

‘[Y]ou have written sometimes more largelie to some private friends, then almost to her Majesties self’: secrecy and sociability in sixteenth-century ambassadorial correspondence.¹

Abstract: This article explores ambassadorial letters as carriers of political information. In a world before regular, printed newspapers, letters from individuals abroad were a valued source of news. Consequently, such letters were a way for those individuals to exhibit their skills, status and political relevance, in addition to fulfilling a central expectation of salaried diplomatic postings. This article asks whether there is a tension involved in trading on the dissemination of intelligence – of potentially secret political information. It does this not through focusing solely on the contents of the letters themselves, but by considering what happens when the letter is subsumed into a wider body of information, in this case as part of a letter-book. By asking who may be interested in diplomatic letter-books or bundles of correspondence, and what they may have been for, we can view the ambassador’s correspondence in a new light: is it intelligence or news, and is the copying of it problematic?

Key words: diplomacy, intelligence, secrecy, information, letters, politics, news

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¹ Leicester to Walsingham, 8 January 1572/3, Dudley Digges, *The Compleat Ambassador* (London: Printed by Tho. Newcomb for Gabriel Bedell and Thomas Collins, 1655), 322-3.

On 8 January 1572/3, Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester wrote one of many letters to Francis Walsingham, then resident ambassador in France. In this letter, he ended his political discussion with a lengthy and 'bold' chastisement that Walsingham's advertisements were being 'made more common... than is thought convenient'.² Leicester's warning that Walsingham should be careful of writing too fully to too many highlights both the centrality of letter-writing in the embassy and the precarious position of the ambassador as one who walks a fine line in deciding what information to convey to whom. Letter-writing was the ambassador's chief manner of maintaining contact, delivering information, and explaining and defending his actions, and thus was a constant and physically demanding duty. Information was also the ambassador's primary commodity, making the letters themselves a physical manifestation of the ambassador's ability and progress. The access to information granted by being in a privileged location abroad was therefore both a source of power and a burden to the diplomat. Leicester's warning points to the possible pitfalls involved in the constant but careful dissemination of such information, where one must balance satisfying both expectant patrons and countrymen, and the more 'official' recipients of privy council and monarch. This construction of the informational demands on the ambassador appears to set up a conceptual divide between letters to 'private friends' – letters that serve a social function – and letters as responses to official instructions on a political level.³ It is this almost instinctive divide between the private and the official, understood as the social and the political, that this article will challenge and explore, and this through considering the letter-book of the ambassador.

There has been a wealth of research into early modern letters and letter-writing conventions over the past decade or so.⁴ It is not new to point out that personal and professional interests were frequently combined in the early modern administrative letter.⁵ However, accepting this as a self-evident fact firstly risks overlooking the complications involved in treating the social and political as theoretically separable interests and spheres, and secondly it leaves unexplored what happens when the ambassadorial letter is placed in a

² Digges, *Compleat Ambassador*, 322.

³ Digges, *Compleat Ambassador*, 322.

⁴ For an overview of work on early modern letters, see James Daybell, 'Recent Studies in Sixteenth Century Letters', *English Literary Renaissance* 35:2 (2005), 331-62. See also Alan Stewart and Heather Wolfe, *Letter-Writing in Renaissance England* (Washington, D.C.: Folger Shakespeare Library, 2004); Jonathan Gibson, 'Letters' in Michael Hattaway (ed.), *A Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 5-19; Lynne Magnusson, *Shakespeare and Social Dialogue: Dramatic Language and Elizabethan Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Gary Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern England, 1500-1700* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005).

⁵ See for example Magnusson, *Shakespeare and Social Dialogue*, 91-113, esp. 92; Schneider, *Culture of Epistolarity*, 103-5.

different context – when it is subsumed into a larger body of correspondence, and used as a political or historical resource. Much of the recent critical work on the early modern letter has focused on its materiality, either in terms of its physical construction in ink, paper and seal, or in terms of social navigation via layout and rhetoric. The latter could be seen to encompass textual features that have material dimensions, i.e. their importance lies in how they function in a specific place on the page, like the use of ‘significant space’ to represent social stratification or the use of generic linguistic features like ‘trouble-making’ and ‘trouble-taking’ in the letter’s language.⁶ There is a real need for a new direction in early modern letters that can build on this work. Taking its lead from a surge of critical interest in the history of information, one possibility is exploration of letters after their immediate sending – their ‘afterlife’ or ‘immediate provenance’ – where their value and use change and they are subsumed into larger bodies of writings, whether a letter-book, commonplace book, antiquarian collection or archived bundle.⁷

This fresh context for the individual letter can help to unpick critical questions and tensions engaged by diplomatic correspondence as sent. These questions include asking what the ambassador’s information gathering is actually for, what it means to call the contents of these letters ‘secret information’, ‘intelligence’ or ‘news’, and whether there is a tension in the value of ‘secret’ intelligence being in part based on dissemination, where the ambassador uses political information to display his skills and to self-promote. The letters of ambassadors can be viewed either individually, as missives sent to a specific recipient to convey particular information, or collectively, as the discrete epistolary product of the embassy, kept either as a bundle of neatly folded and endorsed originals or copied out into a letter-book. This article will accordingly consider what happens to how we view the letter when it is taken out of its immediate context and becomes subsumed into one of these collective contexts: in this case, into a diplomatic letter-book. It will consider how the exclusivity of information changes

⁶ This material approach has a heritage in the seminal studies on manuscript transmission from the 1990s, including Harold Love, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Arthur Marotti, *Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric* (London: Cornell University Press, 1995); H. R. Woudhuysen, *Sir Philip Sidney and the Circulation of Manuscripts 1558-1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). For significant space, see Jonathan Gibson, ‘Significant Space in Manuscript Letters’, *The Seventeenth Century* 12:1 (1997), 1-9. For ‘trouble-taking’, see Magnusson, *Shakespeare and Social Dialogue*, 100-108.

