

Rielly K. Orrell

Lady Rachel Russell's Beloved, Seditious Husband: Letter-Writing and Advocacy in Seventeenth-Century England

ABSTRACT: *This article explores the language and methods utilized by the seventeenth-century British noblewoman Lady Rachel Russell (c. 1636–1723) in her (ultimately unsuccessful) efforts to save her seditious husband Lord William Russell (1639–1683) from execution after the Rye House Plot (1683). Primarily by analyzing the correspondence between Lady Russell and the English Crown, the author argues that Lady Russell leveraged “soft power” to advocate for her husband and (successfully) promote the interests of her children, especially by wielding her character, her gender, and her social status with careful intention.*

KEYWORDS: *early modern history; England; Rye House Plot; Lady Rachel Russell; Lord William Russell; Charles II of England; William III of England; Mary II of England; letters; advocacy*

Introduction

She sat beside her husband during his trial, wrote petitions, called in favors, and threw herself, tears and all, at the feet of the king, but she still could not save him from the executioner's axe. Facing a life without her beloved husband, Lady Rachel Russell set out to defend Lord William Russell's reputation and secure her children's place in the English peerage by using every tool at her disposal. Lady Russell was born Rachel Wriothesley sometime in 1636, descending from two noble families.¹ Her first husband, Lord Francis Vaughan, had died in 1667, leaving Rachel a wealthy young widow.² She married her second husband, Lord William Russell, the second son of the (future) 1st Duke of Bedford in 1669.³ The two were passionately in love and quickly settled into a life of marital bliss, resulting in four children.⁴ Dozens of love letters written by Lady Russell survive, in which she often credits her husband for her “perfect happiness” and writes about her hope for them to “be together to a good old age.”⁵ Unfortunately, this happiness was stripped away in the course of a mere four weeks in 1683.

Due to his Whig connections and political activities, Lord Russell was implicated in the failed Rye House Plot of 1683—a scheme to assassinate King Charles II (r. 1660–1685) and his brother James, the Duke of York (and future James II, r. 1685–1688), on their way back to Westminster from watching horse races at Newmarket.⁶ Lord Russell was committed to the

¹ She was born to the 4th Earl of Southampton and Rachel de Massue, a member of the powerful Massue de Rouvigny family. See Catherine Stepney, *Memoirs of Lady Russell and Lady Herbert, 1623–1723* (Adam and Charles Black, 1898), 18.

² Stepney, *Memoirs*, 25.

³ Lois G. Schwoerer, *Lady Rachel Russell: “One of the Best of Women”* (1988; Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 31.

⁴ Three of their children survived to adulthood: Rachel Cavendish (1674–1725), Catherine Manners (1676–1711), and their son Wriothesley Russell (1680–1711). Their first child, a daughter named Anne, had died in infancy (1671–1672).

⁵ Rachel Russell, Dorothy Sidney Sunderland, and Mary Berry, *Some Account of the Life of Rachael Wriothesley Lady Russell* (Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1819), 6.

⁶ A town 14 miles northeast of Cambridge, world-famous for horse races. John McTague, *Things That Didn't Happen: Writing, Politics and the Counterhistorical, 1678–1743* (Boydell & Brewer, 2019), 87.

Tower of London on June 26, tried on July 13, and executed at Lincoln's Inn Fields on July 21, 1683.⁷ Throughout these four weeks, Lady Russell wrote petitions to secure her husband a better treatment in the Tower,⁸ assembled an experienced legal team, and actively contributed to his trial strategy.⁹ Lady Russell's advocacy continued after her husband's death, as she ordered the printing of Lord Russell's inflammatory final speech on a large scale, cultivated a friendship with the Princess of Orange (later Queen Mary II of England) to help push through her petitions, and fought for her son's right to inherit his grandfather's property and titles. While Lady Russell could not save her husband, she succeeded in winning privileges for him that were rarely given to a prisoner on trial for high treason.

