

ARTICLE

Proximity, Patronage and Politics in the Correspondence of Lady Elizabeth Anson, c. 1748–1760

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Abstract

This article examines the life of Lady Elizabeth Anson (1725–60), daughter of Philip Yorke, 1st earl of Hardwicke, and the wife of Admiral George Lord Anson, first lord of the admiralty. Using a sample of her letters, this article argues that Lady Anson engaged with letter-writing as an inherently political activity. Previous studies of Lady Anson's correspondence have emphasized her role in the Yorkes' political network, but this article foregrounds her marriage to Lord Anson and her life at the admiralty. In a marriage shaped by the strains of naval service, Lady Anson used her talents as a letter-writer to establish a role for herself as her husband's political partner. Building on the work of Elaine Chalus, Judith Lewis, and Sarah Richardson, this article explores the ways in which Lady Anson used letters to disseminate intelligence and negotiate patronage. It examines her friendship with the powerful admiralty secretary, John Cleveland, and considers the ways in which her physical proximity to the admiralty office gave her privileged access to the inner workings of the Royal Navy. Consequently, her writing provides important insights into the ways in which elite women could use letters to establish their own political authority.

Elizabeth Yorke (1725–60) was the eldest daughter of the lord chancellor, Philip Yorke, 1st earl of Hardwicke, and his wife, Margaret. Her childhood was set against the backdrop of the whig ascendancy and in 1748, she married her father's protégé, George Lord Anson (1697–1762). Lord Anson first obtained celebrity during his notorious circumnavigation voyage (1740–4), soon after which he became a commissioner of the admiralty. In 1747, he entered the peerage and in 1751, he became first lord of the admiralty, which gave him oversight over Britain's naval operations. The job was demanding, and the couple resided in the admiralty building, in Whitehall, where they occupied one of the apartments reserved for lord commissioners. The marriage did not

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produce any children and, in his correspondence, Horace Walpole lampooned Lord Anson for his alleged impotence.¹ Regardless, family papers suggest that the pair enjoyed an affectionate marriage, and Lady Anson became embedded in admiralty politics.

Lady Anson's life has received limited attention from academic historians, which is somewhat surprising considering her substantial written output. Where research has been done, it has typically analysed her activities through the lens of her family circle. Naval historian Margarette Lincoln claimed that Lady Anson's place within Hardwicke's political network meant that she was 'her father's daughter first and Anson's wife second'.² In a case-study on Lady Anson's eldest brother, Philip Yorke Lord Royston, Christopher Reid characterized her simply as a 'versatile letter writer' who operated within Royston's socio-political circle.³ Although Lady Anson's family network was central to her political activities, her relationship with her husband has been comparatively overlooked.

A rich historiography on the political lives of elite women has emerged over the past twenty years. The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have proved fertile ground for such research, but the historiographical debates stemming from this later period also provide important context for the life of Lady Anson. In the 1990s, gender historians pushed back against an earlier 'separate spheres' framework, in which women were confined to domestic contexts while men lived in a 'public' world characterized by formal politics. Writing about epistolary culture in eighteenth-century France, Susan Dalton highlighted that scholars now understand that 'language is power', and so 'the division between public and private spheres loses its force'.⁴ More recently, historians have explored the diversity of women's political experiences in the eighteenth century by reaching beyond the dichotomy of 'public' and 'private', and analysing the ways in which elite women engaged with politics outside of formal avenues of participation.⁵ Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah

¹ Horace Walpole to George Montagu, 18 May 1748, W. S. Lewis, ed., *The Yale edition of Horace Walpole's correspondence*, IX (New Haven, CT, 1983), pp. 54–5; Horace Walpole to George Montagu, 5 July 1749, *ibid.*, p. 90.

² M. Lincoln, *Naval wives & mistresses* (London, 2007), p. 30; E. Gill, *Naval families, war and duty in Britain, 1740–1820* (Woodbridge, 2016), p. 56.

³ C. Reid, 'Reporting by letter: the 2nd earl of Hardwicke and his parliamentary correspondents', *Parliamentary History*, 39 (2020), pp. 239–54, at p. 240.

⁴ S. Dalton, *Engendering the republic of letters reconnecting public and private spheres in eighteenth-century Europe* (Montreal, 2004), p. 4.

⁵ A. Vickery, 'Golden age to separate spheres? A review of the categories and chronology of English women's history', *Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), pp. 383–414; A. Vickery, ed., *Women, privilege, and power: British politics, 1750 to the present* (Stanford, CA, 2001); E. Chalus, *Elite women in English political life, c. 1754–1790* (Oxford, 2005); H. Barker and E. Chalus, eds., *Gender in eighteenth-century England: roles, representations, and responsibilities* (London, 1997); K. Gleadle and S. Richardson, eds., *Women in British politics, 1760–1860: the power of the petticoat* (Basingstoke, 2000); J. S. Lewis, *Sacred to female patriotism: gender, class, and politics in late Georgian Britain* (New York, NY, 2003); J. Mori, *The culture of diplomacy: Britain in Europe, c. 1750–1830* (Manchester, 2011); M. Finn, 'The female world of love & empire: women, family & East India Company politics at the end of the eighteenth century', *Gender & History*, 31 (2019), pp. 7–24.

Richardson have emphasized the plurality of women's activities and warned that a focus on formal politics can 'blind' historians to the 'domestic', 'informal', and 'issue-based' contributions that were made by elite women.⁶ It was within this world of informal politics that Lady Anson established herself.

Especially relevant here is the work of Elaine Chalus, who incorporated Lady Anson into her study on elite women in eighteenth-century politics. Chalus argued that Lady Anson's 'unrivalled access' to people and political structures made her a valuable 'partner' to Lord Anson.⁷ The language of partnership came from Chalus's 'pyramid' framework, which organized elite women into a hierarchy based on their different roles, including those of 'confidante', 'advisor', and 'partner'. Within this model, Chalus identified 'partners' as 'the most independent' and 'openly political of all women'.⁸ It was in this category that Chalus placed Lady Anson, describing her as her 'shy husband's political secretary'.⁹ Chalus acknowledged that these categories were never fixed, and indeed, Lady Anson moved between different roles over the course of her life. In this sense, she was one of many politically engaged women during this period, but the intensity of her participation placed her within a small group of 'partner' wives.

Recent histories have embraced the diversity of women's political experiences, but elements of Lady Anson's correspondence do not easily align with current historiographical trends. For example, there are numerous case-studies on women's participation in electoral politics, but Lady Anson rarely mentioned elections in her correspondence.¹⁰ Letters written by her brother, Colonel Joseph Yorke, reveal that, in 1754, she successfully brokered an election treaty with Lord Gower on behalf of her brother-in-law, Thomas Anson.¹¹ However, the letters she wrote in the 1750s contained little evidence of her interest in elections. Similarly, scholarship on political sociability has demonstrated that dinners, salons, and theatrical performances created an 'informal infrastructure' that provided women with an 'alternative' to 'male-dominated political institutions'.¹² Again, Lady Anson rarely wrote about such social events. Judith Lewis argued that female political 'managers' and hostesses often fell into distinct groups, largely because their activities were shaped by their differing time constraints, resources, and temperaments.¹³

⁶ Gleadle and Richardson, eds., *Power of the petticoat*, p. 8.