⁷ Though some scholars have begun work on this topic, there is scope for a full-length work on the letter’s afterlife in its own right, and for a wider move towards appreciating the importance of this aspect of the early modern letter. For a starting point for the afterlife of letters, consider James Daybell, *The Material Letter: Manuscript Letters and the Culture and Practice of Letter-Writing in Early Modern England, 1580-1635* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012). For a case study of the uses of Essex’ circulated letters in a later political context, see Andrew Gordon, ‘*Copycopia*, or, the Uses of Copied Correspondence in Court Culture: A Case Study’ in James Daybell and Peter Hinds (eds), *Material Readings of Early Modern Culture: Texts and Social Practices, 1580-1700* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), 65-81. For the history of information, see Ann Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (London: Yale University Press, 2010).

when the letters that carry it are mutated into a different, larger document that can have different audiences to those of the individual letters. This will be approached by firstly exploring the types of correspondence sent by an ambassador – who they wrote to and what this could involve – and secondly by offering an overview of the sixteenth century diplomatic letter-book, where letters could be written up in neat as a final ‘product’ of the embassy.

There were multiple demands on the early modern ambassador’s letter-writing. As a crown servant abroad, diplomats were expected to gather and transmit information about the foreign court and country, both in answer to royal instruction and to please patrons, peers and kin. Some diplomatic letters are clearly intended to serve a social function without carrying much useful intelligence (i.e. politically-relevant and restricted information). This ‘social function’ could mean conception of the letter as gift or as a personal emissary intended to remind the recipient of the sender’s friendship. Regarding critical work on ambassadorial correspondence, it can be tempting to prioritise one or other of these functions of a letter, and conflate the social with the personal (perhaps terming the delivered information ‘news’) and the political with the official (perhaps with more emphasis on tropes of secrecy, such as ciphers and ‘intelligence’). Examples of letters that lean more towards one or the other can be found within one ambassador’s corpus, making this divide more instinctive. For example, some of the letters of Sir Amias Paulet when ambassador to France in 1576-79 have very little content, and are primarily intended to maintain contact with his peers and neighbours beyond the inner circles of the privy council. Paulet writes to several of his county neighbours and to fathers of young men in his retinue in a similar style, reassuring them of his continued friendship and including more general news than highly potent intelligence. This is seen in a letter to Edward Seymour, earl of Hartford, which employs a shared rhetoric on the protestant struggle in order to show solidarity, as well as dropping in some points of news: ‘Bussy d’Amboyse hath his little armie in Anjou, but whom he serveth God knoweth. Thus your *Lord* seyeth how the poore Protestants are besett on every syde and in dede it may seme that the world hath forsaken them...’⁸ Paulet is aware that his correspondents look to him for up-to-date information from the political hub of the French court, and mixes the occasional point of news with frequent (likely false) apologies that there is little new he can report to them. There is a very different intention behind this letter compared to one sent to principal secretaries Thomas Wilson and Francis Walsingham on 16 March 1578, for example. This second letter includes a good amount of information, given concisely and directly rather than in generalizations, and encrypts some sections in cipher. In addition, it encloses a letter from a ‘very honest and wise man’ that Paulet asks to

⁸ Bodleian, Rawlinson A.331, fol. 8r.

be 'committed to the fire when you have made your profit of it'.⁹ The secret status of the enclosures particularly is emphasised in the text of the letter: Paulet has not even entrusted their contents to the bearer: 'I have been desired to convey the inclosed letters to you, Master Walsingham, safely and secretly, and therefore have not acquainted this bearer with them'.¹⁰

Each of these emphases engages different critical discourses. The supposed binary between the social and the political (or personal and official) spheres of information can be unwittingly reinforced by critical descriptions of the content of letters from political figures abroad. When such content is described as 'news', the critical background brought to mind is that of patronage circles and social groups; it prefigures discussion of seventeenth century news networks and manuscript newsletters, and even eighteenth century Habermasian public spheres. When 'intelligence' in diplomatic letters is discussed, the focus is often on crown employment and delivery of secret information to elite politicians (perhaps one of the 'intelligence triumvirate of Burghley, Leicester and Walsingham').¹¹ Early modern news as a subject of study often begins in the seventeenth century, where talk is of the first era of the newspaper and the nascent public sphere.¹² Conversely, studies of early modern intelligence can feel unnaturally divorced from this context of public or wider circulation. In the field of early modern intelligencing and diplomacy, there is a frequent bias to the more secretive senses of spying and informing, which can be prioritized to the exclusion of the letters' relationship with and potential identity with 'news'.¹³ Neither of these contexts or discourses are mistaken, but I would argue that they are further apart than they should be: bridging

⁹ Bodleian, Add. C 82, fol. 51r.

