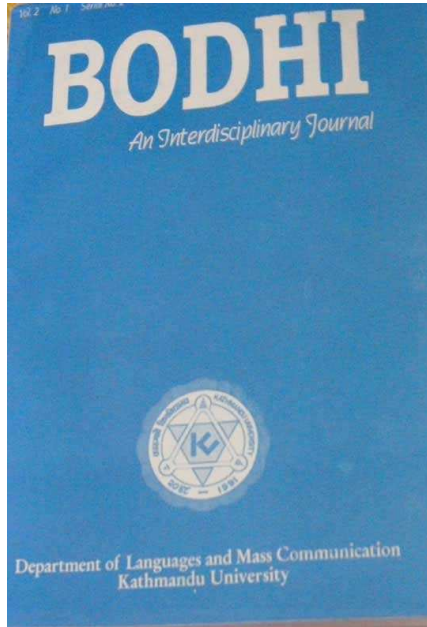


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## Commodification of Personal Letters: The Cultural Politics of Print Industry in Nineteenth Century England

-- Khagendra Acharya

Personal letters, which are written by an individual to specific person(s), are normally not mass communication products. Unless the writer intends to disseminate the letter to a large number through specific person, the domain of letter is what Jürgen Habermas (1981) has called “the immediate milieu of the individual social actor” and thus is not “public sphere” (p. 44). Nonetheless, many personal letters written especially by Romantic writers like William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Jane Austen, exist in many anthologies since nineteenth century, and thus are easily accessible to any interested readers. The cause for this, according to Nichola Deane, is the writers’ “aware [ness] of the commercial value of their letters” (2005, p. 579). Another explanation, though in a different context but on the same matter i.e. analysis of a FM radio program *Mero Katha, Mero Geet*<sup>1</sup>, by Laura Kunreuther postulates, “[it is] a form of urban sociality that is rooted in the public expression and circulation of personal narrative and intimate affairs” (2004, p. 58). Both the explanations, despite their strength to certain extent, do not address the dialectics of authorship and print industry appropriately. Deane’s explanation is post hoc as it locates the cause on the false origin rather than on the real agent of publication. Similarly, Kunreuther’s statement tries to enliven an oldfangled Freudian notion of ‘the talking cure’ to analyze historical reality instead of analyzing the dialectics of material factors. Disagreeing both the views and using *social change theory*<sup>2</sup>, this paper argues that the commodification of personal letters in the nineteenth century is the consequence of cultural politics of print industry.

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<sup>1</sup> *Mero Katha, Mero Geet* is a FM program. Kalyan Gautam, a RJ reads out ‘true life stories’ sent to him by one of his many listeners.

<sup>2</sup> *Social change theory* studies the causes, results, dynamics, and the speed of any change in societies.

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The application of social change theory demands for historical consciousness about the subject of study. Hence, the paper, before concentrating on the major issue: the cultural politics of print industry in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, sketches briefly the history of personal letters.

The genesis of personal letters is traceable at least to the time of writing culture if not to the beginning of human civilization. Looking back, we find many distinguished persons in the history like Isocrates in the fourth century BC, Quintilian in first century BC resorting to it on different occasions. Nonetheless, these instances are sporadic and the major marker of widespread use i.e. letter manuals exist only from around 1000 AD. According to Austin, (2007), “The earliest formulator of rules for letter writing as far as we know was Alberic of Monte Cassino c. 1075. His treatise was of course in Latin. The British Library has a formulary (the original name for a letter-writing manual) which is tentatively dated c. 1207 and was made for the Bishop of Salisbury” (p. 15).

Austin’s study demonstrates how scanty importance was given to letters till the date. And it appears that letters could hardly draw worthy attention despite the existence of manuals till the end of fifteenth century. Changes are visible only then. “As early as the 16th century,” Goldsmith (1989) says, “scholars made personal letter writing an object of formal study, recognizing the epistolary as an authentic literary genre” (p. 48). Erasmus wrote a treatise on letter writing for his English pupils in Paris: *Libellus de conscribendisepistolis*. This was first printed in England in 1521. Following his models, many other writers produced the manuals in this century. Of them Charles Hoole’s *A Century of Epistles English and Latin*, William Fulwood’s *The Enemies of Idleness* and Angel Day’s *English Secretorie* were the best-known manuals. The publication of Nicholas Breton’s volume of model letters, *A Poste with a Packet of Madde Letters*, in 1602 marks a drastic transformation. “From the later half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century,” Briggs & Burke say, “treaties on the art of letter writing published in

large numbers” (2005, p. 37). The popularity of letter manuals can easily be estimated when we consider the involvement of many great writers. In 1725 Daniel Defoe’s “The Complete English Tradesman”, and in 1741 Samuel Richardson’s “Letters Written to and for Particular Friends on the Most Important Occasions” joined what had become an exceedingly popular genre of how-to manuals.