⁷ Chalus, *Women in English political life*, pp. 66, 53–4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 53–4, 70–1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁰ E. Chalus, "'My Lord Sue': Lady Susan Keck and the great Oxfordshire election of 1754", *Parliamentary History*, 32 (2013), pp. 443–59; Z. Dyndor, 'Widows, wives and witnesses: women and their involvement in the 1768 Northampton borough parliamentary election', *Parliamentary History*, 30 (2011), pp. 309–23; R. Lana, 'Women and Foxite strategy in the Westminster election of 1784', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 26 (2002), pp. 46–69; J. Lewis, '1784 and all that: aristocratic women and electoral politics', in Vickery, ed., *Women, privilege, and power*, pp. 89–122.

¹¹ Chalus, *Elite women*, p. 66.

¹² S. Richardson, "'Well-neighboured houses': the political networks of elite women, 1780–1860", in Gleadle and Richardson, eds., *Power of the petticoat*, pp. 56–73, at p. 57.

¹³ Lewis, '1784 and all that', pp. 100–1.

This was certainly true of Lady Anson, whose full-time residency at the admiralty meant that she lacked the physical space, facilities, and staff necessary to regularly host her own soirees. Moreover, her health declined in the mid-1750s, and this restricted her ability to attend social gatherings in both the town and countryside. Resultingly, her correspondence gives the impression of a life lived largely behind closed doors.

This article explores a sample of approximately 400 letters written by Lady Anson to her husband, father, brothers, brother-in-law, and sister-in-law, the majority of which were penned during the Seven Years War (1756–63). They were curated by her family members after her premature death in 1760, and although hundreds were retained, many more were lost or destroyed. Consequently, the contents of this article are necessarily shaped by the fact that these letters were kept and preserved for generations, and so they are as much a product of their recipients' priorities as of their creator's intentions. Although this collection is far from complete, the extant manuscripts are a rich body of material for historians interested in gender and politics.

Earlier studies of Lady Anson's life concentrated almost exclusively on the letters that she wrote to her father and brothers, but this article also analyses her extensive correspondence with her husband. Lord Anson's career as first lord entailed regular trips outside of London, either to command fleets at sea or to visit dockyards. Routine separation meant that letter-writing became significant for the Ansons, as it was for many naval families.¹⁴ In a study of transatlantic correspondence, Eve Tavor Bannet contested that 'letters were a site where speech and writing were constantly rotating into each other's places', and that this 'silent speech' allowed writers to conjure the presence of absent recipients.¹⁵ Similarly, Clare Brant claimed that this reimagining was a 'self-conscious' way of manifesting presence and companionship.¹⁶ Lady Anson herself framed the writing and reading of letters as 'a way of Conversation' that enabled her to maintain contact with her loved ones across physical distance.¹⁷ In 1758, when Lord Anson was at sea, it appears that Lady Anson wrote to him almost every day, and she simultaneously maintained regular correspondences with her brothers and sister-in-law. Lady Anson thus spent many hours each day employed in writing and reading letters.

The historiography on British epistolary culture has cited the eighteenth century as a key period of development in the ways in which letters were constructed and understood. Part of this discussion has focused on the ways in which letter-writing allowed individuals, particularly women, to forge their own social, political, and intellectual networks. Political historian Sarah Richardson identified letter-writing as a 'socially accepted' tool that enabled women to 'penetrate the male bastions of power' without incurring censure.¹⁸

¹⁴ Lincoln, *Naval wives*, p. 30; Gill, *Naval families*, p. 16.

¹⁵ E. T. Bannet, *Empire of letters: letter manuals and transatlantic correspondence, 1680–1820* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 46.

¹⁶ C. Brant, *Eighteenth-century letters and British culture* (Basingstoke, 2006), p. 22.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Anson to George Anson, 3 Apr. [1750], Staffordshire Record Office (SRO), personal papers (Elizabeth Anson to Admiral Anson and miscellaneous), D615/P(S)/1/1/17.

¹⁸ Richardson, 'The political networks of elite women', p. 58.

Leonie Hannan also argued that the ‘messy multiplicity’ of women’s correspondence illuminates the intersection of the domestic, intellectual, and social aspects of women’s lives in this period. Relevant here is Hannan’s argument that letters allowed women to generate and exchange knowledge in a period when women’s contributions to knowledge-making are often overlooked.¹⁹ As this article demonstrates, Lady Anson’s letters generated and disseminated political knowledge for the benefit of her close circle.

Therefore, letters were not simply substitutes for verbal conversation or catalogues of daily events, rather they had diverse meanings for both their authors and their recipients. Eve Tavor Bannet, Clare Brant, and Naomi Tadmor have shown that letters were written and read in various contexts, meaning that correspondence was not entirely introspective.²⁰ Some letters were produced with external assistance, and others were read aloud in communal settings. This was certainly true of the Yorke family, and Lady Anson was conscious that her letters would be circulated by her relatives. In this context, her correspondence acquired an inherently political quality. The act of sitting down and writing allowed for a process of reflection and interpretation that was not always possible in face-to-face conversation. Although epistolary conventions were shaped by literary trends, Lady Anson’s approach to letter-writing had a utilitarian quality that became instrumental to her political influence.²¹ Living within the admiralty, she prided herself on her ability to deliver news before the story was broadcast further afield.²² Letter-writing thus allowed her to curate the vast quantity of information that circulated around the department into a comprehensive narrative. The ability to include and omit certain perspectives gave her the power to transform rumour into fact, and opinion into advice. Therefore, Lady Anson’s letters were not merely the fossilized imprints of her daily life, they were instead part of a process through which she transformed information into intelligence.

This article begins with an analysis of Lady Anson’s position within the admiralty itself. Situated in her private apartments, Lady Anson cultivated friendships with the powerful admiralty secretary, John Cleveland, and other admiralty figures. This gave her privileged access to the inner workings of the Royal Navy and enabled her to claim a particular kind of authority in her letters. Section II interrogates the ways in which she used her letters to generate intelligence whilst section III examines her activities as a patronage-broker. The article concludes with a case-study on Lady Anson’s role in the

¹⁹ L. Hannan, *Women of letters: gender, writing and the life of the mind in early modern England* (Manchester, 2016), pp. 1, 8.

²⁰ Bannet, *Empire of letters*, pp. 235, 273; Brant, *Letters and British culture*, p. 5; N. Tadmor, ‘“In the even my wife read to me”: women, reading and household life in the eighteenth century’, in J. Raven, H. Small, and N. Tadmor, eds., *The practice and representation of reading in England* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 162–74; S. Whyman, *The pen and the people: English letter writers 1600–1800* (Oxford and New York, NY, 2009), pp. 30–45; Reid, ‘Reporting by letter’, pp. 239–54.

²¹ On epistolary literature, see Whyman, *Pen and the people*, pp. 19–45.

²² Elizabeth Anson to George Anson, 1 July 1758, SRO, personal papers, D615/P(S)/1/1/59; Elizabeth Anson to Philip Yorke, 29 June 1758, British Library (BL), Hardwicke papers XXVIII, Add. MS 35376, fo. 154.

controversy surrounding Admiral John Byng in 1756. The scandal subjected Lord Anson to intense public scrutiny over his decision to deny Byng reinforcements and, in response, Lady Anson anonymously published a defence of her husband's conduct in the *Public Advertiser*. Her 'Letter to the Editor' is an interesting example of the ways in which Lady Anson adapted the letter form in order to intervene in an increasingly heated national debate. Given the scope of Lady Anson's writing, her correspondence is an important case-study into the ways in which letter-writing allowed elite women to develop their own political identities.