¹⁰ Bodleian, Add. C 82, fol. 51r.

¹¹ Robyn Adams, 'Sixteenth-Century Intelligencers and Their Maps', *Imago Mundi* 63:2 (2011), 201-16, 202.

¹² As seen in the collection of essays, Brendan Dooley and Sabrina Baron (eds), *The Politics of Information in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2001), for example. See also Joad Raymond (ed.), *News Networks in Seventeenth-century Britain and Europe* (London: Routledge, 2006); *News, Newspapers and Society in Early Modern Britain* (London: Frank Cass, 1999). An exception is Peter Lake and Steve Pincus (eds), *The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), and particularly Lake's own essay that looks at political public debate beyond the newspaper model.

¹³ The subject of early modern intelligence and information gathering is undergoing a critical revival. Traditionally, the subject has been discussed in terms of the sensational and secretive, where the ubiquitous nature of intelligence gathering has been underplayed, for example in books that take a case-study approach of particular plots, such as Alison Plowden, *The Elizabethan Secret Service* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991). Recently, a more nuanced approach has been developing. Publications that do prioritise the 'shadier' senses of intelligence gathering but are more appreciative of the complexities of this subject include, for example, Robyn Adams, "'The Service I am Here for": William Herle in the Marshalsea Prison, 1571', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 72:2 (2009), 217-38; Stephen Alford, 'Some Elizabethan Spies in the Office of Sir Francis Walsingham' in Robyn Adams and Rosanna Cox (eds), *Diplomacy and Early Modern Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 46-62.

these would create a more rounded understanding of the diplomatic role, the transmission of information, and of intelligence gathering abroad.

Though the two Paulet letters quoted do exemplify different (even polar) aspects of the ambassador's letter-writing, both are copied into his letter-books, making a concrete third object yet to be considered.¹⁴ Taking the letters individually, it is easy to conflate social obligations with private correspondence, and political obligations with 'official' correspondence, particularly when they correlate in a specific letter, as is the case in the above examples. Viewing the letters outside of their time-dependent situation and approaching them collectively via the letter-books makes it less possible to make a clear divide between the social and the political, or the private and the official. Essentially, it gives us a new angle of approach. The function and purpose of the letters must change when considered as part of Paulet's whole body of correspondence. The written body thus becomes a new conceptual unit, worthy of attention in its own right, allowing the letters en masse to be both representative of the ambassador and the embassy, and to form a specific resource on the political relations between England and France over these years. Divides such as private versus public, or secret intelligence versus news and information, become less applicable, and their application revealed as an imposition. Once we start considering what functions such letter-books may have served, it becomes clearer how far social and political contexts are meshed, and are more indicative of our approach as scholars rather than separate spheres in actuality. This 'after-life' also raises issues of secrecy, since Paulet's letter to Wilson and Walsingham contains highly secret, ciphered intelligence, yet is copied out into this secondary item: if it is a source of anxiety that the ambassador might write too fully to some, then it would seem to follow that the same anxiety applies to his keeping, copying and potentially sharing of his letters after his embassy. The letter-book mirrors and enlarges the critical tensions involved in the individual letter.

The resident ambassadorship in France was the most long-standing and arguably most significant diplomatic post under Elizabeth I, and Paris was known to be a major international crossroads and accordingly a key place for intelligence gathering.¹⁵ This means that Paulet's (and Walsingham's) letters – as the lasting substance of the position and a comprehensive collection of his intelligence gathering activities – were of interest to his contemporaries and successors for multiple reasons, whether relating to politics, education, historical value, social importance or celebrity. The letters as a whole were also a record of the time, effort

¹⁴ Letter-books of Sir Amias Paulet: 01 May 1577 – 10 Jan 1577/8, Bodleian, Rawlinson A.331, fols 1r-130v; 12 Jan - 29 Aug 1578, Bodleian, Add. C 82, fols 1r-160v.

¹⁵ See Elizabeth Williamson, 'Before "diplomacy": travel, embassy and the production of political information in the later sixteenth century' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Queen Mary, University of London, 2012), chapter two.

and money he expended in this trying and financially demanding position, and accordingly were a record of his loyalty and a defense of his actions, should they be challenged. I would suggest, therefore, that it was for more than administrative thoroughness that Paulet had his embassy letters copied into a letter-book. Despite the lack of uniform practice of Elizabethan diplomats keeping letter-books, or instruction from on high telling them to do so, searching the archives has revealed multiple examples of diplomats constructing comprehensive records of all their outgoing letters, copied into discrete volumes.¹⁶ The term refers to an epistolary entry-book, a record of letters' texts that is itself a material whole, made at or near the time the original letters were sent. The subject here is not loose collections of the letters of a diplomat but of consciously-constructed letter-books, since these are evidence of the use and value of the written corpus in a way that loose papers are not. The masses of diplomatic letters later filed and bound into volumes in the State Paper office point to a general drive to preservation, whereas the discrete, contemporary nature of a letter-book involves the creative intention of political figures.

