EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES

James Howell's *Familiar Letters*, Print, and History

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James Howell's *Epistolae Ho-Elianae: Familiar Letters Domestic & Forren* (1645; expanded and revised in 1647, 1650 and 1655) has been accounted among the very first collections of secular printed letters in English, and for at least two hundred years following its first publication it was certainly among the most popular, claiming admirers from Thomas Warton to William Makepeace Thackeray to George Saintsbury.[1] Most have commended both Howell's easy, personable style and his engaging narration of the major political events of his lifetime, embodied in letters recounting the news of the day to his Royalist friends. But Howell's letters – and indeed, the 'printed letter', as a genre – have never been quite what they seem. Though they are presented as original manuscript letters written by Howell in the three decades preceding their publication – and some of them undoubtedly were – it is well established that Howell in fact wrote, or at least heavily revised, most of these 'original documents' from his imprisonment in the Fleet in 1645, dramatising the events of Howell's earlier life in an exciting and tendentious form of historical fiction.[2] But even if they had been copied word-for-word from Howell's

[1] Gary Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), p. 49; James Howell, *Epistolae Ho-Elianae: The Familiar Letters of James Howell*, ed. by Joseph Jacobs, 2 vols (London: D. Nutt, 1892), I, pp. xv-xx. In *The Rise of Prison Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), Ruth Ahnert has written extensively about printed letters by political prisoners under the Tudor regimes, but unlike Howell's, these books of letters (such as Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*) are primarily religious in orientation. More importantly, Howell's letters were released in print to a readership whose own idea of the nature of public events was being rapidly shaped by the unprecedented availability of print news in the 1640s.

[2] While many of the letters do seem derived from actual correspondence, most scholars agree that in preparing them for the press Howell edited them heavily and probably invented some altogether, creating a substantially new sequence of texts. See Gary Schneider, *Print Letters in Seventeenth-Century England: Politics, Religion, and News Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 7; Verona M. Hirst, 'The

personal archive, the translation from manuscript to print itself would change their meaning. As Gary Schneider has observed, ‘print letters consistently attempted to construct themselves as personal and intimate despite their systematic (re)production’.[3] In a print context, the specific relation of writer to readers was changed; even in an era when handwritten letters were frequently circulated among coteries of acquaintances, a manuscript correspondence implied personal connection in a way that print, designed for public display and monetary gain (and Howell was certainly aiming for both), did not.[4] Jerome De Groot notes that ‘His work is generically complex, combining a form previously considered private (at least in the vernacular) with the public fashioning of an authorial personality’.[5]

But there is another dimension to the *Epistolae Ho-Elianae* as a creation of print. For unlike the countless collections of letters that have flown from the presses in centuries since, Howell’s writing appeared at a unique moment of change. While it is easy to overstate the effects of the ‘news revolution’ of the early 1640s, it is undeniable that life in England changed significantly when, in late 1641, a new variety of newsbook, reporting domestic events in a new format, began to issue from presses.[6] After decades of censorship, government paranoia, and careful deployment of royal spectacle under the Tudors and Stuarts, the relative chaos of the Parliamentary period allowed enterprising journalists and publishers to print nearly all the news the market would bear. If the fact of written news reports was not entirely revolutionary – manuscript newsletters and heavily-censored print gazettes had been circulating for years – the 1640s news boom certainly presented English readers with information in an unprecedented volume. David Zaret found that ‘more publications appeared between 1640 and 1660 than in the prior history of England, from about 1485 to 1640’, while Bob Clarke notes that, after two decades with a single licenced London newsletter in print, sixty-four new titles appeared

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Authenticity of James Howell’s Familiar Letters’, *Modern Language Review* 54.4 (1959), 558-561 (p. 561); D.R. Woolf, ‘Howell, James (1594?–1666)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/13974> [accessed 30 August 2020]; Annabel Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: the Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), pp. 214-18.

[3] Schneider, p. 231.

[4] As Woolf observes, Howell’s letters ‘represent a concerted attempt to fashion a public self and to support himself in so doing, making him one of the earliest English writers to have earned his living almost solely from the proceeds of his pen’ (n.p.).

[5] Jerome de Groot, ‘Prison Writing, Writing Prison during the 1640s and 1650s’, *Huntington Library Quarterly* 72.2 (2009), 193-215 (p. 209).

