Lady Rachel Russell

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Lady Rachel Russell: "One of the Best of Women".

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The center of Rachel’s life during the years of her second marriage was, as we have seen, her husband, her children, and other domestic relationships. But as William’s political career grew from 1673 to 1681 so too did Rachel’s interest in politics. Opportunities for her to participate indirectly in public affairs multiplied. Through her contacts with well-placed people, Rachel kept Russell informed of political developments when he was out of town. She endeavored to comfort, advise, warn, and restrain him. Moreover, she provided a social link to people in public life whom he had not known before his marriage. Among the men with whom he was associated in politics were Rachel’s relations: Shaftesbury, the founder and tactician of the Whig party; Montagu, the English ambassador to France; and de Ruvigny, Jr., emissary from the court of Louis XIV. Russell’s career and Rachel’s connection with it illuminate the public dimension of family culture, highlight the limitations in political opportunities for a woman, and illustrate the dangers of opposing the government in late-Stuart England.

Rachel’s view of her role in politics was ambiguous. On the one hand, she saw herself in largely conventional terms. She had no personal political ambitions, as did Sarah Churchill. Nor did she complain in writing about women’s exclusion from politics, as did a few women during her lifetime. The attitude of Margaret Cavendish, the duchess of Newcastle, who bitterly denounced the political system and declared that it had imposed a “slavery” on women, found no parallel in Rachel’s writing. Rachel accepted without comment that according to custom (rather than law) she could not vote, hold public office, nor sit in the House of Commons. She was apparently unaware that during her lifetime more men than ever before were voting and, with the expansion of the national bureaucracy, holding administrative office.

On the other hand, Rachel’s attitude and activities included unconventional elements. As we have seen, her interest in politics and public affairs was well established long before her marriage to William. She admitted to being so “curious in seeking into the secret causes of events” as to fear herself at fault. Like some other aristocratic ladies who were connected with the highest reaches of government through the men in
their families, Rachel simply assumed that she had a right to know what was going on in politics. She felt that the opinions and recommendations she proffered were worth listening to. She believed that her husband’s political career and her part in supporting it furthered religious and political ideals that she favored. No more than William did she write about political ideas, but his actions and her apparent approval of them implicitly reveal the ideals of both. When she feared for William’s safety, she forthrightly attempted to influence him.

William’s career in the House of Commons falls into two major parts: his movement from obscurity in 1673 to importance in 1678, when the Popish Plot broke, and his ascent to eminence from 1678 to 1680, when he was described as the “governing man” in the House. Throughout this public career he conducted himself in a rash and impetuous manner, boldly attacking the king’s ministers and policies, aligning himself with the Country opposition in the House of Commons, and serving from about 1677 to 1681 in the Commons as the earl of Shaftesbury’s most trusted ally as the Whig party emerged. His major contribution to politics was to champion fearlessly certain political and religious principles and to inspire men to follow his lead. In effect he transferred to politics the aristocratic, chivalric attitude that had informed his private life. After King Charles II dissolved Parliament in 1681, Russell became involved in conspiracies against the government. His career ended in 1683 when he was executed as a traitor, an event that brought wrenching change to Rachel’s life.

Rachel’s active interest in public issues grew in tandem with her husband’s political career. Her first contribution may have been to encourage him to take a serious interest in public affairs, as she was accustomed to having male family members hold high office, and political service was expected of men in his social and economic rank. Also, Rachel was known to have imbibed her father’s views, among them criticism of Charles II and his court as corrupt, immoral, extravagant, sympathetic to Catholicism, and inclined to favor absolutism. It is reasonable to think that she was alarmed by public events that appeared to confirm that assessment. Her long-term interest in politics, her later pride in William’s success and recognition, and her confession that at some periods in her life she was greedy for honor support such a hypothesis.

At the time of his marriage to Rachel in 1669 Russell was, as we have seen, a nonentity in House affairs, and so he remained in 1670. Two years later his role had changed enough for Rachel to include domestic and foreign news in her letters to him. And during the next year, 1673, he emerged from obscurity when he was named with others to discuss House business with the lord chancellor, the earl of Shaftesbury, and was appointed teller on the nay side in a vote on a bill to incapacitate
Dissenters from sitting in the House of Commons. Two acute political observers—Sir William Temple and King Charles II—singled him out as a member of a group in the House of Commons that was especially alarmed over the Third Dutch War and the condition of Protestantism in Europe. On October 31, 1673, for the first time in his life, he opened a major debate.

New, aggressive, and sometimes secret policies in finance, religion, and foreign affairs, which had marked Charles II’s government since 1670, fostered apprehension throughout the country that the court favored France, Catholicism, and absolute rule. The conversion to Catholicism of James, duke of York, and his second marriage to an Italian Catholic princess, Mary of Modena, along with an increase in the numbers of Catholics at Whitehall and in London gave concrete evidence of the increasing influence of Catholics. Unless some miracle of biology or statecraft occurred to enable Charles to produce legitimate offspring, the Catholic duke would someday inherit the throne. One may be assured that William and Rachel regarded that possibility with horror.

Furthermore, several controversial actions taken by king and court during the long intermission of Parliament from the spring of 1671 to February 1673 were suggestive of absolutism. One was the Stop at the Exchequer on January 20, 1672, which brought money into the government without recourse to Parliament and ruined some bankers and investors. Even more controversial was the Declaration of Indulgence issued on March 15, 1672, which granted some religious toleration to Dissenters and Catholics and reopened the sensitive question of the king’s power to suspend and/or dispense with the law. Billeting, the use of martial law, and the very presence of soldiers, raised before and during the war with Holland, potentially threatened law, parliamentary government, and morality. Beginning in the spring of 1673 a propaganda campaign of pamphlets and tracts, mounted by the Dutch, depicted these and other policies as injurious to English liberties and to Protestantism everywhere. These issues animated William’s opposition to the government in the first phase of his career.

Russell’s speech of October 31, 1673, opening debate in Grand Committee on the government’s request for money to continue the Third Dutch War, marked his first public expression of opposition to the government. Despite William’s confessed inarticulateness, his speech was effective. “The business of the day is ‘Money,’ ” he began, and continued by saying that he “would rather be thought to mean well and speak ill than to betray the trust of his country.” Money given to fight against Holland endangered the nation and Protestantism. Expressing himself in rash terms, Russell hinted that the king’s ministers had “betrayed their trust” and urged the House to tell the king so plainly, as
earlier parliaments had done, by refusing to grant any supply at all.\textsuperscript{13}
Although Russell’s proposal failed and more moderate views prevailed, this speech launched his career.

It is not known whether he discussed the substance of his remarks with Rachel, but she may have contributed to forming the views that he expressed. It is known that in the previous year she had followed the news of the naval battles and reported it to William. She revealed sophistication and depth of knowledge in suggesting treachery on the part of the French.\textsuperscript{14} Furthermore, knowledgeable men, such as Colonel John Russell, William’s uncle, had written her in detail in June 1672 about the war and prospects for peace with Holland.\textsuperscript{15} And news that Louis XIV regarded the war as a “Catholic war” to crush Protestant Holland, obtained probably through Rachel’s Huguenot relatives, may have contributed to Russell’s decision to speak out.\textsuperscript{16}

Over the next four months, until the end of February 1674, when Charles II prorogued Parliament for over a year, William emerged as an emphatic supporter of the opposition. During this time Rachel gave birth, on January 17, to the girl named Rachel, and it is likely that her time and thoughts were otherwise occupied. There is no evidence of her reaction to her husband’s continued criticism of the government. Once more, on January 12, Russell took the initiative, introducing the idea that the king’s ministers should be brought to account. Again, his speech was effective. Exempting Charles from blame, he urged the House to discover “the authors of our misfortunes, the ill ministers about the king.” Reinforced by senior members, on January 14, William vigorously supported a motion to remove George Villiers, the duke of Buckingham. Again he employed inflammatory language, declaring that a “knot of persons” close to Buckingham “who have neither morality nor Christianity,” had “turn[ed] our Saviour and Parliaments into ridicule and contrive[d] prorogations.”\textsuperscript{17} As a result of the debate, the House prepared addresses for the removal of Buckingham and of John Maitland, the duke of Lauderdale. From the very beginning of his career, William was fearless in attacking men who held high office.