Much depends on who the audience for such letter-books might have been, and no less on whether we can actually claim that it was the ambassador themselves who compiled them in the first place. Like many aspects of early modern English diplomacy, whether or not a diplomat copied his correspondence into a separate book was essentially down to personal choice. There are many more ambassadorial letter-books made during the seventeenth century and onwards: it is much more of an expected practice by this point.¹⁷ That this is not instructed behaviour makes it even more significant that so many from the sixteenth century have survived: the doctoral survey in 'Before "diplomacy": travel, embassy and the production of political information in the later sixteenth century' collates eighteen made during the reign of Elizabeth I.¹⁸ The subject merits much more critical attention. Letter-books are often simply mentioned tangentially in more wide-ranging studies of early modern letter-writing or appear as printed transcripts of individual items; there are no published works that attempt to review them collectively in the tradition of manuscript publication or diplomatic practice.¹⁹ This article is limited to giving a brief account of some of the features of some exemplars in order to give an overview of the sixteenth century diplomatic letter-book,

¹⁶ See Williamson, 'Before "diplomacy"', chapter three, and below.

¹⁷ Consider for example the later letter-books of Dudley Carleton (British Library (hereafter B.L.), Egerton MS 2813; The National Archives (hereafter T.N.A.), SP 105/94-96, 106), William Trumbull (B.L., Add. MSS 52279-52280; T.N.A., SP 110/88, and many more), Henry Wotton (T.N.A., SP 105/105), Isaac Wake (B.L., Add. MSS 18639, 18640, 34310-34311), Ralph Winwood and Richard Spencer (T.N.A., SP 105/92, 93), and later John Scudmore (B.L., Add. MS 35097).

¹⁸ This number includes some duplicates and works on a reasonably relaxed definition of what constitutes a letter-book. See Williamson, 'Before "diplomacy"', chapter three, esp. 154.

¹⁹ Alan Stewart and Heather Wolfe discuss briefly the possible fate of letters after initial sending, mentioning letter-books as one of several options, in Stewart and Wolfe, *Letter-Writing in Renaissance England*, 182.

before then asking what help this new angle of approach can offer when considering the differing pulls on the ambassador's letter-writing.

The doctoral survey mentioned divides its findings into two categories of letter-books: the most common kind are extensive copybooks for recording all correspondence, and the Paulet volumes are of this type. The second sort are more selective books of letters, sometimes with additional prose or discourses, that more readily form something akin to a directed intelligence product. The 'comprehensive' copybook is more typical of the resident ambassador, and particularly those sent to France. This practice is appropriate to the position: an extensive, long-term record fits with a residency as a post of more permanence and stability with less of a pre-arranged end point, as opposed to that of an 'extraordinary' ambassador, understood here as being associated with short-term, goal-specific negotiation. The labels of resident and extraordinary ambassador are far from unproblematic and should be considered as helpful terms rather than clearly delimited contemporary roles: they are used here with that proviso, and with an understanding that the French residency represents the more stable and defined end of both the positions and the terms that describe them.²⁰ Several of the comprehensive-style letter-books are well-used historical sources, and have been printed in the nineteenth century, such as one of the Paulet manuscripts, the letters of Robert Bowes on embassy in Scotland, and of Henry Unton as resident in France.²¹ One could add to a list of this style of book the manuscript letter-books of Henry Cobham, Thomas Wilkes, Henry Neville, Thomas Parry and Edward Barton.²² One might also consider the several letter-books of Charles Cornwallis, who bridges the survey over into the beginning of the reign of James I.²³

There is a typical format for these types of letter-book, and the similar features that appear from an archival survey suggest a generally accepted style for such items. The letters are often copied in one or two scribal hands into a discrete volume, usually showing evidence of four vertical creases where the paper has been folded before stitching to provide a left-hand margin, which supports conception of them as consciously-constructed reference books. Almost universally there is some kind of descriptive aid to each letter, typically in the form of

²⁰ See Williamson, 'Before "diplomacy"', esp. chapter two.

²¹ Correspondence of Sir Henry Unton ed. Joseph Stevenson (London: W. Nicol, 1847); Copy-book of Sir Amias Poulet's letters, written during his embassy to France ed. Octavius Ogle (London: J. B. Nichols and Sons, 1866); The Correspondence of Robert Bowes ed. Joseph Stevenson (London: Edinburgh, 1842).

²² Cobham: B.L., Cotton MS, Otho E IV, fols 1r-268v; Wilkes: T.N.A., SP 105/91, fols 1r-59v, T.N.A., SP 105/91 fols 60r-95v; Neville: T.N.A., PRO 30/50/2, fols 121r-144v; Parry: B.L., Add. MS 38138, fols 1r-35v; Barton: B.L., Cotton MS, Nero B XII.

²³ B.L., Cotton MS, Vespasian C V, fols 1r-176r; B.L., Cotton MS, Vespasian C IX, fols 1r-330v; B.L., Cotton MS, Vespasian C X, fols 1r-348r; B.L., Cotton MS, Vespasian C XI, fols 1r-405v; TNA, SP 9/213.

a title to the letter's text, containing sender and recipient details, the date and perhaps further information on content or delivery. This mimics the function (and sometimes the exact wording) of the superscription on the verso of sent or draft letters. These recurring features suggest two things: that there were embedded administrative practices that the scribe compiling a volume was likely to adhere to, whether diplomatic or not, and that the logical provision of information makes it probable that such books were used for both record and future reference. Questions of authorship, intention and audience are key in thinking about the aforementioned issues of secrecy, sociability and political use. However, these are notoriously difficult to unlock where there is a lack of contemporary discourse on the matter, as is the case for the actual administrative processes of the early modern embassy.