[6] See Nicholas Brownlees, ‘Narrating Contemporaneity: Text and Structure in English News’, in *The Dissemination of News and the Emergence of Contemporaneity in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Brendan Dooley (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 225-50 (pp. 244-7).

in 1642 alone.[7] Meanwhile, pamphlet controversies raged as never before. By any measure, a new culture of print readership arose, and if it did not provide much compensation for the disorder and violence spreading across the Atlantic Archipelago, it surely allowed more people than ever before to fret about it. As Nigel Smith observed, while it is difficult to assess just how much was printed or who read it, what matters is that 'national perception had been changed for good by a media revolution'.[8]

Immersed in this flood of print in 1645, Howell's perceptions were changed as well; the world of information exchange of the 1620s and 1630s, which his letters dramatise, could no longer exist. While the two modes of dissemination were frequently mixed, and manuscript remained the most important news medium through the first decades of the eighteenth century,[9] after 1641 it was no longer possible to read or think about handwritten newsletters without also thinking about news from the press. What was once seen could not be unseen. It is not just that Howell put letters in print; in a significant sense, at the moment of Howell's publication, print was putting *all* letters in print, forcing a new way of thinking even on writers, such as Howell, who decried its effects. Where earlier prison writers might have thought of themselves in manuscript correspondence with a sympathetic coterie of friends and coreligionists, whose intimacy could be 'oppressed' by the process of print publication, Howell realized that even his Royalist friends were reading print news and engaging with the ideas they encountered there; in spite of himself, he had become enmeshed in a new print-based public sphere.[10] In this essay I examine the *Epistolae Ho-Elianae* as a work of literature whose beauty and interest consists in a nostalgic evocation of lost ways of seeing the world, centred on practices of representation his own book undermines. On the one hand, Howell imagines the affairs of state being conducted in manuscript among a small group of well-connected courtiers, without regard for, or even the ability to imagine, what would later be called public opinion. On the other, he imagines a politics of royal representation in which the

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[7] David Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions, and the Public Sphere in Early-Modern England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 175; Bob Clarke, *From Grub Street to Fleet Street: An Illustrated History of English Newspapers to 1899* (London: Ashgate, 2004), p. 17. See also Andrew Pettegree, *The Invention of News: How the World Came to Know About Itself* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 220; Paul J. Voss, *Elizabethan News Pamphlets* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), p. 4; Joad Raymond, *Invention of the Newspaper* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 9-16.

[8] Nigel Smith, *Literature and Revolution in England, 1640-1660* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 24.

[9] Ian Atherton, 'The Itch Grown a Disease: Manuscript Transmission of News in the Seventeenth Century' in *News, Newspapers, and Society in Early Modern Britain*, ed. by Joad Raymond (London: Frank Cast, 1999), pp. 39-65 (p. 40).

[10] See Ahnert, pp. 145-6.

'public' is constituted by the body of the monarch, which must be visually displayed in theatrical fashion through parades and spectacles.[11] And yet both of these ideas about what constitutes 'the public', embodied in forms of communication, are rendered impossible by the form of communication in which Howell is working: the printed book. Howell's Royalist nostalgia has been noted; but while Schneider argues that Howell imagines the familiar letter itself as a Royalist form, I argue that his post-1641 print context in fact ensures that the past he envisions is firmly a product of the present.[12] This tension, I suggest, makes Howell's letters worth reading today. His 1645 account of the 1623 Spanish Match, in particular, reveals a transformation of the very concept of the 'public event' in just a few brief years, for there, and elsewhere in the *Epistolae*, Howell engages with the practice of royal spectacle through a contrary medium of publicity: print. A pamphleteer who decried the spread of pamphletry, Howell illustrates the contradictions of a mind immersed in media change, holding tenaciously to a vision of communicative reality that his own practice belies.

A Welshman and staunch royalist, Howell had held a number of diplomatic posts under James I and Charles I in the 1620s, probably worked as a royalist spy in the '30s, and consequently in 1642 found himself imprisoned by Parliamentary authorities in the Fleet, where he was kept until 1650.[13] From his confinement he began vigorously publishing a diverse range of political works, of which the *Epistolae Ho-Elianae* are best-known today.[14] As letters, their authenticity has been questioned from the beginning. Anthony à Wood, writing in 1691, dismissed them as 'never written before the Author of them was in the *Fleet*, as he pretends they were, only feigned, (no time being kept with their dates) and purposely published to gain money to relieve his necessities',[15] but the very obviousness of the retrospection suggests that Howell intended to deceive no one. Rather, it makes most sense to consider the letters as Howell described them on the title page: *Partly Historical, Political, Phylosophical*. That is: they should be understood as a historical project, undertaken for political purposes, with excursions into a form of

[11] I use these terms in the sense pioneered by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. by Thomas Burger (Cambridge: M.I.T Press, 1989), pp. 7-56. For more on the theatrical dimension of royal representation, see Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975) and Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[12] See Schneider, *Print Letters in Seventeenth-Century England*, pp. 154 and 170.

[13] In *Athenae Oxoniensis* (2 vols., London: Printed for Tho. Bennet, 1691-1692), Anthony à Wood claimed that Howell was imprisoned not for political reasons but for debt; see Wood, II, p. 265. The facts are not clear. At any rate, Howell always declared himself the victim of Parliamentary harassment.

[14] For more biographical information on Howell, see Jacobs's 1892 introduction, as well as Woolf. All further references are to Jacobs's edition, unless otherwise noted.