Russell also joined others in criticizing the government’s handling of the army. In a debate on February 7 he inferred that “CABAL-Interest” had “set up an army to establish their interest,” and concluded his speech with an ominous and intemperate remark: “This government, with a standing army, can never be safe; we cannot be secure in this House, and some of us may have our heads taken off.”\textsuperscript{18} At the end of the debate, members voted to declare that continuing any forces other than the militia was a “great grievance” and voted to petition the king to disband all troops that had been raised since January 1, 1663.\textsuperscript{19}

In 1675 Rachel resumed her self-appointed role of keeping her
husband informed about public affairs when he was out of London. In February when he was at Stratton, she sent him copies of the *Gazette* and the *Mercury*. Assuring William that she had “asked everyone I see for news,” she reported rumors about candidates for the position of chief justice, and relayed a gossipy account about the jealousy at court between the duke of York and Henry Savile, which, in view of the episode four years before involving Savile and Rachel’s sister, must have delighted Russell. Intelligence about the court’s interest in seeing a naval report prepared by the Dutch admiral, De Ruyter, and the progress of French arms reached William through Rachel’s letters at the time he was preparing for the new session of Parliament, which opened in mid-April 1675.20 Printed sources supplied some of Rachel’s news. People with access to the inner circles of government also provided her with information. They included Lord William Alington, her brother-in-law, M.P. for Cambridge; the earl of Bedford; Francis Charlton; the Honorable Conyers Darcy, her stepmother’s husband; her half-sister Elizabeth and her husband, Ralph Montagu; Lady Shaftesbury and Shaftesbury himself; Spencer; and Colonel John Russell, William’s uncle.

Only a few letters from William to Rachel during the years from 1673 to 1683 have survived, although Rachel’s references to others prove that he wrote often.21 In one letter, written from London on Tuesday, August 10, 1675, Russell reported that he had discussed with Henri de Ruvigny, Rachel’s French uncle, the fall of Crequi. This confirms that the two men enjoyed a friendly relationship at the time. He filled his letter with other public news: a rising among the Bretons in Normandy, a disturbance among French weavers in Moorefields, and the feeling among “knowing people” that Parliament would not meet until February. He confided his interpretation of events, the court’s response to French reverses, and the significance of the fall of Crequi. Apologizing for the shortness of this lengthy letter, he said he had several more stories to tell her which slipped his mind.22 This single letter suggests the regularity with which William and Rachel corresponded on public affairs and testifies to his confidence in her interest and judgment in politics.

No comment from Rachel about William’s role in either the spring or fall parliamentary session has survived. But the record makes clear that he continued to oppose the government at every turn, resisting a motion for customary thanks for the king’s opening speech, serving on a committee to draw up reasons why Lauderdale should be removed, and calling for the impeachment of Thomas Osborne, earl of Danby, the lord treasurer and the third minister whose dismissal he had demanded.23 Moreover, in October 1675 he took part in a stratagem to obstruct the king’s business by igniting anxiety over standing armies and English
soldiers serving in the French army in ways that revealed his willingness to use unfounded rumor in the service of political tactics. By the time the king prorogued Parliament on November 22 for fifteen months, William had further increased his visibility and identified himself strongly with extremists in the Country party. A friend of the court expressed the hope that before Parliament reconvened, Russell’s two brothers-in-law (Lord Alington, his sister’s husband, and Edward Noel, Rachel’s sister’s husband), “might do some good with him.” That did not happen.

Another influence Rachel had on William’s political career was to introduce him to the earl of Shaftesbury, a critic of the government since 1673, who became the organizer and tactician of the Country opposition and then the Whig party. Russell and Shaftesbury were so far apart in age, temperament, and political attainment and status that they probably would not have established so much as an acquaintanceship had it not been for the connection through Rachel. In 1677 Russell was a man of thirty-eight, a large, active, genial, unbookish person of still modest attainments, whereas Shaftesbury, in his mid-fifties, was a short, slight person, whose health had never been robust and who carried a permanent drainage tube in his abdomen, left there following a spectacular operation in 1668 for a hydatid cyst on the liver. Whereas Russell had held no office beyond minor local ones in Bedfordshire and Hampshire, Shaftesbury had occupied some of the highest posts in the nation—under-treasurer, president of the Council of Trade, chancellor of the Exchequer, and lord chancellor. Highly intelligent, a skilled orator, ambitious to exercise power, and willing to use almost any political means to attain his ends, Shaftesbury was also deeply committed to certain political and religious attitudes. He favored limited monarchy and toleration for Dissenters; and expressed hatred of Catholicism and arbitrary government, devotion to the rule of law, fear of standing armies, and respect for the landed, well-to-do classes. Russell, as we know from his actions and speeches, shared these views.

Rachel enjoyed a warm relationship with Lord and Lady Shaftesbury, and close ties bound the two families. Their estates lay near one another in Hampshire. Marriage linked them: in 1655 the then Anthony Ashley Cooper married as his third wife Margaret Spencer, Rachel’s cousin. Shaftesbury owed his start in Restoration politics to Southampton, who, as treasurer, used his influence to win him appointment as chancellor of the Exchequer and under-treasurer.

Rachel and her cousin Margaret, ten years her senior, were good friends. Both women were intelligent, thoughtful, interested in politics, and sincerely religious. Rachel and Margaret spent part of the summer of 1662 together at Bath, where the earl joined them. In 1675,
1676, 1677, and 1679 Margaret either called on, dined with, or played cards with Rachel. One time she stayed for three weeks with her.\textsuperscript{33} When Wriothesley was born in 1680, Margaret stood as godmother.\textsuperscript{34} The two women comforted each other in the trials that their husbands brought to their lives, as in 1681 at the time of the Oxford Parliament, when Margaret was desperately afraid that Shaftesbury would be arrested, or after William Russell’s execution, when Margaret was the only woman that Rachel invited to be with her.\textsuperscript{35} In September 1683 Lady Shaftesbury addressed Rachel in a poignant letter of sympathy as “my best and dearest friend.”\textsuperscript{36} In a later letter Margaret subscribed herself as “unimaginably passionately affectionately yours.”\textsuperscript{37}

Rachel had still other contacts with the Shaftesbury household. Margaret’s brother, Robert Spencer, was a source of news of public affairs, as was Francis Charlton, Shaftesbury’s one-legged cousin.\textsuperscript{38} Rachel met John Hoskins, Shaftesbury’s solicitor and probably his kinsman, at Shaftesbury’s house and formed such a good impression of his abilities that after William’s death she asked him to advise her on legal and business matters.\textsuperscript{39} Further, it is likely that Rachel was acquainted with John Locke, who was not only Shaftesbury’s physician, adviser, and intellectual companion, but also was physician and traveling companion to her half-sister Elizabeth Percy, countess of Northumberland.\textsuperscript{40} Whether Russell met Locke in these familial circumstances is unknown. Since William was not a man of ideas, a friendship between them is unlikely. No letters between them have survived. Yet they must have seen each other more often than the one specific record of an intended meeting in August 1680 would suggest.\textsuperscript{41}

There are no surviving comments from either Russell or Shaftesbury about the other. But it is obvious that Shaftesbury was the dominant figure in the relationship. Shaftesbury would have respected William for his energy, fearlessness, selflessness, growing popularity, and willingness to accept direction from him. Russell’s noble family, familial and kinship connections, wealth, expectations of inheriting a title and even greater wealth, and reputation, since his marriage to Rachel, for honesty, morality, and religion were all extremely useful to Shaftesbury. Russell would have admired the older man for his experience, past offices, bold leadership, and ideals.