In this article, I explore Lady Russell's letters to understand how she used her writing before, during, and after her husband's trial to advocate for him and his reputation. I argue that Lady Russell intentionally leveraged her character, gender, and social status to support her husband and promote her children's interests. I examine Lady Russell's advocacy predominantly through her own words in the letters she wrote to figures ranging from her husband to the English king (in fact, aspects of Lady Russell's 1683 letter to King Charles II feature in all three sections of this article). In addition, I utilize an epistle written by Lord Russell the night before his execution,¹⁰ an account of his time in the Tower of London by the Scottish cleric (and future Bishop of Salisbury) Gilbert Burnet (1643–1715),¹¹ and a published copy of Lord Russell's final speech.¹² Lady Russell's letters are sourced from two collections, one originally transcribed by Lady Russell's steward Thomas Sellwood and published in 1773,¹³ and another transcribed and published by the English writer Mary Berry (1763–1852) for the Duke of Devonshire in 1819.¹⁴ The Sellwood collection also contains the record of Lord Russell's trial. The original spelling and grammar are preserved in all quotes from these texts, with some minor alterations for clarity.¹⁵ For specific information on the Russells, I have consulted several works by the late historian and Women's Studies scholar Lois G. Schwoerer (1927–2025), which have been instrumental in piecing together the

⁷ Schwoerer, *Lady Rachel Russell*, 103.

⁸ Prior to his execution, Lord Russell was transferred to Newgate Prison.

⁹ Schwoerer, *Lady Rachel Russell*, 108.

¹⁰ George Canning, *An epistle from William Lord Russell, to William Lord Cavendish: By George Canning, of the Middle Temple, Esq.*, 2nd ed. (Printed for the author; and sold by R. and J. Dodsley in Pall-Mall, T. Becket and P.A. De Hondt in the Strand, and C. Henderson at the Royal Exchange, 1763), 13.

¹¹ Gilbert Burnet, *Bishop Burnet's History of his own time: From the Restoration of King Charles II to the Settlement of King William and Queen Mary at the Revolution: To which is prefix'd A Summary Recapitulation of Affairs in Church and State from King James I to the Restoration in the Year 1660*, vol. 1 (Printed for Thomas Ward, 1724), 562.

¹² William Russell, *The Speech of the Late Lord Russel to the Sheriffs Together with the Paper Deliver'd by Him to Them at the Place of Execution, on July 21, 1683* (Printed by John Darby by direction of the Lady Russel, 1683).

¹³ Rachel Russell, *Letters of Lady Rachel Russell; from the manuscript in the library at Woburn Abbey. To which is prefixed, an introduction, vindicating the character of Lord Russell Against Sir John Dalrymple, &c. The fourth edition, corrected. To this edition is added, (not in the London Edition) the trial of Lord William Russell, for high treason; Extracted from the State Trials at large* (1773; Printed for A. Leathley, in Dame-Street, 1774).

¹⁴ Russell et al., *Some Account*.

¹⁵ For example, the use of the "long s" is common in all of the contemporary texts; however, I have replaced this particular character with a "round s."

timeline. Schwoerer's 1985 article, "William, Lord Russell: The Making of a Martyr, 1683–1983,"¹⁶ and her 1988 biography, *Lady Rachel Russell: "One of the Best of Women,"*¹⁷ are utilized throughout. Additionally, I have incorporated works by Susan Wiseman, John McTague, Marguerite B. Hicks, and others to establish context.¹⁸ The article is divided into three sections—titled "Character," "Gender," and "Social Status"—to reveal Lady Russell's intentional use of these three elements in her letter-writing and advocacy.

1. Character: "The Best and Dearest Wife in the World"

Lady Russell was not alone in her love for and skill in letter-writing. Detroit bibliophile Marguerite B. Hicks, in her M.A. thesis, "A Survey of the English Women Writers 1652–1700," asserts that the Restoration Period's "cultured, leisured society" was the perfect environment for aristocratic women to cultivate a letter-writing culture through which they shared news and intimate thoughts, thus categorizing letter-writing under the umbrella of the expected gendered activities for upper-class women.¹⁹ This culture was characterized by relationship building according to proper customs of rank, weaving a web so complicated that literature scholar Paul Trolander has described it as requiring a skillset of "letteracy" to succeed.²⁰ Lady Russell was certainly a good writer, but I believe that it was her skill in "soft power" that allowed her to secure a better future for the memory of her husband and that of her family.²¹ One aspect that she utilized when cultivating her network was her character and, by extension, her own, personal reputation.