Paying attention to the materiality and provenance of these books can begin to provide some answers to these questions. The letter-book of diplomat Henry Unton covers his first residency in France (1591-2), and contains mainly outgoing letters to major political figures in the domestic government, namely the Queen, Lord Burghley, Chancellor Hatton, Robert Cecil, and the earl of Essex, along with letters received primarily from these said figures, and transcripts of enclosures. We can make judgments on the preoccupations and intentions of this book by consideration of what information is included: in this case, the titular information on most letters is extensive, and almost always states not just the sender or recipient, but also the bearer of the letter. This prioritising of information emphasises the familiar concern with the unreliability of the early modern carriage of letters, and echoes the preoccupation with the bearer seen at the beginning of so many individual letters. The uniformity of hand and ink in the volume underlines its conceptual unity: it is not a piecemeal, accidental collection but a discrete object. It appears that it was transcribed from Unton's loose copies that were made alongside the sent outgoing letters and kept folded as long thin packets; there is evidence for this in a single word of marginal annotation on the individual copies.²⁴ On the enclosing address leaves for the loose copies there are regular contemporary annotations just below the descriptive endorsements and in a different ink, reading 'entred'.²⁵ Thus it appears that the legation secretaries went through each copy and methodically entered it into the letter-book, as part of a set administrative process.

The possibility remains that the letter-book was compiled not by Unton but by a later archivist or interested party. If this were the case, the letter-book would be of interest more for its implications for later manuscript publication and the compilation of political resources by antiquarians, rather than for what it tells us about Unton's intentions. However,

²⁴ The draft copies are now in B.L., Cotton MS, Caligula E VIII.

²⁵ For example, see the address leaves of copies dated March 1591/2 in B.L., Cotton MS, Caligula E VIII, fols 279r-300v.

identification of the handwriting of the body of text or of marginal comments in the books can prove the involvement of the author-diplomat, which can additionally locate the construction or use of the volume in a particular time period or place: several of the diplomatic letter-books in the doctoral survey can be placed in this way. I have identified the first half of Unton's letter-book as being in the hand of his legation secretary Thomas Edmondés.²⁶ Since Edmondés remained abroad in a chargé d'affaires role after the ambassador's departure and the volume is demonstrably Unton's – as witnessed by the occasional instance of his autograph marginalia – the letter-book was most likely completed in France during the embassy, after the date of the final letter and before Unton departed. That the original copies were still kept shows that the letter-book does not fulfil the exact same function as this more passive record, otherwise it would be defunct. Instead, I would suggest that the volume as a whole forms an 'information product', valuable both to Unton and to domestic authority figures, both as representative of the embassy in an abstract fashion and as a serious body of political intelligence on France in the early fifteen-nineties. This conclusion is further supported by the fact that there is a second transcript of Unton's letter-book, now housed in the Bodleian and probably made in the late sixteenth century, so not long after the construction of the original.²⁷ Though there survives no useful contextual data on why this copy was made, its existence suggests the recognised value of such books, and also that there may be multiple reasons for creating a letter-book, since the two copies could represent multiple needs being catered for.

One can offer informed speculation on what these needs might have been. For example, though otherwise substantially the same, the Bodleian version contains additional material on the embassy's finances: this could suggest that this particular book was intended as an 'official' end product of the embassy, meant for those in government to whom such information would have been directly relevant, and acting to emphasise and validate Unton's personal expenses. Similarly, the autograph marginalia in the British Library manuscript suggests that the original was kept for consultation and active use by Unton himself. There is also room here for the letter-book functioning as a personal display of both time and effort expended by Unton on what was a notoriously arduous diplomatic posting: it immortalises his hard work undertaken for the crown, and thus becomes a very physical manifestation of his loyalty and civic duty. Like Unton, Paulet has two diplomatic letter-books that also appear to have been transcribed as a conscious project – even complete with a small marginal note

²⁶ For discussion of techniques of hand-writing identification, see Tom Davis, 'The Practice of Handwriting Identification', *The Library* 7th series 8:3 (2007), 251-76.

²⁷ Bodleian, e.Mus.18.

reading 'imperfect here' where the copyist's source was missing or degraded.²⁸ It is unknown what either of these were used for, and little is known about their early provenance. It is difficult, therefore, to state whether it is problematic that apparently sensitive intelligence was transcribed into a volume that seems to promote its maker: it depends on what audience was envisaged.