I

On 16 May 1758, Lady Anson wrote to her father, Lord Hardwicke, with a summary of that week's events. Hardwicke was a prominent figure in successive whig governments, and through his daughter and son-in-law, he kept a close eye on naval administration. Lady Anson began her letter thus:

I hold the Pen as Secretary to my Lord [Anson] to return his very sincere thanks to your Lordship for your very affectionate Letter he has just received...It gives him great pleasure to find your Lordship approves the step he has taken as to taking command of the Fleet...I believe my Lord omitted mentioning in his Letter on Saturday, that Sr. Ed[ward] Hawke...has earnestly desired to serve under [Anson], wch. has been agreed to, & he is already set out for Portsmouth. I must add too that by what I cannot help hearing, there seems no sort of probability that my Lord should return from Portsmouth 'till the wished for hour of his return.²³

A month earlier, Admiral Edward Hawke had commanded the Channel Fleet in a blockade against the French port of Brest when a misunderstanding with the admiralty caused him to strike his flag, effectively surrendering. At the same time, the army and navy were preparing to launch a raid on the French port at St Malo, and, in order to prevent Hawke's behaviour from disrupting the mission, Lord Anson assumed command of the Channel Fleet.²⁴ Lady Anson lamented their separation on a personal level, but she was also concerned that the first lord had been forced from the admiralty at a critical juncture. It was with relief, then, that she informed Hardwicke that Hawke had resumed his post and that Lord Anson was travelling to Portsmouth. As the prospect of a French invasion hung over Britain, Lady Anson viewed her husband's return as a national priority. This short paragraph demonstrated the multiple roles occupied by Lady Anson throughout the war years: a concerned wife, dutiful daughter, diligent 'Secretary' and an informant who circulated information that she 'cannot help' but overhear.

²³ Elizabeth Anson to Lord Hardwicke, 16 May 1758, BL, Hardwicke papers X, Add. MS 35359, fo. 403.

²⁴ D. A. Baugh, *The global Seven Years War, 1754-1763: Britain and France in a Great Power contest* (London, 2011), p. 307.

Throughout the 1750s, Lady Anson consciously adopted the title of ‘Secretary’ in the letters she wrote to her father. She claimed to be writing with Lord Anson’s authorization, and these notes were filled with information about naval manoeuvres and appointments. The earliest extant example of this self-fashioning occurred in June 1753, when she opened a note to Hardwicke with an apology that admiralty business ‘prevents my Lord from being his own Secretary’.²⁵ These references multiplied following the outbreak of war with France in 1756, when Lord Anson’s expertise was in high demand. In January 1757, she wrote: ‘[Lord Anson] hopes [Hardwicke] will forgive his answering by a Secretary, having a good many people with him.’²⁶ Again, in August 1757, she expressed her husband’s regrets: ‘Lord Anson...begs pardon for employing a Secretary to inform his Lordship of an Incident that had just happened.’²⁷ Chalus identified this trope and characterized Lady Anson as ‘her shy husband’s political secretary’, a role that was undertaken by many elite women in this period. Indeed, the volume of Lady Anson’s written output is testament to the time and energy that she invested in her self-defined secretarial work.²⁸ However, although these letters echoed those of other politically active women, the context in which Lady Anson was writing gave her choice of language particular significance.

Fundamentally, the term ‘Secretary’ had a specific meaning at the admiralty, and there were important differences between admiralty secretaries and the political secretaries studied by Chalus. The admiralty was the government department responsible for naval operations, and it was directed by the first lord, who presided over the six lord commissioners that made up the board of admiralty. The board was supported by the admiralty office, which consisted of the admiralty secretary, his deputy, and eight permanent clerks.²⁹ As the head of the admiralty office, the secretary supervised the clerks, liaised with the first lord, and attended board meetings. He also read each letter that was addressed to the board before deciding whether the matter should be raised with the lord commissioners. Naval historian N. A. M. Rodger estimated that the board read only 20 per cent of the letters addressed to them, whilst the remaining 80 per cent were handled by the secretary and his team.³⁰ These letters flowed into the admiralty from across the world, and in a study of naval officers’ correspondence, A. B. McLeod claimed that the secretary had every detail about the navy ‘at their fingertips’.³¹

Secretaries were important figures in the department, and Rodger has argued that they occupied an ‘almost unique’ position in eighteenth-century

²⁵ Elizabeth Anson to Philip Yorke, Lord Hardwicke, 12 June 1753, BL, Hardwicke papers, Add. MS 35359, fo. 374.

²⁶ Elizabeth Anson to Lord Hardwicke, 26 Jan. 1757, *ibid.*, fo. 387.

²⁷ Elizabeth Anson to Lord Hardwicke, 10 Aug. 1757, *ibid.*, fo. 399.

²⁸ Chalus, *Elite women*, p. 66.

²⁹ N. A. M. Rodger, *The admiralty* (Lavenham, 1979), p. 62.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

³¹ A. B. McLeod, *British naval captains of the Seven Years’ War: the view from the quarterdeck* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 181.

politics.³² Their relentless workload required a diverse skill set, and many secretaries enjoyed a lengthy tenure because their expertise was difficult to replace. Between 1694 and 1795, there were only four admiralty secretaries, compared with seventy-six under-secretaries of state in the same period.³³ Furthermore, admiralty secretaries often sat as MPs in order to guard the navy's interests in parliament, meaning that they were elected politicians in their own right. Their status was reflected in their substantial wages; by the 1780s, Secretary Philip Stephens was paid over £2,000 a year, which was double the salary of a lord commissioner and three-quarters that of the first lord.³⁴ In this sense, admiralty secretaries were well-connected figures who commanded significant power and respect within the department.

Lady Anson's time at the admiralty aligned with that of John Cleveland, one of the most influential secretaries of the eighteenth century. Cleveland had previously served as the admiralty's chief clerk during the 1740s, and he worked as joint secretary alongside Thomas Corbett until 1751, when Corbett died and Lord Anson made Cleveland sole secretary.³⁵ Lord Anson valued Cleveland's knowledge and experience, and the two men developed a close working relationship. On occasion, the extent of Cleveland's influence attracted resentment. Frances Boscawen, wife of naval officer Edward Boscawen, scorned the friendship between Lord Anson and his secretary when she sniffed that 'Cleveland is Lord High Admiral'.³⁶ He also appeared as a villainous puppet-master in Matthew Darly's cartoon, *Occasional conformity*, published in October 1756. The image depicted a meeting of the board, presided over by Lord Anson in the form of an ungainly sea lion (a reference to his circumnavigation voyage). Seated opposite him was Cleveland, who tugged hard on several chains attached to Anson's nose.³⁷ The cartoon alluded to an incident in which Cleveland's eighteen-year-old son was made a naval captain despite his relative inexperience. When it was printed in the autumn of 1756, Lord Anson and his colleagues were engulfed in controversy after Admiral John Byng publicly blamed the loss of Minorca on their mismanagement. The image of Lord Anson in chains fed into a wider conversation about government corruption and accountability.

In this context, Lady Anson's decision to identify herself as a 'Secretary', even if humorously, is intriguing. The connotations of the term were not lost on her, nor would they have bypassed her husband. In adopting this terminology, she consciously inserted herself into the admiralty's masculine power structures. Although Lady Anson only used the term 'Secretary' in her letters to Hardwicke, she depicted herself as Cleveland's counterpart in her correspondence with Lord Anson, particularly during the Seven Years War. In one letter from July 1758, she hastily scrawled: 'Mr. Cleveland & I

³² Rodger, *Admiralty*, p. 64.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 64–5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

³⁵ G. F. James, 'The admiralty establishment, 1759', *Historical Research*, 16 (1938), pp. 24–7.

