

ANNA SWÄRDH

Utter Confusion on Every Side? Helena Northampton's Supplicatory Letter to the Earl of Sussex

Abstract: This essay examines the supplicatory letter the Swedish-born Helena, marchioness of Northampton, addressed to Thomas Radcliffe, third earl of Sussex, in 1576 or 1577, hoping he would help her regain access to Elizabeth I. The essay situates the letter within the early modern patronage system and the court environment, but foremost within the field of early modern letter-writing in general, and the supplicatory letter in particular. The essay shows how a number of rhetorical strategies, designed to inspire pity and benevolence mainly through *ethos* and *pathos*, are employed to create positions for both supplicant and addressee. In this way, the letter reaches the desired goal of regaining royal presence. By looking at the letter through the frames of early modern letter-writing and more general rhetorical practise, the essay points to a tension between the letter's stated sentiment of "utter confusion" and its highly formalised expression, indicative of the letter's rhetorical situation and especially of the constraints related to its sender's social status. The letter is transcribed in an appendix.

Keywords: Helena marchioness of Northampton, née Elin Snakenborg, Thomas Radcliffe, third earl of Sussex, early modern letter-writing, supplicatory letter, rhetoric

The research for this essay was carried out with support from the Swedish Research Council. An early version was presented at the Research Group for Culture Studies (KuFo) at Karlstad University and at the Nordic Association for English Studies (NAES) conference at the University of Agder, Kristiansand. I am grateful for the feedback provided on these occasions, and also for the helpful comments from the anonymous readers and the editors at *Rhetorica*. I also wish to thank Johanna McElwee and Neil Forsyth.

Rhetorica, Vol. XXXIX, Issue 1, pp. 67–90. ISSN: 0734-8584, electronic ISSN: 1533-8541. © 2021 by The International Society for the History of Rhetoric. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rh.2021.39.1.67>

INTRODUCTION

One of the many extant supplicatory letters from the early modern period was sent by the Swedish-born Helena, marchioness of Northampton (1549–1632), to Thomas Radcliffe, third earl of Sussex (1526/7–83). Born Elin Ulfsdotter Snakenborg, Helena had left Sweden as one of the maids of honour of the Swedish princess Cecilia Vasa (1540–1627) on her journey to London in 1564, where she remained after Cecilia left in 1566. In 1571 she married William Parr, first marquess of Northampton (1513–71), who died only six months later. Her second husband was Thomas Gorges (1536–1610), courtier and groom of the chamber, a marriage that temporarily resulted in Helena’s exclusion from court (for the sake of simplicity, I will refer to her as Helena throughout the essay). This essay examines the letter she addressed to Sussex, in 1576 or 1577, asking him to help her regain access to Elizabeth I.

The one-page letter, transcribed below, consists of an emotional description of Helena’s outcast state, combined with the request for Sussex’s help in restoring her to the queen’s favour. The letter is now in the British Library, in the Cotton MS Titus B II, which contains documents from the time of Edward VI to Elizabeth I.¹ The British Library catalogue entry functions as a brief summary of the letter’s content: “Helena (marchioness of) Northampton, to the E. of Sussex; lamenting sorrowfully her disgrace with the queen, and craving him to procure her leave to return to court. (Orig.) Whitefryers, Oct. 19, 1576?”² Charles Angell Bradford’s 1936 biography *Helena, Marchioness of Northampton* uses the letter for biographical detail, as does Gunnar Sjögren’s 1973 Swedish biography.³ Both biographers include edited and modernised transcripts of the letter, in English and Swedish respectively, with some errors of detail in Bradford’s English version. Brita Green’s recent and privately printed biography too prints the letter and contextualises it.⁴ While the letter has thus been of interest

¹British Library (BL), Cotton MS Titus B II, Item no 162, Helena marchioness of Northampton to the earl of Sussex, Oct. 19, 1576 [?], fols. 346r–247v (wrongly catalogued as fol. 344 in the BL online catalogue); microfilm SCH NO 146824; photograph BL Imaging Services, October 2019.

²Description for BL, Cotton MS Titus B II, Item no 162, British Library online Archives and Manuscripts catalogue.

³C. A. Bradford, *Helena, Marchioness of Northampton* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1936), 65–67; G. Sjögren, *Helena Snakenborg: En svenska vid Elisabet I:s hov* (Stockholm: Askild och Kärnekull, 1973), 80–84.

⁴B. Green, *Helena Snakenborg “The Good Lady Marquess”: Elizabeth I’s Swedish Lady-in-Waiting* (Privately printed, 2019), 110–20.

mainly for biographical and historical information, this essay offers a detailed analysis of the letter with focus on how it makes rhetorical use of supplicatory conventions to communicate its plea within early modern patronage, a system on which Helena and her husband depended for status and privileges. It was a system of mutual obligations and benefits for achieving authority and influence, and a system that was highly coded in terms of protocol and decorum.

Early modern letter-writing very concretely shows the workings of patronage: formulaic and surrounded by rules, it is at the same time transactional and non-static in its allocation of authority, to receiver and sender both. When it comes specifically to women's letter-writing, much recent scholarly focus has been placed on how letter-writing allowed women to "fashion a carefully constructed persona."⁵ Scholars who have charted the development of letter-writing in the period more generally note its formulaic and conventional qualities. To Jonathan Gibson, early modern letter-writing theory is "composite," resting on the classical ideal of the familiar letter, the medieval "simplified application" of classical rhetoric to letter-writing, and early modern rhetorical guidelines.⁶ Lynne Magnusson describes early modern women's letter-writing in terms of "inherited paradigms:" "heavily formulaic and repetitive, they foregrounded ostentatious markers of status and performance of deference."⁷ Before her,

⁵J. Daybell, "Letters," in L. Knoppers, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 181–93 (p. 182). Cf. J. Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 7, 167–68. Even though much is still unknown about the exact nature of women's education, the recent interest in letter-writing is showing that the majority of the aristocracy, courtiers, humanists, and their wives and daughters could write, and were encouraged to write letters. See, for instance, V. Larminie, "Fighting for Family in a Patronage Society: The Epistolary Armour of Anne Newdigate (1574–1618)," in J. Daybell, ed., *Early Modern Women's Letter-Writing, 1450–1700* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 94–108 (p. 94). On women's education and its informality and lack of records, see also J. Daybell, *The Material Letter in Early Modern England: Manuscript Letters and the Culture and Practices of Letter-Writing, 1512–1635* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), 53–54, 60–61; J. Daybell, "Letters," 182; J. Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers*, 11–17; B. J. Harris, "What They Wrote: Early Tudor Aristocratic Women, 1450–1550," in J. Daybell and A. Gordon, ed., *Women and Epistolary Agency in Early Modern Culture* (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), e-book, n. pag.

⁶J. Gibson, "Letters," in M. Hattaway, ed., *A New Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 453–60 (p. 454).