Her contemporaries duly noted Lady Russell's virtue, loyalty, and love for her husband, as evidenced in writings about her. Lord Russell endlessly sang the praises of "the Best and Dearest Wife in the World," which I have made the title of this section for its sincerity.²² Alluding to Lady Russell's virtuous persona, Mary Stuart, then the Princess of Orange, wrote to her in 1687, "I have all the esteem for you which so good a character deserves, as I have heard given you by all people."²³ I contend that Lady Russell intentionally leveraged this reputation in her advocacy. Maintaining "a basis in personal virtue" lent her words and actions credibility, which can be seen throughout her husband's court case and beyond.²⁴

¹⁶ Lois G. Schwoerer, "William, Lord Russell: The Making of a Martyr, 1683–1983," *Journal of British Studies* 24, no. 1 (1985): 41–71.

¹⁷ Schwoerer, *Lady Rachel Russell*.

¹⁸ Susan Wiseman, *Conspiracy and Virtue: Women, Writing, and Politics in Seventeenth Century England* (Oxford University Press, 2006); McTague, *Things That Didn't Happen*; Marguerite B. Hicks, "A Survey of the English Women Writers 1652–1700" (M.A. thesis, Wayne [State] University, 1937).

¹⁹ Hicks, "Survey," 183.

²⁰ Paul Trolander, *Literary Sociability in Early Modern England: The Epistolary Record* (University of Delaware Press, 2014), 80.

²¹ "Soft power" describes a more subtle form of diplomacy which focuses on persuasion, as opposed to the more traditional, demand-based "hard power." Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (Public Affairs, 2004), 166.

²² Russell, *Speech*, 4.

²³ Russell, *Letters of Lady Rachel Russell*, 104.

²⁴ Wiseman, *Conspiracy and Virtue*, 326.

Lord Russell's trial was held on July 13, 1683, at The Old Bailey in London.²⁵ Its proceedings have been preserved in Sellwood's collection of Lady Russell's letters and give us a glimpse of the role Lady Russell played during the trial. After deliberating for some time regarding the jury's composition, the following dialogue played out:

"Lord Russell: My lord, may I not make use of any papers I have?
L.C.J.: [Lord Chief Justice, Sir Francis Pemberton]. Yes, by all means.
Attorney General: [Sir Robert Sawyer]. Yes, a servant.
Lord Russell: May I have somebody to write to help my memory?
L.C.J.: Any of your servants shall assist you in writing any thing you please for you.
Lord Russell: My wife is here, My Lord, to do it.
L.C.J.: If my Lady please to give herself the trouble."²⁶

This dialogue not only confirms that Lady Russell was present and beside her husband but also provides a record of her role as her husband's trial secretary. The wife of the accused having a hand in the trial is significant—even "unprecedented," as Lois G. Schwoerer has argued.²⁷ Lady Russell placed herself in a visible position at her husband's side to remind the court of their marriage and piety, thus taking advantage of her virtuous reputation to elicit sympathy while assisting her husband in a material way.²⁸

The day before his execution, Lord Russell wrote an epistle for his friend, Lord William Cavendish (1640–1707). Three stanzas of the poem are dedicated to Lady Russell, commending her efforts to "save her husband's honest name," even though they knew that she could not save his life.²⁹ Lady Russell was well known for her respectable character, whose "heav'nly virtues, and unfading charms" were utilized to great effect in her petitions and letters, giving her more credibility.³⁰ She was considered so trustworthy that, before the trial, she was able to request and was given a list of all the jury members' names.³¹ These examples demonstrate the link between Lady Russell's reputation as a virtuous figure and her actions throughout her husband's trial. She continued to use her character as a tool after Lord Russell's execution.

With the help of his wife and that of the Scottish cleric Gilbert Burnet, Lord Russell penned the speech he was to give just before his execution.³² This speech was highly provocative. In addition to declarations of love for Protestantism and hatred for Catholicism, Lord Russell laid out a final proclamation of his innocence by accusing the government of "kill[ing him] by forms, and subtleties of law," which he dubbed "the worst kind of murther [murder]."³³ In no uncertain terms, he assessed his execution as a judicial murder. While contemporary historians argue that the trial was fair and even generous at times, Lord Russell's speech was

²⁵ Russell, *Letters of Lady Rachel Russell*, 367, 368.

²⁶ Russell, *Letters of Lady Rachel Russell*, 368.

²⁷ Schwoerer, *Lady Rachel Russell*, 111.

²⁸ Schwoerer, *Lady Rachel Russell*, 111.

