeros but can't

figure out where to put them, who stumbles abruptly into the source of his bad reputation and then rambles his way out of it. As incredible as his story is out of context, within the ephemeral world of mid-eighteenth-century English popular culture his claims are patently ridiculous. Assuming he meant to state 100l. as his annual income, his claim to have had anything to do with Kitty Fisher is preposterous—Fisher was nicknamed “The Hundred Pound Miss” in reference to her standard nightly fee, well beyond Mulhane’s means. Despite this, he is demonstrably sincere in one respect: Theady Mulhane did not kill Fisher, who died of tuberculosis at Bath in 1767 (Pointon 77).

This cameo authenticates *London Courtship* as a kind of fiction, no matter where or how the letters came to be collected. Kitty Fisher’s appearance as another of Mulhane’s paramours implies that B.L. might not be the practical, frustrated maiden she appears. The extended title refers to B.L. as “a celebrated young lady.” A year later, Thrush, *London Courtship*’s publisher, uses the same epithet in the title of a spurious Kitty Fisher pamphlet, *A humorous poetical Dialogue, between the one celebrated Miss F--- M-- and the now famed Miss K--- F---* (1760). Had B.L. possessed a fraction of Fisher’s celebrity, the subtitle would have undoubtedly made coy use of her initials, a customary practice in the period for publishers like Thrush.¹⁰ The reference to B.L. as “celebrated” in the subtitle inflates her project into something scandalous rather than practical, a process encouraged by the appearance of other “celebrated” figures like Kitty Fisher and her fictional former paramour, Mulhane. Rather than making Mulhane’s letter more credible by referring to a real person, this unconvincing attempt to connect Mulhane with Fisher threatens to lump the entire enterprise with the scurrilous pamphlets that made fictional characters out of real women like Fisher, who ran her own ad in the March 27, 1759 *Public Advertiser* railing against the pamphleteers and biographers that, she assured the public, were maliciously libeling her (Pointon 86-7). The publisher violates any promise of fidelity to actual letters responding to B.L.’s notice by explicitly encouraging the reader to imagine B.L. not as a maiden lady, but as a public catalyst for fictional adventures in the mode of Fisher. In this light B.L.’s notice loses its sheen of sincerity, as the mention of Fisher threatens to make its author a candidate for a different kind of market. Thus, the letters in *London Courtship* degrade both B.L.’s project and, in subtler fashion, B.L. herself.

The pamphlet’s structure supports both ends. As each correspondent uses the epistle to construct an incorporeal presence, the editor, in conducting these phantoms and perhaps incorporating invented ones, becomes an authority within the text all the more God-like for remaining unseen (Cook 26-8). *London Courtship*’s editor curbs the Richardsonian impulse to footnote or comment on

the letters. The only text outside of the letters and the advertisement consists of the title page's instructions, quoted above, for those who want to verify the contents of the pamphlet, and two concise sentences introducing the ad and the letters: "The following Advertisement very lately appeared in a Daily News Paper," and "The following Letters were actually the Result of this Advertisement" (3, 4). Only in the arrangement of the letters themselves does the editor reveal himself. Though many of the letters lack dates, there are enough present to exclude chronology as a possible organizing scheme. Geography is similarly no help—the authors don't consistently note their locations, and, when listed, the pubs and coffee-houses are all over London and in no particular order.

Thus, it is in the numbering and arrangement of the letters that the editor shows his hand. Any reader confused about Theady Mulhane's suitability for B.L. might be brought to the right conclusion by editor's choice to run it as the thirteenth letter. My most sexually explicit example, Mr. X.Y., appears five letters after a suitor warns the advertiser that she is unlikely to find what she seeks "in such a degenerate Age as this" (42). This undated caution foreshadows Mr. X.Y.'s "business" inquiry so that the reader's skepticism of this method is incited, then satisfied by the collection's plunge into outright vulgarity, wisely stashed near the end. In the center of this brief pamphlet, the editor places the letter written by P.Q. as a reminder to the readers of the pamphlet that the Hardwicke Marriage Act protects only young women and girls, not "A Maiden Lady of about 22 Years of Age."