⁷L. Magnusson, "Letters," in C. Bicks and J. Summit, ed., *The History of British Women's Writing, 1500–1610* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 131–51 (p. 131). See also, for instance, J. Daybell, *The Material Letter*, cited in n. 5 above, p. 53–84; L. Magnusson, "Mixed Messages and Cicero Effects in the Herrick Family Letters of the Sixteenth Century," in J. Daybell and A. Gordon, ed., *Cultures of Correspondence in Early*

Norman Davis had outlined how English letters of a “formal, respectful kind” were highly conventionalised in their opening sequences of polite expressions, a “set of formulas” well-known and consistent throughout and also beyond the fifteenth century.⁸ The formulaic and conventional qualities of letter-writing at the time made it possible for writers to rhetorically model their epistolary selves within the frames of stylistic and social decorum. Patronage has been defined by Linda Levy Peck as the “ubiquitous relationship that permeated early modern political, social, economic, and artistic life,”⁹ and within this system, relative status was upheld in what Richard Dutton has described as “an endless cycle of reciprocal indebtedness.”¹⁰ Such reciprocity is common to both letter-writing and the transactional quality of patronage as described by sociologists Robert Paine and S. N. Eisenstadt: power moves not only in one direction. Within and between social hierarchies or groups, exchanges function reciprocally, awarding influence and authority to both parties involved, if not equally.¹¹

Modern Britain (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 131–55 (p. 133–38); J. Gibson, cited in n. 6 above, p. 453–60. For the development of letter-writing education from the middle ages to the renaissance, see also C. Poster and L. C. Mitchell, in C. Poster and L. C. Mitchell, ed., *Letter-writing Manuals and Instruction from Antiquity to the Present: Historical and Bibliographic Studies* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), Chapters 3, 5–8.

⁸N. Davis, “The *Litera Troili* and English Letters,” *The Review of English Studies*, 16.63 (1965), 233–44 (p. 236–43). Less scholarship exists on early modern letter-writing in Sweden, but it confirms the situation as described for England. See S. Hansson, *Swensk brevskrivning: teori och tillämpning* (Gothenburg: Gothenburg University, 1988), 11, 15–24 and passim Chapters 1 and 2 for the European character of early modern Swedish letter-writing; and S. Hansson, *Salongsretorik: Beata Rosenhane (1638–74), hennes övningsböcker och den klassiska retoriken* (Gothenburg: Gothenburg University, 1993) (abstract and summary in English).

⁹L. Levy Peck, *Court Patronage and Corruption in Early Stuart England* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 2.

¹⁰R. Dutton, “Patronage, Licensing, and Censorship,” in D. B. Hamilton, ed., *A Concise Companion to English Renaissance Literature* (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2006), 75–93 (p. 75).

¹¹R. Paine, “A Theory of Patronage and Brokerage,” in R. Paine, ed., *Patrons and Brokers in the East Arctic* (St John’s: Memorial U of Newfoundland, 1971) 8–21; S. N. Eisenstadt, *Power, Trust, and Meaning: Essays in Sociological Theory and Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); S. N. Eisenstadt and L. Roniger, *Patrons, Clients and Friends: Interpersonal Relations and the Structure of Trust in Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). How this system of interpersonal dependence organised the upper classes and their dependants has been studied by scholars such as R. Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton and the Literary System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); L. Levy Peck, *Court Patronage and Corruption in Early Stuart England*, cited in n. 9 above; J. Guy, *The Reign of Elizabeth: Court and Culture in the Last Decade* (Cambridge: Cambridge

Helena's status as a Swedish noble-woman, and as one of the young women attending on Cecilia Vasa, would vouch for a certain level of education. That she could write and could follow epistolary conventions is clear from an extant letter written by her in 1566 to her mother (in Swedish), and from later letters to her children (in English). From 1566, she was part of the English court environment, which would have given her further cultural knowledge relevant to the rituals surrounding supplication, including the employment of letters. James Daybell points out that a large part of the supplicatory letters written by upper-class women were penned by court ladies.¹² Helena's letter to Sussex was written to remedy unwanted absence from court, and while it has been noted that epistolary genres are flexible and elements of petition are found in almost every kind of renaissance letter,¹³ the letter to Sussex is a pure supplicatory letter, written with the purpose of asking for a very specific service.

Frank Wigham, Lynne Magnusson, and Alison Thorne have examined supplicatory letters from a rhetorical perspective in articles that draw attention to their highly formulaic nature.¹⁴ Wigham charted a number of supplicatory strategies used in the letters of Toby Matthew's suit for the deanery of Durham in the early 1580s, and Magnusson has added to his work by emphasising how the petitioner's social status determines the rhetorical register used. Drawing on terminology from politeness theory as developed within discourse pragmatics, she translates into "linguistic scripts" the rhetorician Angel Day's description of petitioning styles in his English letter-writing manual *The English Secretorie*, first printed in 1586.¹⁵ James Daybell has confirmed these findings in a survey of 1,000 letters of supplication

University Press, 1995); C. Perry, *Literature and Favoritism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and R. McCabe, *Ungainefull Arte: Poetry, Patronage, and Print in the Early Modern Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹²J. Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers*, cited in n. 5 above, p. 238.

¹³J. Daybell, "Scripting a Female Voice: Women's Epistolary Rhetoric in Sixteenth-Century Letters of Petition," *Women's Writing*, 13.1 (2006), 3–22 (p. 10); J. Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers*, cited in n. 5 above, p. 233.

¹⁴F. Wigham, "The Rhetoric of Elizabethan Suitors' Letters," *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 96 (1981), 864–80; A. Thorne, "Female Captivity and the Rhetoric of Supplication: The Cases of Lady Mary Grey and Lady Arabella Stuart," *Lives and Letters*, 4.1 (2012), 153–71; L. Magnusson, "A Rhetoric of Requests: Genre and Linguistic Scripts in Elizabethan Women's Suitors' Letters," in J. Daybell, ed., *Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450–1700* ((2004) London: Routledge, 2016), 51–66.

¹⁵L. Magnusson, "A Rhetoric of Requests," cited in n. 14 above, p. 56–57, 60. She admits, though, that "[p]ragmatics is not wholly responsive to the discourse conditions of the Elizabethan political scene" (53).

written by women, concluding that what distinguishes women's letters from those of men is their employment of "motherhood, wifehood, widowhood, and female frailty" as rhetorical strategies.¹⁶ In the following analysis of Helena's letter to Sussex, I will draw on previous analyses of supplicatory letters in order to show how a number of rhetorical strategies typical of the genre are employed to create roles or positions for both supplicant and addressee, roles designed to inspire pity and benevolence mainly through *ethos* (the speaker's good character) and *pathos* (emotions) and, in this way, reach the desired goal. I will refer to Lady Mary Grey's supplicatory letters to William Cecil as a source of comparison, on the understanding that these letters were written earlier than Helena's, between 1565 and 1572. I will revisit Angel Day's manual, which is the earliest such text printed in English (appearing a decade after the letter under study), and with him stress the rather considerable allowance for variation within the conventional form. I will also make use of Roy Eriksen's examinations of early modern periodicity—how (parts of) texts can function as "extended" rhetorical periods¹⁷—as a further analytical tool for grappling with rhetorically constructed selves and others. By looking at the letter through the frames of early modern letter-writing and more general rhetorical theory and practise, the essay will point to a tension between on the one hand the letter's declared sentiment of "utter confusion" and on the other its highly formalised expression. My suggestion is that this tension between assumed role and execution is indicative of the letter's rhetorical situation and perhaps especially the constraints related to the sender's social status.¹⁸ slight deviations

¹⁶J. Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers*, cited in n. 5 above, p. 264.

¹⁷R. Eriksen, *The Building in the Text: Alberti to Shakespeare and Milton* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001); R. Eriksen, "Poetics, Stylometrics and Attribution Studies: Periodicity in Marlowe," in R. Eriksen and P. Young, ed., *Approaches to the Text: From Pre-Gospel to Post-Baroque* (Pisa: Fabrizio Serra Editore, 2014), 171–90.