[15] à Wood, *Athenae Oxoniensis*, II, p. 265.

philosophical discourse that ultimately serves to promote Howell's image of himself as a gentleman in conversation with gentlemen.[16] The documentary accuracy of individual letters concerns him much less than the social ideals embodied in the letter as a genre. Looking back to the letters of Seneca and Cicero (both depicted prominently on the title page), Howell sees a form that is familiar but not intimate, weaving far-flung men of substance into a single social fabric.[17] Through epistolary form, Howell gives his history both a social place – a network of well-connected gentlemen, exchanging both news and ideas with their peers – and a social time, the illusion of immediacy that Richardson would later call writing 'to-the-moment'. Regardless of when Howell might actually have sat down to his correspondence in real life, in the published *Epistolae* his reports are timely and consistent. Letters allow Howell to dramatise his history as it unfolds, on the stage of communication that defines its world.

But it is not only the books' content that engages with history; the cultural role and purpose of letters themselves were changing with the times. While prior to the 1641 abolition of the Star Chamber and Court of High Commission most foreign events and all domestic goings-on had been reported in England through manuscript correspondence, with the accession of the Long Parliament, as we have seen, new pathways appeared. Though manuscript letters reporting news were undoubtedly still both prevalent and important in 1645, they were no longer the only effective way to find out about major national events. Where the heavily censored corantos and pamphlets of the 1620s – memorably satirised by Ben Jonson in *The Staple of Newes* (1625/1631) – had provided an officially sanitised discourse in print, London readers could now hear a greater clamor of voices, and voices of a decidedly different type.[18]

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[16] On Howell's ideal of male gentility based more on ideology and manners than noble birth, see Michael Nutkiewicz, 'A Rapporteur of the English Civil War: The Courtly Politics of James Howell', *Canadian Journal of History* 25 (1990), 21-40 (p. 33).

[17] For more on Howell's use of the classical models, see Patterson, pp. 203-211. On the letter as a social form, see Schneider, *Print Letters in Seventeenth-Century England*, pp. 7-8.

[18] As Harold Love and Clare Brant (among others) have observed, the distinction between manuscript and print is never firm or complete; manuscripts were often copied and disseminated widely, while print was often confined within relatively small social networks. Yet it is clear from comments like those Howell makes himself (e.g., 'open printed language', in *Epistolae Ho-Elianae*, II, p. 442) that writers in the mid-seventeenth century considered a print audience to be significantly larger and less distinguished than an audience for manuscript: print implied both a national scope and a broad social range in ways manuscript never could. See Love, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

Howell is very interested in these changes, and indeed rehearses the difference he sees between the two eras. Early in the book, an entry dated 1623 frankly theorises what a good letter ought to do in Howell's ideal world:

> I thank you a thousand times over for yours of the 3rd of this present, which abounded with such variety of News, and ample well-couch'd Relations, that I made many Friends by it...[19]

Another typical letter, addressed to Howell's cousin Jack Price, bears a common variation on the formula:

> I thank you for yours of the third current, and the ample Relations you give me of *London* Occurrences, but principally for the powerful and sweet assurances you give me of your Love, both in Verse and Prose.[20]

In Howell's vision, a letter ought to impart information about occurrences of public interest, and it ought to be shared among acquaintances, some of whom may as a consequence become friends. It ought also to tell amusing stories in a pleasant style. Essentially, Howell imagines the letters of Cicero (his primary model) as the dominant news medium of 1623; the very idea of news is bound to membership in an elite group who might become personally involved with the events being described. The transmission of news happens between individuals, linked by blood, friendship, and commerce, with room for lengthy stories and even philosophical reflections. To Howell's mind, this is how public events ought to be discussed. Later, though, in a letter dated 1644 and probably aimed at Milton, Howell deplores the current state of public discourse:

> These Times (more's the pity) labour with the same disease that *France* did during the League; as a famous Author hath it, *Prurigo scripturientum erat scabies temporum*: The itching of Scribblers was the scab of the Time: it is just so now, that any triobolary Pasquiller, every *tressis agaso,* any Sterquilinious Rascal, is licens'd to throw dirt in the faces of Sovereign Princes in open printed language (2:442).