³⁶ F. E. Boscawen and C. F. Aspinall-Oglander, *Admiral's wife: being the life and letters of the Hon. Mrs. Edward Boscawen from 1719 to 1761* (London, 1940), p. 206.

³⁷ M. Darly, *Occasional conformity*, 1756, paper, 64mm x 104mm, 1870, 1008.2958, British Museum.

have forgot to tell you sooner...that the Chevalier de Rohan [a French prisoner of war] has leave to return to France.³⁸ On 18 July 1758, she notified her husband that he would soon 'be informed from the [admiralty] office' that 'our Troops are landed' at the French fortress in Louisbourg.³⁹ Lady Anson valued her proximity to the office and she prefaced much of her news with notes about timing, particularly in relation to whether or not Lord Anson would receive her letters before Cleveland's. Although Lord Anson's letters to his wife have not survived, there is some suggestion from Lady Anson's correspondence that he asked her to converse with Cleveland on specific issues. The most notable example of this occurred in July 1758, when Lord Anson was stationed in the English Channel. During his absence, the board ordered a fleet to sail for Louisbourg, a key settlement in France's North American empire. One of the designated ships, *Vanguard*, did not depart with the rest of the squadron; Lord Anson had seemingly queried the delay because Lady Anson explained that 'Cleveland says...the sickness of Men belonging to [*Vanguard*] was the reason of her not going soon.'⁴⁰

As the last quote demonstrates, Lady Anson reported on conversations with Cleveland in her letters. So valuable were these encounters that she evinced disappointment when she 'could pick no news out' of the secretary.⁴¹ After war was declared in May 1756, she used her letters to routinely relay Cleveland's advice, recommendations, and warnings to her husband. In July 1758, shortly after Lord Anson left London to patrol the English Channel, Lady Anson wrote that 'Cleveland says P. Edward is certainly to go with Capt. Howe', alluding to the proposed raid on Cherbourg then being organized by the board.⁴² Later that summer, Cleveland 'told me the Board had had an Account of one [British] Ship wch...had been robbed no less than fourteen times' as it cruised along the Dutch coast.⁴³ In November 1758, Lady Anson informed her brother, Royston, that 'Mr. Cleveland this minute lets me know, that he has just received an Express from Bristol' that contained the alarming news that Captain Saumarez had intercepted a French ship in the Bristol Channel.⁴⁴ These references to verbal conversations with Cleveland allowed Lady Anson to carve out a role for herself as a vital link in the admiralty's chain of communication.

However, the details of Lady Anson's association with Cleveland are unclear, largely because Cleveland's personal correspondence has not survived. Lady Anson did not mention the location of her interactions with him, so it is not known whether she spoke or met with him in her apartments, his office, or at other locations. These details were, perhaps, deliberately omitted. In a

³⁸ Elizabeth Anson to George Anson, 20 July [1758], SRO, personal papers, D615/P(S)/1/2/13.

³⁹ Elizabeth Anson to George Anson, 18 July 1758, *ibid.*, D615/P(S)/1/2/11.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Anson to George Anson, 12 July [1758], *ibid.*, D615/P(S)/1/2/10a.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Anson to Jemima Yorke, Lady Grey [n.d.], Bedfordshire Archives (BA), correspondence of Jemima Yorke, Marchioness Grey, and Lady Elizabeth Anson, L30/9/3/36, fo. 277.

⁴² Elizabeth Anson to George Anson, 11 July 1758, SRO, personal papers, D615/P(S)/1/2/9e.

⁴³ Elizabeth Anson to George Anson, 17 Aug. 1758, SRO, *ibid.*, D615/P(S)/1/2/21a.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Anson to Philip Yorke, 4 Nov. [1758], BL, Hardwicke papers XXVIII, Add. MS 35376, fos. 178–9.

study of naval patronage in the late eighteenth century, Catherine Beck argued that Admiral John Markham's wife, Maria, obscured her role in patronage networks out of concern that meeting with other men would damage her reputation.⁴⁵ We cannot know how Cleveland viewed Lord Anson's intelligent young wife, but it seems that the Ansons' marriage was an affectionate one, and observers noted that the admiral was 'excessive fond' of Lady Anson.⁴⁶ Moreover, Lady Anson's older brother, Colonel Joseph Yorke, once described her as Lord Anson's 'Fellow in the other sex', on account of her love for the navy.⁴⁷ As Cleveland well knew, the first lord's trust was a powerful asset and it seems likely that Lord Anson's esteem, alongside Lady Anson's status as Hardwicke's daughter, facilitated her induction into the admiralty's inner circle.

By the late 1750s, Cleveland was a recurring character in Lady Anson's letters, and she framed their friendship in terms of trust and candour. Throughout the war years, she described having read documents that would only have been accessible to the board, the secretary or the office staff. On two occasions in the summer of 1759, Lady Anson mentioned to her sister-in-law that Cleveland had shown her his 'private' letters containing important news about the war. Furthermore, she regularly extracted content from the 'A-la-Mains', which were letters sent to the board by naval officers, government officials, and diplomats from across the British empire.⁴⁸ In Lady Anson's correspondence with Royston, she claimed to have read A-la-Mains dispatched from Paris, Toulon, Hanover, The Hague, Brunswick, Vienna, Russia, China, and Canada, indicating the global scope of her news network.⁴⁹ Writing to her husband in July 1758, she enclosed a paragraph that she had transcribed from 'the Office a-la-Mains, from Brest', and the following week, she reported on events she had read 'out of the French a-la-mains'.⁵⁰ In August 1759, when she sought news about the ongoing siege of Louisbourg, she told Lord Anson that she had perused 'you're [sic] A-la-main to the Office'.⁵¹ That same month, she forwarded a sealed note from Colonel Yorke to Royston along with 'as much as she can recollect out of the A-la-Mains...wch. she had not time to transcribe'.⁵² This suggests that Lady Anson had access to these documents for prolonged periods of time, and the

⁴⁵ C. S. Beck, 'Patronage and the Royal Navy 1775–1815' (doctoral thesis, University College London, 2017), p. 207.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Boscawen and Aspinall-Oglander, *Admiral's wife*, p. 86.

⁴⁷ Joseph Yorke to Elizabeth Anson, 8 Aug. 1755, BL, Hardwicke papers XXXIX, Add. MS 35387, fo. 89.

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Anson to George Anson, 22 July [1758], SRO, personal papers, D615/P(S)/1/2/14a; Elizabeth Anson to George Anson, 27 July [1758], *ibid.*, D615/P(S)/1/2/15d.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Anson to Philip Yorke, 19 June 1758, BL, Hardwicke papers XXVIII, Add. MS 35376, fo. 148; Elizabeth Anson to Philip Yorke, 25 Mar. 1758, *ibid.*, fo. 145; Elizabeth Anson to Philip Yorke, [n.d.], *ibid.*, fo. 163; Elizabeth Anson to Philip Yorke, 5 Oct. 1758, *ibid.*, fo. 164; Elizabeth Anson to George Anson, 17 July 1757, SRO, personal papers, D615/P(S)/1/1/53a; Elizabeth Anson to George Anson, 11 July 1758, *ibid.*, D615/P(S)/1/2/9a.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Anson to George Anson, 22 July [1758], *ibid.*, D615/P(S)/1/2/14a.