The relationship between Shaftesbury and Russell deepened, and when Parliament reconvened in 1677, William had become one of Shaftesbury’s most trusted and dependable allies in the House of Commons. From the time of the Popish Plot, which broke in the autumn of 1678, and the ensuing Exclusion Crisis, which lasted until the dissolution of the Oxford Parliament in March 1681, Russell was Shaftesbury’s “point man” in the Lower House. The role placed him on the extreme
edge of issues and in the spotlight and was fraught with potential hazard.

During the short parliamentary session from mid-February to mid-April 1677, when Russell was absent on estate business, Rachel intensified her efforts to keep her husband informed. She wrote in April that she had tried to gather news because she wanted to “entertain your dear self the better by this letter; . . . for all my ends and designs in this world are to be as useful and acceptable to my Mr. Russell as I can.” She traveled about London with her sister Diana, Lady Alington, and talked with Lord Alington (who gave her a copy of Charles's message to the House of April 11), Sir Hugh Cholmondeley, and her cousin Spencer. Thus fortified, she wrote her husband a lucid, sophisticated, and comprehensive account of the results of a debate in the House of Commons, the attitude of the Lords, and the view of the court towards the proceedings. She also copied Charles’s speech for William. Still further, Rachel made herself visible for the first time by dining with Shaftesbury in the Tower. Her visit was, in effect, a political act, and a bold one.

This visit to Shaftesbury is the only evidence available from 1677 to suggest that Rachel approved of his views and thus of the part Russell played in the Commons in forwarding them. Shaftesbury, along with three other peers, was sent to the Tower on February 17. The circumstances were as follows. On February 15, the day Parliament opened, Shaftesbury and three other peers in the House of Lords caused Russell and others in the Commons to introduce the proposition that the parliament was dissolved. The move was a sharp rebuff of the king, who, in opening Parliament and asking for supply, had promised to do everything consistent with “Christian Prudence” to preserve the Protestant religion as established by the Church of England and to secure property and liberty. In both Houses the main argument was that ancient laws, dating back to the fourteenth century, required Parliament to meet at least once a year; the prorogation had lasted fifteen months, and hence the body was dissolved. Such an argument threatened a prerogative of the crown to call and dissolve Parliament at its pleasure.

While Russell did not contribute to the substance of the debate, he helped to sharpen the issue. Admitting that “he was no great reader of Statutes and therefore is no competent judge of those mentioned,” he moved an address to the king that Parliament was dissolved, so that the issue could be settled. The proposal had no success in either House, in part because members were disinclined to give up their seats. In the Commons, support was lacking to bring the question to a vote, which made more visible the few men, Russell among them, who promoted the issue. The four peers were sent to the Tower on February 17 for their part in the action, and Shaftesbury stayed there for almost a year. Loy-
ally Russell on February 20 sought permission, as was required, to visit Shaftesbury but was turned down, thereby making Rachel’s subsequent visit all the more prominent.\(^49\)

William’s social status was enhanced with the death of his elder brother in January 1678. William assumed the courtesy title of Lord Russell and the position of heir to the Bedford title and fortune. Now that his rank equalled that of her first husband, Rachel adopted his name and was known henceforth as Lady Russell or Rachel Russell.

Lord Russell’s new status facilitated his moving into a position of genuine consequence in English politics when Parliament reconvened in January 1678 after a prorogation of eight months. In February and March he and opposition peers engaged in secret conversations with emissaries from France. In the autumn, he exploited the Popish Plot for partisan purposes. As before, Russell’s actions and language were rash and fraught with personal risk; they alarmed Rachel, who sought to restrain him. But the steps he took served the principles of the parliamentary opposition, inspired less brave M.P.’s, and won William their admiration.

Rachel also influenced William’s career by introducing him to her French uncle, Henri de Ruvigny, Sr., and her cousin, Henri, Jr. Between 1667 and 1676 her uncle served as an envoy from Louis XIV. De Ruvigny and Rachel had always been fond of each other, and he saw the Russells often. De Ruvigny, who was in his seventies and held a high place as spokesman for French Protestants in Louis XIV’s government, was respected for his “eminent administrative powers and great dexterity.” Under a “very plain exterior,” he used both candor and finesse.\(^50\) It is unlikely that de Ruvigny and Lord Russell would have established a relationship at all had it not been for the connection through Rachel. De Ruvigny and Russell, however, became friends. In 1673 Henri may have confided to William (who in turn told Rachel) that he had approached Shaftesbury with a view to bribing him to support the interests of France.\(^51\) If this story is true, the Russells knew firsthand that the French government had contrived to bribe M.P.’s to achieve a policy congenial to their interests. Apparently they did not object, for the intimacy with de Ruvigny remained intact.

De Ruvigny, Jr., a man of thirty years in 1678, was also an intimate of the Russells. In part because of that, Louis XIV sent him to London armed with money to see how the mutual interests of the parliamentary opposition and the French government might be served.\(^52\) The French court entrusted the task to young de Ruvigny rather than to his father because they felt that the latter was too old to undertake it. The younger de Ruvigny had already had experience under his father’s guidance in influencing members of the English Parliament. The French
Lady Rachel Russell counted on Russell to introduce Henri “into a great commerce with the malcontented members of Parliament.” They were also prepared “by the means of Will Russell” and others to pay Whigs for their help.\(^53\)

In February and March 1678 Lord Russell and Denzil, Lord Holies, met with de Ruvigny. It was not the first time that French emissaries and members of the parliamentary opposition had met for an exchange of news, views, and, often, bribe money.\(^54\) But this was the first time that Russell had taken part in such an encounter.

William was willing to engage in these secret conversations, the discovery of which could have ruined his political career, and Rachel apparently approved because of the apprehension and confusion generated by Charles II’s domestic and foreign policies in 1677 and 1678. On the surface at least, a diplomatic revolution conceived by Danby had changed England’s foreign policy from pro-French to pro-Dutch.\(^55\) Charles would propose peace terms to France and Holland and, if they were rejected, ally himself with Holland. The policy required an army, Danby said, which would enable Charles to “speak boldly” to Parliament asking for a liberal supply in exchange for disbanding the soldiers. This new approach was sealed by the marriage in the fall of 1677 of Princess Mary, the duke of York’s elder Protestant daughter, to her cousin, William, prince of Orange, Louis XIV’s inveterate foe. Louis XIV rejected Charles’s peace proposals, tried to sow dissension among the allies and between Holland and England, promoted the idea in England that an army threatened the liberties of the people, and prepared to bribe members of Parliament not to fund an army for war against France.\(^56\) Faced with Louis’s rebuff, Charles in the fall of 1677 recalled English troops serving in France, thereby making good his threat to assist Holland.

The question observers asked was, Do these public steps reflect a genuine change in policy? Or are they a pretense enabling Charles, with the connivance of Louis XIV, to raise men and demand money, and when accomplished, to arrange a peace with France and use his troops to destroy parliamentary liberties and Protestantism? Many people, Russell among them, sincerely feared the latter. Charles had put his critics in an awkward position by ostensibly embracing an anti-French foreign policy just as they had urged him to do. They were reluctant to support that policy with men and money because they distrusted the king. One way to resolve their dilemma was to discover the real intentions of Charles and Louis. Such was the purpose of Russell’s meeting with de Ruvigny, Jr.

