

MODERN PHILOSOPHY

Thinking in Letters

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Mon./Wed. 1:40-3:20pm

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Room: Spence 101

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PHL 333A (62283)



Vermeer, *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid* (1670-1)



Vermeer, *Lady with Her Maidservant Holding a Letter* (1767-8)

Overview

In the seventeenth-century, a vast network of intellectual and literary communities emerged in Europe and North America. This community spread across political, religious, cultural, and gender divisions. The main reason for the emergence of such a diverse community was the increase in the popularity of letter writing. Unlike anything before, the practice of letter writing became the dominant form of discourse in what is often called the “Republic of Letters.” Another indication of this writing practice was the rise of the epistolary novel, works of fiction that use letters or diary entries as literary framing devices. While most studies of this period have focused on literary and cultural dimensions, the philosophical significance has not been considered in much detail. This class will take up this task and consider the practice of letter writing as a form of philosophical discourse.

Let’s think about how most philosophy is done. Most academic classrooms assume that philosophy is expressed in one form: the book. A quick survey through the canon, however, reveals that there are various forms of philosophical writing. The most popular and lasting works by Aristotle, Augustine, John Locke, Hegel, Heidegger, etc. take the form of a grand treatise or a magnum opus. Despite the preponderance of treatises in philosophy, the book is only one form of “doing philosophy.” We can list several other forms. Poetry is one of the earliest forms of philosophical writing. From Parmenides’ *On Nature* to Lucretius’ *The*

Nature of Things to Nietzsche’s “A Prelude in Rhyme” that begins his *Gay Science*, plenty of philosophy has been written in poetic verse. Dialogue or dramatic plays are also quite common. Plato’s dialogues are the most popular example, though everyone from Aristotle to Descartes wrote dialogic philosophy. There also manifestos, such as those of Marx and Engel. In the last few centuries, essays and journal articles became perhaps the most common forms of philosophical writing. The Information Age has provided a whole new set of forms, including philosophy blogs, tweets, videos, etc. Given all of these, it seems clear to me that *there is not a single correct way to write philosophy*. Despite the continuous practice of writing letters, from the ancient Athens to the twenty-first century, there has not yet been a sustained focus on letter writing as a philosophical mode of discourse. This class will thus ask us to consider the philosophical import of epistolary writing.

There will be four sections of letter writings. First, we will look at the letters sent between René Descartes and Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia. These letters will take us into an unusual conversation for the Modern Period. Unlike anything before or after, the Republic of Letters allowed women’s voice to enter into the philosophical conversation. While Descartes, often considered the “Father of Modern Philosophy,” exchanged letters with all of the luminaries of the early 17th-century, it was a young woman, Princess Elisabeth who offered the most important and devastating challenge to Cartesianism. Second, we will turn to Margaret Cavendish’s fake letters. In these, Cavendish engages in epistolary debate with Thomas Hobbes, Descartes, and other leading male voices in European thought, though without ever actually exchanging letters. The men would not deign to give her an audience, so she made them do so. Third, we then take up the unfinished correspondence between G.W.F. Leibniz (the last person to “know everything”) and Samuel Clarke, the ardent supporter of Sir Isaac Newton. Fourth and finally, we will turn to person who I take to be *the* most important figure of Modern Philosophy: Baruch Spinoza. After looking at a few of his more important letter exchanges, we will finish the course by taking up the central book in his breathtaking masterpiece: the *Ethics*.



René Descartes



Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia

Assignments

Philosophical Diary

Throughout the course of the semester, you must keep a philosophy diary. Let’s think of these as *philosophical letters* written to yourself, which is basically what a diary is. You should write a new letter to

yourself before each class day that we discuss a new reading. Let's make sure this is clear: if you are asked to read something for Wednesday, then you should do the reading and the entry before class on Wednesday. These entries will organize our class discussions. Each entry should be a minimum of about a written page or 419 words (word count does not include the passage), and should follow this format:

(1) *Select a passage*

- a. While reading our texts, try to remain sensitive to those passages in the readings that *speak to you*, that *grab you*, that *provoke a movement in your mind or body*. Mark these passages in the text (with a highlighter, pen, pencil, knife, nail, etc.). Please write directly onto the page. After finishing reading the whole assigned section of the text, please provide a precise citation (page number, section, etc.) from the text, including the first and last few words of the passage. Our class discussions will ask us to turn to these passages.