⁵¹ Elizabeth Anson to George Anson, 2 Aug. 1758, *ibid.*, D615/P(S)/1/2/16.

⁵² Elizabeth Anson to Lady Grey, 21 Aug. 1759, BA, Yorke/Anson correspondence, L30/9/3/106, fo. 553.

act of copying these texts suggests that she was undertaking similar work to that of the office clerks. However, unlike the clerks, who sent their transcripts to the secretary, Lady Anson deployed her work to the advantage of her political network. The fact that she claimed to have selected passages and duplicated them for her own use was a conscious articulation of her authority as a correspondent.

Lady Anson thus used her skills as a letter-writer to establish herself as Lord Anson's political partner. Cleveland's motivations for sharing the A-la-mains with Lady Anson are unclear, but the fact that he permitted her to view his correspondence along with other admiralty documents implies that he trusted her. It is also possible that Cleveland saw Lady Anson's talent for writing as an opportunity to make his own work more efficient. Although the admiralty had its own system of messengers, war increased the risk that letters would be lost, misdelivered, or intercepted. By duplicating news and information in her letters, Lady Anson helped to keep her husband up to date on fast-changing situations, which mitigated the risks involved in long-distance communication. Therefore, writing enabled her to act as the secretary's counterpart, a role that became self-reinforcing once Cleveland recognized the importance of her relationship with Lord Anson. In turn, he increasingly granted Lady Anson access to politically sensitive information about Britain's war machine. This professional relationship served both parties. For Cleveland, it was convenient to have the first lord's confidante close by and, for Lady Anson, Cleveland's trust enabled her to penetrate the admiralty's male sanctum and obtain information that would be useful to her wider family. By identifying the admiralty secretary as the source of her news, Lady Anson capitalized on Cleveland's reputation as an influential political agent, and by iterating their friendship, she invested her own writing with authority, expertise, and legitimacy.

II

Although Cleveland's name helped to validate Lady Anson's news-writing, she also cultivated connections with other admiralty officials. One such associate was Gilbert Elliot, a Scottish poet who served as a lord commissioner between 1756 and 1761. Elliot predominantly featured in Lady Anson's letters to Lord Anson, in which she represented herself as Elliot's confidante. Interestingly, Elliot's correspondence with his own wife, who lived in Scotland, suggests that he was accustomed to conversing with politically active women.⁵³ A positive relationship with Lady Anson was undoubtedly beneficial to Elliot, given that her opinion was valued by Lord Anson, and on several occasions, Elliot and Lady Anson reportedly discussed naval matters together. The most striking example of this occurred on the night of 18 June 1758, when the board received news that British troops had landed successfully at St Malo and were about to storm the French port. Lady Anson wrote to her husband the following day: 'Our Neighbour Mr. Elliot was so good as to convey the account to me in the middle of the night, & not having my Wits about me, upon being

⁵³ Chalus, *Elite women*, p. 55.

just waked...I concluded [it] must be to communicate the taking of St. Malos.⁵⁴ Lady Anson was 'disappointed' to find that British forces had not seized the port immediately and was 'simple enough to express some disappointment in my answer'. When the board received a more optimistic report early the next morning, Lady Anson regretted her initial response. In order to make amends, she invited Elliot to her apartment in order 'to thank him for his attention'.⁵⁵

This passage is insightful for its representation of the spatial dynamics within the admiralty, as this was a rare example in which Lady Anson stated the time and location of an exchange. Elliot sent her the 'account' late at night, which implied that she received the news shortly after the board itself. From a political perspective, her privileged proximity to the board gave her vital access to important news. However, she carefully highlighted to her husband that this late-night news came to her in a note, thereby sparing her from accusations of infidelity and improper conduct. This fine balancing act exposed the tension between her responsibilities as a political partner and her duties as a wife. For many elite women, these roles were compatible, but for Lady Anson, they could cause friction. Her marital home was situated in a hypermasculine space, and so her behaviour was under constant observation. Although the wives of other commissioners occasionally stayed at the admiralty, it seems that Lady Anson was the only one who lived there full time, at least during the 1750s. Lord Anson's substantial fortune meant that he could easily have purchased his own townhouse, but it seems that the couple preferred living in their admiralty apartment, where they were close to the action. As the only elite woman in the building, Lady Anson's experience of that space was heavily gendered. Constantly surrounded by men, her husband's frequent absences placed her in a precarious position. Although she needed to maintain positive relationships with her husband's colleagues, such close proximity threatened to tarnish her reputation further afield.

Although she clarified the location and timing of this particular incident, similar details were absent from her other letters. Such omissions downplayed her numerous interactions with men and obscured the temporal aspects of her knowledge-gathering process. Where Lord Anson was concerned, there were occasions where honesty was vital to maintaining trust, particularly when it came to receiving male visitors. Her invitation to meet Elliot in their private apartment served as an apology to her husband's colleague, but she clearly highlighted to Lord Anson that Elliot would be received during daylight hours, when other staff would witness his comings and goings. In an effort to disarm any rumours that might reach her husband, Lady Anson forewarned him of Elliot's visit, perhaps to reassure Lord Anson that this was a polite, though necessary, meeting. It was through this selective transparency that she reconciled her responsibilities as a loyal wife with her activities as a political partner.

Although Lady Anson benefited from her association with Cleveland and Elliot, her own political acumen was integral to her authority. Her early letters to Lord Anson rarely touched on naval matters, but as she settled into

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Anson to George Anson, 19 June 1758, SRO, personal papers, D615/P(S)/4/2/4a.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

marriage, she increasingly divulged her opinions to him. On 12 July 1758, Lady Anson stewed over the political machinations that, in her opinion, deliberately kept Lord Anson at sea. She explained to her husband that his protégé Admiral Charles Saunders had spoken with Pitt, the secretary of state for the southern department, and requested to relieve Lord Anson of his command. By this time, Pitt and Anson had developed a productive relationship, facilitated in part by Pitt's 'blue-water' policies.⁵⁶ Although Anson and Pitt collaborated on naval operations, Lady Anson was wary of Pitt, perhaps because he had been a vocal opponent of her father in the 1740s. When Pitt refused Saunders's entreaty, Lady Anson became suspicious that Pitt had:

some other reason, & what can that be but his desire to keep you out 'till he pleases to have done with his Enterprize...I am very unhappy in the Idea, & in the way in wch. it is done; I mean particularly as to the not having let the Ships come in as they ought for refreshment.⁵⁷

The 'Enterprize' in question was not elucidated because Lady Anson deliberately obscured the matter in her writing, although it may have been related to an abandoned plan to attack Cherbourg. Lady Anson's conspiratorial language helped to sustain the secrecy surrounding the mission, and in this way, her discretion consolidated her integrity. A week later, Pitt persuaded Lord Anson that Saunders was still in poor health, and Lady Anson admonished her husband: '[Saunders] is really so much better, & your being here is so much wanted, that I do not see why you should scruple to let him relieve you now.'⁵⁸ Lord Anson's reply has not survived, but it is telling that Lady Anson exerted pressure on her husband when they disagreed about naval matters.

Lady Anson's obfuscation of the 'Enterprize' is a good example of the ways in which she experimented with the language of secrecy in her letters. She used the word 'secret' on many occasions, but the term was applied to both social and political events. Among other things, these 'secrets' included the engagement of a male friend, the government's attempts to solve the 'Turin Cypher', and a stay of execution for the spy Dr Florence Hensey.⁵⁹ Positioned within the admiralty's intelligence network, Lady Anson was concerned with what she knew, what the people around her knew, and what she could make known to others. In letters to her husband, father, and brothers, she regularly wrote about manoeuvres and strategies and, if intercepted, these details had the potential to compromise specific squadrons. At one point, she became fearful that her post was being tampered with when she

⁵⁶ For Anson's role in the war, see R. Middleton, *The bells of victory: the Pitt-Newcastle ministry and the conduct of the Seven Years' War, 1757-1762* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 21, 224; and Baugh, *Global Seven Years War*, p. 624.