The letter-book of Sir Henry Sidney when Lord Deputy of Ireland in 1575 is a clear example of a letter collection used as self-promotional writing.²⁹ Though Sidney is not an ambassador to another monarch, similar reputational anxieties apply to the difficult position of Lord Deputy as one who serves the Queen abroad, estranged from the court. This volume, in form and style much like the comprehensive diplomatic letter-books, has a highly elaborate title page that advertises the grandeur and importance of Sidney's time abroad. The page has box margins and forty-one words dedicated to describing its author. This is clearly meant as a concrete resource on his time abroad, and as display of his status as erstwhile Lord Deputy, but to whom is this display directed? As with Walsingham's letters when ambassador to France, this could be aimed at 'private friends' or to those at the very top of Elizabethan governance: there are examples of Sidney both promoting his political interests to his peer and successor Arthur Grey, fourteenth Baron Grey of Wilton, and to William Cecil, Lord Burghley.³⁰

A clear example of one possible intention and (at least desired) audience behind such letter-books can be found in a compilation of letters by diplomatic agent William Herle. Herle is a ubiquitous but under-studied figure in early modern politics and intelligence gathering.³¹ He was continually involved in diplomatic and intelligencing activity yet did not always enjoy full accreditation or remuneration, and accordingly was frequently anxious about his relative status and political weight, and not least about his financial liquidity. It is therefore a highly ambitious pitch for favour and attention that he sought to capitalise on his presence in the Low Countries during the assassination of the Prince of Orange by compiling a book of papers titled: 'To the Queenes most excellent Majesty. my negotiations in East Friseland,

²⁸ Bodleian, Add. C.82; Bodleian, Rawlinson A.331, fol. 41v.

²⁹ B.L., Cotton Titus B X, fols 2-172. For Sidney's reputational anxiety and concern over promoting his own letters, writings and political views, see Williamson, 'Before "diplomacy"', 238-42.

³⁰ See Julian Lock, 'Grey, Arthur, fourteenth Baron Grey of Wilton (1536-1593)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/11524>> [accessed 4 Oct 2011]. For analysis of a letter from Sidney to Burghley that strongly encourages the Treasurer to keep Sidney's letters as a reference resource to inform future policy-making, see Williamson, 'Before "diplomacy"', 238-40.

³¹ For a comprehensive discussion of the career and life of William Herle, see Robyn Adams, "'Both Diligent and Secret': the Intelligence Work of William Herle' (unpublished doctoral thesis: Queen Mary, University of London, 2004) and Adams' digital edition, *The Letters of William Herle Project* <<http://www.livesandletters.ac.uk/herle/index.html>>

1584'.³² This two line inscription cut from the now lost vellum binding demonstrates that, regardless of whether this particular book actually reached Elizabeth, collections of diplomatic and intelligence letters could be intended for the very highest political circles. The Herle and Sidney books are comparable though different to the comprehensive diplomatic letter-book: the Sidney book is stylistically very similar to comprehensive books of diplomatic letters, but originates in a different political position abroad, and the Herle diplomatic book is a more adapted, varied collection of letters and papers, rather than a complete record of all of his letters. Herle's book therefore represents the more digested, selective letter-book, mentioned previously as being more often associated with the shorter-term diplomatic posting. This second type is simply further along the scale of a letter sent in the first instance at one end, and a digested intelligence package at the other: it shows that letters were used as significant political writings, that they were kept and consulted as such, and could be reproduced for an elite political audience.

If it were clear that this was the only possible audience for such books, issues of secrecy and clandestine intelligence would be straightforward; it wouldn't be problematic that some of the books contain deciphered text, that Paulet's second letter-book contains the aforementioned letter to Walsingham, or that Unton's is prefaced with his own cipher and concluded with an itemised bill 'For espial and Intelligences', for instance.³³ However, such books could also function as self-display in a more personal context, perhaps intended for their library book-shelf, particularly since at this time the ambassador's papers were their own personal property. If, as argued, such letter collections represented serious political and historical resources, then an ambitious crown servant would be likely to want to keep such records and use them to his own advantage in furthering his career: this is certainly seen later during the reign of James I, when the keeper of the early state paper office Thomas Wilson continually battled to obtain papers from reticent diplomats.³⁴ These uses do not have to be mutually exclusive, but the question remains of how to approach issues of secrecy and the public or official versus the private or social functions of such documents.

A first response to this is that any intelligence contained in the letters is no longer secret in the secondary and necessarily later context of the letter-book. The practical value of secret information is located in its freshness and its exclusivity, which means that it is less problematic that such items are included in larger volumes with a wider audience, after the

³² Bodleian, Rawlinson C 424, fols 1r-215v

³³ Bodleian, e.Mus.18, fol. 167r.

³⁴ Williamson, 'Before "diplomacy"', 202-205; W. Noel Sainsbury, 'Calendar of Documents relating to the History of the State Paper Office to the Year 1800' in *The Thirtieth Annual Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode for HMSO, 1869), 212-93, 213.

end of the embassy. A second response develops this idea of exclusivity: if there is not a strict boundary between the ambassador's 'private' and political friends – if the activity of the state is conducted through the personal letter and through the rhetoric of friendship (as explained by Magnusson and Schneider) – then even a widened audience need not disrupt the restricted status of ambassadorial correspondence. Private friends and political patrons at this socially elite level are part of the same audience, and the sense of exclusivity and restriction that contributes a good proportion of the value of the intelligence is maintained. There are three contexts here. The first is the immediate delivery of information and the use of letters as social and political tools, and this requires careful navigation in order to protect the exclusivity that gives value to the intelligence; this is where Walsingham was chastised for getting the balance wrong. The second context is the movement of these letters into a stored bundle or a written letter-book, whether as copies, translations or originals: these become the resources of government and fill the 'official collections and repositories in the Tower and Exchequer', the rooms of the principal secretaries and the clerks of the privy council, and political antiquarians' collections like Robert Cotton.³⁵ Robert Cotton was both collector and political figure, and his collection of the paperwork of government – past and present – was a frequently utilized repository. Extant lists of his book loans see the letters of diplomats (amongst others) being used as a real political resource.³⁶ The people who could have access to these letters and letter-books are limited to elite groups and the very well-connected, meaning that this is not a public context as we might understand it today.