Along with the development of letter manuals, another development is noticeable i.e. the development of epistolary novels. James Howell (1594-1666), who is often credited for fashioning novels in epistolary form, has incorporated letters written about prison, foreign adventure and the love of women in “Familiar Letters”. Later in 1684, Aphra Behn explored the potentiality of epistolary form in the novel *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*. Originally published in three volumes, the novel uses three letters, *Love-Letters Between a Noble-Man and his Sister*, *Love Letters From a Noble Man to his Sister*, and *The Amours of Philander and Silvia*, to shape the entire structure of the novel. The epistolary novel as a genre became popular in the 18th century with the works of authors like Samuel Richardson. Richardson, who was urged on by what he perceived as a moral crisis in English society particularly among the newly well-off middle classes, pressed letter-writing instruction into the service of moral recovery. His novels– *Pamela*, *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison*– are in epistolary form. Later in the 18th century, the epistolary novel slowly fell out of use. Yet, we can find its use in Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice* and *Lady Susan*.

The story so far sketches a cursory understanding about the history of letters and the use of this model of communication in fiction. Moreover, it answers why fictionalized letters became an easy to use material in the novels. To get answer to the question– why real personal letters appeared in the anthologies only in the nineteenth century– demands an in-depth analysis of the politics of print industry in England.

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Printing till the first half of fifteenth century in England was only the job of scribes. They would spend months to prepare a single manuscript copy of any text. When England brought home the invention of Gutenberg almost twenty-six years after its invention in 1450, the changes turned out to be revolutionary. “A man born in 1453, the year of the fall of Constantinople,” Clapham (1957) has said, “could look back from his fiftieth year on a lifetime in which about eight million books had been printed, more perhaps than all the scribes of Europe had produced since Constantine founded his city in A. D. 330” (p. 37). Yet, print did not replace manuscript printing completely. In a sense, print was not accepted unanimously despite its miraculous achievements. For instance, Vespasiano de Bisticci, who was the most celebrated Florentine book merchant, in his memoir *Lives of Illustrious Men* refers to the beautifully bound manuscript book in the Duke of Urbino’s library that, “snobbishly implies that a printed book would have been ‘ashamed’ in such elegant company” (Eisenstein, 2002, p. 153). Manuscript, a means of social bonding between the individuals involved, could hardly be displaced by print due to the reservation of many people.

In the sixteenth and seventh centuries, men of high status (and women even more so) were often unhappy with the idea of publishing books, on the grounds that the books would be sold to the general public and so make the authors look like trades people. As a result of this prejudice, coterie poets and other writers preferred to circulate their work in manuscript copies to their friends and acquaintances. It was in this form that the poems of Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86), for example, the sonnet sequence *Astrophel and Stella*, circulated in Elizabethan England. Again, the love lyrics of John Donne, written in 1590s, were not published until 1663, two years after the author’s death. (Briggs & Burke, 2005, p.37)

The very common use of print in fifteenth and sixteenth century England was reproducing Bible in different languages,

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 prescribing rules of writing letters, producing multiple copies of pamphlets and newsletters, and disseminating news about happenings. In the seventeenth century, print was basically confined to political causes. It was only in the eighteenth century i.e. during Enlightenment, England could explore high potential of print.

Print industry, which was backed up strongly by Enlightenment's unequivocal emphasis on reason, strengthened the cause of Enlightenment itself. The mutual bond resulted in the production of numerous books and consequently commercialization. Both the publishers and authors were benefited by the industry. John Brewer's study, which accesses the success of a publisher cum a writer, is worthy to quote at length:

In his early years, when he had little capital or clout, Richardson was often hired by a bookseller to print part of a work. He was a craftsman for hire, a cog in the publishing machine. ... Richardson's career as a printer followed the path laid down in his first published work, the advice book *The Apprentince's Vade Mecum: or, Young Man's Pocket Companion*. ... The success of his epistolary fiction transformed Richardson from a prosperous printer into a literary lion. He was inundated with fan mail, flooded with suggestions for his plot, and deluged with praise and criticism. (2002, p. 241-2)

Publishing industry was a boon to him. The industry which in Richardson's birth was "a collection of trades, dominated by a powerful guild and confined to a few streets and lanes in the city of London" gave him not only literary success but also economic one. When he died in 1761 he left "a comfortable fortune of £ 14,000" (op. cit., p. 243). The industry, as already said, was beneficial to authors also. So substantial was the payments from their publishers that some authors 'begin to think of abandoning patrons and living from the proceeds of their writing'.