²⁹ Canning, *Epistle*, 13.

³⁰ Canning, *Epistle*, 13.

³¹ Russell, *Letters of Lady Rachel Russell*, 365.

³² Burnet, *Bishop Burnet's History*, 562.

³³ Russell, *Speech*, 4.

bold and had such a significant impact on popular opinion that it became a thorn in the government's side.³⁴ Immediately, pamphlets emerged to dissect Lord Russell's speech, calling him an "Enrag'd Mad Dog" and other creative nicknames, as pamphleteers slandered him by claiming the speech had not been written by Lord Russell himself.³⁵

Lady Russell addressed this rumor in a strongly worded letter to King Charles II. This letter contains another instance of her relying on her good reputation as a tool. She opened the letter with a bold sentiment: "I find my husband's enemies are not appeased with his blood, but still continue to misrepresent him to your Majesty."³⁶ She then attacked the rumor head-on, testifying that she had personally heard her husband discussing all the topics covered in the speech, thereby vouching for its authenticity as Lord Russell's own words.³⁷ She went on to assert that Gilbert Burnet's account also contained a record of Lord Russell having had these conversations. Her evidence for these claims relied entirely upon her character and testimony. Lady Russell wrote phrases like "I can truly say, and am ready in the solemnest manner to attest," and "the paper, which was written at my request," thereby exhorting the king to recall her personal piety and good character.³⁸ Lady Russell's virtuous traits were not just tied to her reputation, but also to her performance in seventeenth-century gender roles—a topic which I explore next.

2. Gender: "A Woman Amazed with Grief"

Another persuasive element appears in the latter half of Lady Russell's letter to King Charles II, from which this section's title is derived. In her letter-writing, Lady Russell purposefully leveraged gendered language and performance for her benefit. Her letter to the king and her correspondence with the Princess of Orange, Mary Stuart, illuminate the unique power that upper-class women were able to wield through letter-writing.³⁹ Lady Russell utilized her gender performance in a visual sense as well, particularly by highlighting her role as a loving wife and mother during Lord Russell's trial. These actions were intrinsically linked to Lady Russell's gendered position in British society and gave her the persuasive edge she needed to secure some significant victories for her family.

The following excerpt appears at the end of Lady Russell's 1683 letter to King Charles II, written just days after the execution of Lord Russell. It makes up the conclusion of the letter and contains some of the clearest examples of Lady Russell's skill in using her gender as a tool to advocate for her husband's reputation:

"And if after the loss, in such a manner, of the best husband in the world, I were capable of any consolation, your Majesty could afford it by having better thoughts of him, which when I was so importunate to speak with your Majesty, I thought I had some reason to believe I should have inclined you to, not from the credit

³⁴ See Schwoerer, "William, Lord Russell," 54.

³⁵ *A Vindication of the Lord Russell's Speech and Innocence in a Dialogue Betwixt Whig & Tory: Being the Same that was Promis'd to the Observator in a Penny-Post-Letter* (N.p., 1683), 13.

³⁶ Russell, *Letters of Lady Rachel Russell*, 92.

³⁷ Russell, *Letters of Lady Rachel Russell*, 92.

³⁸ Russell, *Letters of Lady Rachel Russell*, 92.

³⁹ Hicks, "Survey," 47.

of my word, but upon the evidence of what I had to say. I hope I have writ nothing in this that will displease your Majesty. If I have, I humbly beg of you to consider it as coming from a woman amazed with grief; and that you will pardon the daughter of a person who served your Majesty's father in his greatest extremities, [and your Majesty in your greatest posts] and one that is not conscious of having ever done any thing to offend you [before.] I shall ever pray for your Majesty's long life and happy reign. Who am, With all humility, May it please your Majesty & c[etera]."⁴⁰