¹⁸Lloyd F. Bitzer defines the rhetorical situation as "a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence," while examples of constraints are "beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, interests, motives" but also the orator's "personal character, his logical proofs, and his style:" "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 1.1 (1968), 1–14 (p. 6, 8). For an account of the criticism but also development of the concept of rhetorical situation since the late 60s, see for instance M. J. Young, "Lloyd F. Bitzer: Rhetorical Situation, Public Knowledge, and Audience Dynamics," in J. A. Kuypers and A. King, ed., *Twentieth-Century Roots of Rhetorical Studies* (London: Praeger, 2001), 275–301.

from decorum point to the reciprocal flexibility of the patronage system and its conventions. Throughout, I will be referring to the letter as Helena's, on the understanding that it was, in all likelihood, penned by a scribe.

I: STATUS AND EPISTOLARY SUPPLICATION

The situation in which the letter was written was not unique, and therefore enveloped in protocol and conventions. This section will situate the letter in the cultural context of supplication after a clandestine court marriage and point to general scribal conventions for formal letter-writing, before moving on to epistolary formulas employed in allocating roles for supplicant and helper in the letter. The way in which the letter combines cultural knowledge with minor deviations from conventions, it will be suggested, can be taken to indicate the high status of the supplicant.

It is well known that a number of marriages and extra-marital affairs at court resulted in exile from the queen's presence, for longer or shorter term, and this seems to have been the case also for Helena and her second husband Thomas Gorges. In *Elizabeth I and her Circle*, Susan Doran differentiates between secret marriages, refused permission to marry, and cases of sex outside marriage in a discussion of these "scandals" and of the reasons behind Elizabeth's actions. Obedience was expected from the women surrounding Elizabeth, and Doran points out that in the case of the maids of honour she stood *in loco parentis*. Neglecting to deal with their indiscipline could reflect poorly on Elizabeth's ability to govern.¹⁹ Perhaps the most prominent of these scandalous marriages are those of Lady Katherine Grey (1540–68) and Lady Mary Grey (1545–78), which took place in 1560 and 1565. Katherine and Mary Grey were sisters of Lady Jane Grey who ruled the country for nine days in 1553. In the case of Katherine Grey, there were strong political reasons for Elizabeth's reaction, and royal favour was never recovered. However, her sister regained royal favour after a number of years' exile (during which she wrote numerous letters of supplication).²⁰

¹⁹S. Doran, *Elizabeth I and Her Circle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 205–13; cf. J. Rickman, *Love, Lust, and License in Early Modern England: Illicit Sex and the Nobility* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 40.

²⁰Lady Katherine Grey was secretly married to Edward Seymour in 1560, and upon discovery kept in captivity until her death; she gave birth to two children in the Tower. Katherine's marriage to a strong nobleman would result in a "power base"

Mary Scudamore, née Shelton (1550–1603), is a case closer in time to Helena's. Scudamore's marriage was revealed in 1574, and she was already taken back into favour the following year. Doran specifically mentions Scudamore and Helena when making the point that Elizabeth's anger soon abated if she was "especially fond of" the maids who had married in secret and their fault was judged "not too great."²¹ In his biography, Bradford relies on the existence of letters of supplication from Katherine and Mary Grey to Elizabeth to suggest that Helena's letter itself is a strong indication of a similar situation of writing: "There is, therefore, no reason for thinking otherwise than that Gorges had been separated from his newly wedded bride when their secret nuptials had been discovered to the Queen, and that he had been sent to the Tower (or Marshalsea) and Helena banished from the Court to pine away in solitude."²² The very existence of the letter thus makes it reasonable to assume that it was written as the result of Helena and Thomas Gorges' clandestine marriage. In the same way that there is no direct evidence of the marriage, there is no extant response from Sussex in the form of a letter. This situation is not unusual, as the character of supplicatory letters is, in the words of Daybell, "necessarily one-sided:" few epistolary responses survive, and instead other sources record the fulfilment of requests.²³ In the case of Helena and Thomas, previous scholars have pointed to Elizabeth's giving of New Year's gifts to both of them in 1577/78 together with other favours of preferment as indications that they had been resumed into her favour by this time (the records for 1576/77 are missing).²⁴ We

against a queen ruling alone, reinforced by the couple's Protestantism, which would further challenge Mary Stuart's claim on the succession, and thus upset the relationship between England and Scotland. Against the background of the succession debates in Parliament in 1563 and 1566, which Katherine's marriage influenced, the couple's wish to have their marriage declared valid and their children legitimate resulted in prolonged imprisonment and lack of pardon (S. Doran, *Elizabeth I and Her Circle*, cited in n. 19 above, p. 55–56, 63). Lady Mary Grey, a maid of honour, married Thomas Keyes in 1565, resulting in house arrest for Mary, while Keyes was sent to the Fleet Prison. No political motive was suspected in their case and Mary recovered royal favour after her husband's death in 1571 (S. Doran, 56, 59). On illicit sex at the court as a challenge to Elizabeth I's authority (especially during the later reign), see also J. Rickman, *Love, Lust, and License*, cited in n. 19 above, p. 27–68.

²¹S. Doran, *Elizabeth I and Her Circle*, cited in n. 19 above, p. 209.

²²C. A. Bradford, *Helena, Marchioness of Northampton*, cited in n. 3 above, p. 67.

²³J. Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers*, cited in n. 5 above, p. 230.

²⁴C. A. Bradford, *Helena, Marchioness of Northampton*, cited in n. 3 above, p. 67–70; G. Sjögren, *Helena Snakenborg*, cited in n. 3 above, p. 83–86; S. Doran, *Elizabeth I and Her Circle*, cited in n. 19 above, p. 209–10; B. Green, *Helena Snakenborg*, cited in n. 4 above, p. 116–17.

can only guess at the importance of the supplicatory letter in this scenario.

As pointed out by Magnusson and Daybell, among others, letter-writing was, to a large extent, a communal activity at this time—not only in the sense that letters were rarely read only by the receiver, but also because composition might well have been collaborative at times.²⁵ There are a number of reasons, material as well as cultural, for believing a scribe was employed in the composition of the letter to Sussex. The letter consists of a folded bifolium with the text of the letter on the first folio page and the address on the last. The text fills one folio page, with a left-hand margin and similar space left at the top and bottom of the page, excepting the signature that takes up a little more than the bottom right third of the width. This layout is in line with general conventions for folio-letters, which tended to leave a left-hand margin as “a mark of formality and decorum,” according to Daybell, but were written close to the right-hand side.²⁶ The hand is different from the signature, and it is an even and regular secretary hand. The English is elegant. The signature is a very flourished “Hellena northampton,” more similar to Elizabeth’s well-known signature than that of Helena herself in the letter to her mother from 1566, simply signed “Elin.”²⁷ The flourished signature recurs in the 1588 letter to Charles, Duke of Sodermania (1550–1611; ruled as Charles IX of Sweden, 1604–11), again a formal letter (in Latin).²⁸

Employing a scribe or secretary for a formal letter would be in line with convention at the time, showing the right level of deference and decorum: a formal letter should not be written in one’s own hand, while a familiar one was expected to be so.²⁹ Bradford’s comment on the letter’s “remarkably good English for a foreigner who had only lived in the country for about ten years” and Sjögren’s similar

²⁵See for example J. Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers*, cited in n. 5 above, p. 61–63, 75–86; J. Daybell, *The Material Letter*, cited in n. 5 above, p. 74–83; L. Magnusson, “Letters,” cited in n. 7 above, p. 135; “A Rhetoric of Requests,” 52.