Publishing this quantity of responses to her advertisement with so little commentary seems to endorse the maiden lady's method of finding a husband. However, the editor arranges the letters for a dramatic effect that decisively undercuts the entire enterprise. From its earliest iterations, matrimonial advertising garnered suspicion for providing an outlet for unmarried people to engage in activities reserved for married people, like finding a mistress or exchanging sex for money and goods (Cocks 93-103). Thus, the mention of Kitty Fisher in the Mulhane letter acts not only as a marker of genre, it also reminds the reader that participants in matrimonial advertising are often engaged in more explicitly sexual markets as well.

London Courtship trades on the very basest premises for humor: ethnic stereotypes, puns, even anatomical references. Past this grubby exterior, it allows a glimpse of eighteenth-century people grappling with a conundrum that seems familiar and modern: can virtual social networks make satisfactory substitutes for face-to-face interactions? It is no accident that this pamphlet comes on the heels of the Hardwicke Marriage Act, which attempted to enforce the exchange of

private information in traditional public space with its statutes requiring parish residency and the calling of banns. As Chris Roulston notes, the Hardwicke Marriage Act is the product of a time when the reality of marriage was becoming more and more private as the “household family” shrunk to the more familiar nuclear family. At the same time, ideas about marriage became more subject to public debate than ever in periodicals, fiction, and politics (17). More than anything, *London Courtship*, despite its lack of direct commentary on the letters, exposes the hazards of replacing private social networks with public ones. Incontrovertible evidence of the dangers of this kind of contact would not arrive until the Red Barn Murder case of 1828, when William Corder’s use of the newspaper to attract a wife after killing his lover Maria Marten sparked countless plays, ballads, and broadsheets, and continues to spawn adaptations, most notably a BBC drama in 1980 and a typically oblique Tom Waits song in 1992.¹¹

In *London Courtship* the actual public space facilitating the informal exchange of information, a village church, is replaced by the virtual space of the newspaper’s classified ads (Epstein 22). This exchange of the village church for the urban newspaper is not just a product of speculation long after the fact. While not quite contemporary with *London Courtship*, the following defense of matrimonial advertising ran in London’s *Morning Herald* in 1787:

I am sensible, Sir, that some of your readers, male as well as female, will be apt to form an unfavorable opinion respecting the author of this address; but this circumstance will not give him a moment's concern. Whatever is done contrary to the mode established by fashion and custom must ever expect to meet with censure, if not with ridicule; but then it must to be remembered, that this mode, being frequently at variance with season and common sense, is not always to be considered as the true standard of right and wrong.—It is certainly no more a breach of moral rectitude, to advertise for a suitable partner for life, than for a temporary companion in a post-chaise. It is not much above a century ago, since it was customary to publish the bands (sic) of marriage in the market-place, instead of the church; and if the ceremony were again transferred from the church to the newspapers, neigh Religion, morality, or decency would, in my opinion, be at all affected by such a change.

Equating the church, the market-place, and the newspaper, the author of this letter to the editor (who signed himself “A Candidate for Matrimony”) anticipates the theoretical moves of writers centuries later. Within this self-interested plea he

establishes a history of marriage as a secular exchange of goods and services no different from the negotiations between merchants and consumers, negotiations that transition uncontroversially from market square to classifieds column.

London Courtship implies this danger within the responses, enumerating the unsavory characters awaiting a single woman. Beyond instilling readers with fear of what B.L. may find as she negotiates the marriage market among strangers, the pamphlet impugns the motives of its own “heroine” by equating her with a notorious courtesan both in the subtitle and in the Theady Mulhane letter. *London Courtship* must be understood not only as a symptom of changing attitudes toward marriage, but also as part of a dialectic between the possibilities created by technological advancements and traditional venues for social exchange, as well as the suspicion that builds around those who embrace these changes.