Lady Russell was keenly aware of the risks in sending these words to the king, as she recognized she was asking for a lot. In just a few days, she denounced the widely-circulating rumor that Lord Russell had not written his final speech, and she asked for and was given permission to "set up an escutcheon [i.e., a commemorative shield] in William's honor," which was "unheard of" in the case of an executed traitor whose attainder was supposed to prevent such heraldic memorialization, all while working to ensure that her husband's property would not be seized by the state.⁴¹ Two days after Lord Russell's execution, the Privy Council, "with the king and the Duke of York in attendance," ordered the interrogation of Lady Russell with regard to 2,500 copies of Lord Russell's controversial speech making their way into Bedford.⁴² No record of the interrogation has survived, but this event and the compounding stress of her circumstances surely weighed heavily on her mind as she chose her words. Lady Russell's status as the widow of a convicted traitor made the already daunting task of writing to the king even more difficult. Charles II did nothing to stop the scaffold speech rumor spread by Lord Russell's detractors at court, which may indeed have originated with the government itself.⁴³ The king was openly in favor of executing Lord Russell and is reported to have said to George Legge (c. 1647–1691), the Baron of Dartmouth and Master-General of the Ordnance, "If I do not take his life, he will soon have mine."⁴⁴ Lady Russell may not have heard these words, but she knew Charles II had not looked favorably upon her late husband, and she must have experienced the risks of challenging the government during her interrogation. It is clear she needed to play every card in her hand to advance her goals without offending the king and thereby risking even greater turmoil for herself and her family.

The above excerpt is especially meticulous in its diction, showcasing Lady Russell's use of gendered language. Lady Russell described herself as "a woman amazed with grief" and the "daughter of a person who served your Majesty's father."⁴⁵ She intentionally connected her gender with her emotional state, aiming to elicit sympathy for her position as a grieving widow to lessen the impact of her bold tone. Lady Russell described the death of the "best husband in the world" as pushing her to become uncharacteristically "importunate" (i.e., overly persistent) to excuse her bold words and actions.⁴⁶ The deliberate attention to diction reveals her care in drafting this letter.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Russell, *Letters of Lady Rachel Russell*, 93.

⁴¹ Schwoerer, *Lady Rachel Russell*, 108.

⁴² Schwoerer, *Lady Rachel Russell*, 138.

⁴³ Schwoerer, *Lady Rachel Russell*, 138.

⁴⁴ Schwoerer, *Lady Rachel Russell*, 130.

⁴⁵ Russell, *Letters of Lady Rachel Russell*, 93.

⁴⁶ Russell, *Letters of Lady Rachel Russell*, 93.

⁴⁷ Given its crossed-out sections, this letter is likely a draft, and the final version sent to Charles II is lost.

The use of gendered language is seen more subtly in Lady Russell's correspondence with Mary Stuart. Marguerite B. Hicks regards the act of letter-writing as especially "within the sphere of women's activities," allowing women to share intimate thoughts with each other in a relatively informal way.⁴⁸ Through her letters, Lady Russell built a friendship with the Princess of Orange, who later ascended to the throne and became Queen Mary II of England (r. 1689–1694) after the Glorious Revolution (1688) alongside her co-ruler, King William III (r. 1689–1702).⁴⁹ One of the earliest contacts between the two women appears to be a letter from the Princess of Orange to Lady Russell in 1687. Mary Stuart references a previous letter that has not survived, in which Lady Russell's "kindness [she] shew'd [showed] both to the Prince and myself" earned a great deal of affection from the princess, who emphasized her sympathy for "the sad misfortunes" that Lady Russell had suffered.⁵⁰ Sellwood's collection of letters includes seven pieces of correspondence between Mary Stuart and Lady Russell, with the latter always apologizing for possibly irritating the former with her letters.⁵¹ The two maintained a warm friendship through their epistolary exchanges. In fact, the Princess of Orange often expressed her admiration of Lady Russell with sentiments like, "I shall be glad to show more than by words the esteem I have for you" and "wishing for any occasion to shew you how really I am and always shall be your very affectionate friend."⁵² These tender words certainly paint a pretty picture, and the two may very well have considered themselves friends. However, it is significant to note how often Lady Russell found occasions for Mary Stuart to show her appreciation, especially after the latter had ascended to the English throne.

Both surviving letters from Lady Russell to Queen Mary II include a political request in some form. The first letter, dated July 24, 1691, is filled with friendly sentiments for the queen, along with a request to install Mr. Richard Vaughan (c. 1655–1724, a relative of Lady Russell's first husband, Lord Francis Vaughan) in the position of Auditor of Wales.⁵³ The second, dated October 23, 1691, almost exclusively concerns a petition. Lady Russell made a point to comment that she had held back on presenting it until it was "fit" and now hoped she could present it to the king and queen.⁵⁴ While an argument could be made that this point is moot due to survivorship bias, I assert that—given Lady Russell's sharp social and political skills—it was in her character to intentionally utilize favors or persuasion to achieve her means. This relationship bore fruit quickly after King William III and Queen Mary II had taken power, as seen in the reversal of Lord Russell's attainder "immediately after the revolutionary settlement."⁵⁵ With the encouragement of the king and queen, the House of Lords investigated the circumstances of Lord Russell's trial and declared it a judicial murder in 1689.⁵⁶ In 1694, the government even elevated Lord Russell's father (1616–1700, also named

⁴⁸ Hicks, "Survey," 182.