²⁶J. Daybell, *The Material Letter*, cited in n. 5 above, p. 100–101; cf. J. Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers*, cited in n. 5 above, p. 47–51.

²⁷Rigsarkivet, Copenhagen, MS Danske Kancelli, Opsnappede svenske breve fra Syvårskrigens tid (1559–1573), Elin Snakenborg to her mother Agneta [Knutsdotter Lillie] Henriksson Snakenborg, 1566 (unbound, n. pag.).

²⁸Reproduced by G. Sjögren, *Helena Snakenborg*, cited in n. 3 above, p. 105.

²⁹J. Daybell, Introduction, *Early Modern Women’s Letter-Writing, 1450–1700*, J. Daybell, ed., (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 1–15 (p. 4); J. Daybell, “Female Literacy and the Social Conventions of Women’s Letter-Writing in England, 1540–1603,” in J. Daybell, ed., *Early Modern Women’s Letter-Writing, 1450–1700* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 59–76 (p. 63–69); J. Daybell, “Letters,” cited in n. 5 above, p. 183; Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers*, cited in n. 5 above, p. 64, 72–75.

evaluation of Helena's English as fairly good ("ganska god") should probably be seen in the light of previous disinterest in early modern letter-writing and its conventions.³⁰ Green is also of the opinion that Helena would have gotten help: "[t]he style and language in Helena's letter is not her own."³¹ Doran has pointed out that the women at Elizabeth's court were generally well educated, coming from noble or gentry families, but more than this, that their function as intermediaries was "embedded into court culture," well placed as they were to promote suits.³² For a woman such as Helena, who had spent time at or near court for a number of years by the time of the letter's writing, the system of intermediaries and other conventions surrounding formal supplication would have been familiar knowledge. Similarly, Helena and her scribe would have heard and read letters of supplication ("[t]he persistent suit was a regular part of the everyday performance of court life," as Magnusson points out³³). Scholars surmise that for women, familiarity with letter-writing came from contact with the form, contact which provided knowledge of conventions.³⁴ In what follows, Mary Grey's letter-writing will make concrete this situation and function as an example of what such models might have looked like.

The letter is addressed "To my Very Good | Lorde the Earle | of Sussex," according to expectations and courtly decorum; few suitors petitioned the queen directly and "a good court connection" was required "who could speak in favour of their suit" to her.³⁵ Sussex returned in 1564 from Ireland where he had served since 1556. He was made president of the council of the north in 1568, a privy councillor 1570, and lord chamberlain of the household in 1572. He belonged to the privy council's inner circle in the 1570s and early 1580s.³⁶ Soon

³⁰C. A. Bradford, *Helena, Marchioness of Northampton*, cited in n. 3 above, p. 66; G. Sjögren, *Helena Snakenborg*, cited in n. 3 above, p. 81.

³¹B. Green, *Helena Snakenborg*, cited in n. 4 above, p. 114.

³²S. Doran, *Elizabeth I and Her Circle*, cited in n. 19 above, p. 193, 202–205.

³³L. Magnusson, "A Rhetoric of Requests," cited in n. 7 above, p. 55.

³⁴See, for instance, Jennifer C. Ward, "Letter-Writing by English Noble-Women in the Early fifteenth century," in *Early Modern Women's Letter-Writing, 1450–1700*, ed. James Daybell (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 30–31; Alison Truelove, "Commanding Communication: The Fifteenth-Century Letters of the Stonor Women," in *Early Modern Women's Letter-Writing*, ed. Daybell, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 42–58 (p. 49–50); Magnusson, "Letters," cited in n. 7 above, p. 136.

³⁵"The number of suits a courtier was petitioned to raise was, therefore, a mark of his or her perceived intimacy with the queen" (S. Doran, *Elizabeth I and Her Circle*, cited in n. 19 above, p. 5).

³⁶W. T. MacCaffrey, "Radcliffe, Thomas, Third Earl of Sussex," *ODNB* online (2004) n. pag.; S. Doran, *Elizabeth I and Her Circle*, cited in n. 19 above, p. 19–29.

after Cecilia and her train had arrived in London in 1565, Cecilia gave birth to a son, and Sussex was one person who took part in the christening ceremony. Green also suggests he might have met Gorges in relation to both men's employment in affairs related to putting down the Rebellion of the Northern Earls in 1569.³⁷ In the letter, Sussex is given the function of what Robert Paine defines as a "broker" in patronage relationships, a middle-man believed able to exercise influence.³⁸

Wigham described the Elizabethan business letter as offering "hard" stylistic evidence of the character of enacted courtesy" that maintained relations within the class-stratified patronage system.³⁹ In the letter, we can see how roles or positions are created both for writer and receiver and how obligations are built into the text. The opening of a letter at the time would contain a salutation and commendation, wishes for the addressee's health (and also that of his or her family), and expressions of thanks to God for one's own health, while the ending of a letter would contain repetitions of wishes for health and blessings.⁴⁰ Depending on situation, though, these things could vary. In the section on *Petitorie* letters in his manual, for example, Angel Day shows that there was great room for variation in how to open such a letter. Helena's letter does not open with a salutation separate from her cause of writing. Instead, "my very Good Lorde" is placed within parentheses in the main clause of the opening sentence: "I beseych you (my very Good Lorde) to have *some* pitty of mine vnfortunat misery." This parenthetical insert functions as a salutation and follows the convention of indicating relative social status, drawing attention to Sussex's nobility. That this was important to do is communicated by the ten tightly printed pages of opening phrases and titles suitable for signalling appropriate deference depending on relative status provided by Day.⁴¹ A wish for blessings is found at the end of the letter (after which we find the place, date and signature): "Thus

³⁷A. C. Bradford, *Helena, Marchioness of Northampton*, cited in n. 3 above, p. 30–33; G. Sjögren, *Helena Snakenborg*, cited in n. 3 above, p. 16–17; B. Green, *Helena Snakenborg*, cited in n. 4 above, p. 33, 115.

³⁸R. Paine, "A Theory of Patronage and Brokerage," cited in n. 11 above, p. 19–21.

³⁹F. Wigham, "The Rhetoric of Elizabethan Suitors' Letters," cited in n. 14 above, p. 864.

⁴⁰See for instance N. Davis, "The *Litera Troili* and English Letters," cited in n. 8 above, p. 236–43; J. C. Ward, "Letter-Writing by English Noble-Women," cited in n. 34 above, p. 30–31; A. Truelove, "Commanding Communication," cited in n. 34 above, p. 42–58 (p. 49–50); L. Magnusson, "Letters," cited in n. 7 above, p. 136.

⁴¹Angel Day, *The English Secretorie* (London, 1586; STC 6401), 24–34.

praynge your happy estat, with encrease | of all honor and prosperity. I cese to trouble your Lordshipe any fourther." The employment of the title again signals deference before his status, even if the letter excludes any references to service; Helena does not term herself "bound" to Sussex or his to "command."⁴² (For contrast, Mary Grey styles herself the queen's "trew" subject, and, more importantly, Cecil's "pore frynde to commande."⁴³) This exclusion, and the parenthetical salutation, could indicate that while aware of generic expectations regarding subservience, Helena (and/or her scribe) is also aware of her own very high social status, her position of power this way influencing details of her letter.