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Anson to George Anson, 12 July 1758, SRO, personal papers, D615/P(S)/1/2/10.

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Anson to George Anson, 19 July 1758, *ibid.*, D615/P(S)/1/2/12.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Anson to Lady Grey, 28 June [1750], BA, Yorke/Anson correspondence, L30/9/3/20, fo. 202; Elizabeth Anson to Lady Grey, 3 Nov. [1750], *ibid.*, 30/9/3/25, fo. 225; Elizabeth Anson to George Anson, 12 July 1758, SRO, personal papers, D615/P(S)/1/2/10b.

noticed that a letter from Lord Anson had arrived with a damaged seal.⁶⁰ Despite these concerns, Lady Anson continued to disseminate sensitive information amongst her network on what she felt was a 'need to know' basis. Writing to her husband in May 1760, Lady Anson imparted a 'secret' gleaned from Colonel Yorke, stationed at The Hague. Yorke witnessed the Prussian government's 'neglect' of its armed forces, and believed that this disorganization had contributed to their recent defeat in battle. However, given that Britain was allied with Prussia, Yorke did 'not chuse to spread' this information further afield himself.⁶¹ Instead, Lady Anson sent it to her husband, anticipating that such news would have consequences for Britain's own military strategy. This example thus encapsulated the ways in which Lady Anson deployed the language of secrecy in her letters; through her writing, she was able to make and remake secrets according to political expediency and in so doing, she bolstered her own authority as an 'insider'.

III

Furthermore, Lady Anson's correspondence was also an important vehicle for the negotiation of naval patronage. In this period, elite women, particularly those with close connections to male politicians, operated as both supplicants and patronage-brokers.⁶² Lady Anson was no exception, and, as the wife of the first lord, she encountered many people who hoped to procure her husband's assistance. In a study of naval patronage in the late eighteenth century, Catherine Beck argued that the 'physical proximity' of naval networks meant that patronage was often 'organised' by letter.⁶³ Unfortunately, the letters that Lady Anson received from acquaintances and strangers have not survived, but her correspondence with Lord Anson and her relatives referenced the numerous supplications she received from both men and women.

Lady Anson's admiralty connections meant that she acquired significant influence as a patronage-broker. The board of admiralty held tight control over naval appointments, and it also controlled ten parliamentary boroughs, meaning that the admiralty wielded patronage over seats in the House of Commons. N. A. M. Rodger emphasized that Lord Anson was a particularly powerful first lord because his political connections gave him 'unparalleled authority' over naval patronage.⁶⁴ However, supplicants without any admiralty contacts had to submit their requests to the secretary, who acted as a mediator. Consequently, although Lord Anson dominated the decision-making process, the system relied on Cleveland's judgement. By contrast, Lady Anson offered a direct route to the first lord. Beck's study of Maria Markham, wife of Admiral John Markham, who served as first lord from 1806, found that she

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Anson to George Anson, [n.d.], *ibid.*, D615/P(S)/1/1/14.

⁶¹ Elizabeth Anson to George Anson, 3 May 1760, *ibid.*, D615/P(S)/1/2/47.

⁶² Lincoln, *Naval wives*, pp. 56–65; E. Chalus, "'To serve my friends': women and political patronage in eighteenth-century England", in Vickery, ed., *Women, privilege, and power*, pp. 57–88, at p. 80.

⁶³ Beck, 'Patronage and the Royal Navy', pp. 3, 197.

⁶⁴ Rodger, *Admiralty*, p. 60.

was targeted by individuals with ‘peripheral’ or ‘lapsed’ connections to her husband.⁶⁵ Similarly, Lady Anson was an attractive figure for individuals who sought access to the first lord but were not well acquainted with Cleveland.

Lady Anson delivered to her husband the various requests she received from people hoping to secure employment or promotion. In July 1758, Lady Anson received a letter from Mary Hughes, the daughter of naval officer Robert Hughes. Hughes wrote to Lady Anson ‘unknown to her Father & Mother, to intercede for Mr. Collingwood who I believe the Commissioner mentioned to you’.⁶⁶ Thomas Collingwood had been the captain of the *Siren* but when his command ended in June 1758, he struggled to find a new position.⁶⁷ When Collingwood’s application to another commissioner failed, his lover wrote to Lady Anson claiming that ‘there are two Frigates now vacant or building...[and] what can I do for her & her Lover’. Interestingly, Hughes acted without her parents’ knowledge, perhaps indicating that her family disapproved of the relationship. Unable to utilize her father’s connections, Hughes instead appealed to the wife of the first lord. It is unknown whether the two ladies had been introduced before this point, but Lady Anson’s advocacy proved successful. The couple married in London on 12 October 1758 and, six days later, Collingwood became commander of a new thirty-two-gun frigate bound for the Leeward Islands.⁶⁸

Numerous supplications came to Lady Anson through her family members. In May 1748, just weeks after the Ansons’ wedding, Marchioness Grey seized on this new connection and petitioned her sister-in-law to find employment for an anonymous young man in the navy. Lady Anson reassured Marchioness Grey that she had ‘ordered’ her new husband to ‘speak for’ the man at the next board meeting.⁶⁹ Although the outcome of this entreaty is unknown, the note is an interesting survival from the early years of the Ansons’ marriage. Lady Anson’s confident and humorous tone, in which she represented herself as a young bride issuing orders to a fifty-one-year-old admiral, contrasted with the reserved formality that characterized her early letters to Lord Anson. Hardwicke had been Lord Anson’s political patron since the early 1740s, and it seems probable that Lord Anson consented to Grey’s request out of deference to his new father-in-law. Therefore, Lady Anson’s standing within the Yorke dynasty gave her significant political leverage when it came to accessing naval patronage.

In 1751, shortly after Lord Anson became first lord of the admiralty, his wife wrote to him on behalf of Walter Harrison, a gentleman from Lichfield who

⁶⁵ Beck, ‘Patronage and the Royal Navy’, p. 126.

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Anson to George Anson, 20 July [1758], SRO, personal papers, D615/P(S)/1/2/13; J. Debrett and G. W. Collen, *The baronetage of England* (London, 1840), p. 300.

⁶⁷ R. Winfield, *British warships in the age of sail, 1714–1792: design, construction, careers and fates* (Barnsley, 2007), p. 256.

⁶⁸ London, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1757–63, London Metropolitan Archive, London Church of England parish registers, P69/And2/A/01/Ms 6671/2, fo. 36; Winfield, *Warships in the age of sail*, p. 200.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Anson to Lady Grey, 10 May 1748, BA, Yorke/Anson correspondence, L30/9/3/1, fo. 149.

sought promotion for his sailor son. It is likely that the Harrison case was originally presented to Lady Anson by Lord Anson's older brother, Thomas, who lived at Shugborough Hall, in Staffordshire, and served as the MP for Lichfield. Lady Anson stressed her husband's obligation to Harrison, who had been a 'zealous friend' of the Anson family for many years, and she framed the promotion of Harrison's son as a reward for his loyalty.⁷⁰ It is interesting that, although Thomas and George Anson enjoyed an amiable relationship throughout the 1740s, it was Lady Anson who mediated her brother-in-law's petition. She did more than simply forward requests to her husband because she included notes on the supplicants' backgrounds in order to ask her husband's opinion. The details she included, and the tone in which she wrote, integrated these petitions into a web of loyalty, duty, and obligation. Several sentences containing her endorsement had the power to circumvent the months of solicitation and waiting that typically accompanied the admiralty's recruitment procedures.