⁴⁹ Tim Harris, *Revolution: The Great Crisis of the British Monarchy, 1685–1720* (Allen Lane, 2006), 333.

⁵⁰ Russell, *Letters of Lady Rachel Russell*, 104.

⁵¹ Russell, *Letters of Lady Rachel Russell*, 117.

⁵² Russell, *Letters of Lady Rachel Russell*, 117, 224.

⁵³ Russell, *Letters of Lady Rachel Russell*, 223.

⁵⁴ Russell, *Letters of Lady Rachel Russell*, 230–231.

⁵⁵ Schwoerer, "William, Lord Russell," 60.

⁵⁶ Schwoerer, "William, Lord Russell," 60.

William) and styled him the 1st Duke of Bedford, specifically as compensation for Lord Russell's trial and execution.⁵⁷ Lady Russell's friendship with Queen Mary II and her effective use of "soft power" through gendered language certainly helped to win these victories.



Figure 1: George Hayter, *The Trial of William Lord Russell in 1683, 1825?*, oil on canvas, 28 x 43 inches, Ferens Art Gallery, Kingston upon Hull, UK, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Trial_of_William_Lord_Russell_in_1683.jpg.

Lady Russell artfully leveraged both gendered language and gendered performance, as seen with clarity during Lord Russell's trial. Lady Russell rallied experienced lawyers and assembled eleven witnesses for her husband, but her most remembered contribution was visual.⁵⁸ She was present at her husband's side throughout the trial, which was a strategic move planned by herself and Lord Russell's friends.⁵⁹ When Lord Russell was granted the use of a pen and paper, he declared that his wife would take up the role of trial secretary, as discussed earlier. Lady Russell then presumably rose and walked to a table, where she took her place and began to take down Lord Russell's words.⁶⁰ This powerful image can be best understood through a painting by the English artist George Hayter (1792–1871), inspired by the event and created in 1825 (see Figure 1). Lady Russell can be seen seated near the center of the frame, looking up at the Lord Chief Justice, Sir Francis Pemberton (1624–1697), with a quill in hand and ready to take down his words on a few pieces of paper laid out before her. She is the

⁵⁷ Schwoerer, "William, Lord Russell," 60.

⁵⁸ Stepney, *Memoirs*, 59.

⁵⁹ Schwoerer, *Lady Rachel Russell*, 114.

⁶⁰ Stepney, *Memoirs*, 59.

only woman in the room, and the attention she commands in such a central location is unmistakable.

The Russells had orchestrated an unusual scene. As the court turned its attention—even for just a moment—to Lord Russell’s loving wife, while she stood and walked across the room to support her husband, the jury was reminded of the Russells’ happy family unit. The play to elicit sympathy may not have saved Lord Russell’s life, but I believe it may have tempered the room of men at least for a moment, given the slightly softened tone of Pemberton’s, “If my Lady please to give herself the trouble.”⁶¹ The incident was likely preconceived by Lady Russell and their legal team.⁶² While acknowledging that Hayter’s painting was completed 142 years after the event, it is nonetheless a helpful aid to envision the impact of Lady Russell’s appearance and role. Whether or not she wore the angelic white gown shown in the painting (see Figure 1), the image of Lady Russell rising and taking a prominent seat in a courtroom packed with men cannot be overstated.

3. Social Status: “*The Right Honorable Rachel Lady Russell*”

The title for this section comes from a quote written by Thomas Sellwood in the introduction to his collection of letters and demonstrates the formal way to address Lady Russell. As we have seen, Lady Russell made use of her personal character and her gendered position. One aspect of her life that she paid meticulous attention to was her place in the British peerage, which she used to sway others to bestow favors or grace. Lady Russell hailed from two noble lineages (the Wriothesley earls of Southampton and the prominent French Huguenot house of Massue de Rouvigny), then married into the powerful Bedford family (the Russells), and was therefore aware of how to use her position. This skill is seen in Lady Russell’s mass printing of Lord Russell’s speech, the reference to her father’s service in her letter to King Charles II, and a letter promoting her children’s interests and addressed to King William III.