In the letters of Toby Matthew's suit for the deanery of Durham in the early 1580s, Frank Wigham found a number of strategies, or "devices of appeal," that a supplicant can make use of: excusing the act of request, establishing desert by invocation of authority or moral desert, promising remuneration or indebtedness, assuming a self-deprecating position, and casting the addressee in a role of generosity, by, among other things, reminding him or her about the responsibilities that come with superior rank.⁴⁴ Already in the parenthetical salutation, obligations that come with superior status are hinted at. A second parenthesis, found in the second sentence of the letter, encourages Sussex to assume a benevolent attitude by reminding him of previous favours: "(whom I have ever founde willinge of your owne selfe to shew [*your*] | most honorable favor)". This way of discreetly designing a desired role for the addressee of a supplicatory letter is a common strategic move, as noted above: by alluding to the aristocratic virtue of generosity, the petitioner would cleverly remind the patron of the responsibility that comes with his or her status, strongly inviting him or her to act accordingly also in the situation at hand. Sussex would thus be encouraged to act in line with his previous "most honorable" ways, and in line with obligations of and expectations on status and rank. Also in line with convention, Helena uses the move of excusing the act of request itself. This is done by drawing attention to the shamelessness of her action and, more importantly, to the disturbance it will cause Sussex: "And allthough shame should forbid | me to procure your

⁴²Cf. J. Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers*, cited in n. 5 above, p. 247.

⁴³National Archives, MS State Papers 12/40, Lady Mary Grey to William Cecil, Sept. 30 1566, fol. 146. All following quotations are from this letter. Other critics referred to in this essay who discuss Mary Grey's letters are L. Magnusson, "A Rhetoric of Requests," cited in n. 14 above, esp. p. 57–59; A. Thorne, "Female Captivity and the Rhetoric of Supplication," cited in n. 14 above, p. 158–60.

⁴⁴F. Wigham, "The Rhetoric of Elizabethan Suitors' Letters," cited in n. 14 above, p. 869–75.

fourther disquiet, in tender of an importunat sute." Magnusson identifies such "trouble-making"—for instance, apologising for stealing the addressee's time—as a key trope in suitors' letters.⁴⁵ As an example, Mary Grey finds herself "bold to truble" Cecil with her "rude letter." The desired effect of the trope would no doubt be pre-emptive disarmament, in Helena's letter as in other cases. Finally, Helena implies that she has no other way to turn: "Wher shall I make my mone?" and "I cane Low[ke] | for no other hop nor comforde, but vtter confusion on every side pra | pared." This way, Sussex becomes her only hope, and is thus, again, spurred on to responsible action. The "confusion" that awaits should probably be taken in the sense of ruin or destruction, but it might also be understood to indicate disorder and, possibly, "mental perturbation or agitation."⁴⁶ In either case, "prepared" would indicate a future situation—ruin or disorder *about* to happen—and thus the phrasing would also inadvertently make a reader sense that Helena still manages to function, still having the means to write a well-ordered letter.

The letter also creates a specific, and conventional, role for the sender, again designed to manipulate the outcome of the request by presenting the supplicant as pitiable but also deserving of help, through its combination of *pathos* and *ethos*. Wigham's analysis of Mathew's letters "suggests that flattery *must* be visible if it is to manipulate the patron by imputing a virtue that restricts choice."⁴⁷ Alison Thorne similarly speaks of an "overtly submissive" attitude needed in order to "publicise the asymmetrical relationship instantiated between suppliant and patron," in her analysis of imprisoned high-ranking female petitioners' letters (Lady Mary Grey and Lady Arabella Stuart).⁴⁸ Throughout the letter, Helena is represented in a state of suffering and misery, here exemplified by the opening lines:

If the extreme anguis of a sorowfull mynde, may move your Lordshipe to regarde a wofoull complaynt: I beseych you (my very Good Lorde) to have *some* pittie of mine vnfortunat misery, whos paynfull passion[e] no Lingeringe tyme cane appeace, nether continuall care will cese to vex with most bitter trouble.

⁴⁵L. Magnusson, "A Rhetoric of Requests," cited in n. 14 above, p. 55, 58.

⁴⁶OED online, "confusion" 1.a., 5.a., 3.a.

⁴⁷F. Wigham, "The Rhetoric of Elizabethan Suitors' Letters," cited in n. 14 above, p. 875, italics in original.

⁴⁸A. Thorne, "Female Captivity and the Rhetoric of Supplication," cited in n. 14 above, p. 156.

In this passage, adjectives reinforce the emotional impact of the already colourful nouns in repetitive pairings, at times further emphasised by alliteration: “extreme anguis,” “sorrowfull mynde,” “vnfortunat misery,” “paynfull passion[e],” “continuall care,” and “most bitter trouble.” The passage provides an example of what has been described by Daybell and Jonathan Gibson as “overtly melancholic” and “excessively melancholic” rhetoric respectively. Its appearance has been traced to the influence of Ovidian language, especially that found in the *Heroides* (available in English in 1567).⁴⁹ Also, the letter opens in a humble way with a conditional clause. In *The English Secretorie*, Angel Day differentiated between a more self-abating position of the petitioner focussed on “humilitie and entratie,” a more confident one focussed on “supposall and assuraunce,” and a third, placed between these, of “pleasures or courtesie.”⁵⁰ The humble letter-writer, Thorne suggests, would have employed a more indirect mode of request-making, using the conditional or subjunctive mood and making no claims of self-worth,⁵¹ and this is precisely what happens in the quoted passage (and in the letter as a whole). Opening with an if-clause and furthermore inserting a “may,” the letter operates by what Day terms “insinuation”: “wherein covertlye . . . we seeke by cunning reasons” to win favour in cases where “long debasement” is required or where “mislyke maye be already grounded” in the receiver.⁵² A later description again discusses insinuation in cases demanding great modesty, where it might be best to proceed “by *Insinuation* the better by covert meanes to wade into the depth of our *Petition*.”⁵³

A model petitionary letter among Day’s examples opens in the same manner as Helena’s:

IF floudes of teares sealed with hard and bitter sighes, if continuall sorow and never ceasing care, if consuming greifes not of a diseased bodie, but of a pestered minde, might have rendered sufficient and

⁴⁹J. Gibson qtd. in J. Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers*, cited in n. 5 above, p. 252–53.

⁵⁰Angel Day, *English Secretorie* (1586), cited in n. 41 above, p. 184; qtd. in A. Thorne, “Female Captivity and the Rhetoric of Supplication,” cited in n. 14 above, p. 157; cf. L. Magnusson, “A Rhetoric of Requests,” cited in n. 14 above, p. 57; and J. Daybell “Women’s Letters of Recommendation and the Rhetoric of Friendship in Sixteenth-Century England,” in J. Richards and A. Thorne, ed., *Rhetoric, Women and Politics in Early Modern England* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 172–90 (p. 176).

⁵¹A. Thorne, “Female Captivity and the Rhetoric of Supplication,” cited in n. 14 above, p. 157.

⁵²Angel Day, *English Secretorie* (1586), cited in n. 41 above, p. 22.