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Dr. Johnson, ... whose hatred of patronage was notorious, received £ 1, 575 in advance for his *Dictionary* from a group of five booksellers, including Thomas Longman and Andrew Miller. Miller gave the philosopher-historian David Hume an advance of £ 1,400 for the third volume of his *History of Britain*, and William Robertson an advance of £ 3,400 for his *History of Charles V*. The poet Alexander Pope had received a still higher sum £ 5,300, for his translation of Homer's *Iliad*. (Briggs & Burke, 2005, p. 49)

Despite the rosy picture, an internal crisis was also going on in the industry. As the industry could hardly avoid the possible loopholes within its mechanism, unethical practices were also taking place. Consequently, it was almost impossible to curb piracy that had its firm ground already, "London booksellers, like those of Venice and Amsterdam before them, were already notorious by the late seventeenth century for the theft of their rivals' literary property" (*ibid*, p. 49). To solve the problem, many measures were taken. One of them was the formation of alliances among printers to share their expenses and profits, an agreement that sounds similar to that of modern joint-stock companies. The system of partnership was helpful not only to curb piracy to a great extent but also to publish even very expensive books. Another measure taken to curb the problem was enactment of intellectual property law. Britain passed an Act in 1709 to guarantee "authors or their assignees the sole right to print their work for fourteen years" (op. cit., p. 46).

The next problem brought by the reality of print industry was sycophantism. In a sense, legitimacy of the idea of professional authorship was of no use for the publication of books. "The author's first task," Brewer (2002) has said, "was to seek entry into the labyrinth of publishing. Without the resources of a Horace Walpole and despite the opportunities afforded by the periodical press, the writer almost certainly needed to procure the services of a bookseller" (p. 246). And astonishingly, the treatment of booksellers to authors was hardly of expectation

level: “Whether the writer approached a bookseller in person or solicited support through importunate correspondence, the author’s reception was rarely warm, occasionally tepid and often cold” (*ibid*, p. 246). The last resort of authors was to “join one of the many informal coteries and circles which made up literary London” (*op. cit.*, p. 247). In a sense, it was only the publishers and certain patrons who wagged the whole tradition of ‘print culture’.

It was for the same reason any anthology of personal letters was not published. Letters written by Romantic writers like William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, and Jane Austen appeared only when they were instrumental for any fitting cause. As publishers could locate no benefit in them, they “publish[ed] and trade[d] in the copyrights of established figures” rather than the letters by these writers. To understand how economically oriented the mind of publishers was, we can refer to the system of what economists now call ‘advance payment’. The publishers would prefer the publish books that would come with the list of subscribers.

The object of subscription was to secure down payments on and promises to purchase a book before its publication. This ensured that production and distribution costs were covered before a work went to press, an arrangement that pleased the booksellers because it cut risks and could promise large profits. (Brewer, 2002, p. 249)

The understanding of print industry from fifteenth to eighteenth century gives an understanding that the publishers were the pivots of print industry. They would decide on the basis of “the principle of legitimacy which its advocates call ‘popular’, i.e. the consecration bestowed by the choice of ordinary consumers, the mass audience” (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 83). As very limited letters fulfilled the required criteria, very few of them got published.



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The publication of any volume of personal letters that served not only the interest of the publisher but also of many others appeared almost a century later. Lord Brabourne Edward printed the anthology of Jane Austen personal letters in 1884 which is the first book of this type. The book comprises of the letters written by Jane Austen to a young authoress Anna Austen, her sister Cassandra Austen, her cousin Fanny Knight, and Mr. Clarke along with the introduction and critical remarks of its editor Lord Brabourne Edward. All these letters are of strictly interpersonal nature- the content of any of these letters do not seem to be aimed for any other than the addressee of the letter.