There is a third context – wider publication beyond these intended groups – and this area also deserves further critical attention. There was clearly a market for political letters and documents beyond the immediate political arena, as seen by the copying and circulation of the famed Venetian *relazioni*. These written diplomatic reports were so popular, both within and beyond Italy, that demand for them even led to illicit reproduction by professional scribal groups, feeding a newly emerging lucrative information and news business.³⁷ The extent to which English counterparts were copied beyond the immediate and elite context of ambassador and principal secretary is hard to assess. There are examples of later print publications of English diplomatic letters, but this is less immediate than the highly mobile and oft reproduced *relazioni*. There is also a wider context of the copying and circulation of topical English letters that reach beyond the inner circles of court, for example the Earl of Essex' self-promoting letters of travel advice or his 1598 'apologie' in favour of war with

³⁵ Kevin Sharpe, *Sir Robert Cotton, 1586-1631: History and Politics in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) 78.

³⁶ See Sharpe, *Sir Robert Cotton*, 78-9, for Cotton's loan lists, which Sharpe describes as a 'who's who' of Jacobean government.

³⁷ Filippo de Vivo, *Information and Communication in Venice: Rethinking Early Modern Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) reprinted 2008, 60.

Spain, Elizabeth's consolation letter to Lady Norris on the death of her son, and so on.³⁸ These most famous examples are not diplomatic letters, but this context of manuscript publication and dispersion should affect how we (and their writers) think of copied diplomatic letters: even if they did not disperse this far when first written into letter-books, the possibility was there. In the long term, however, all such papers are eventually public: they become public property as sources for the construction of modern historical narrative. The warning delivered from Leicester to Walsingham is there to be used as evidence for an anxiety over the spread of information exactly because the letter containing it was consciously preserved, and eventually found its way into the public arena. Eighty-three years after sending, this letter was published in a collection of letters and treaties of the reign of Elizabeth I, The Compleat Ambassador.³⁹ There is an evident audience for this by-then historical material. According to the address to the reader, this audience has a 'greediness' for access to the letters, both because they have 'delighted the curious eye', and because the papers 'may be of great use to those Gentlemen that shall be bred up to serve Princes hereafter in this kind of Honorable Employment', i.e. they act as educational precedent.⁴⁰ The language of secrecy and thus of privileged access is used when discussing the letters of state: the address stresses that the letters were 'never intended for the press' and refers to two previous volumes, the 'CABALA, and Secrets of Empire'.⁴¹ Even in this later incarnation, the letters' value and their association with secrecy are understood as being based in the access to the elite political and social circles that the letters themselves represent – their value is formulated in these terms.

The immediate provenance of Leicester's letter to Walsingham, i.e. the path that it took in its early life after it was first sent, is particularly evocative of the issues of control, dissemination and privacy surrounding the early modern diplomatic letter. In its subject matter, its chastisement of ambassador Walsingham for releasing information too widely specifies two crimes: he writes too fully to too many (whether or not they be 'of the greatest'), and has trusted 'weighty causes' to untrustworthy messengers, unwittingly allowing information to carry uncontrolled 'from friend to friend'.⁴² In addition to this, the letter closes with the clear instruction to burn it: 'And I desire you to commit this letter to *Vulcan*'.⁴³ Finding this instruction amongst diplomatic and other letters in the modern archive is not unusual, and speaks to the lack of control that can be maintained over one's writings, as well as to the

³⁸ Three of these letters are copied into the final leaves of Unton's letter-book, BL Add MS, 38137 fols 160r-173v, in a later hand. See Williamson, 'Before "diplomacy"', 163-4.

³⁹ Digges, The Compleat Ambassador, 322-23.

⁴⁰ Digges, The Compleat Ambassador, 'To the Reader', unpaginated.

⁴¹ Digges, The Compleat Ambassador, 'To the Reader'.

⁴² Digges, The Compleat Ambassador, 322.