⁵³Angel Day, *English Secretorie* (1586), cited in n. 41 above, p. 170.

assured testimonie, whereby to persuade your laden eares surcharged by this time with the weight of my incessaunt and continuall cries. . .⁵⁴

In his explanatory analysis accompanying the model letter, Day stresses the supposedly emotional impact of this structure: "The *Exordium* is carried by *Insinuation*, expressing the vehement effectes and surcharged conceites of a minde more than ordinarily grieved."⁵⁵ And the imagery is indeed striking, dominated by tears and accompanied by sighs, sorrow, and cries. Possibly the flood of tears is already in the writer's mind when he talks about "wading" into the "depth" of the petition (although he uses the verb elsewhere in his text for general movement). The opening is also structurally impressive, with the repetitive pattern (parison or compar⁵⁶) of if-clauses and pairings of adjectives in "hard and bitter," "sufficient and assured," "incessaunt and continuall." A similar structure recurs towards the end of Helena's letter, in the double if-clauses appearing just before the closing wish for blessings, followed by date and signature:

Wherfore if any pittie may move your Lordshipe to rue a poure, desolat, and banished creture: I beseych you to remember my sorowfull cauce to her Majestie that if any hope be left I may receive some relieufe.

This humble deference, again combined with emotionally charged adjectives ("poure, desolat, and banished") to create the melancholic tone mentioned above, exemplifies the letter's resort to *ethos* and *pathos* to argue its case. Mary Grey too describes her "longe and greuos | empresonment," and her "greffe. . .so greate" that "no turmente [can] be compared to that payne," and yet this is fairly limited by comparison, and lacks the rhetorical force of repetitions and more vivid adjectives that create Helena's melancholic rhetoric.⁵⁷ The verb "beseych" is repeated, this choice of verb a recurring sign of a self-humbling registered by Magnusson in letters in the mode of "humility and entreaty."⁵⁸ Finally, through her reference to her "Longe sufferinge, prayer, sati[s] | faction" whose connotations call forth a

⁵⁴Angel Day, *English Secretorie* (1586), cited in n. 41 above, p. 174.

⁵⁵Angel Day, *English Secretorie* (1586), cited in n. 41 above, p. 176.

⁵⁶On this figure, see for instance R. McDonald, "Compar or Parison: Measure for Measure," in S. Adamson, G. Alexander, and K. Ettenhuber, ed., *Renaissance Figures of Speech* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 39–58.

⁵⁷J. Daybell uses Grey to exemplify the melancholic rhetoric (*Women Letter-Writers*, cited in n. 5 above, p. 252). It should be noted that when read together, the force of Grey's letters gain from intertextual echo and repetition.

⁵⁸L. Magnusson, "A Rhetoric of Requests," cited in n. 14 above, p. 58.

religiously upright persona, Helena also presents a moral argument for desert and further strengthens her *ethos*.

While the supplicant's role is thus largely conventionally created, there are in the letter some deviations from typical patterns. In a third parenthesis the letter presents what is a feeble but still clear admittance of error in the inclusion of the word "offence:" "[if] | any sorowfull greyfe, or most gret hearte brekinge, with all hind[rance] | and inconvenienses, may be sufficient punishment for an [offence]." But the parenthetical statement also presents an argument for Helena's case, in the conditional. As pointed out by both Wigham and Thorne, arguments or resorts to logic are unusual in letters of petition, as the focus tends to lie much more on the sender and receiver, on *ethos* and *pathos*, than *logos*: the petitioners typically focus on crafting an appealing persona and manipulating feelings through mimetic arousal of emotions, especially pity.⁵⁹ Therefore, it is interesting that this statement, although parenthetically and conditionally phrased, is still included in the letter. The implied argument presented is, of course, that grief, heart-breaking, hindrance and inconveniences *are* sufficient punishment for the offence, and one could thus say that the parenthesis functions as a script in the sense of providing the agent, Sussex, with a helpful compact for a line of argument he could present before the queen. Similarly, it is noteworthy that the letter does not make use of any strategy noted by Daybell as specific to women writers: Helena does not refer to her womanhood, nor does she focus on "negative female gender assumptions" such as frailty or weakness.⁶⁰ Instead the stress lies on destiny and fortune in the phrases "vnfortunat misery," "all misfor[tune]," "cruell destiny," and "most vnfortunat," thereby distancing blame from Helena's own person. This is very different from the letters of Mary Grey, who consistently craves pardon from the queen and promises to keep herself "out of her maiestes desplesur" (which she has "desarved"), should she be received back into favour. As indicated above, it could be surmised that Helena's status influenced details of her letter, thus resulting in a slight tension between the assumed role of deferent supplicant and such details of deviation.

⁵⁹F. Wigham, "The Rhetoric of Elizabethan Suitors' Letters," cited in n. 14 above, p. 870–72; A. Thorne, "Female Captivity and the Rhetoric of Supplication," cited in n. 14 above, p. 158.

⁶⁰J. Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers*, cited in n. 5 above, p. 255.

II: ELEGANCE AND RHETORICAL SKILL

Responding to a specific situation in line with cultural conventions for supplication and following epistolary formulas in allocating roles for supplicant and helper, the letter thus combines such cultural knowledge with minor deviations from conventions, all of which can be seen to indicate the high status of the supplicant. A similar conclusion can be drawn also from a close examination of the letter's use of an elegant periodic structure, and its skilful employment of parentheses. Here too a tension can be sensed between the assumed role of remorseful supplicant on the verge of utter confusion and the very elegance of the letter.

The request itself, what Helena wants to achieve with her letter, is placed at the centre of the text, where she asks if it may please Sussex "in pitifull considerat[i]on | be *some* meane that I may yet *come* to the Court if hit be bu[*t before*] her *Majestie*." The key issue is thus that of alienation, of lacking attendance or presence (and, with it, status), and the letter signals some of the pressure exerted by the social conditions of patronage. To quote Wigham, "[u]nder Tudor absolutism, royal 'presence' had become an ultimate reality," and absence, for whatever reason, lead to fear of lost status and influence, the "social conditions of pressure and anxiety" revealed in letters such as the one studied here.⁶¹ In his manual, Day shows the rhetorical basis for letter-writing in several ways: in his attention to decorum; in his advice to follow the order of *inventio*–*dispositio*–*elocutio* when writing a letter; in his discussion of the high, middle, and low styles; and in his careful attention to the rhetorical parts (*partes*) of a letter—*exordium*, *narration*, *propositio*, *confirmation*, *confutation*, *peroration*.⁶² The placing of the request, the *propositio*, at the centre is thus expected and in line with the typical ordering of the *partes*. As for the rest of the letter, it would be slightly trickier to agree on any exact fit to the six-part structure. Day also stresses variation throughout his manual (a stress also reflected in Daybell's examination of letters). For example, Day provides a number of model letters where the order of the *partes* breaks with expectations, explaining that "where practize and skill hath sufficiently enabled a man to write well, there is no necessitie that such

⁶¹F. Wigham, "The Rhetoric of Elizabethan Suitors' Letters," cited in n. 14 above, p. 866–67.