Apparently well prepared for the meetings, perhaps through briefings by Shaftesbury,\(^57\) Russell forcefully stated his suspicions that a secret treaty existed between Charles and Louis. He indignantly turned
aside de Ruvigny’s suggestion that France should bribe M.P.’s to secure their vote against giving money for war with France, saying that he “should be very sorry to have any commerce with people capable of being gained by money.” But he took de Ruvigny’s suggestion of bribing M.P.’s to mean that there was no secret treaty between England and France. Acknowledging the difficulties in bringing along the House, Russell said that he and his friends would “work underhand” against increasing money for war against France and would add such disagreeable conditions to the grant already made that Charles would prefer peace to accepting them. He affirmed that he and his friends wanted only the dissolution of Parliament. Assuring de Ruvigny that such were Shaftesbury’s sentiments, Russell said that he would “engage” Shaftesbury in the affair but speak to no one else about it. William suggested that de Ruvigny and Shaftesbury meet “one of these days” at Southampton House. 58 Always on the side of extreme measures, Russell asserted that he was resolved to attack Danby, the duke of York, and “all the Catholics.” 59 Following this meeting in March, Russell and Holles, joined by Buckingham and Shaftesbury, met at the beginning of April with the French ambassador, Paul Barrillon, marquis de Branges. 60 Expressing renewed anxiety over Charles’s intentions, they suggested that Louis should ask Charles point-blank whether he intended peace or war. Russell reasoned that the question would not cause war, if war were not already planned, and it would prove that Louis had no secret agreement with Charles to use a sham war to destroy English liberties. Barrillon believed that this proposal aimed either to force a war between England and France, thereby protecting Parliament from the army, or to win assurance of Louis’s protection should a domestic crisis develop between Charles and his critics. Should these conversations be revealed they clearly would embarrass the English participants.

Rachel certainly knew of these meetings, and it is likely that she approved of them. Her half-sister, Elizabeth, wrote to tell her that de Ruvigny was coming and to assure her that his mission would not harm William. 61 Moreover, an urgent letter Rachel wrote to William a year later, in February 1679, suggests that she approved of her husband’s contacts. In the letter she said that she needed to see William “to discourse something of that affair that my uncle was on Sunday so long with me about. It is urged, and Your Lordship is thought a necessary person to advise about it.” 62 If Rachel had disapproved of William’s conversations with her French cousin in 1678, it seems unlikely that a year later she would have allowed herself to be drawn into a lengthy discussion with her French uncle on a matter that she veils in oblique language. Further, her note implies that she herself was willing to promote William’s discussions with the French even after the potentially damag-
ing episode in the Commons over the de Ruvigny meetings, to be discussed. To do that suggests a boldness that matches William's, notwithstanding her deepening concern for his safety. Finally, the warm familial relationship with the de Ruvigny family continued, another indication that Lady Russell did not disapprove of the meetings.

The conversations testify to the central place William had assumed in the opposition in the Commons. Barrillon acknowledged this role, referring to Russell and "his cabal." The talks show that William was able, whether by instruction or his own resources, to effectively carry on delicate conversations. Moreover, they illustrate still again his bold courage. It was obviously a risky business for anyone to engage in conversations with representatives of a foreign power which they publicly decried, the more so for a rapidly emerging leader of the opposition in the House of Commons. Finally, they testify to Russell's moral strength. Not only did he express abhorrence of the idea of accepting money from the French; he resolutely refused to accept money. There is no evidence either that he distributed bribe money to fellow Whigs.

If the participants thought that these talks would be kept secret, they were mistaken. Montagu wrote Danby as early as January 1, 1678, all he knew of the de Ruvigny mission and later offered advice to Charles through Danby on how to handle it. He specifically mentioned that Russell, the contact person, was expected to introduce de Ruvigny to opposition members. His report, of course, was a duty of his post, but a contemporary believed that Montagu also wanted to "libel" Russell in revenge for Russell's opposing Montagu's marriage to Lady Northumberland, Rachel's sister. The news of de Ruvigny's mission and Russell's part in it spread rapidly enough to reach the ears of at least one court supporter by January 14, and if it went that far, one may be sure it went farther still.

In the meantime, Russell and his colleagues in the House of Commons faced the problem of holding rank-and-file members of the opposition to the strategy discussed with the French without revealing that strategy. The difficulties they encountered reveal that the Country party was not especially well organized at this time. For example, on March 14 Sir Gilbert Gerrard urged the House to ask Charles for an immediate declaration of war on France, his purpose being to assure that the army would be rapidly employed away from England. But at the instigation of Shaftesbury and certainly with prior planning, Russell was quick to derail the motion by raising the specter of a Catholic menace. Russell moved that the House "set the saddle on the right horse" by going into a committee of the whole to "consider of the sad and deplorable condition we are in, and the apprehensions we are under of popery, and a standing army; and...of some way to save ourselves from
ruin.” His tactic was successful. Others expressed concern about saddling the right horse too, and the House, despite objections, galloped off to a lengthy debate that took them far afield from the idea of declaring war on France, with the result that Gerrard’s motion failed.

Lady Russell followed the Commons debates carefully and with mounting anxiety for the safety of her husband. During one of them in March 1678, she had a note delivered to William while the House was in session. She had heard of his intentions from her sister-in-law Diana, who had overheard William discussing his plans with Lord Alington. Rachel understood that William intended to “take notice of the business (you know what I mean) in the House.” “This alarms me, and I do earnestly beg of you to tell me truly if you have or mean to do it.” Unabashed in offering her judgment, Rachel warned, “If you do, I am most assured you will repent it.” Suggesting that she had raised such a question with him before, she wrote, “I beg once more [italics supplied] to know the truth.” Rachel concluded with a special appeal to William’s obligation to her. She said, “If I have any interest, I use it to beg your silence in this case, at least today.”

The note is of uncommon importance. Her use of the phrase “once more” suggests that Rachel had importuned her husband to tell her what his plans were more than once. It indicates that in this instance he had not confided in her, and that she had refused to be silenced. It also shows that Rachel believed that she possessed information indicating that William would repent the move he planned. But unless William moderated even stronger motions than the ones he offered, the advice from his wife went unheeded. Yet it must have made some impression on him, for he preserved the note.

In subsequent weeks Russell continued to be in the forefront of the attack on the government. On May 7, 1678, probably at the instigation of Shaftesbury, Russell promoted a resolution for the removal of the king’s counsellors. Blaming the king’s advisers for waiting so long to assist the enemies of France and asserting that the nation could expect no improvement so long as they remained in office, he seconded the motion to name Lauderdale in the address and also probably supported another resolution which named Danby.

The king was genuinely outraged at these steps, and once more Russell had aligned himself with the opposition in an action especially offensive to the court. It is a reasonable presumption that Lady Russell did not endorse these moves.

In the autumn the political situation changed dramatically. The Popish Plot was revealed by the king at the opening session of Parliament on October 21, 1678. That revelation confirmed the parliamentary opposition in its worst fears. Some people, Russell among them, sincerely believed in the reality of the plot. What Rachel thought is unknown. Others, especially Shaftesbury, were skeptical about the
genuineness of the plot, but saw it as a political weapon to be used against the government. However viewed, the Popish Plot became a cause célèbre and the justification over the next three years for the campaign to exclude the duke of York from the succession.