(2) *Ruminate on the passage*

- a. Then you will *ruminate* on this passage by writing an intellectual diary entry. To see what I mean by "ruminating," consider what Nietzsche says: a text "has not been deciphered when it has *simply* been read...what is required is an art of interpretation...one thing is necessary above all if one is to practice reading as an *art* in this way...something for which one has almost to be a cow: rumination" (*Genealogy of Morals*). Etymologically, to 'ruminate' means "to chew the cud." Cud is a portion of food that returns from the chewer's stomach to the mouth in order to be chewed a second time. Like chewing on a cud, I ask you to "chew" on an idea, argument, question, claim, etc. in a passage until it becomes pliable enough for you to mold it into various sophisticated concepts and ideas and into a philosophical letter. Your letter should capture this process of "chewing on" the passage that struck you. Follow the movements of your thoughts as they changed and slowly became part of your body and mind (just as chewing and eating turns things that are not-you into you).

You will also include other types of entries into your diary, such as a reflection on our trip to the Rubenstein library or some other kind of event or activity that may require a diary entry, and I may change the format in order to fit the themes of a reading (for example, I may ask you to write letters to your classmates). *You should give me a paper copy of these entries everyday*. You will be allowed to *miss three* diary entries, no questions asked. When you skip, please write on the top of your next entry the date on which you skipped along with "skipped" written in big letters. (200 points/20% of the grade).

Four Letters

Your exams will take the form of *four letters*, one for each of the four sections of the course. Your first letter will be addressed to Descartes or Elisabeth (or both of them); your second letter will be addressed to Cavendish; your third letter will be addressed to Leibniz or Clarke; your fourth letter will be addressed to Spinoza. Each letter should be a minimum of 4-pages long. The goal of each one is to clearly and creatively demonstrate to me the depth and sophistication of your comprehension of the philosophical concepts, ideas, arguments, claims, theories, and positions, that show up in the letters and diaries we read, discuss, and write during our semester. For example, when you write your first letter, the one to Descartes or Elisabeth (or both), you should seize upon only a few concepts (most likely, only one or two) that appear in their correspondence and argumentatively engage them. Flesh these concepts out. Unfold them in the various directions that they unfold. Break them down into their component parts, move these around a bit in an attempt to make sense of them, then put them back together, perhaps building something new. Demonstrate to me your ability to articulate and expand upon these modern philosophical concepts. Do not just repeat what they say; say something new with what they said. Since you are writing to them directly, challenge, question, and interrogate them, just as you might do so with a living interlocutor. Show me what you got. Impress me with your sharp acumen and capacities for deep and powerful philosophical insight. (150 points each; totaling 600 points/60% of your grade)

Book of Letters

For your final assignment you will bind your four letters together into a single “Book of Letters.” To do this, you will read back through your four letters, make changes that improve them (perhaps based on my comments), and then add an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction and conclusion should be a minimum of a page in length each. The introduction should introduce a potential reader to the letters that follow. For this, you could do something very creative, such as introducing the project as a book of letters that was found hidden under the floorboards of an old home in Amsterdam or something fun like that. The conclusion should tell your potential reader the most important and interesting thing you learned during the semester; tell us what will stick with you after the class finishes. (100 points/10% of the grade).

Participation

We should be very clear about this: *in order to pass this class, you must participate regularly, enthusiastically, and respectfully.* This is a small class, which should mean that we will receive the highest most person-specific educational experience you can find at Elon. To ensure this is the most rewarding experience possible, everyone must participate regularly and enthusiastically. Philosophy, especially the Roman variety, demands continuous engagement. Earnest and direct engagement with this class is essential. If you are not participating every day, you are not doing philosophy. Also, **you must bring the correct book to every class.** For every day you do not bring the book, in the edition listed on this syllabus, you will be deducted points. You *must* have the paper edition of the text. There is something wonderful about holding a real book, made of paper, in the hand. Enjoy it! Also, all the books are cheap. Buy them early and bring them to class. You should also be on time to class. While unexpected things do happen, if you are late to class regularly, you will be deducted participation points. Then there is the question of phones and texting. Since this is, again, such a small class, lets just turn them off during our time together. Finally, if you miss a graded assignment due to a legitimate reason, you *must* have an official document (Dr.’s note, funeral program, AAA receipt, call from Obama, etc.) justifying this absence. Without such a document, you will *not* be permitted to make-up the missed assignment. (100 points/10% of the grade).