This is itself a somewhat disingenuous thing to say in open printed language, for by lashing out at the scribblers in print he can only sink to their level. In effect he nostalgically idealises a world in which information about public persons and events is

[19] Howell, *Epistolae Ho-Elianae,* I, p. 107.
[20] Ibid, I, p. 194.

circulated privately in manuscript, while really operating in a world where information is circulated publicly in print. Importantly, the supreme affront in Howell's book is *lèse-majesté*; in order to maintain their symbolic sovereignty, monarchs must be perceived but not spoken about by the people. Royal spectacles, in which the monarch claims authority by the fact of being seen, are crucial to this political-communicative order – but, as we shall see in the discussion of Howell's letters on the 1623 Spanish Match, those spectacles clash awkwardly with the medium of print. Presumably, a gentleman might hear criticism of a prince's doings through his connections to the court, transmitted in confidence by manuscript, but the 'openness' of the 'open printed language' is associated with the impecunious and illegitimate. As Michael Nutkiewicz has pointed out, throughout his works Howell consistently promotes an ideal of gentility based less on aristocratic birth or wealth than on an ideology of elite connection; here, though, he articulates that ideology through the contradictory medium of a printed screed, produced to maintain himself through his imprisonment.[21]

What is true of temporal politics is true of spiritual discourse as well:

> nor did the Art of Printing much avail the Christian Commonwealth, but may be said to be well near as fatal as *Gunpowder*, which came up in the same Age: For, under correction, to this may be partly ascribed that Spiritual Pride, that variety of Dogmatists, which swarm among us.[22]

Here, too, Howell uses the privacy of the letter to distinguish his own efforts from the swarm. While the print world in which the book is produced and consumed is considerably more demotic than the manuscript world it depicts, readers must nonetheless choose an emotional stance: do they belong (ideologically, if not in practical fact) to the self-selected group of gentlemen to whom Howell speaks, or to the illegitimate ranks of scribblers who ought not to be speaking at all? Though Howell's imagined commonwealth may depend on restricted channels of speech, in which only the worthy are 'licens'd' to take part in public discourse, and that on the condition that they keep quiet in the face of princely power, in fact he lives and writes in an England of unprecedented communication.

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[21] Nutkiewicz, 'A Rapporteur of the English Civil War', 23, 33; J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 341.

[22] Howell, *Epistolae Ho-Elianae,* II, p. 526.

Such a pose is familiar enough from Horatian satires of all kinds. What is different and interesting about Howell's book, though, is the way it imagines not only the transmission of news but the category of news itself. To understand how he thinks about what information ought to be transmitted, about whom, and how, it will help to consider that portion of his letters which has drawn most commentary in his time and since: his retelling of the events of the Spanish Match in 1623. In this remarkable sequence, the metaphors of royalty as theatre (which Howell himself, in his 1664 *Discourse Concerning the Precedency of Kings*, would later call 'the greatest Glory of all England')[23] are re-deployed, through the fiction of the gentlemanly manuscript news-letter, but ultimately of course through print. When in October of 1623 Prince Charles and the Duke of Buckingham returned empty-handed from their attempt at a marriage treaty with Spain, the presses could still be controlled strictly enough to ensure that the ensuing pamphlets, ballads, and doggerel poems all framed the venture as a triumph. The real story of what happened, as the English participants in Madrid themselves understood it – how they were detained and manipulated for months to ensure that England did not intercede in the Palatinate – was not widely disseminated.[24] It was not reported in the single officially licensed news-book of Nathaniel Butter. An official pamphlet, later attributed to the English ambassador at Madrid, John Digby, Earl of Bristol, gave only a relentlessly upbeat account of the events, ending well before the deal's failure. Purported translations of two Spanish accounts similarly gave away no information about the match's failure, and indeed focused primarily on the public pageantry that greeted Charles on his arrival in Madrid. A 'Copie of a letter written by ane honorable gentleman servand to His Highnes, to a lord of His Majesties Privie Counsale in both kingdoms', printed at Edinburgh, provided similar cheerleading. The anti-Spanish polemicist Thomas Scott had fled to Holland after the publication of his 1620 *Vox Populi* and managed to publish his *Second Part of Vox Populi* only from exile; Thomas Middleton's sensational allegory *A Game at Chess* was not performed until 1624, and moreover landed him in jail. For more accurate and up-to-date information, a well-connected reader would turn to manuscript

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[23] James Howell, *Proedria vasilike a discourse concerning the precedency of kings: wherin the reasons and arguments of the three greatest monarks of Christendom, who claim a several right therunto, are faithfully collected, and renderd* (London: Printed by Ja. Cottrel, for Sam. Speed..., and Chr. Eccleston ..., 1664), p. 47; EEBO Wing H3109.

[24] For the 'real story as of what happened, as the English participants in Madrid themselves understood it', I rely heavily on Glyn Redworth, *The Prince and the Infanta: The Cultural Politics of the Spanish Match* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003). Nigel Smith notes that the topic enjoyed a great revival, thanks to the 'news revolution': 'In the transition from manuscript to print in the early 1640s, a good deal of revision of texts took place, in keeping with the requirements of the new market. The neo-dramas, dialogues and *argumenta* concerned with the Spanish match and James I's foreign policy were revised on top of the revisions which were made during the 'period of manuscript circulation', and then published again' (p. 31).

letters from correspondents at the scene, which, though often copied commercially and circulated many times, necessarily reached a much smaller audience. It is in this correspondent's role that the Howell of 1645 imagines his younger self. Indeed, he dramatises in his letters the action of reading the '*Venetian* Gazette' – one of the first printed newsletters in Europe – and passing on the 'foreign *Aviso's*' in a manuscript letter to a well-placed friend (Lord Colchester) back in England (1:149-150).