Lord Russell cooperated with Shaftesbury in the latter’s efforts to exploit the Popish Plot in the service of removing the duke of York from the succession to the throne. On November 1 Shaftesbury led the Lords in agreeing with the Commons that a “damnable plot” existed and on November 2 introduced a motion that the duke of York should be removed from the king’s “Councils and publick affaires.” Coordinating strategy, Russell, two days later, introduced the same motion in more extreme form, asking that the duke be removed from the king’s presence as well as his council. In an “unusually able speech” using language close to that of Shaftesbury, William asserted that “all our dangers proceeded from the duke of York, who is perverted to popery, and from him only.” Softening this audacious attack, he insisted that he had great respect for the duke, but declared that his virtues “did but enhance our dangers.” Although enthusiastic support existed for the motion, a majority of M.P.'s were reluctant to proceed. Their reluctance revealed fissures in the ranks of the opposition and also the effectiveness of Charles’s response to the motion: on November 9 in a formal ceremony in the House of Lords the king promised to do all Parliament might ask to protect the Protestant religion so long as the “right of succession” and the “descent of the Crown in the true line” were preserved. The House declined to take action on Russell’s motion. But his motion again demonstrated his willingness to advocate an extreme course of action. His courage and conviction won him the admiration of the House.

In late November 1678 rumor reached the duke of York that Charles II’s bastard son, the duke of Monmouth, had held “cabals” with Russell and “others of that gang” and talked of putting Monmouth forward as successor to the throne. Whether the rumor was true or not, it could not have endeared William to James. If Lady Russell heard of these meetings, she left no record of them.

William’s prestige in the House was so high that he escaped severe damage when in December 1678 his meetings with de Ruvigny were revealed in the political cross fire between Danby and Montagu. In the course of the dispute Danby unveiled letters written by Montagu in January about the de Ruvigny mission. His purpose was to demonstrate that the parliamentary opposition was in league with France. But his ploy boomeranged. Russell, the only one named in the letters, was not above using a duplicitous remark to protect himself. Appealing to the House, he said, “I defy any man alive to charge me with any dealings
with the French. My actions here have given sufficient testimony to the contrary.” His remark, however, was unnecessary, for fellow M.P.’s rushed to exculpate him. Among them was Montagu himself, who insisted that he and his wife looked upon the de Ruvigny mission as a joke because they knew that the French could get nothing out of Russell. The prevailing opinion was that the letters had been produced by the court “with some design against” Russell, and that William was “most remarkable in his affections to the good of the Nation.” Members decided not to enter the letters in the House journal lest they draw a “dark paraphrase upon this noble Lord’s actions.” Thus, Russell escaped what could have been a devastating blow to his political career. The outcome of this episode might have been different. A remark by one member suggests misgivings in some members’ minds. Colonel Titus said, “All we here very well understand Lord Russell’s character. But how after ages may understand it, I know not.”

William and Rachel do not seem to have blamed Montagu for this episode. Perhaps they reasoned that he was fulfilling his responsibilities as ambassador in reporting the de Ruvigny mission and accepted his assertion that he and his wife laughed at the thought that France would benefit from a meeting with William. The Russells apparently dismissed the rumor that Montagu had sought revenge for Russell’s opposing his marriage. Russell probably applauded Montagu for helping to achieve Danby’s downfall. There was certainly no rupture between the two families. Rachel even expressed sympathy for Montagu when she reported on January 4, 1679, that he had been summoned before the council to “see his cabinets opened.” “The poor man,” she wrote, “is delivered out of a peck of troubles, one may perceive.”

Within a fortnight of the revelations of the Danby-Montagu correspondence, on December 30, 1678, Charles II prorogued Parliament, and he dissolved it on January 30, 1679. A long-standing goal of the opposition had been achieved. The ensuing election of a new parliament and then the mounting excitement over Exclusion sealed until the eighteenth century further interest in Russell’s involvement with the French emissaries.

The parliamentary elections that took place in January and February of 1679 testify to William’s newly elevated political status. There was no thought that Russell should stand for Tavistock in Devon, the borough he had represented for eighteen years. He was nominated as knight of the shire for Bedfordshire and Hampshire and was returned for both counties, an unusual honor.

William and his associates worked hard to win this election. He visited both counties, spent considerable money for feasting and enter-
taining, and almost certainly saw to it that campaign pamphlets and tracts were distributed. Whether or not William presented a speech before the electors, a device that became a feature of elections in 1681, is unknown, but in view of his verbal inaptitude it seems unlikely. Russell may have used underhanded methods to forward his chances in attempting to discredit his opponent in Bedfordshire. It was claimed by Thomas, Lord Bruce (eldest son of the earl of Ailesbury, the lord-lieutenant of the county), that before the “pretended plot” broke, Bedfordshire gentlemen had pledged their support to Bruce. But Lord Russell’s “party,” at Russell’s “instigation,” circulated a rumor that Bruce’s father did not believe in the plot. Bruce blamed his defeat on this malicious gossip. The earl of Ailesbury was also furious at the “ill offices done him in the county.” Whatever his means, Russell was a great success. He won handsomely in Bedfordshire, by five hundred voices, it was said. Much to the relief of the Bedfordshire men—who, Rachel reported, were “ready to break their hearts” had the decision been different—William chose to represent Bedfordshire rather than Hampshire.

Rachel attached great importance to the election. During William’s absence, she made a concerted effort to collect election news for him, “coast[ing] the town,” as she put it, making a “dozen visits” (including one at Whitehall), asking questions, dining at Shaftesbury’s house, and often dropping by Montagu House for the express purpose of uncovering political news. The news she garnered kept William abreast of events that he could not otherwise have known in a timely way. For example, Rachel told him of Lord Ailesbury’s reaction to his son’s defeat in Bedfordshire, of the Bedfordshire gentlemen’s anguish that he might not represent them, and of the status of other candidates. She relayed the remark that Charles made upon learning that Shaftesbury had written his followers not to choose fanatics. In his amusing way the king said that “he had not heard so much good of [him] a great while.”

Rachel also provided William with sympathy, support, and encouragement. She comforted him with the thought that “the enjoyments at sweet Stratton, will recompense all.” Referring to how difficult his situation would likely be “in town and country” because of some unidentified problem, she wrote, “My love, I am in pain,...because I am sure you must have a great deal.” When Russell received accolades of praise from fellow political leaders, Rachel reported all that they said, remarking that “my heart thinks abundantly more is due to my man.” Her letters about the elections show strikingly how small a part she played in the process and how deeply interested she was.

William’s success on the hustings elevated his reputation with Shaftesbury and other opposition leaders. Russell had become so much
a part of the inner circle of opposition leaders that portions of a letter from William to Rachel were read aloud to Shaftesbury’s dinner guests. Shaftesbury jocularly said to William Sacheverell that Russell was the “greater man,” for Sacheverell was “but one knight, and Lord Russell would be two.” Sacheverell rejoined that “if it were in his power [Russell] should be a hundred.” Indicating his high opinion of Russell, Shaftesbury marked him “thrice worthy” in lists he made of parliamentary members he could trust.  

Lady Russell was undoubtedly with Lord Russell in London during the spring parliamentary session from mid-March to mid-May 1679, for no letters have survived from these months. Thus, there is no indication of her reaction to the steps he took in the House. One move provides an example of Russell’s willingness to separate himself from Shaftesbury. The Commons faced the question of how to deal with Danby, who stood charged of treason because of the revelations in his correspondence with Montagu. Shaftesbury wanted to disable Danby by expedients short of an attainder.  
The Lower House wanted to attaint Danby, in part to underscore their right to punish a minister, and Russell, remaining silent in the debates, went along with them. With Whig party stalwarts he was appointed on March 27 to the committee on the bill for summoning Danby to surrender himself or face attainder. The upshot of subsequent maneuvering in both Houses was victory for the Commons’ bill and the imprisonment of Danby in the Tower. The episode illustrates that Shaftesbury lacked firm control over the forces of the opposition.

