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Notes from an Eighteenth Century Courtship

Cynthia Booth Ricciardi
Bridgewater State College

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Author’s note:
In 1997 I had the pleasure of seeing The Delicate Distress by Elizabeth Griffith (1727–1793), which I co-edited with Susan Staves, return to print after over two hundred years’ obscurity. Griffith was a prolific and popular author: in addition to translations of French works, she has to her credit several plays which were produced in London; an analysis of Shakespeare’s plays; three popular epistolary novels; and, finally, a conduct book, Essays, Addressed to Young Married Women (1782). Her literary career began, however, with the 1757 publication of letters she and her husband Richard exchanged during their unusually charged courtship. Twelve years later, they had “revised and enlarged” the first two volumes through several new editions, and accumulated four more volumes. I am currently developing an annotated critical edition of the first two volumes of A Series of Genuine Letters between Henry and Frances.

Sir,
You have behaved with great dishonour. You have shewed my letters to ----, and you could not have had any temptation to this but what was disengenuous: for it was impossible for a person of illiberal education to form any sort of judgement from them, except what must be to the disadvantage of my character.
Farewel for Life,
Frances.

So ended (temporarily) a clandestine correspondence between Elizabeth ‘Frances’ Griffith and Richard ‘Henry’ Griffith, who during their lifetimes became one of Ireland’s—and England’s—most renowned literary couples. That they did so was a consequence of publishing that correspondence, inviting eighteenth-century readers to ride the seasaw of their courtship. Audiences in the twenty-first century who are entertained by the dating exploits on ‘Bachelorettes’ and ‘Blind Date’ likely differ little from their eighteenth-century counterparts, who made ‘Henry and Frances’ both best-selling authors and household names. In the Griffiths’ era, as now, published personal correspondence allowed the reading public to glimpse the intimate details of others’ lives, whether to identify with them, exclaim over them, or hold them as models for their own behavior.

The latter category describes the works of Richard and Elizabeth Griffith, whose best-selling Genuine Letters propelled them, if not to fortune, at least to fame. The early correspondence has all the elements of a Hollywood reality show: She is a ‘sprightly’ middle-class girl in her early twenties, of no significant fortune, living in Dublin under the protection of an aunt; he is a self-educated man of limited means in his early thirties, a self-confessed libertine interested only in an ‘indulgence of fond affection.’

Despite the risks to her reputation and her future well-being, Elizabeth allows herself to be drawn into a correspondence with Richard. From the outset, he makes no effort to conceal his intention to make her his mistress. For Elizabeth’s part, it is clear that while she takes pleasure in the intellectual discourse his letters afford her, she is made uneasy by his advances. On the pages of their correspondence, entwined among the philosophical allusions, the conflict grows, and her sometimes plaintive displays of emotion contrast sharply against his more reserved, intellectual arguments. In one early instance, he replies to one of her letters with a rejection of a ‘Platonic’ relationship:

...[N]othing you can say, or any one else can do, will make me Amends for the want of your Company, if you would be as kind when present, as you express yourself in Absence; but, as I have good Reason to think you Coquette in this Matter, I swear it is most cruel Treatment, to give me Hopes, which you have not Generosity or Courage to fulfil.... [A]nd tho’ I can fast a Day upon a Page of Epictetus, yet I could not live one Night upon all the Volumes of Plato (Letter II).

Such allusions disturb Elizabeth deeply, leaving her uncertain and emotional. In her first letter, after Richard has visited, she writes:

...I begin to hate you and myself, for being one Moment uneasy about a Man, who perhaps hardly remembers me enough to forget me... These Thoughts... do not proceed from any slight Opinion I have of your Sincerity, but a mortal Apprehension that neither my Sense or Merits can purchase your Esteem, without which your Love would shock me (Letter I).
Without which your Love would shock me. Her phrase rings with reproach, but it is apparent that Richard, at least at this juncture, hears it merely as part of the ‘game’ which he has obviously played before. Underestimating her resolve, he sets out the argument, reminiscent of Andrew Marvell’s poem, beginning

‘Dear Sprightly’: I forget whether it is your favourite Rochefoucauld or La Bruyère, who says, ‘there may be an Affection between Persons of different sexes, without any further Desire or Thought; but as they certainly regard each other, as of different Genders, this cannot be called pure Love, or pure Friendship, but is a mixed Affection of a third sort.’ Now... since our Friendship cannot be pure, let us stick to that Passion which may be so, and is, in effect, but a warmer and more intimate Friendship. Your only Reason, for preferring Platonics must be, that you imagine they may last longer than Love; ... but he, that is born of Woman now-a-days, has but a short Time to live; therefore it must certainly be better Oeconomy to make our Joys exceed, in Exquisiteness, what they fall short of in Duration.... We should do in Life, as Gamblers do at Play, push away for what they call the great Game; but, finding the Run against us, we [then]... play our Cards for the Aftergame. Now, when we find Love beginning to decline, we may shuffle a good sober Friendship out of it; but Love was never pieced out of a decayed Friendship. So that indeed, my Dear, you seem to begin at the wrong End, and have both Reason and Nature against you (Letter XI).