In his letters regarding the match he cultivates this sense of elite connection, even as the publication of the letters undermines it. Indeed, he notes with amusement what happens when too many commoners take an interest in royal events:

> And now it was publickly known among the vulgar, that it was the Prince of *Wales* who was come; and the confluence of People before my Lord of *Bristol's* House was so great and greedy to see the Prince, that to clear the way, Sir *Lewis Dives* went out and took coach, and all the crowd of People went after him…[25]

Though Howell disassociates himself from the 'great and greedy' crowd of lookers-on, it is in fact in the service of this very symbolic order that he works. But we are not being shooed away by the decoy, but rather invited into the scene as Howell – an insider, working under Bristol in the English embassy – saw it. At the same time, 'publickly known' here certainly means the spread of rumours by word of mouth. Howell the imagined reporter is aware of the rumours, but does not depend on them to know what is going on.[26] He is above them, in a gentlemanly sphere of manuscript conversation, and the existence of that gentlemanly sphere shapes his understanding of the nature of a public event. Yet his book, entering as it does into a print-based public sphere, caters to the same desire it claims to place its readers above – only now, those print readers have shown a desire, if not a capability, for some form of self-rule.

He goes on in the same paragraph to describe what actually takes place, after the mob has been led away:

> so the Prince himself a little after took coach, wherein there were the Earl of *Bristol*, Sir *Walter Ashton*, and Count *Gondomar*; and so went to the *Prado*, a place hard by, of purpose to take the Air, where they stayed till the King pass'd by. As soon as the *Infanta* saw the Prince, her colour rose very high, which we

[25] Howell, *Epistolae Ho-Elianae,* I, p. 165.

[26] While this takes place in Spain, elsewhere Howell makes it quite clear that he considers the common people of England in a similar light. See, for example, vol. I, pp. 173 and 352.

> hold to be an impression of Love and Affection; for the Face is oftentimes a true Index of the Heart.

The obvious question here is from what vantage point Howell was able to view this intensely visualised scene; if the only men accompanying the Prince were Bristol, Ashton, and Gondomar, Howell must himself have heard this story second-hand from one of them, if not at a further remove. That messy detail is obscured here, and indeed we are invited to view the Infanta as spectators to an actress on stage, whose emotions we determine by watching her face – just as the crowd of vulgar spectators hopes to view the Prince. The point here is that we know the importance of the Prince and Infanta because we are watching them. At another moment, Howell takes us into a court theatre where the Prince and Princess are the real and acknowledged centre of attention:

> There are Comedians once a week come to the Palace, where, under a great Canopy, the Queen and the *Infanta* sit in the middle, our Prince and *Don Carlos* on the Queen's right hand, the King and the little Cardinal on the *Infanta's* left hand. I have seen the Prince have his Eyes immoveably fix'd upon the *Infanta* half an hour together in a thoughtful speculative posture, which sure would needs be tedious, unless affection did sweeten it: it was no handsome comparison of *Olivares*, that he watch'd her as a cat doth a Mouse.[27]

As in the previous examples, Howell's own location here is obscured. The meaning of royal bodies is made a topic for public interpretation; searching the Infanta's face and the Prince's posture for signs of love, we become part of an outsider's practice of royal-watching that takes the royals less as political actors than as, simply, actors. While we are clearly meant to care about the performance's implications in the real world of political events, the weight of Howell's interest and energy falls on the process of spectatorship itself. This is a theatrical performance in which the spectators outshine the players as objects of regard. Conceptually similar both to the French prose 'novels' of aristocratic intrigue then appearing in English translation and to Caroline heroic stage tragedy, this mode suggests that the actions of royalty are to be watched, not discussed.

Having established the importance of popular spectacle in his notion of history, Howell continues to narrate his insider's account of the diplomatic machinations surrounding the Match. The narrative's division into letters in fact emphasises, rather than disrupts, its essential continuity, for while a series of actual letters to different recipients would almost certainly show some repetition or extraneous information, these do not. Nor do they

[27] Howell, *Epistolae Ho-Elianae,* I, p. 169.

conform to the conventions of realist diurnal time that would dominate later epistolary novels such as *Clarissa*. In the first (1645) edition the letters are not dated, while in the second (1647) and following editions they are assigned dates in an improbably regular sequence. The point here is to record not moments in time, but moments in a continuous story; the letters function less as documents than as chapters, focusing our attention relentlessly on whom and what Howell finds historically important. The experience of manuscript communication, as the people involved would actually have known it, has dropped away; we are instead seeing a purely nostalgic view of royal politics, one that could not have existed before print news.