Another step Russell took during this session marked a watershed in his career. On April 27, deeply alarmed by news that the French intended to bring the duke of York back to England by force, members of the House opened the issue of how to protect the Protestant religion in the reign of the present king and “his successors.” In this debate Russell made the most powerful speech of his career. Charging the House with “but trifling hitherto,” Russell declared that “if we do not something relating to the succession, we must resolve when we have a prince of the popish religion to be papists, or burn.” “And I will do neither,” he said defiantly. He vigorously denied that his ownership of abbey lands had promoted his anti-Catholicism. Stressing his scorn for Catholicism and also revealing a capacity for coarse humor, he went on, “I despise such a ridiculous and nonsensical religion—A piece of wafer, broken betwixt a priest’s fingers, to be our Saviour! And what becomes of it when eaten, and taken down, you know.” Expressing hope that the present House would “neither be bribed, corrupted, nor cajoled, nor feasted into the giving up the grand concerns of our religion and property,” he moved for the appointment of a committee to draw up a bill “to secure our religion and properties in case of a popish successor.”
plied in the speech was a preference for limiting the power of the king rather than excluding York from the succession, but Russell’s speech was critically important in the movement towards the first Exclusion Bill.

Russell’s speech almost certainly had a dual purpose. It served also to reassure the House that he had not been co-opted by the king, for just a week before, on April 20, 1679, he had accepted a summons from Charles to become a member of the newly constituted thirty-member Privy Council. It was the first administrative office of any consequence that he had held. His appointment testifies to the position he had achieved. This body was the brainchild of Sir William Temple, and one of its purposes was to bring in members of the opposition and involve them in the work of government. The king’s announcement of the new appointments had provoked skepticism and scorn in the Lower House. Further, on April 22, rumor circulated that Russell would be appointed governor of Portsmouth. William may well have designed his forceful speech on April 27 to blunt the suspicion that preferment would silence him.

The result of William’s motion on April 27 was a resolution, passed unanimously, that the duke of York’s religion and the expectation of his accession have encouraged conspiracies of papists against the king and Protestantism. Russell was selected to carry the resolution to the House of Lords for their concurrence. That same day the House instructed the committee of safety it had appointed a month before to draw up an “Abstract of such Matters as Concern the duke of York” respecting the plot.

The report of this committee on May 11 provided the context within which the first Exclusion Bill was introduced. Russell, who was not a member of the committee, inflated the evidence it presented of York’s correspondence with popish leaders. William cited still another letter “of a more desperate style and matter of any of the rest.” He did not, however, reveal his position on limitations or exclusion, and the fact that he was not named to the committee to draw up the first Exclusion Bill suggests that his views were still ambivalent. On exclusion, as on a number of other issues, the Whigs were not a monolithic body, as has sometimes been suggested.

Russell had to make a decision on exclusion on May 21, when the House divided on the second reading of the Exclusion Bill. As a prominent member of the House, he could not absent himself to avoid the vote, as many members did. He voted for exclusion. In electing exclusion over limitations, he took a position different from that of his best friend, Cavendish, and became closer than ever to Shaftesbury. He explained later in his scaffold speech that he chose exclusion because he believed that limitations smacked of republicanism. From this date on, excluding
York from the line of succession to the throne became the central goal of Russell’s political activities. The matter was not put to the test in May 1679, for on the twenty-seventh the king prorogued Parliament.

In the absence of Parliament, the Privy Council offered Whigs the only institutional forum within which to exert pressure on the king. Russell stayed a member for almost exactly nine months, until the end of January 1680, drawing upon himself the still deeper enmity of the king. He deliberately identified himself with Shaftesbury, who was made lord president, and, alone among councillors, followed Shaftesbury’s lead in promoting the idea of exclusion. As Shaftesbury became increasingly isolated, so too was Russell. Russell irritated Charles. On June 6, when the council was discussing the rising of the Covenanters in Scotland, Russell expressed wonder that the trouble had not occurred sooner, “since His Majesty had thought fit to retain incendiaries near his person, and in his very Council.” His meaning was that Lauderdale was to blame for provoking the revolt by his cruel rule. When Lauderdale made a move to leave the meeting, the king, in an oblique slap at Russell, said, “No, no, sit down my Lord. This is not a place for addresses.” And in a direct slap, Charles refused to dismiss his minister. A month later, on July 10, Russell, Shaftesbury, and “two or three more” responded “with the greatest rage in the world” to Charles’s announced decision to dissolve Parliament and summon another one for October 7. That summer Charles remarked to a friend that he would soon be parted from “Russell and his party.”

The parliamentary elections in September underscored anew Russell’s standing in the country and Rachel’s active interest. Despite the king’s efforts through Lord Ailesbury to defeat him, William won reelection in Bedfordshire. And, once again testifying to his great popularity, Russell also won reelection in Hampshire. There, the marquess of Winchester, allegedly without William’s knowledge, proposed him when the freeholders met about the election. “Although at a great distance,” he defeated Edward Noel, his brother-in-law. Word of William’s success reached Southampton House while Russell was “campaigning” in Bedfordshire and Rachel opened the letter addressed to William, “curiosity inviting me,” she confessed. The Hampshire election preceded that in Bedfordshire, and Rachel, believing that once elected, William could not be elected twice, wrote, “I know not how you are to behave yourself.” She sought advice from her brother-in-law, Lord Alington, who reported that William could stand in Bedfordshire and would have a fortnight after the House convened to decline one of the elections. Alington predicted that if Russell declined in Hampshire, then Noel would win.

Russell again declined Hampshire, and Noel was then elected. It
may have been that Winchester proposed William as part of a “deep stratagem”: Russell would decline to serve, a by-election would be necessary, and a second Whig would be elected, a result which could not be assured on the day of the first poll. If the stratagem in Hampshire had indeed been executed without Russell’s knowledge, Rachel was among the first to see the complications for her husband.

But Parliament did not meet in the fall. On October 14 Charles dismissed Shaftesbury as lord president of the Privy Council and on October 17 prorogued Parliament to January 26, 1680. Russell was again outraged, but his protests and those of others were turned aside, and rumors circulated that Russell and his friends Cavendish and Capel would resign. The last meeting of the council that Russell attended was on November 7, 1679, but matters did not reach a climax until January. On January 26, the day Parliament was to have met, Charles formally prorogued it; and four days later—urged on by Shaftesbury—Russell, Cavendish, and two others resigned from the Privy Council in a body. Observers described the episode as “unprecedented,” “remarkable,” and ominous. Charles openly displayed his delight in seeing these men go, granting them permission to withdraw “with all my heart.” Privately he expressed contempt for them.

The next ten months of 1680 were difficult ones in the Russells’ private and public life. Tension between the king and his critics continued to escalate, with mutual suspicions deepening—of a government coup on the one hand, of an uprising on the other. Lady Russell’s personal life was somewhat disordered. The death of her sister, Elizabeth, in March filled her with sadness. The unexplained disharmony between her and William in June surely did likewise. Moreover, she was pregnant with her last child for much of the time, giving birth to a son on November 1, 1680.

Yet, Rachel increased her efforts to serve as her husband’s “informer.” Declaring her intention to “suck the honey from all that will be communicative,” she enlarged her sources to include a privy councillor (unidentified); a “black coat” (meaning a cleric); Henry Sidney; Sir Thomas Cheeke, son-in-law of Philip Sydney, earl of Leicester; Lady Inchiquin, a lady-in-waiting to the princess of Orange; and perhaps Lady Harvey, Montagu’s sister, who was deeply involved in politics. The result was that Rachel conveyed news that few people could have known about at the time. For example, she reported that the lord mayor of London had examined some men charged in the Prentices Plot; that the council intended to discuss the imminent reappearance of Monmouth, who, “great talk” had it, intended to raise a regiment; that there were rumors of a “new plot” involving Monmouth and Shaftesbury; that “most” people were predicting that following the meeting of the council
in June the king would convene Parliament. Of possible importance in reinforcing Russell’s belief in the validity of the evidence that William Bedloe (Titus Oates’s accomplice) had presented in the Popish Plot was Rachel’s report that Bedloe, dying of fever, had declared on his deathbed to Sir Francis North that all he had told was true. Finally, she hinted in a letter that she had advised William to seek an accommodation with the duke of York. “I hear,” she wrote in June, “you had the opportunity of making your court handsomely at Bagshot”—where James was staying—and she went on to observe rather ruefully, “if you had had the grace to have taken the good fortune offered.” It is no wonder that by autumn of 1680 Rachel regarded the times as “crazy” and offered the prayer that God would preserve her and William from the “sharpest trials.”