⁶²Angel Day, *English Secretorie* (1586), cited in n. 41 above, p. 13–17, 18–22; cf. J. Daybell's charting of a letter's rhetorical parts in *Women Letter-Writers*, cited in n. 5 above, p. 241–45.

should be tied to rule, who beeing of sufficient knowledge and capacite, are able to decerne what is meetest ...⁶³

For this reason, our methods of analysis too must be flexible. In this case, I am tempted to read the letter as an example of the periodicity Roy Eriksen has studied in early modern texts, in which a passage of text forms an arch built by central lexical items. In this way extending the model of the period (the complete and well-balanced sentence) to longer sections of text reflects the “essential role of periodicity in Renaissance aesthetics and poetics,” and allows us to look for the “formal intention” of a passage or text.⁶⁴ Periodicity is marked by patterns of repetition; metrical or rhythmical repetition, but also repetition of syllables, of words and clauses or clause patterns. Drawing on Aristotle’s *The Art of Rhetoric*, Eriksen identifies three basic verbal figures of the period: *epanalepsis* (repetition at the beginning and end), *epanados* (repetition in the middle and beginning or end), and *antimetabole* (chiasmus, inverted repetition of two words).⁶⁵ In the letter to Sussex, we can see the request spelled out at the centre, reinforced by parallel references to the request itself in terms of “complaynt,” “sute,” “mone,” and “cauce,” two appearing before and two after the central request. When we look at the opening as compared to the ending of the body of the letter (before the closing phrases), we find further repetitions of clause patterns, of phrases, and of words in these two sentences. The conditional if-clause recurs, as noted above; the expressions “may move your Lordshipe | to regarde” and “may move your Lordshipe to rue” similarly balance each other; the reference to pity occurs in close connection to these phrases, but chiasmically placed in relation to them; the “I beseych you” clause in both cases follows on the conditional clause. We also see how the repetition is varied: the abstractly described state of “anguis,” “misery,” “passion[e],” “care,” and “trouble” has been made more concrete in the “banished creture.”

⁶³Angel Day, *English Secretorie* (1586), cited in n. 41 above, p. 180.

⁶⁴R. Eriksen “Poetics, Stylometrics,” cited in n. 17 above, p. 173–75. In his 2014 article, Eriksen focuses on literary texts, while the 2001 monograph expands the thesis to architecture and architectural writing. I will here mainly refer to the article. Alastair Fowler discusses very similar structures as Eriksen using the concept “recessed symmetry” in *Triumphal Forms: Structural Patters in Elizabethan Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), esp. 91–124. See also Brian Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric*, for the renaissance interconnection of rhetoric and the fine arts (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), esp. 340–74. Mario Praz too has dealt with systems of proportion and harmony in the art and architecture of the renaissance and their classical influence, but unlike Eriksen, Fowler, and Vickers, he underplays the rhetorical tradition: *Mnemosyne: The Parallel between Literature and the Visual Arts* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 61–63, 82–90.

⁶⁵R. Eriksen “Poetics, Stylometrics,” cited in n. 17 above, p. 176.

While so far balanced, the second of the two sentences compared then moves on to end on a hopeful note by reference to hope and relief, strategically placed just after the mention of “her *Majestie*.” This is similar to how the letter thrice connects Sussex to pity by placing the two close together on the page: “pitty” occurs twice and “pitifull considerat [ion]” once in the fairly brief letter, all three times in close connection to a reference to Sussex (“my very Good Lorde” in the first instance and “your Lordshipe” in the other two). As with the references to his favour, the attention drawn to pity would again indicate his desired route of action. While this letter obviously forms a whole already, regarding it as an extended period draws attention to its polished unity, its forceful argumentation, its elegant and strategic presentation of key ideas. This way we see how rhetorical detail functions to support the larger pattern of allocated roles in the supplicatory exchange. While periodicity might indicate “a will to find an aesthetically pleasing form,” Eriksen stresses that it mainly is “an expression of a wish to communicate and persuade, while pleasing.”⁶⁶ Confusion, in other words, is not found on the letter’s formal level.

For sake of clarity, it should be stated that the letter is not unique in this structure. Mary Grey’s letters show similar structures, and more prominently so in her later letters, which are also longer and more complex. Again, the letter dated 30 September 1566, which I have quoted from in this essay, displays the same framing of a centrally placed request: also, in this case, the wish for regained favour as well as the more elaborate promise to keep out of Elizabeth’s displeasure, should such favour be regained. Around these centrally placed items are found mirroring references to Cecil as her “greate | frynde” and her “eruest sutter,” and to her “empresonment” and her “tyme of truble,” references framed in turn by the opening and closing excuses for troubling Cecil with her letter and taking his time. To repeat: the structure is central to the time’s writing, as shown by Eriksen, among others. What separates the two letters is the higher level of rhetorically subtle elaboration, balance, and delicacy found in Helena’s letter.

Remaining on the rhetorical-structural level, the letter’s employment of parentheses is worth some attention, as all three parentheses contain central information, a fact seemingly at odds with the figure itself. As mentioned above, the first functions as a salutation while also indicating differentiating social status and concomitant obligations within the economy of patronage; the second parenthesis elaborates more clearly on this issue, casting the addressee in the desired role of

⁶⁶T. Eriksen “Poetics, Stylometrics,” cited in n. 17 above, p. 177.

helper or broker by reminding him of previous favours and encouraging him to act similarly in the present situation; and the third parenthesis constitutes the closest we get to an admittance of error and an argument for Helena's case, as dealt with above. In the last case, it could even be argued that the parenthesis is what allows this to happen, the figure seemingly functioning to play down what is expressed within the brackets (or *lunulae*, little moons). Rhetoricians of the early modern period typically describe how parenthesis is employed, but do not say much more than that.⁶⁷ George Puttenham calls it a figure of "tollerable disorder" inserted "for larger information or some other purpose" and, later, John Smith provides a longer discussion, but concludes that "all Parentheses are in extrems, either graces or foys to a speech;" they may serve as explanations when a sentence "may seem dark, or doubtful" or they may prevent or confute an objection "by the timely prevention of an answer."⁶⁸ Nothing of this seems relevant for the letter under study. Day uses parentheses in the model supplicatory letter referred to above, and the marginal note "Parenthesis" draws attention to the figure, but without any comment on its effect.⁶⁹

In an examination of parentheses in early modern printed verse, John Lennard points to the conventionality of the figure to vocatives and relative or conditional clauses (as in Helena's letter), but he also notes that "the mark may be taken to point to itself," and in cases where the enclosed words "profit" from their status of being placed within parentheses, "an additional level of meaning is grafted to the text."⁷⁰ This is, I suggest, what goes on in the letter, the three parentheses functioning to both diminish *and* draw attention to their content, a move that can be understood as part of the letter's combination of convention and deviation. In his analysis of supplicatory letters, Wigham connects the strategy of self-deprecation to Baldassare Castiglione's concept of *sprezzatura* (to act and appear with a certain effortlessness in all one does), described in his extremely influential *The Courtier* (1528; in English 1561). Wigham observes how "[t]his technique magnifies the effect of any self-presenting act by suggesting that the actor's powers, when focused, go far beyond this show"; such *sprezzatura* results in a "curious double power in supplicatory prose," as it

⁶⁷Richard Sherry, *A Treatise of Schemes and Tropes* (London, 1550; STC 22428), [Bviii]; Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence* (London, 1577; STC 19497), Fiiijv; Angel Day, *The English Secretorie* (London, 1592; STC 6402), 2:89.

⁶⁸George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (London, 1589; STC 20519.5), 140; John Smith, *The Myserie of Rhetorique Unvail'd* (London, 1656; Wing S4116A), 189.

⁶⁹Angel Day, *English Secretorie* (1586), cited in n. 41 above, p. 175.