Lord Russell’s final days were spent in prayer, accompanied every day from noon to sundown by the Scottish cleric Gilbert Burnet. Following Lady Russell’s request, Burnet kept a record of everything they discussed and everything that happened up until the fatal day itself.⁶³ Burnet helped Lord Russell write a letter to the king, in which he begged for his imprisonment not to reflect badly on his wife and children. Burnet and Lady Russell were present while Lord Russell penned his scaffold speech a few days before his execution. He “shewed [showed] them [drafts of speech portions] to his Lady” and to Burnet himself “before he writ them out fair.”⁶⁴ Once finished, Lord Russell had four copies of the speech made and signed them.⁶⁵ He gave the original with three copies to his wife and kept one to have on hand at his execution. Lord Russell delivered his speech and calmly laid his head upon the block, where

⁶¹ Russell, *Letters of Lady Rachel Russell*, 368.

⁶² Stepney, *Memoirs*, 59.

⁶³ Burnet, *Bishop Burnet’s History*, 562.

⁶⁴ Burnet, *Bishop Burnet’s History*, 558.

⁶⁵ Burnet, *Bishop Burnet’s History*, 558.

it was cut off in two strokes.⁶⁶ Burnet writes that, within one hour of Lord Russell's execution, the speech was already selling in the streets of London.⁶⁷ How could this even be possible?

Conveniently, the copy available to me includes a telling detail in its colophon.⁶⁸ At the end of the text are the words "Printed by John Darby, by Direction of the Lady Russel. 1683."⁶⁹ Given that a lady of means like Lady Russell would have had the ability to ensure that the speech would have been published without any reference to her name, it is reasonable to consider the actual inclusion of her name in the colophon as intentional and significant. Similar to her visibility and role at Lord Russell's trial, the reference to Lady Russell's name in the publication of her husband's inflammatory speech may have been intended to further elicit public sympathy and stoke the murmurings of injustice that had already begun to emerge. Just her name was enough to stir up the public image of Lady Russell's family's service to the Crown, as well as the powerful connections she was constantly building upon with her letters.

Lady Russell's letter to King Charles II further reveals her skill to leverage her position in the British peerage. She pointed out that she was the "daughter of a person who served your Majesty's father" to soften her bold language at the beginning of the letter. Referencing her father's service to the late King Charles I was a notable choice, as she chose to cross out "and your Majesty in your greatest posts."⁷⁰ While it is unknown why she decided to remove this section, there are clues that can unearth some informed interpretations. Perhaps she believed that by referencing her father's service to the king's father (who, in 1649, had himself been executed for treason during the English Civil War), she could draw a parallel between the "false" charge of treason against Charles I and the biased charge against her late husband. Perhaps this is why she crossed out the "and your Majesty" section, as it detracted from the power of the previous sentiment. Maybe she believed that emphasizing her family's connection to the Stuart dynasty before and after the English Civil War might more effectively prove her family's loyalty to the Crown.

As we have seen earlier, Lady Russell enjoyed great victories for Lord Russell's memory during the reign of King William III and Queen Mary II. Lady Russell, however, still shrewdly sought better futures for her children. She was adept at cultivating and maintaining what Lindsay O'Neill has described as a fluid "epistolary network" that could be leveraged for favors and relied upon for companionship.⁷¹ Lady Russell's network is clearly visible in one of the final pieces in Sellwood's collection. This letter was written by Lady Russell to King William III on

⁶⁶ The executioner, Jack Ketch, did his job so haphazardly that he later published an apology, proclaiming he had not been drunk and that Lord Russell had distracted him. For more on this, see Jack Ketch, *The Apologie of John Ketch, Esq., the Executioner of London, in Vindication of Himself as to the Execution of the Late Lord Russel, on July 21, 1683* (Printed for John Brown, 1683). Ketch's actual authorship of this text is questionable.

⁶⁷ Burnet, *Bishop Burnet's History*, 561.

⁶⁸ A colophon appears at the end of a work containing the publisher's stamp and printer's information.