In the Spanish Match sequence, as elsewhere in Howell's book, it is apparent that true public *importance*, the necessary centre of any public story, is unquestionably located in the monarchy. The actions of elite men, communicating 'public affairs' in manuscript, matter insofar as they affect the movements of power symbolised by the monarchs themselves. In a less-than-subtle bit of foreshadowing, he comments on the growing rift between the Duke of Buckingham, favourite to Charles, and the Earl of Bristol, James's emissary in Madrid:

> As there is some darkness happen'd 'twixt the two [Spanish] Favourites, so matters stand not right 'twixt the Duke and the Earl of *Bristol*; but God forbid that a business of so high a consequence as this, which is likely to tend so much to the universal good of Christendom, to the restitution of the *Palatinate* and the composing those broils in *Germany*, should be ranvers'd by differences 'twixt a few private Subjects, though now public Ministers.[28]

Howell finds no difficulty in separating the 'private' man from the 'public' office; while princes and monarchs hold an unquestioned importance and centrality for everyone, even highly-placed aristocrats, apart from their official duties, are simply men. Unlike the vulgar spectators he periodically denigrates, who simply want to see a symbol of kingly importance for its own sake, he understands and appreciates the human weakness and pure coincidence behind major political events. He wishes to demystify. Yet the patently contrived *form* of his letters, by opening the world of 'private' gentlemen to the eyes of a very different kind of 'public' in an artificially coherent narrative, has quite the opposite effect, lending his plot an air of inevitability and his characters a theatrical sense of role.

This tension between journalistic revelation and theatrical spectacle is most strongly emphasised by what seems at first an odd interpolation into the narrative of the Spanish

[28] Ibid, I, p. 172.

Match: the assassination of the Ottoman sultan Osman II. Breaking into the otherwise smoothly connected tale of diplomatic maneuvering in Madrid, this letter (Book I, Section 3, number XXI in the 1645 edition; in subsequent editions dated August 17, 1623) purports to pass on the news from a manuscript circulated at the Spanish court during a lull in the negotiations:

> The Court of *Spain* affords now little new; for there is a *Remora* sticks to the business of the Match, till the *Junta* of Divines give up their Opinion: But from *Turky* there came a Letter this week, wherein there is the strangest and almost tragical news, that in my small reading no Story can parallel, or shew with more pregnancy the instability and tottering estate of human Greatness, and the sandy Foundation whereon the vast *Ottoman* Empire is rear'd: for *Sultan Osman*, the *Grand Turk,* a Man according to the humour of that Nation, warlike and fleshed in blood, and a violent hater of *Christians*, was in the flower of his years, in the heat and height of his courage, knock'd in the head by one of his own Slaves, and one of the meanest of them, with a Battle-axe, and the Murderer never after proceeded against or question'd.[29]

Clearly, we are to interpret the story of Osman here as a comment on 'the instability and tottering estate of human Greatness' in Howell's England of 1645. But we should not pass over the ways in which Howell imagines that such greatness is demonstrated and perceived. As Howell's fishy metaphor creates a tone of genteel sociability, so too does he imply that news-letters arrive to him directly from diplomatic correspondents elsewhere abroad, without the mediation of an English press. There would, after all, be little point in passing the news on to his correspondent in England if it were already widely known there. The August date would also seem to make a reasonable amount of sense, for at that point Prince Charles was certainly still lodged at the Spanish court (though poised for a face-saving withdrawal) and Howell was indeed there with him. Yet the 'strangest and almost tragical news' Howell relates from Turkey was by then more than a year old: Osman was assassinated in May of 1622, and the events had been reported in at least two English printed accounts before the end of that year.[30] Howell's account in

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[29] Ibid, I, p. 175.

[30] On the chronology of Charles's negotiations, see Redworth; for reports of Osman's death published in 1622 see Thomas Roe, *A true and faithfull relation, presented to his Maiestie and the prince, of what hath lately happened in Constantinople, concerning the death of Sultan Osman, and the setting vp of Mustafa his vncle Together with other memorable occurrents worthy of obseruation* (London: Printed [By F. Kingston] for Bartholomew Downes, 1622; EEBO STC (2nd ed.) / 18507.71a) and the unattributed *The strangling and death of the Great Turke, and his two sonnes* (London: Printed by I. D[awson] for Nicholas Bourne and Thomas Archer, 1622; EEBO STC (2nd ed.) / 18507.62). A modern account may be found in

fact repeats and summarises one of these, the *True and faithfull relation, presented to his Maiestie and the prince, of what hath lately happened in Constantinople, concerning the death of Sultan Osman, and the setting vp of Mustafa his vncle* by the English ambassador there, Thomas Roe. Howell does not disguise his source, at one point referring to Roe by name:

> Another kind of Prophetic speech dropt from the *Grand Visier* to Sir *Thomas Roe* our ambassador there, who having gone a little before this Tragedy to visit the said *Visier*, told him what whisperings and muttering there were in every corner for this *Asiatic* voyage, and what ill consequences might ensue from it; therefore it might well stand with his great wisdome to stay it; but if it held, he desird him to leave a charge with the *Chimcham* his Deputy, that the *English* Nation in the *Port*, should be free from outrages: whereunto the *Grand Visier* answerd, Trouble not your self about that for I will not remove so far from *Constantinople*, but I will leave one of my legs behind to serve you, which prov'd too true, for he was murtherd afterwards, and one of his legs was hung up in the *Hippodrome*.[31]

The lurid story is presented as gossip, either given to Howell directly by Roe or passed on to him through a network of acquaintances. The 'letter' that has arrived at Madrid, we are given to assume, is the same sort of letter we are reading – a personal exchange among gentlemen. Yet the account follows Roe's so closely that it seems impossible for Howell to have written it without direct reference to the printed letter.[32] Even if we assume that a manuscript copy had made its way to him, the chronology is all wrong: seventeenth-century rates of travel notwithstanding, a well-connected diplomat attached to the most important embassy at the time would be expected to receive major international news of state somewhat before the London proto-newspaper-buying public. Howell's 1645 desire to depict himself in a 1623 world of elite manuscript news has run quite past the point of plausibility. His nineteenth-century editor, Joseph Jacobs, attributes his frequent chronological mistakes to a combination of disordered copy-texts (Howell's letters having been seized, and then returned to him, by Parliament) and a fallible memory of twenty-year-old events,[33] but even supposing that Howell in 1645 honestly believed Osman's death to have occurred in the spring of 1623, we still must wonder why he chose

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Stanford Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), I, pp. 189-93.

[31] Howell, *Epistolae Ho-Elianae,* I, p. 169.

[32] Indeed, in an editorial process not unlike Howell's own, the text of Roe's letter had been printed yet again in Roe's 1631 addition to Richard Knolles's very popular 1603 *Generall Historie of the Turkes* (London: printed for Adam Islip, 1631; EEBO STC (2nd ed.) / 15054), pp. 1406-13.

[33] Howell, *Epistolae*, I, pp. lxxv-lxxxii.

to preface Roe's account to make it fit into this particular moment in his own history of the Match.

One implication is clear: Howell sees in the 1622 story of Osman a type of the violent ambition and lawless popular uprising against kingly rule he perceives around him in 1645, recalling the assassination of Buckingham in 1628 and even prophesying the execution of Charles in 1649. The allegory is not hard to see, and Howell belabors the point:

> This fresh Tragedy makes me give over wondering at anything that ever I heard or read, to shew the lubricity of *mundan* Greatness, as also the fury of the Vulgar, which, like an impetuous Torrent, gathers strength by degrees as it meets with divers Dams, and being come to the height, cannot stop itself: for when this rage of the Soldiers began first, there was no design at all to violate or hurt the Emperor, but to take from him his ill Counsellors; but being once a-foot, it grew by insensible degrees to the utmost of outrages (I:179-180).

Planted inside the story of the Spanish Match, it emphasises both the high stakes of Charles's diplomatic game and the danger he courted in so strongly flouting the anti-Catholic mood of the English population. Obvious, too, is the conventional use of Oriental settings to suggest situations closer to home. Recent scholarship has emphasised the complex ways in which the Ottoman lands were used on the early-modern English stage to engage with contemporary anxieties about religion, commerce, and other practices of identity.[34] When considering 'this fresh Tragedy', Howell and his audience would certainly remember recent stage tragedies such as Thomas Goffe's *The Raging Turk, or Bajazet* the Second (1631) and *The Couragious Turk, or Amurtth the First* (1632), Fulke Greville's *Alaham* and *Mustapha* (written late in the reign of Elizabeth, but published in 1633), and William Cartwright's *The Royall Slave* (1639), as well as such French heroic romances in prose as Madeline de Scudéry's *Ibrahim, ou L'Illustré Bassa* (1641).[35] Many more had been written, printed, and performed earlier in the preceding decades. As Burton has noted, 'the majority of the Turkish plays engage the world they purport to describe via ahistorical, often implausible fictions, forged from the triangulation of anxieties,

[34] Daniel Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570-*1630 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp 13-19 and 30-34; Jonathan Burton, *Traffic and Turning: Islam and English Drama, 1579-1624* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), pp. 28-33; Matthew Dimmock, *New Turkes* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 3-9.

[35] Vitkus, p. 211, n. 59; R.M. Cushman, 'Concerning Fulke Greville's (Lord Brooke's) Tragedies, *Alaham* and *Mustapha*', *Modern Language Notes* 24.6 (1909), 180-1.

desires, and real material conditions'.[36] When Howell refers to the 'almost tragical news', he thus speaks quite literally, invoking a popular connection between real news from the Ottoman court and fictional stories presented on stage.