⁴³ Digges, The Compleat Ambassador, 323.

untrustworthy nature of their contents: this letter almost informs the credulous critic that it is destroyed. There is a telling irony in the way that such a letter was consciously preserved, then obtained by antiquarian Robert Cotton (according to Simon Adams and Alan Bryson, these papers were ‘probably purloined from the state paper office’), then repeatedly copied in the public arena, and finally published as the first printed edition of English diplomatic correspondence.⁴⁴

Despite this beautifully layered example, individual letters can be limiting when discussing the social and political, and private and official, pulls on the ambassador’s letter-writing, because a letter can always be found that exemplifies a particular aspect of their writing (and thus of their positions as ambassadors), leaving the other ignored or downplayed. This is why diplomatic letter-books are so useful: they provide a different context in which to frame the letters, where their physical nature as a collection encourages us to conceive of them as such, moving away from treating the letter as a singular container of fact and narrative. Even more significantly, this points to a need to rethink the state paper archives more widely, attending to early context and provenance in order to rehabilitate the contemporary use of such items and therefore grasp why these particular papers, bundles and books survive where others do not, rather than simply employing them unquestioningly in the creation of a narrative. This attention to the context of survival is also encouraged by Filippo de Vivo in his *Information and Communication in Venice: Rethinking Early Modern Politics*, where he argues that the critic must ask what has motivated the survival of each of their sources, and what this reveals about both the source and the environment and individuals that produced and preserved it. We must ask whether its survival was intended, how its construction was altered or influenced by this intention, and what effect or use it was envisaged as having.

These questions are particularly relevant to both de Vivo’s *relazioni* and to English diplomatic writings because these have been of central importance in constructing political narrative and historical evidence, both by contemporaries and by modern critics, and because they engage issues of secrecy that complicate their use and propagation. *Relazioni* are probably the most famous example of something that is defined by the intention to keep it secret, and simultaneously by the evident transgression of this secrecy. De Vivo helpfully points out that repeated assertions about the secret and restricted nature of such writings, and a loud rhetoric of secrecy coming from the Venetian Senate more generally, is not actually clear evidence for a secret and restricted state; if anything, it betrays an anxiety

⁴⁴ Simon Adams and Alan Bryson and Mitchell Leimon, ‘Walsingham, Sir Francis (c.1532–1590)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2009 <<http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.catalogue.ulrls.lon.ac.uk/view/article/28624>> [accessed 11 July 2012]

founded on its insecurity.⁴⁵ De Vivo argues that the value of secrecy in the Venetian state was not based in keeping the specific fact or the specific contents of a *relazioni* hidden, but rather was based in secrecy as an image: secrecy was part of the myth of Venice because it presented a unified government, it was an indicator of authority and an enforcer of hierarchy. The workings and disagreements of the ruling class were the secret, yet evidently it was only possible to maintain the image and structures of secrecy in reality. In de Vivo's words, 'secrecy was instrumental in projecting as well as maintaining unanimity, an element of the myth as well as a tool maintaining the reality underpinning that myth'.⁴⁶ This is obviously a very different context to that of crown servants in England, and one of Vivo's suggestions is even that secrecy in a sense 'compensated for the lack of divine right legitimacy' in the Venetian republic.⁴⁷ However, the same anxieties over the mutually supportive roles of secrecy (or the *idea* of a privileged or restricted audience) and social and political hierarchy are highly applicable in the English context. For example, Leicester's concern over Walsingham's early liberality is less about the contents of the intelligence, and more about the social grouping and the order in which his information is divulged: Walsingham's laxity over informing messengers of his intelligence risks leakage beyond the political elite altogether, and writing more fully and more immediately to 'private friends' than to the Queen undermines the political hierarchy. It sullies the image that the Queen is the first and foremost recipient of information from her ambassador, and in a way this break in political protocol is as valuable as a sign of favour to Walsingham's private friends as the subject matter itself.

It can therefore be argued that secrecy and intelligence are more useful for indicating the presence of social groups and hierarchies rather than necessarily engaging the senses of clandestine and immoral plotting that has traditionally been the preserve of the study of information gathering. Accordingly, there is less need to set up 'intelligence' as opposed to 'news'; whether a letter contains one or the other is less determined by the contents and more by the expectation laid on it, and by its audience and circulation. Diplomatic letter-books have proved useful in reducing the impulse to divide the letters conceptually, as well as allowing the letters en masse to be both representative of the ambassador socially and a real political resource. The nature of the letters as political resource undergoes an important change through this centralizing process. By the time the letter-book is constructed, after the embassy, the letters within change from being of immediate importance like the Paulet letter with the flammable enclosures, to forming more of a long-term political 'historie'. Nicholas

⁴⁵ See especially de Vivo, *Information and Communication in Venice*, 49-50.

⁴⁶ de Vivo, *Information and Communication in Venice*, 43.

⁴⁷ de Vivo, *Information and Communication in Venice*, 43.

Faunt, in his treatise on the office of the principal secretary, states that similar collections of ambassadorial letters (this time in the context of the Principal Secretary's office) would 'serve instead of an Historie and apt introduccion to other negociacions', making the letters akin to a written discourse on the host country.⁴⁸ This word 'historie' is useful in thinking about the status of the information, with connotations of learning by reading, of discourses by travellers or would-be diplomatic agents, and of authoritative reference works. There need not be competing claims on the ambassador's letter-writing if we think about the audience for their letter-books being the political and social elite, which in terms of Elizabethan governmental hierarchy are often one and the same, and if we here use the language not of secrecy but of exclusivity. In terms of secret intelligence, it becomes more useful to think of the information and letters as 'privileged' rather than 'secret', and the environment in which they are circulating not as public or private but as a socially and politically privileged elite.

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⁴⁸ Charles Hughes, 'Nicholas Faunt's Discourse Touching the Office of Principal Secretary of Estate, &c. 1592', *The English Historical Review* 20:79 (1905), 499-508, 504. The transcription is Hughes'.