This is particularly evident in the letters written by Colonel Yorke. Only Yorke's letters to Lady Anson have survived, so we do not have her responses, but his letters were filled with petitions in which Yorke advocated for his acquaintances. One interesting example occurred in August 1756, when Yorke was stationed at The Hague and serving as a captain in the 9th Regiment of Foot. In the letter, Yorke asked Lady Anson for her assistance in securing a promotion for his 'old friend' Captain Angel, commander of the *Swallow* sloop. Yorke described Angel as a 'Clever fellow' and a 'foreigner', although his nationality was never stated. By March 1756, tensions were mounting between Britain and France, and Yorke explained that Angel's foreign identity hampered his career progress. Through his sister, Yorke pleaded with Lord Anson to cast 'an Eye of pity upon my old friend'.⁷¹ Yorke specifically recommended that Angel be assigned to a post ship, but all expectations were trumped when Lord Anson gave him command of the warship *Deal Castle*. When Yorke received news of Angel's promotion, he thanked his sister and enthused that '[the navy] look upon you as their friend & Protectoress'.⁷² Lady Anson had successfully persuaded her husband to promote a 'foreign' captain just as the admiralty was preparing for a European war, and it is likely that she used her brother's reputation as a diplomat to support Angel's case. In a study of the Seven Years War, Daniel Baugh labelled The Hague as 'the information centre of Europe'.⁷³ By assisting one of Yorke's friends, Lord and Lady Anson reinforced their relationship with one of The Hague's insiders, and thus bolstered their own intelligence network.

The importance of letter-writing as a vehicle for patronage was especially evident when potential supplicants tried to gain access to Lady Anson outside of her carefully constructed correspondence networks. This is evident in her

⁷⁰ Elizabeth Anson to George Anson, [n.d.], SRO, personal papers, D615/P(S)/1/1/41.

⁷¹ Joseph Yorke to Elizabeth Anson, 10 Aug. 1756, BL, Hardwicke papers XL, Add. MS 35388, fo. 190.

⁷² Joseph Yorke to Elizabeth Anson, 3 Oct. 1758, *ibid.*, fo. 204.

⁷³ Baugh, *Global Seven Years War*, p. 22.

encounters with 'Nurse Russell', a nursemaid formerly employed by Royston and Grey. Grey dismissed Russell in 1759 when her services were no longer required, and without her own income, Russell had to rely on the low wages of her husband, a customs official. Their relationship was sometimes turbulent, and several years earlier, Mr Russell confronted Lady Hardwicke at her London home demanding to know the whereabouts of his wife. Shortly afterwards, Marchioness Grey wrote to Lady Anson about employing Mr Russell at sea, but Lady Anson declared that she could not find him a suitable posting.⁷⁴ When Nurse Russell lost her position in 1759, she decided to visit Lady Anson, in person, at the admiralty. Lady Anson described the event to Grey:

I had yesterday a visit from Nurse Russell, whose Husband is arrested, for five pounds, she says: I have enquired again upon this occasion & cannot find it is possible to send him to Sea in any way...The poor Woman I am very sorry [for]. She is now with Child...but I do not know how in the world to help her.⁷⁵

Russell evidently hoped that Grey's relationship with the Ansons would alleviate her family's problems, but Lady Anson apparently refused to intervene. Her claim that she was unable to find work for Mr Russell is striking, given that, by this point in the war, the navy was consuming manpower at a high rate. Crucially, Lady Anson exercised her judgement when intervening in her husband's patronage network. She did not passively forward every request that she received from her relatives, rather she reflected on the character of the individual concerned and proceeded in a manner that would not compromise her reputation for sound judgement. Lady Anson did not explain her reluctance to Grey, but she hinted that Mr Russell's character was not suited to the discipline of naval life. This was particularly important to Lord Anson, who had previously implemented numerous reforms designed to instil stricter discipline amongst all ranks of the navy. Lady Anson refused to advocate for a man whom she knew to be volatile, perhaps out of fear that his behaviour would reflect badly on herself, and simultaneously undermine her husband's agenda.

Moreover, this incident reveals the extent to which Lady Anson's role as a mediator relied on her correspondence networks. When Grey failed to persuade her sister-in-law, Nurse Russell took matters into her own hands and met with Lady Anson in her admiralty apartment, possibly hoping that her visible pregnancy would elicit sympathy. Although Lady Anson expressed pity, she perhaps resented Nurse Russell's intrusion, fearing that such an association would be considered ill-judged. Other strangers and acquaintances had previously succeeded in winning Lady Anson's recommendation by relying either on their own writing abilities, as in the case of Mary Hughes, or on endorsement from Lady Anson's relatives. It is not known whether Nurse Russell was literate, but when the conventional course of supplication proved

⁷⁴ Elizabeth Anson to Lady Grey, 17 Oct. [1751], BA, Yorke/Anson correspondence, L30/9/3/32, fo. 247.

⁷⁵ Elizabeth Anson to Lady Grey, 31 July [1759], *ibid.*, L30/9/3/150, fo. 543.

unsuccessful, she circumvented the networks of correspondence that Lady Anson had spent years cultivating. These epistolary networks allowed Lady Anson to exert pressure on her husband in a way that protected her from outside observation, and when this system was breached, it compromised the delicate nexus of discretion, circumspection, and influence through which Lady Anson operated.

IV

Lady Anson's correspondence largely centred on her circle of family and friends but, on one occasion, she decided to publish one of her letters in a newspaper. This episode has previously been analysed by Elaine Chalus, but it is worth considering here because it marked a significant development in Lady Anson's political career.⁷⁶ In March 1756, Admiral John Byng was ordered to raise a fleet bound for the Mediterranean, but Lord Anson feared that a French invasion was imminent, and so decided to retain a number of warships in the English Channel. This meant that Byng was given a smaller crew than he had anticipated. When the French besieged the British garrison at Minorca the following month, Byng was ordered to defend the fort. When his requests for reinforcements were refused by the board, Byng withdrew to Gibraltar and effectively abandoned Minorca to the French. He was recalled to Britain where ministers debated his fate, and in June 1756, several newspapers printed Byng's letter to the admiralty board, in which he blamed the incident on the admiralty's mismanagement. In a recent book about Byng, naval historian Joseph Krulder similarly claimed that Anson 'condemned' Byng by scapegoating him for the admiralty's errors.⁷⁷ Other historians have questioned the utility of such blame games, but there is no doubt that the resulting scandal eventually brought down the government.⁷⁸ By November, Pitt had replaced the duke of Newcastle as prime minister and both Hardwicke and Lord Anson resigned from office. In January 1757, a court martial found Byng guilty of failing to do his utmost in the face of the enemy, and he was executed two months later. It was not until July 1757 that Anson returned to the admiralty as first lord, under the Pitt–Newcastle coalition.⁷⁹

Upon first hearing the news about Minorca, Lady Anson expressed shock, but her disbelief quickly soured into rage. On 1 July, she wrote to Thomas Anson condemning Byng's 'absolutely unpardonable' retreat to Gibraltar. She claimed that Byng had 'secret' knowledge about Port Mahon that would have secured a British victory, a fact that she claimed to be 'certain' but

⁷⁶ Chalus, *Elite women*, p. 66; Lincoln, *Naval wives*, p. 65.