Indeed, following Roe's lead, Howell's Oriental tale hinges not just on violence and revenge in high places, but on visible emotion. In a striking scene, Howell describes the Turkish soldiers' rebellion:

> The next day they found out *Osman*, and brought him before *Mustapha,* who excused himself with Tears in his Eyes for his rash attempts, which wrought tenderness in some but more scorn and fury in others; who fell upon the *Capi Aga*, with other Officers, and cut them in pieces before his Eyes.[37]

Even more intensely than his report from Madrid, Howell's version of the events in Constantinople takes its aesthetic cues from the theatre, imagining the contending monarchs as players emoting before a surly and difficult plebeian crowd. In Howell's eyes, Turkish politics – already presented by Roe as a romance – allow theatrical kingship to flourish in a purer and more emotionally gripping form than even the court of Spain, where despite his best efforts to cast Charles as a storybook hero he is still irritated by the problems of 'private Subjects'. The more distant the source of the news, the more it conforms to Howell's true notion of what news ought to be: a spectacle which, despite his pose as a competent, involved gentleman, places the reader in the position of spectator, not participant. The Turkey of 1623, in Howell's mind, lies so far from the English public sphere of 1645 in which he writes that its politics and history may be discussed as abstractions and ideals, unaffected by the reality of political discourse. Instead, he emphasises the act of looking on. Yet it is only the print public sphere that allows that retrospective fantasy to exist.

To the politics of elite connection and of polemical publication, then, Howell adds a third idea of political practice, a form of escapist royal-watching that is meant to seem utterly opposed to the scrum of hack-writing in which his book takes obvious part. In fact, the court intrigue Howell imagines among the Turks is the ideal to which his publishing efforts paradoxically aspire. Even as he trumpets his own importance as a peer to the peers who determine the destiny of a nation, and even as he writes history as a broadside in the pamphlet wars around him, he links that history to the stage fantasy of far-off

[36] Burton, p. 33.

[37] Howell, *Epistolae Ho-Elianae,* I, pp. 177-8.

Turkey, where the rise and fall of central personages seems ordained by the rules of the genre.

What most astonishes about Howell's Turkish digression is its apparent lack of irony. Though the passage explicitly compares its story to stage tragedy, there is no sense that this might be an inappropriate or ridiculous way of writing history; nor does it give any sign that the violation of chronological verisimilitude might strike readers as in any way odd. While Howell's letters abound with forced metaphors and facile wit, there is no indication that the inclusion of Roe's story is itself to be seen as a clever move. Instead, heroic tragedy seems as viable a way of thinking about public events as any other. Indeed, its formal limitations represent for Howell an ideal political order, one in which the chief actors and their significant actions can be unquestioningly known. Howell's book would have us believe that no matter what other circumstances might obtain in his public career, the world really *ought* to work according to the conventions of tragedy. In the collision of his three modes of writing – as political action, as documentary history, and as escapist entertainment – we can see Howell's uncertain relation to the world around him. His royalist ideology moves him to focus all attention on the monarch, while his elitist aspirations demand that he prove his credentials as a gentleman insider, dropping names extravagantly and using the idea of the letter itself to brag of his connections. Yet here he is, writing for money, in direct conversation with the sorts of people he most despises. With this contradiction driving him, it is little wonder that he should wish to see his story in ideal terms, beyond the realities of political life in England, obscuring his function as a print publicist by means of a different, theatrical logic. Writing amidst a flood of domestic information in print – in which, for the first time, the proceedings of Parliament were made widely available to a print audience[38] – Howell nostalgically imagines a world in which importance is much more obvious, visible, and clearly defined, where to watch is to know what is worth watching.

Howell's historical drama, then, presents the code of the gentlemanly insider as a kind of foil for the unbecoming curiosity of the print-reading outsider. The illusion of epistolary form – that is, the belief that a letter reports events as they happen, without greater pattern – is put in the service of a retrospective narrative that makes historical events as inevitable as those of stage tragedy. Like many other writers, Howell practices the reverse of what he preaches, pretending to operate within an exclusive social group while in fact making himself available for all takers. He is able to believe in a public sphere made of men, in which the manuscript correspondent *is* the media, while really operating in a public sphere

[38] Raymond, *Invention of the Newspaper*, p. 13; Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture*, p. 47.

made of spaces and technologies.[39] Perhaps his undeniably real imprisonment in the midst of war and political turmoil justified his confidence in his own inherent importance. Perhaps that confidence was simply a pose for political ends. And perhaps he simply was not able to see that the world of print really had changed around him. But in his firm belief in spectacle despite his exile to the printed word, Howell embodies the experience of media change in aesthetic form.

[39] As Zaret has argued, a 'Paradox of Innovation' is often apparent in seventeenth century print culture, in which new modes of communication are generally not recognised as such by those who are in the process of inventing them; see *Origins of Democratic Culture,* pp. 6, 10, 40-2.