REVIEW
Literary Networking

Lindsay O'Neill

Paul Trolander
Literary Sociability in Early Modern England: The Epistolary Record
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IN *LITERARY SOCIABILITY in Early Modern England: The Epistolary Record*, Paul Trolander interrogates the process of literary production by focusing on the role of networks and sociability. He considers a broad swath of time, 1620 to 1720, and has consulted almost 29,000 letters, from which he has developed a database. Relying on a large number of letters—inherent evidence of sociability—he seeks to advance an argument that "literary sociability" was at the forefront of literary production in this period. He states that his chief reason for doing so is to counter the view that a wide chasm divided print and manuscript production. But his evidence appears to go even further: in the world of literary sociability he presents, networks were more important than authors. For Trolander, it is networks of authors, facilitators, and consumers that actually produced works and determined their worth—which meant that the author was but one cog in the system. Apart from the relationship of manuscript to print, Trolander thus engages with a number of other current scholarly issues, including the increasing popularity of correspondence as a source, the growing interest in networks, and the value and appropriate use of large amounts of data.

The first four chapters of the book are essentially methodological discussion, a substantial proportion of which is devoted to a rationale for the database itself. The first chapter sets out the theoretical stakes, arguing that examining literary sociability makes it clear that manuscript and print production were not mutually exclusive, and in fact worked together. Focusing on literary creation as a process, Trolander argues, has the helpful effect of drawing attention away from works as material objects, a shift that helps to erase much of the divide between print and manuscript. The second

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chapter defends the boundaries of the study, both the selection of evidence and the delimitation of the period under investigation, by showing that the technologies necessary for literary sociability—paper, literacy, "letteracy," print, and the post—were already in place and not subject to major upheavals between 1620 and 1720.

The third chapter moves closer to the letters themselves and their creators, laying out the different roles, or reputations, of the correspondents. Trolander first categorizes them as authors or non-authors and then assigns them positions within those designations, dividing authors by field (for example, antiquarians or religious writers) and non-authors by their actions (for example, consumption or regulation). Chapter 3 then demonstrates that letters were usually exchanged between those belonging to similar fields and furthermore that class often correlated with those fields. Chapter 4 looks closely at the way writers used letters, focusing on the language of sociability and friendship and its role in maintaining links between individuals. This point, in turn, shows that letters connected chains of people rather than merely writer and addressee. This sets the stage for the following chapters, in which Trolander turns to the role and importance of networks.

In chapters 5 and 6 Trolander uses the database to reveal the structure and function of networks. In chapter 5 he categorizes letters not by the authors' reputations, as in previous chapters, but by the *actions* they seek to bring about. He assigns individuals "subject positions," such as author, third party, or proxy, which he claims defined the way they acted in a specific situation. Literary production emerged from these overlapping and multiple engagements rather than being defined by the author. Focusing on the actions that he sees embedded in letters, Trolander attempts to show that such epistles were part of a system that sought to get particular things done, and what they got done is the main focus of chapter 6. Here he shows that correspondents wrote letters to assist authors, to share opinions and news, and to help or hinder the reputations of others. Trolander finds these workaday actions critical for the production of works and the spreading of news, but notes that networks associated with these functions were usually quite small and centered around authors rather than consumers.

The last two chapters attempt to move beyond sociability as it relates to literary production and to examine its larger implications. Chapter 7 addresses the social, cultural, and economic worth sustained by networks. Economically, they mattered, since printers would be more willing to take on a work backed by a strong network; but such networks also held a deeper, cultural worth in the minds of their participants, Trolander observes. The members of these networks saw themselves as a part of a larger mission to increase the cultural capital of the nation. He points to the establishment of libraries, such as John Dee's and the Bodleian, as representative of this mission. The final chapter tracks the networks in motion, showing that they did not work in isolation but rather used and depended upon each other and increasingly turned to institutions, like the Royal Society, to accomplish their goals.

At the beginning of the book Trolander explains that he "originally undertook the present study in order to understand how authors and consumers in Early Modern

England experienced the transition from a manuscript to a print culture" (1). That transition does lurk in the background throughout: his analysis of the epistolary networks that connected authors, readers, and representatives of the book trade, among others, does nicely reveal links between manuscript and print. But the engine driving this book appears to me to be Trolander's stronger interest in the power of networks and literary sociability. The power of networks has received less attention than the relationship between manuscript and print (he reviews some of that scholarship on pp. 12–13), so this is a helpful perspective.

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Scholars interested in information exchange and knowledge production have recently emphasized the role of networks. Historians of science have found them quite useful in explaining how ideas traveled and were processed, especially at a distance.[1] That historians of science were highly critical of the idea of a print revolution probably facilitated their embrace of the network as an alternative approach to the dissemination of knowledge.[2] Historians interested in trade and information exchange have also relied on networks and sociability to explain how business was accomplished and information spread.[3] According to these historians, networks were critical to the production of scientific ideas and trade as well as literary works, which suggests a widespread reliance on networks in the early modern period.[4]

While Trolander does not engage with the work that has been done on networking in studies of trade and the production of knowledge, his book brings literary production into this arena. It should be pointed out here that only around 10 percent of the almost 29,000 letters that Trolander considers referenced literary production (4)—

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1. For example, see L. W. B. Brockliss, *Calvet's Web: Enlightenment and the Republic of Letters in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford, 2002); David S. Lux and Harold J. Cook, "Closed Circles or Open Networks?: Communicating at a Distance during the Scientific Revolution," *History of Science* 36, no. 2 (1998): 179–211; and E. C. Spary, *Utopia's Garden: French Natural History from Old Regime to Revolution* (Chicago, 2000).

2. Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago, 1998), 1–6; and Adrian Johns, "How to Acknowledge a Revolution," *American Historical Review* 107, no. 1 (2002): 107–25.

3. For networks in the world of trade, see David Hancock, "The Triumphs of Mercury: Connection and Control in the Emerging Atlantic Economy," in *Soundings in Atlantic History: Latent Structures and Intellectual Currents, 1500–1830*, ed. Bernard Bailyn and Patricia L. Denault (Cambridge, Mass., 2009), 112–40; David Hancock, "The Trouble with Networks: Managing the Scots' Early Modern Madeira Trade," *Business History Review* 79, no. 3 (2005): 467–91; and Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven, Conn., 2009). For networks and news exchange, see Lindsay O'Neill, "Dealing with Newsmongers: News, Trust, and Letters in the British World, ca. 1670-1730," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (2013): 215–33; and *News Networks in Seventeenth-Century Britain and Europe*, ed. Joad Raymond (London, 2006).

4. For a critique of this approach, see David A. Bell, "This Is What Happens When Historians Overuse the Idea of the Network," *New Republic*, October 25, 2013, http://www.newrepublic.com /article/ 114709/world-connecting-reviewed-historians-overuse-network-metaphor.

which makes one curious as to what the other 90 percent aimed to accomplish. While I certainly did not expect Trolander to deal with that other 90 percent within the compass of a study on literary sociability, the remainder of the evidence does point to a larger context left undeveloped.

One of the notable differences between Trolander's networks and those explored by historians of science and trade is the relative importance of distance. Historians who turn to networks and use letters as evidence are usually attempting to explain how those separated by distance exchanged information and nurtured ties, but Trolander is relatively silent on this matter (71).[5] This is reflected in the way he deals with the letters themselves. What, if not for distance, caused these individuals to write letters to accomplish their business? Were letters written to some while visits were accorded others? The subtitle of this book, "The Epistolary Record," may indeed suggest an acknowledgment that letters are only one way to investigate literary sociability, since finding evidence of face-to-face interaction is more difficult. I would have nonetheless appreciated more analysis of the specific nature of epistolary sociability. Trolander does engage deeply, especially at the beginning of the book, with the way letters constructed and therefore inhibited the interaction between correspondents, and he refers to the need to learn letter-writing etiquette as explored in studies by Eve Tavor Bannet and Susan Whyman.[6] In later portions of the book, however, the important fact that letters filter sociability and were a deliberately chosen medium slips away.

Yet losing focus on epistolary sociability opens up space for the networks to hold center stage in the last chapters of Trolander's study, where he offers useful correctives to the way scholars have typically approached letters. Letters have often been seen as "wholes" tied to one person—as places where individual identities are formed or negotiated—or as material gifts exchanged between two people.[7] Instead, Trolander recognizes that one letter might have set in motion multiple actions and connections to individuals. It might, for example, offer comments on one individual's manuscript, ask for financial assistance from another, and thank a third person. Trolander sees letters as doing many things for many people, a shift that highlights networks and actions—a refreshing change.

The expansive base of evidence on which Trolander relies is simultaneously a strength and a weakness. Examining and dissecting almost 29,000 letters is a considerable feat, and Trolander has thought about these letters and their writers in new and creative ways and from multiple perspectives. But the database often seems an end in itself: defending it and justifying its categories at times seem to dominate the work, a not-atypical problem in studies that present large amounts of data. At times, Trolander's larger points are not apparent, either left unstated, submerged in data, or unmoored from other points to which they should be explicitly linked. I often found myself excited by a specific point and yet unsure of how it was connected to the larger argument. For example, chapter 7 has an interesting discussion of the way members of literary networks saw themselves as adding to the cultural capital of the nation, as noted above; but how this builds upon comparably broad assertions elsewhere in the book is not explored. Perhaps the desire to increase the cultural capital of the nation through institutions like libraries changed the way networks functioned—after all, as Trolander argues in his final chapter, networks increasingly relied on organizations like the Royal Society. Drawing these threads together, either through a general conclusion or shorter summaries at the ends of chapters, would have helped clarify the larger implications of this study. I would also have been interested to see Trolander situate his notion of literary sociability in relation to the scholarship on networks and networking generally, instead of taking the connections between manuscript and print as the leading edge of his argument. This might have allowed what I see as this book's main contribution—the rising importance of networks and the displacement of the author—to shine. *Literary Sociability in Early Modern England: The Epistolary Record* nonetheless enhances the current view of literary production, which is fruitfully seen as a process dependent on networks of individuals.

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[5] See especially Sarah M. S. Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 2008).

[6] See Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1680–1820* (Cambridge, 2005), xvii; and Susan Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers, 1660–1800* (Oxford, 2009), 9.

[7] For letters and identity, see Konstantin Dierks, *In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America* (Philadelphia, 2009); and Toby L. Ditz, "Shipwrecked; or, Masculinity Imperiled: Mercantile Representations of Failure in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *Journal of American History* 81, no. 1 (1994): 51–80. The study that most directly addresses the place of the letter as a gift is *Sent as a Gift: Eight Correspondences from the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Alan McKenzie (Athens, Ga., 1993).

LINDSAY O'NEILL is Assistant Professor (Teaching) at the University of Southern California and the author of *The Opened Letter: Networking in the Early Modern British World* (2014).