⁷⁷ J. J. Krulder, *The execution of Admiral John Byng as a microhistory of eighteenth-century Britain* (London, 2021), pp. 124–6; S. Kinkel, 'Saving Admiral Byng: imperial debates, military governance and popular politics at the outbreak of the Seven Years' War', *Journal for Maritime Research*, 13 (2011), pp. 3–19, at p. 4.

⁷⁸ See E. Wilson, 'Review: the execution of Admiral John Byng as a microhistory of eighteenth-century Britain by Joseph J. Krulder', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 56 (2023), pp. 510–12.

⁷⁹ Elizabeth Anson to George Anson, 6 Mar. 1754, personal papers, D615/P(S)/1/1/44. This document was incorrectly dated at a later time.

'not...to be made public – or at least not by me'.⁸⁰ When the scandal around Lord Anson intensified, she mounted a passionate defence of her husband in the form of a 'Letter to the Editor'. In August 1758, she forwarded a draft of the text to Whiston: 'I return the draught you saw last night, as I have been obliged to whittle down two of the paragraphs, in compliance with our...fear of offending'.⁸¹ The 'naming [of] particular Persons' had met with 'insuperable objections' from Royston, and Lady Anson reluctantly modified the piece in order to avoid accusations of libel. Having revised the text, Lady Anson instructed her brother to send it to the press but begged him to 'not send it in my hand', out of fear that her handwriting would be recognized. Her plea for anonymity sprang from her desire to appear 'unknowing' and 'less like a too well-informed Defender', in case it was 'imagined that we were not so unknowing of it as we would chuse to be thought'. Lady Anson thus tried to conceal her identity out of concern that the exposure of her own influence would unleash further anger towards her husband.⁸²

On 27 August, Lady Anson's letter appeared in the *Public Advertiser* under the male pseudonym 'Civicus'. The following extract demonstrates the strength of her indignation at the attacks against her husband:

The Advantage gained by the French in the Conquest of Minorca is represented as gained, not over the Nation, but by the Phlegmatic Indolence of the Person who superintends our Naval Affairs. Where was the Phlegmatic Indolence of the Person here calumniated when he persevered, in Spite of Storms and Tempests, and tho' two of his best Ships had defected him, in doubling Cape Horn, and pursuing the great Object of that Expedition?⁸³

Whereas satirical prints represented Lord Anson as a government minister rooted in a corrupt cabinet, Lady Anson utilized the circumnavigation voyage as evidence of her husband's 'Skill', 'Courage', and 'Perseverance'.⁸⁴ By redirecting public attention to the venture that had first made Lord Anson a national hero, she emphasized the suffering he had endured earlier in his career and tried to restore his reputation for level-headed leadership.

Lady Anson's decision to publish her work as a 'Letter to the Editor' was especially pertinent. Although letters were the format with which she was most familiar, this particular letter marked a significant escalation in her political activities. In a study on politics and the press in the eighteenth century, Bob Harris claimed there was 'massive growth' in the numbers of letters sent to newspapers, and were popularized as a format because they gave individuals

⁸⁰ Elizabeth Anson to Thomas Anson, 1 July 1756, SRO, letters from Elizabeth Anson to Thomas Anson, D615/P(S)/1/3/22.

⁸¹ Elizabeth Anson to Philip Yorke [n.d.], BL, Hardwicke papers XXVIII, Add. MS 35376, fos. 132–3.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ *Public Advertiser*, 27 Aug. 1756, in *ibid.*, fo. 156. A copy of the article was affixed to Lady Anson's letter.

⁸⁴ See *Byng's ghost to the triumvirate*, Anonymous, 1757, British Museum (BM) 1868,0808.4052; *The devil turn'd drover*, Anonymous, 1756, BM, 1868,0808.4020; *The 3 Damiens*, Matthias Darly, c. 1757, BM, J,1.12.

access to large public audiences.⁸⁵ Many were published anonymously, making it impossible to determine the numbers of women involved.⁸⁶ M. John Cardwell has argued that, during the mid-century, a single copy of a newspaper might have been read or heard by between twenty and fifty individuals.⁸⁷ With this in mind, Lady Anson's text might have reached a broad audience who were unaware that the author was the first lord's wife. In an article about newspaper letters in the 1790s, Johanne Slettvoll Kristiansen highlighted that many newspapers were printed quickly on cheap paper and were 'not intended to last'. Kristiansen depicted the 'ephemeral nature' of newspapers as a 'challenge' that deterred writers from using this format, but in Lady Anson's case, this ephemerality was perhaps part of the attraction.⁸⁸ The speed with which newspapers were printed allowed Lady Anson to make a timely intervention in public discourse, but the materiality of newspapers perhaps posed less of a risk to her position. Her letter to Royston confirms that she was anxious about being identified as the author, so a newspaper letter was perhaps a relatively safe option because it was comparatively short-lived.

When writing for the press, Lady Anson was compelled to hide the same femininity and wifely status that had granted her access to the male-dominated world of the admiralty. Her letter was both a defence of her husband and of the Royal Navy, but Lady Anson understood that this intersection of the domestic with the political could be damaging. Her conscious attempt to mask her identity with a masculine persona reveals the challenges that elite women like Lady Anson faced when they attempted to engage in political debate. However, her anonymous letter hints at the tantalizing possibility that she may have been one of many women who helped to shape the political discourse of the mid-eighteenth century.

V

In May 1760, Lady Anson contracted a fever and died in the admiralty building, aged 34. Announcing Lady Anson's sudden death to a friend, Marchioness Grey described her sister-in-law as an 'Example to the World of very Uncommon Talents...ever employed to the best & most Useful Purposes'.⁸⁹ Lady Anson's 'busy Active Mind' was well suited to the constant thrum that surrounded her at the admiralty, and her skills as a writer made her 'Useful' to both her family and the department more generally.⁹⁰ For the Yorke and Anson families, Lady Anson's death was both a personal tragedy and a political blow.

⁸⁵ B. Harris, *Politics and the rise of the press: Britain and France, 1620-1800* (London, 1996), p. 28.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁸⁷ M. J. Cardwell, *Arts and arms: literature, politics and patriotism during the Seven Years War* (Manchester, 2004), pp. 10-11.

⁸⁸ J. S. Kristiansen, 'Newspaper debates in late eighteenth-century England: "Letters to the Editor" versus the political pamphlet', *Journal of European Periodical Studies*, 6 (2021), pp. 155-70, 158.

⁸⁹ Lady Grey to Isabella Howard, 3 June 1760, BA, correspondence to Jemima Yorke from Isabella Howard Countess Carlisle, L30/9a/2, fo. 35.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

For Lady Anson, letter-writing was a political act. The process of writing gave her the ability to curate, co-ordinate, and disseminate intelligence amongst her family circle and beyond. In the case of Lady Anson, letter-writing carried the constant risk of interception and exposure, but it also provided her with opportunities to work as her husband's political partner. As Lord Anson presided over the admiralty board room, Lady Anson metaphorically listened in at the door. She carried the information she gleaned from conversation and admiralty documents to her desk, and, through her correspondence, she transformed it into political intelligence. Her letters yield important insights into the ways in which elite women were able to use their pens for political ends, in a period when they were otherwise excluded from formal channels of political participation.

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