Such cautionary sentiments at no time made an impression on William. Although his activities are clouded, he continued to meet with radical Whig leaders. In April rumor had it that Russell, Shaftesbury, Cavendish, and Monmouth were meeting in “cabails” at a different house each night to lay “their heads together to oppose [the king’s] interest...in Parliament or elsewhere.” In May when the king suffered another illness, they reportedly met to discuss contingency plans in case of his death, Shaftesbury telling the group that many eminent men in London had said that if Charles died and if he, Monmouth, and Russell would assist them, they would rise in revolt to prevent York from succeeding to the throne. In public William was appearing openly, indeed provocatively, with radical Whigs. With Monmouth he attended a splendid dinner held in London in May where one toast was “The confusion of all pretending Popish successors!” It could not have been just coincidence that much to Bedford’s indignation the king pointedly declined an invitation to dine early the next month. Russell also signed a paper entitled “Reasons whereupon the duke of York may most strongly be reputed and suspected to be a Papist,” the basis for presenting James as a recusant to the Middlesex Grand Jury. Russell appeared with others in the Court of Requests on June 21 and again on June 30 to enter the information. Their effort failed, but it identified Russell with extremists. In July an observer described him as “a blind follower” of Shaftesbury, and as “great a Commonwealth man as Algernon Sidney.”

Rachel could not have been ignorant of the public events with which Russell was associated, but whether she knew of the private meetings of the “cabails” is unknown. She does not mention these episodes in her letters, but one would not expect her to refer to them; she was too astute for that. However, anxiety over William’s safety threads through her letters, possibly reflecting knowledge of her husband’s clandestine affairs.
Throughout the parliamentary session lasting from October 21, 1680, to January 18, 1681, others deliberately tried to inflate concern about James’s succession by linking the duke to the Popish Plot. To that end, Thomas Dangerfield (a man with a criminal record who since 1679 had testified as needed about aspects of the Popish Plot) appeared in the House on October 26 and swore that James had tried to hire him to kill the king. It was within this context that Russell on October 26 delivered a speech that prepared the way for the second Exclusion Bill. With his usual rhetorical extravagance, Russell declared that “this Parliament must either destroy Popery, or they will destroy us; there is no middle way to be taken, no mincing the matter.” His motion, that the House consider means to secure the government and religion, and “provide against a popish succession,” passed unanimously.133

William was in the forefront of the tactical maneuvering that underlay the second Exclusion Bill.134 He kept the issue before the House even while it debated other issues and then, on November 2, the day after the birth of his son, took a direct initiative which resulted in a resolution to bring in a bill to disable the duke from inheriting the throne of England.135 William was the first man appointed to the committee to draw up the bill, which meant that he served as chairman, if usual practice was followed. So well prepared was the committee, which included many seasoned Whig leaders, that only two days later William presented the second Exclusion Bill for a first reading.136

On November 6 Tories tried to derail the bill by arguing that it did not name a successor to James. The tactic aimed to divide the Whigs, who were far from united on a successor, and to embarrass them by charging that failure to name a successor implied an intention to set up a commonwealth.137 But the House finally agreed to instruct the committee to add a proviso to the bill that exclusion extended only to the duke.138 The proviso that Russell brought back from the committee on November 8 read ambiguously that “the Crown shall descend to such person, during the life of the duke of York, as should inherit the same, in case the duke were dead.”139 The language preserved the right of Princess Mary but did not specify her by name, nor did it deny the claims of others.

Three days later, on November 11, the Commons passed the bill without a division and deputed Russell to carry it to the Lords.140 The House’s sense of urgency, well illustrated by their requiring the clerks to stay up all night to engross the bill,141 was frustrated, for when Russell reached the Upper House that day, it had adjourned. For four days Shaftesbury and others engaged in complex negotiations to assure the success of the bill. On the fifteenth, William could contain his impatience no longer. Somehow he got the bill in his hands, and although
“many” M.P.’s wanted to delay still longer, Russell’s “impetuous temper and exceeding ardour...hurried him with such violence that he run away with it.” Seeing him depart, a “great crowd” of members followed him. In the crowd were the lord mayor of London and the aldermen who were M.P.’s, their presence underlining the support of the City for exclusion. When the bill was delivered to the peers about 11:00 A.M., men from the Commons “gave a mighty shout” and were answered by some peers with a “very great acclamation.”

The defeat of the bill, accountable to the superior rhetoric of Halifax and the presence of the king throughout the long debate, which lasted until 10:00 p.m., was a severe disappointment to Russell. So distraught was William that his language matched his impetuous action. He said that if his father had voted against exclusion, he would “have thought him an enemy to the king and kingdom” and concluded, “I hope that if I may not live a Protestant, I shall die a Protestant.” Such language was suggestive of violence, as was that of some other M.P.’s, and it is possible that at about this time Russell, along with Monmouth, Lord Grey of Werk, and others, heard Shaftesbury recommend insurrection.

At about this time Russell adopted an extreme position on the issue of the duke of York. He felt that James should be tried—and executed—as a traitor for his alleged activities in the Popish Plot. This solution, shared by “some others equally violent,” went beyond even Shaftesbury, who, reasoning that the king would never let his brother be brought to the block, was content with exclusion and exile. But Russell argued that while York would not return in the earl’s lifetime, “we who are younger” had reason to fear that he would “take revenge” on them. At the time of his arrest and trial Russell disavowed any thought of using violence against the king and his brother and brought in witnesses to testify to his character. Whig historians are agreed that he was incapable of violence, but, as we have seen, Russell had indulged in violence in his youth and chosen the army as a career. This idea of how to solve the problem of York really is not incompatible with his personality.

News that William held this view circulated widely enough for Barrillon to report it to Louis XIV. So it almost certainly was known to Charles and James and would not have endeared Russell to either of them. It may be that the memory of this idea was in Charles’s mind when he rejected Rachel’s pleas for her husband’s life with the remark that if he did not have Russell’s head, Russell would have his.

For the rest of the parliamentary session William and other Whig leaders contrived to keep exclusion alive while doing everything possible to embarrass the government. One tactic was to charge royal ministers with promoting popery. From November 13 to January 7, 1681,
Russell participated in attacks on four crown officers: Sir George Jeffreys, then recorder for London; Sir Francis North, lord chief justice of the Court of Common Pleas; Sir William Scroggs, lord chief justice of the King’s Bench; and Laurence Hyde, a lord of the Treasury, and York’s brother-in-law.¹⁴⁹

These men—Jeffreys, North, Scroggs, and Hyde—were all powerful individuals who remained in the king’s favor. Some of them would play a part in Russell’s treason trial two and a half years later. None could be expected to forget that Russell was prominent among the Whigs in the Commons who were determined to remove them. Russell, however, remained silent when Halifax, Rachel’s kinsman, came under fire.¹⁵⁰ Perhaps Halifax’s gratitude that Russell had no part in the resolution calling for his dismissal helps explain his sympathy towards Russell at the time of William’s trial.