⁷⁰J. Lennard, *But I Digress: The Exploitation of Parentheses in English Printed Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 15–16, 21.

combines self-deprecation with a suggestion of self-praise and pride, or a sense of one's worth.⁷¹ Similarly, Alison Thorne notes a "disjunction" between the "ostentatious display of humility" and the suppliant's "sense of his or her own elevated status" in the letters she examines.⁷² In the letter to Sussex, I would suggest that the employment of parentheses could be seen precisely as a form of *sprezzatura*, where the parenthetical markers signal humbleness while at the same time calling attention to what is contained within them, thus constituting a form of humble begging that still draws attention to its skill. One could perhaps speculate on a mildly ironical or knowing undertone being conveyed through this employment of parentheses, possibly hinting at a perceived unfairness of alienation, or possibly pointing to the artificiality of performing supplication, thus again indicating a tension in the letter between assumed role and execution.

Finally, one could suggest that the very elegance and skill of the letter presents yet another argument for the *ethos* of the sender. Cicero connected the balanced structure of speech to that of a well-built house, both expressing moderation and moral rectitude: "The well-made or balanced structure of a speech, its *concininitas*, serves as a formal ideal for the design of a building and at the same time for the virtue of prudence," Eriksen explains.⁷³ A rhetorically well-structured letter would thus serve, in itself, as ethical support for the case expressed. As noted, there is no way of knowing how much Helena contributed to this letter and how much the scribe she seems to have employed. It could be estimated that both would have been familiar with the conventions applying to format as well as with the ceremony of a supplicatory letter intended ultimately to plead with Elizabeth, but it would seem likely that the rhetorical elegance is the work of an educated scribe or secretary. In his "Epistle to the Reader," Angel Day marks "what great perfection is to be required in" an English secretary,⁷⁴ and Helena's letter seems to indicate she had access to a top person. Like other details touched on above, her access to a skilled scribe says something about her position and her network. And the very employment of a secretary would, again, add to the "double power" of the letter's supplicatory discourse, in an obvious way

⁷¹F. Wigham, "The Rhetoric of Elizabethan Suitors' Letters," cited in n. 14 above, p. 873–74.

⁷²A. Thorne, "Female Captivity and the Rhetoric of Supplication," cited in n. 14 above, p. 156.

⁷³R. Eriksen *The Building in the Text*, cited in n. 17 above, p. 53.

⁷⁴Angel Day, *English Secretorie* (1586), cited in n. 41 above, p. 2v.

casting doubt over the professed state of confusion, while simultaneously communicating command of the supplicatory situation.

CONCLUSION

The supplicatory letter from Helena, marchioness of Northampton, to Thomas Radcliffe, third earl of Sussex, is only one example of letters that are shaped by and illustrate the highly rhetorical system of early modern patronage. Studying such letters shows in a very concrete way how early modern letter-writing—described as a “natural medium for oiling the wheels of friendship and patronage”⁷⁵—establishes and maintains social and family connections, but also defines and upholds relative status through modes of address, style, and tone. The supplicatory letter specifically “aims to create a community of author and addressee in pursuit of a specific and local goal,” where the process of supplication “brings into view the *reciprocity* of courtesy, courtesy as organised interaction rather than static arrangement of image.”⁷⁶ Even though the situation for a request is very specific in each case, the transactional relationship of patronage as such is visible in this reciprocity. This is exemplified by the letter examined: Sussex is allocated the position of benevolent generosity suitable for his high rank, reminded of his obligations and described as Helena’s only hope in the face of impending ruin. Helena’s position in the letter is subservient, as it should be, but not excessively so. A number of small deviations from conventions and expectations create a rhetorical position for the letter’s sender from which she can present her case in such a way that her own high social standing is not compromised. As this essay has shown, the letter’s details of rhetoric and style contribute to this image. Regarding the letter to Sussex as an extended period and thinking of its parentheses in terms of *sprezzatura* draws attention to its detailed artfulness and thus to its writer as acutely aware of rhetorical strategies that were recommended, used, and recognised at the time. This level of analysis too concerns the broader situation in which letters were written and thus speaks to material and political concerns related to power, status, connectedness, access to scribes, level of education, and so on, as well as highlighting the rhetorical, or even aesthetic, quality of letters.

⁷⁵V. Larmine, “Fighting for Family in a Patronage Society,” cited in n. 5 above, p. 106.

⁷⁶F. Wigham, “The Rhetoric of Elizabethan Suitors’ Letters,” cited in n. 14 above, p. 864–65, italics in original.

The tension detected between declared sentiment and formal expression is thus partly a result of the rhetorical situation and its constraints, and as such it indicates that at this point in her life, Elin Snakenborg had morphed into Helena Northampton (recently married to Gorges) also in the sense of mastering the courtly culture of the country in which she had arrived a decade earlier. Even though there is no extant epistolary response to the letter, as noted above, it can still be surmised that it did play some role in regaining royal presence and a continued privileged place in the system of courtly patronage that bestowed gifts and commissions on Helena and her husband. In the following decade, the couple went on to rebuild Longford Castle, and Helena's role as chief mourner in Elizabeth's funeral train as well as her presence at the coronation of James VI and I testify to her continued position within this system. In retrospect, this result also points to a person already too driven, too attuned to the system's workings, for her professed state of "utter confusion."

APPENDIX: THE LETTER

Abbreviations have been expanded in italics. Uncertain readings are placed in square brackets. Those parts of the letter's margin that are missing from the latest photograph (BL Imaging Services, October 2019) but included in the State Papers Online photograph and in the British Library microfilm are italicised within square brackets.

If the extreme anguis of a sorowfull mynde, may move your Lordshipe to regarde a wofoull complaynt: I beseych you (my very Good Lorde) to have *some* pittie of mine vnfortunat misery; whos paynfull passion[e] no Lingeringe tym cane appeace, nether continuall care will cese to vexe with most bitter trouble. And although shame should forbid me to procure your fourther disquiet, in tender of an importunat sute (whom I have ever founde willinge of your owne selfe to shew [*your*] most honorable favor): yet my wery life subiect to all misfor[*tune, enforce*] me to revell my harde and hevye state. Cravinge most v[*eril*]y [(if) any sorowfull greyfe, or most gret hearte brekinge, with all hind[*rance*] and inconvenienses, may be a suffitient punisment for an [offence]] that then hit may pleace your Lordshipe in pitifull considerat[ion] be *some* meane that I may yet *come* to the Court if hit be bu[*t before*]

her *Majestie*. for if my cruell destiny should be bent to laye su[*ch and*]
 so great misery vpon me, that nether by Longe sufferinge, prayer, sati[s]
 faction, nor any meenes, I may forgo hit, alas my Lorde to what
 extremity shall I be brought? Wher shall I make my mone? or [*how*]
 shall I desyer to ioy in the coumpany of any body: I cane Low[*ke*]
 for no other hop nor comforde, but vtter confution on every side pra
 pared. Wherefore if any pittie may move your Lordshipe to rue a
 poure, desolat, and banished cature: I beseych you to remember my
 sorowfull cauce to her *Majestie* that if any hope be left I may receve
some relieufe. Thus praynge your happy estat, with encrease
 of all honor and prosperity. I cese to trouble your Lordshipe any fourther
 from my solitary howse in the Whight friers. the xix^{te} of octobe[r].

The most vnfortunat
 Hellena northampton