While purporting to merely publicize the reach of a single ad, *London Courtship* represents the newspaper not as a neutral space for social networking equivalent to the church or market square, but as a venue for meeting strangers, who, if we sympathize with our maiden lady, B.L., we hope will remain strangers. The perception that the institution of marriage was itself in flux due to the passage of the Hardwicke Marriage Act compounds this pessimistic view. The social ills of clandestine marriage or their legislative antidote spurred pamphlets from both sides throughout the 1750s (Stone, *Road* 424). If the actual impact of the Marriage Act on English life has been overstated, as Rebecca Probert has persuasively demonstrated, the popular belief that the act represented a break from tradition is well-documented.¹² It was the popular belief that the institution of marriage was in flux, not the actual extent of the shift in law that sparked *London Courtship*'s subtle commentary on the dangers of matrimonial advertising. The Hardwick Marriage act had no statistical impact on the average marriage age in England, but by creating real limitations for those under twenty-one, it made the liberty of those twenty-one and older that much more threatening (Vranjes 204). In any case, the average age before and after its enforcement exceeded twenty-one, meaning, yet again, that the shift in marriage was much more a shift in ideas about marriage.

The pamphlet demonstrates the imagined impact of this shift by exposing the dangers of a twenty-two-year-old woman brokering a marriage on her own. The twenty-third letter explicitly states the author's earlier disappointment at a partnership spoiled by the objections of his love object's relatives. No such barriers exist for B.L., which makes the impertinence and desperation of her suitors truly threatening. Many letters explicitly or implicitly prize discretion as they negotiate for this possible union, mirroring B.L.'s ad and suggesting shame

on both sides—shame related to the novelty of using a newspaper to enter the marriage market. According to a law that had only been in effect for five years, twenty-one years of age was the appropriate time to let young women wade into this market on their own, but careful perusal of the responses to B.L.’s ad show a woman suddenly exposed to accused murderers, brazen fortune-hunters, beggars, and bloviators wielding impossibly unparseable prose. Joining these voices within a single edited volume allows a larger subjectivity to emerge. Habermas, while considering the nature of the letter in eighteenth-century England, writes, “Subjectivity, as the innermost core of the private, was always already oriented to an audience” to the extent that “an idiomatic expression at the time described the well composed (sic) letter as ‘pretty enough to print’” (49). In publishing these responses, manifestly not “pretty enough to print,” *London Courtship* invokes a third subjectivity, summoned to judge these responses wanting.

To whatever extent *London Courtship* contains actual responses to B.L.’s advertisement, the anxieties it incites and depicts about its times are real. *London Courtship*’s lack of explicit moralism replicates the isolation of its heroine, B.L., in the marriage market. The silence around B.L.’s carefully arranged possibilities adds a foreboding air to what, on the surface, might seem a celebration of the empowerment of the technologically-enhanced public sphere in the context of a revised vision of marriage. Each shift multiplies the anxiety-producing potential of the other, just as recent legal and cultural revision of the institution of marriage has accelerated anxiety in seeming lockstep with development of new social spaces in which that anxiety can be telegraphed.

¹ Rachael Scarborough King convincingly argues for letters as documents that defy Habermas’ strict boundaries of public and private in *Writing to the World*.

² For detailed discussion of the development and dictates of Hardwicke’s Marriage Act, see Lawrence Stone, *The Road to Divorce: England 1530-1987* 121-136, and John Gillis *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to Present* (New York: Oxford Univ., 1985) 140-142, and Bridget Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England*, 196-210.

³ Vranjes argues persuasively that the age at which parents relinquish control of their daughters parallels the developmental age when a woman is thought to move from acting on romantic impulse to acting in ambitious self-interest.

⁴ Lawrence Stone advanced the theory that companionate marriage as a model developed among the Puritans preceding and during the English Interregnum and flowered among the wider population in the eighteenth century in *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800a* thesis he substantially revised in *The Road to Divorce*. See also Gillis, 14.

⁵ In *The Secret History of Domesticity* Michael McKeon notes that the standard trope in popular literature of the time had the father side with monetary concerns while the progeny sought to satisfy other passions. Rather than dismiss both as form of greed, the separation of private and public allows the personal struggle to become analogous to the political struggle, thus the father insisting on an advantageous match becomes a tyrant. (132-4).