Even a modern reader, jaded by the promiscuous behavior shown in television shows and feature films, might wonder at the success of such a ploy. Elizabeth, of course, will have none of it. In the next letter, she makes her position clear, describing a version of love which elaborates her fears:

Love, which is not founded on Esteem, can neither be real, nor permanent; it is only the Effect of a wanton Caprice, and is more likely to terminate in Distrust than Friendship. Pure Love, like pure Gold, cannot subsist without an alloy; which, tho’ it debases the ideal Value, enhances the true one, by making them both (Love and Gold) more fixed, and fit for Use;... the Love which does not begin in Friendship will never end there. But Friendship is independent, and requires no mixture, no Alloy; it’s Purity, contrary to the Nature of Gold, is it’s Strength and Stability; nor is it without it’s Elevations and Transports; the mutual Contemplation of Truth, and the Communication of Knowledge, being higher Enjoyments than mortal Sense is capable of... As Friendship then is independent of Love, and self-sufficient in it’s own Nature, why may it not subsist, from it’s own Purity, between Persons of different Sexes?... tho’ with the Advantage of more Delicacy on one Side, and more Respect on the other... This Platonick Love... is of the Nature of that Affection,... which consists of such a guardian Benevolence on one Side and such a Gratitude on the other, as makes the most charming Society in the World.

Recant, thou Prophane! Nor offend me again by so much as hinting at that Love, which is independent of Friendship. (Letter XII).

Here Richard, a veteran of many such campaigns and undoubtedly surprised at her firm resistance, retreats gracefully, admonishing:

Never suspect my Friendship, or my Love, after the Assurance I gave you once, that, when I grow indifferent in either, I will ingenuously confess it to you; though, How should I have Courage enough to declare a Thing, for which I can never have a Reason?

This emotional sparring, with their literary discussions of Plato, Pliny, Cowley, and others, sets the pattern for their ‘courtship’ correspondence during the next four years. But in 1750, to her shock and dismay, Elizabeth learns that Richard has shown someone else her letters. Her reputation thus endangered, she responds with the letter beginning ‘Sir, You have behaved with great dishonour...’ and their relationship enters into what Richard calls an ‘Interregnum’ of many months. For Elizabeth, Richard’s breach of trust emphasizes her vulnerability and renews her fears that his intentions are ultimately, unbearably, different from hers. Her distress is obvious, and although their correspondence resumes, she is soon pushed to her limit by her aunt’s decision to move to England. Elizabeth issues an ultimatum to her suitor:

Answer me now, my Heart’s dear Harry, with Truth and Justice, for Reason prompts the Question and Honour will not daily longer, can you indeed lay your Hand on that dear Breast, where Fanny’s Heart inhabits, and tell me you have Love, Honour, and Constancy enough, to repay all her past, present, and future sufferings, by seriously intending, whenever it is in your Power, to make her your Wife?... Let not a false Delicacy to yourself, or an affected Tenderness for me, prevent your speaking your Sentiments with that frankness, which, I think, I ever merited from you... (Letter CXXIV).
Her letter turns the tide, ending the long conflict. Richard finally understands the consequences of encouraging her to love him, and encouraging her to open her mind to him. His subsequent proposal is lost to posterity, but in a note included with his Will, he remarks,

I was not over-reached into this match by art, nor hurried into it by passion; but, from long experience of her sense and worth, I reasoned myself into it...
I found I had so engaged her Affections that no other Man could make her happy, and so dallied with her Character, that only myself could repair it. Thus Honour, Justice, and Generosity concurred, to what my Love and Reason had before approved (following Letter CCLXXXV).

Their marriage, as described in print, was exemplary. Letters following their wedding on May 12, 1751 show a remarkable change in Elizabeth’s demeanor. No longer an uncertain maid but a legally recognized wife, she writes without any trace of her previous uncertainty, and their correspondence focuses on their intellectual pursuits, their authorship, their children, and their mutual esteem. However, lest modern readers be dismayed at a mundane outcome to an adventurous relationship, it is important to note that their marriage remained secret for more than a year because of Richard’s interest in a pending lawsuit. Anticipating this possibility, Elizabeth invited an unimpeachable witness to the legality of her position: the Countess of Cork, Lady Orrery, attended her wedding ceremony.

Eventually, Richard was able to acknowledge both his wife and subsequent children, and the Griffiths settled down to a somewhat nomadic life. To claim that the couple “lived happily ever after” would be to ignore their troubles over Richard’s continually failing businesses, their consistent financial woes, and their difficulties setting up their son in apprenticeship. Through every setback, however, the two supported and encouraged one another. Richard traveled extensively for business reasons, and the couple amassed a copious collection of letters. That Elizabeth continued to believe in their union is clear in a letter from the final volume of their correspondence, more than twenty years after their marriage:

I am as thoroughly convinced, as you can be, that no other Man on Earth could have rendered me so happy, or ever have drawn forth even the small Merits I possess. You are my Polar Star, and my Love the Needle, that has pointed every Action of my Life, and thought of my Heart, to you, and you alone (Letter DCLXXVII).

Considering that Elizabeth spent five years alternating between delight and despair until Richard recognized the wisdom of marrying her, it is not surprising that the bulk of her later work focuses on relationships before and after marriage. Her final book, Essays, Addressed to Young Married Women brings her full circle, from anxious ingenue to settled matron. In the last essay of that work, she advises “every young married woman... [to] seek the friend of her heart in the husband of her affection... Happy are the pairs so joined... blessed are they who are thus doubly united!”

With access to the couple’s early correspondence, both historical and modern audiences can know the depth of feeling and experience with which Elizabeth Griffith penned those words.

—Cynthia Booth Ricciardi, BSC ’81 is a Visiting Lecturer in the Department of English

Most of Elizabeth Griffith’s work, like these two plays performed in London, focus on relationships in courtship and marriage.