A Journey to Duke Archives

At some point in the semester, we will take a class field trip to the Rubenstein Rare Books library at Duke University. This library contains some incredible early editions of several canonical texts from Modern philosophy. This trip will allow us to learn about the materiality of these texts. A text is a very special product, and we will learn how to “read” a book in a new way, beyond the letters and sentences, focusing on the composition, printing, and texture of the text.

Independent Reading Group

Given that the content of this class consists only of letters, I will offer the opportunity to students who would be interested in reading more of the canonical texts of these philosophers. This will take the form of a sort of “group independent study” reading group. The idea is that a few of us will get together once a week in order to discuss (for maybe an hour) our readings of, say, Descartes’ *Mediations* or more Spinoza’s *Ethics*. We could meet in the Philosophy Department, a coffee shop, a park, or perhaps something that would be more in line with the kinds of spaces in which these philosophers lived and worked. These readings and discussions will be useful in themselves and for deepening our in-class discussion. If people are interested, we could end the class with some presentations from these students to the rest of the class.

Grade Distribution and Calculation Table: The total possible points for this class is *1000 points*.

<i>Assignment</i>	<i>Possible Points</i>	<i>Your earned points</i>
First Letter	150	
Second Letter	150	
Third Letter	150	
Fourth Letter	150	
Book of Letters	100	

Diary	200	
Participation	100	
<i>Total</i>	1000	

Grade Scale	A = 92-100%	A- = 90-91%
B+ = 88-89%	B = 82-87%	B- = 80-81%
C+ = 78-79%	C = 72-77%	C- = 70-71%
D+ = 68-69%	D = 60-67%	

Texts

In Print

The Correspondence of Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes, ed. and trans. by Lisa Shapiro (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2007)

Leibniz and Clarke: Correspondence, trans. Roger Ariew (Hackett Publishing: Indianapolis, 2000)

Spinoza: The Letters, trans. Samuel Shirley (Hackett Publishing: Indianapolis, 1995)

On Moodle

Margaret Cavendish's *Philosophical Letters*:

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eebo;idno=A53058.0001.001>

Outline for Cavendish' *Letters*: <https://stewartduncan.org/letters-philosophical-letters/>

Resources

Online

<https://archive.org/details/uvresdedescartes04desc>

<http://republicofletters.stanford.edu/>

<http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/spinoza1661.pdf>

<http://projectvox.library.duke.edu/content/philosophers>

<http://www.newnarrativesinphilosophy.net/>

Trunk of undelivered Dutch letters: <http://brienne.org/unlockedbriennearchive>



Class Schedule

- Jan. 30 Who wrote these letters and why?
 Feb. 1 Rae Langton, "Duty and Desolation"

Descartes and Elisabeth

- Feb. 6 *The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes*, 61-73
 Feb. 8 *Correspondence*, 81-96
 Feb. 13 *Correspondence*, 97-111
 Feb. 15 *Correspondence*, 111-124
 Feb. 20 *Correspondence*, 124-156
 Feb. 22 *Correspondence*, 156-182

Cavendish

Feb. 27 *Letters* 1.1-13
Mar. 1 *Letters* 1.14-29
Mar. 6 *Letters* 1.30-45
Mar. 8 *Letters* 2.1-34
Mar. 13 *Letters* 4.27-33
Mar. 15 Dish in the cave: TBD
Mar. 20-24 **SPRING BREAK**

Leibniz and Clarke

Mar. 27 *Correspondence*, 1-13
Mar. 29 *Correspondence*, 14-35
Apr. 3 *Correspondence*, 36-65
Apr. 5 *Correspondence*, 66-88

Spinoza and...

Apr. 10 “Portrait of the Philosopher as a Young Man” & “TBD”
Apr. 12 *The Letters* TBD
Apr. 17 **EASTER**

Apr. 19 *The Letters* TBD
Apr. 24 *The Letters* TBD
Apr. 26 Spinoza’s *Ethics*, Bk. III
May 1 Spinoza’s *Ethics*, Bk. III
May 3 Spinoza’s *Ethics*, Bk. III
May 8 TBD



Samuel Hirszenberg, "Spinoza and the Rabbis" (1907)