⁶ As Bob Clarke notes, the use of fictional correspondents, though not invented by Addison and Steele, allowed them to embody perspectives more sophisticated than the partisan caricatures popular at the time (44-5).

⁷ Henry Sampson reproduces the early ads as well as Houghton's responses in *A History of Advertising from the Earliest Times* (Chatto and Windus, 1874). The following are two representative examples of the ads appearing in the July 19, 1695 edition:

A Gentleman about 30 Years of Age, that says he has a Very Good Estate, would willingly Match Himself to some Young Gentlewoman that has a Fortune of £3000 or thereabout, And he will make Settlement to content. (479)

A Young man about 25 Years of Age, in a very good Trade, and whose Father will make him worth £100, would willingly embrace a suitable Match. He has been brought up a Dissenter with his Parents, and is a sober Man. (480)

Some weeks later, Houghton made the following announcement, "It seems the public either did not believe in the reality of these advertisements, or were suspicious of the advertisers, for a few weeks after the editor thought necessary to declare again: --

"These proposals for Matches are real, and I do promise to manage them and such like with so much Secresie and Prudence that none shall discourse with their best Friends, with more Confidence of Fidelity than with me, let them be of what Rank soever." (480).

⁸ Betty Rizzo thoroughly breaks down the expenses of a single genteel woman during this period, noting that even a visitor to Sarah Scott's fictional utopia in *A Description of Millenium Hall* would require about £125 a year (34-6).

⁹ Perhaps the most concise way to illustrate the nature of work as a companion is to use Sarah Fielding's term for the position: toad-eater. As Rizzo explains, a companion's responsibilities might encompass the duties of a wife, housekeeper, lady's maid, governess, even a mistress. Because middle and upper-class women could not leave the home unaccompanied, even the mistress of a fully-staffed household often required a companion. Sarah Fielding, Charlotte Lennox, and other mid-century writers portray the position as more difficult because of the affective labor required and the lack of direct remuneration which would allow a companion to work her way out of her position (26-8). Jane Collier, Sarah Fielding's friend and collaborator in her satirical advice manual, devotes the entire second chapter of her satirical advice manual *An Essay on the Art of Ingeniously Tormenting* to the selection and torture of companions (87-103). Viewed from another angle, B.L. chooses not between varieties of domestic servitude and marriage, but between paid affective labor and unpaid affective labor. Though Rizzo never casts the professional companion in exactly these terms, much of Scott's, Fielding's, and Lennox's fiction pushes for recognition of a companion's work as labor, using the companion as a less-controversial proxy for the wife. For a broader look at uncompensated emotional work, see Michael Hardt's "Affective Labor."

¹⁰ Roughly contemporary Thrush titles include *An enquiry into the real merit of a certain popular performer. In a series of letters, First published in the Craftsman or Gray's-Inn Journal; With an Introduction to D-d G-k, Esq* (1760), *The Gentleman and lady of pleasure's amusement: In eighty-eight questions, with their answers, on love and gallantry. To which are added, the adventures of Sophia, with the history of Frederick and Caroline* (1759), and *The secret history of Zeokinisul, king of the Kofirans. Being an authentic account of the amours of Lewis XV. And interspersed with several curious anecdotes. Translated from the Arabian manuscript of the learned Krinelbol. With a key, explaining the fictitious names used in this history* (1760).

¹¹ The BBC drama, *Maria Marten*, is not widely available. Waits' "Murder in the Red Barn" is track eleven of his 1992 album *Bone Machine*. The murder inspired the popular melodrama *Maria Marten; or the Murder in the Red Barn* (1840) which, according to Michael R. Booth, was one of the nineteenth-century's most regularly performed plays.

¹² On the exaggeration of the Marriage Act's impact, see Probert. Eve Tavor Bannet and Lisa O'Connell see the Marriage Act as having a more substantial impact on the lives of women.

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