Brabourne's venture, which is very often described as 'encroachment to Jane Austen's private sphere', cannot simply be viewed as the consequence of the publisher's profit motive only. To view thus is to 'reduce a complex interplay of many components into monolithic vulgar Marxist perspective'. Similarly, to view the production of the text as author's desire for popularity is anachronistic. For a proper understanding of the cause, it is essential to study cultural politics of print industry in relation to Austen's works.

One of the components of cultural politics that needs study is the intellectual property right Act of 1807. The Act, which was a curb against piracy that was rampant during the time, had provision for 'authors or their assignees the sole right to print their work for fourteen years'. As the law had that provision for only fourteen years, publishers could print any work without informing the author. It was only in 1887, Berne Convention passed international copyright. Hence, the publisher (Longman and Rees) had no obligation to author as they were under the law of 1709. The second component of cultural politics i.e. renaissance of Austen's popularity after the 70s of nineteenth century also needs an analysis.

Jane Austen's writings, especially novels, were hugely popular during the first three decades of nineteenth century. Many

admiring readers, who considered themselves part of a literary elite, viewed Austen's works as a mark of their cultural taste. Great novelists like Sir Walter Scott and critics like Richard Whatley also praised her writing. Such favorable climate for Austen's novels however reached to almost decadence in the thirties. Although her novels were republished in Britain in the 1830s, they were not bestsellers. As they failed to conform to Romantic and Victorian expectations, "powerful emotion [be] authenticated by an egregious display of sound and color in the writing," nineteenth-century critics and audiences generally preferred the works of Charles Dickens and George Eliot. But in the 70s, Austen's writings started getting appreciation of many critics. With the publication of J. E. Austen-Leigh's *A Memoir of Jane Austen* in 1870, Austen was introduced to a wider public as "dear aunt Jane", the respectable maiden aunt. Author and critic Leslie Stephen described the popular mania that developed for Austen in the 1880s as "Austenolatry". What followed in this decade were the reissues of Austen's novels—Routledge released the first popular editions in 1883 in a sixpenny series. Lord Brabourne Edward's collection of *Jane Austen's Letters* is also one of many in the milieu of rapid production.

The third component of cultural politics i.e. the old age system of patronage also played a role in the publication of the book. Here, the dedication of Edward accomplishes the job of patronage. The dedication accomplishes two functions simultaneously. First it reveals the nearness of the writer to the queen and second it guarantees that the publisher would not suffer loss at least. Hence, Brabourne's 'encroachment to Jane Austen's private sphere' cannot simply be viewed as 'a job to satisfy the queen'. The following is Edward's dedication.

TO  
THE QUEEN'S MOST EXCELLENT  
MADAM

It was the knowledge that your Majesty so highly appreciated the works of Jane Austen which

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emboldened me to ask permission to dedicate to your Majesty these volumes, containing as they do numerous letters of that authoress, of which, as her grand-nephew, I have recently become possessed. These letters are printed, with the exception of a very few omissions which appeared obviously desirable, just as they were written, and if there should be found in them, or in the chapters which accompany them, anything which may interest or amuse your Majesty, I shall esteem myself doubly fortunate in having been the means of bringing them under your Majesty's notice.

I am, Madam,  
Your Majesty's very humble  
and obedient subject,

BRABOURNE

The publication of the book thus coincides with both significant literary developments and consists of some important factors. The encounter of the royal interest, the importance of the blessings to the authors, a defunct copyright Act, and an emerging commercial public in nineteenth-century England shaped the dialectics of cultural politics of print industry. The desire of authors/publishers to associate themselves with royal blessing initiated the politics and also valorized the royal family's endeavor. Ultimately, it involved the publishers. The interest of publishers, which was generally economically oriented, played a determining role in the selection/ rejection of any work. Hence, to account publisher's interest as the only cause of publication is to reduce complex interplay of many components and consequently deny their role. To be specific on Austen's case, Routledge is one of many reasons for the publication of her letters. The role of other factors like the interest of the Queen on Austen's letters, defunct copyright act, and the desire of Edward to get patronage of the queen is also

noteworthy. Finally, when the logic– printing industry was enmeshed into cultural politics during nineteenth century– is combined with an apparent reality i.e. to produce any work without appropriate consent is a shameful commodification, we can draw the nexus between the former and the latter. The anthology of Austen’s letters, which bears out the cultural politics of print industry in nineteenth century England, demonstrates why the personal letters written by romantic age writers in general and Jane Austen in particular became commodities.

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