⁶⁹ Russell, *Speech*, 4.

⁷⁰ Russell, *Letters of Lady Rachel Russell*, 93.

⁷¹ Lindsay O'Neill, *The Opened Letter: Networking in the Early Modern British World* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 78.

March 1, 1701, and it begins by thanking the king for his royal favor bestowed upon Lord Rutland, her daughter Catherine's husband. Following this, Lady Russell wrote the following:

"I earnestly desire my son Bedford may succeed, as he has been first, and early honoured with the marks of your favour. And I hope I may live to see your Majesty has bestowed one more upon him, who appears to me to have no other ambition, except what he prefers above all others, making himself acceptable to your Majesty, and living in your good opinion. I presume to say, I believe there is no fault in his intentions of duty towards your Majesty, nor, I trust, ever will be; and that, as his years increase, his performances will better declare the faithfulness of his mind."⁷²

This portion of the letter most evidently illustrates Lady Russell's astute persuasion skills and her understanding of the power of a title. She referred to her son, Wriothesley, simply by his new title as the 2nd Duke of Bedford. Her father-in-law, the 1st Duke of Bedford, had passed away one year earlier—and had been explicitly elevated to this rank as compensation for Lord Russell's trial and execution.⁷³ So, Lady Russell had good reason to further ingratiate herself with King William III. She stressed that her son's usefulness would only increase with age, evidently intending for him to remain close to the sitting monarch and retain the power so recently bestowed upon the family due to her skills.

The strongest theme seen in this letter is Lady Russell's emphasis on the loyalty of her son and her entire family by extension. Pointing out that her son had "no other ambition" than remaining faithful and dutiful to the Crown was shrewd diplomacy, as she thereby pushed the memory of her husband's conviction of high treason aside in favor of the newly crafted loyal image of her family.⁷⁴ Lady Russell clearly understood how her position in the peerage afforded her powerful connections, and she wanted the same privilege for her children.

Conclusion

Lady Rachel Russell was adept at utilizing various methods to fight for her husband's life and reputation. Leveraging the tools at her disposal—her character, her gender, and her social status—with considerable purpose, she won significant privileges rarely given to a convicted traitor or his kin. Thus, Lady Russell's letter-writing and advocacy won her family continued respect and prosperity. To be fair, an argument could be made that Lady Russell was not intentionally setting out to use aspects of herself as tools and that, instead, her writing was simply a therapeutic outlet for her grief. Certainly, her grief was honest and deeply felt. Her desolate emotional state can be seen in a vast number of letters in both collections. Lady Russell described her grief, writing, "I want him to talk with, to walk with, to eat and sleep with; all these things are irksome to me now; the day unwelcome, and the night so too," with similar sentiments throughout multiple letters.⁷⁵ In 1685, she wrote to her friend and former chaplain Dr. John Fitzwilliam (c. 1630–1699) about her struggle to go on, "especially when

⁷² The original letter that this was transcribed from was found in the king's pocket when he passed away in 1702. Russell, *Letters of Lady Rachel Russell*, 258.

⁷³ Schwoerer, "William, Lord Russell," 60.

⁷⁴ Russell, *Letters of Lady Rachel Russell*, 258.

⁷⁵ Russell, *Letters of Lady Rachel Russell*, 8–9.

one has more than one's own miserable carcass to have a regard for, which while my children are, I have."⁷⁶

However, having analyzed her words and actions, I assert that Lady Russell was a talented diplomat and writer who recognized areas in which she could best help her family. The evidence reveals that Lady Russell's words and actions often took advantage of various strategies to best push her agenda while safeguarding against retaliation. It is my hope that this article has put a spotlight on a woman who may have been forgotten as the unimportant wife of a condemned traitor, were it not for the colorful collection of letters she left behind. While it cannot be known whether her family would have prospered as they did after the Glorious Revolution without Lady Russell's efforts, it can indeed be said that her bold determination protected her family's reputation and ensured their security.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Rielly K. Orrell of Riverside, California, earned his B.A. in History (2023) at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF). He is currently pursuing an M.A. in History at CSUF, where he is a member of the Theta-Pi Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society). He also served as an editor for volume 52 (2025) of "The Welebaethan: A Journal of History." The article published above originated in a graduate research seminar offered by CSUF's Department of History.

⁷⁶ Russell, *Letters of Lady Rachel Russell*, 147.