A further tactic, aimed partly at refueling consciousness of the Popish Plot, was to bring to trial the five Catholic peers, including the aged William Howard, viscount Stafford, charged with complicity in the plot. On December 7, fifty-four peers, William’s father among them, returned a verdict of guilty against Stafford.¹⁵¹ As was usual in the case of a peer convicted of treason, Charles commuted the barbarous sentence of hanging, drawing, and quartering to simple beheading, a step that moved the sheriffs of London to appeal to the House of Commons for a ruling. The grounds of the appeal were the apprehension that if the king could commute the form of the execution, he might be able to pardon the victim. Only after a couple of lawyers discounted this possibility did the Lower House agree to the commutation of the sentence.¹⁵² These points are pertinent to Russell because rumor had it that he had objected to commuting the sentence.¹⁵³ The story gained credence, and when Charles commuted the same sentence on behalf of William in 1683, he adverted to it. Assuming its accuracy, one must explain, as admirers of Russell have done, that surely the reason for William’s objection was not bloodthirstiness, but rather the constitutional issue which had brought the London sheriffs to the House in the first place.

Later in December, William and other Whig leaders turned to negotiating with the king to win him over to exclusion. Gossip circulated that during the Christmas recess, they and Charles reached a deal,¹⁵⁴ whereby in return for the exclusion of the duke, the Whig leadership would bring Parliament to grant the king ample supplies and the power (such as Henry VIII had held) to appoint his own successor. The advantages to Charles would be financial security and power over his successor, thereby making all claimants dependent upon him. Whig leaders
would win offices; Russell, for example, would be named governor of Portsmouth, a post earlier connected with his name. Shaftesbury disavowed these negotiations, once again illustrating Russell’s independence and the absence of ironclad control over the Whigs. But the deal with the king collapsed. Charles prorogued the session on January 10 amid bitter exchanges with the Whig leaders. On the eighteenth he dissolved Parliament and summoned a new one to meet at Oxford on March 21, 1681.

This session of Parliament marked the apogee of Russell’s political career. He was regarded as the “governing man” in the Commons. He addressed the House more often, rising sixteen times, and apparently spoke more effectively. For the first time in his life his speeches won praise. Indeed, it was said that only he and a handful of other former members could command the attention of the House. His high standing also won him more committee assignments than ever before. A physical manifestation of his overwork and emotional strain during the session was indifferent health and nosebleeds.

His contribution to the opposition was to move members along in face of doubts, indeed of retreat sometimes. He was always out in front on the issues, recommending an extreme tactic and showing no fear in his criticism of individuals at the highest reaches of government. His seeming willingness to sacrifice for his religion and government everything a man might hold dear—a devoted wife, a loving family, and great wealth and position—made him an inspiration to others. His steadfast adherence to certain political and religious principles further enhanced his reputation.

Although Russell left no theoretical statement, as did his associate Algernon Sidney, his speeches and actions reveal his views, and his scaffold speech reaffirmed many of them. Russell wanted to restrict decisively the prerogative powers of kingship and shift authority to Parliament in such areas as foreign policy, appointing and dismissing royal ministers, standing armies, and calling and dismissing parliaments. He wanted Parliament—that is, men of substance—to exercise power. William believed in the right of resistance, a position implied in his parliamentary career and in the conspiratorial conversations with which he admitted a connection and reaffirmed when he was imprisoned. He was no republican or commonwealthman, whatever the suspicions of some contemporaries. William expressed dismay when Slingsby Bethell, an acknowledged republican, was elected sheriff of London in 1680. His decision to support exclusion over limitations, as already noted, rested on his conviction that limitations would leave the monarchy without sufficient powers. The French ambassador distinguished Russell from the republican Sidney, saying that William wanted
a king whom he would choose and a monarchy he would fashion.\textsuperscript{158} Still, if Russell's ideas on government had prevailed, a very different kingship from that of Charles II would have resulted.

The energizing force in Russell's politics was his irrational hatred of Catholicism and dislike of High Church Anglicanism. The strong influence of Nonconformity and perhaps the fear (as his enemies charged and he denied) that a Catholic king would mean the return of monastic lands and the impoverishment of his family explain his attitude. The exclusion of York from the succession to the crown became a cause célèbre in Russell's life.

The recognition that Russell received in Parliament was matched by praise heaped on him by people outside. His enormous success in the elections testified to his widespread popularity; if the late seventeenth century had had approval ratings, Russell's would surely have stood very high on the scale. Personal letters, private toasts, and expressions of admiration over the preceding two years conveyed the same message. At least one printed tract singled him out for comment, calling him the "Tribune of the People," a title which, interestingly enough, Shaftesbury had applied to himself in the autumn of 1679.\textsuperscript{159} So firm became his reputation as a champion of Nonconformity that in 1680 William Bates, a Presbyterian minister, dedicated a book to him, citing his efforts to achieve "union among all that agree in the substantial parts of doctrine." Bates heaped praise on William for his "excellent virtues," "inflexible integrity and courageous wisdom."\textsuperscript{160} The publication of the book further identified Russell with the Dissenting community. But clearly his popularity extended beyond that; Burnet said that he "never knew any man to have so entire a credit in the nation" as William.\textsuperscript{161}

Russell's popularity in Parliament and country served him well in the elections to the Oxford Parliament in early 1681. As before, Lady Russell kept him informed about election news.\textsuperscript{162} He won again in Bedfordshire, but this time the Hampshire gentlemen made no effort to have him represent them.

Lady Russell's anxiety mounted during these months over the dangers she felt William was courting. The result was a major quarrel between the two of them. The night before Russell left to attend the Oxford Parliament on March 18, they quarreled from seven in the evening till nine the next morning. The next day Rachel wrote him contritely: "I hope my dearest did not [mis]interpret any action of mine. . . . I am certain I had sufficient punishment for the ill conduct I used, of the short time then left us to spend together, without so terrible an addition. . . . I was really sorry I could not scribble as you told me you designed I should. . . . [for] I might have prevailed for the laying by a smart word or so, which will now pass current, unless you will oblige a
wife, after eleven years, by making such a sacrifice to her now and then, upon occasion offered.”¹⁶³ In her voluble way Rachel probably urged her husband to follow a certain course of action at the upcoming Parliament and met with his refusal. The letter demonstrates the strength of Rachel’s convictions and concern for her husband’s welfare and her unabashed boldness in haranguing him.

Lady Russell followed the news of the Oxford Parliament closely, reading the king’s speech in print before William had seen it, and reporting the rumor (which she dismissed as groundless) that Shaftesbury had been impeached. Her concern for Russell continued. She wrote him anxiously, “Look to your pockets; a printed paper says you will have fine papers put into them, and then witnesses to swear.”¹⁶⁴ Rachel’s remark must have referred to the efforts of the government to entrap its Whig opponents by planting incriminating papers on them.¹⁶⁵

Nothing untoward happened at the parliamentary session. Charles, who had entered into another agreement with Louis XIV for money in return for dissolving Parliament and not summoning another one, gave his Whig opponents little time to set out their predictable agenda. The first few days after the opening of the session on March 21 were enlivened by the discovery of an alleged plot by Edward Fitzharris and some sharp exchanges about it. Russell was appointed to the committee to draw up the impeachment against him.¹⁶⁶ On the twenty-sixth, the House turned to the central issue on the minds of all members, exclusion, and Russell seconded the bill proposed to eliminate the duke of York from the succession. The arguments and words he used sounded familiar. William recalled how long he had been of the opinion that “nothing but excluding the duke...can secure us.” “Should he come to the Crown, his power will be more...Every day we see the sad consequences of his power.” Nothing else but exclusion would secure the nation. For the first time he justified his position on the grounds of his obligation to the county he served. After thorough debate, a resolution passed to bring in the third Exclusion Bill.¹⁶⁷ It was read a first time on Monday, March 28, and ordered read a second time the next day. But before further business could transpire, Black Rod knocked at the door summoning members to attend the king. Charles, arrayed in his robes of state, dissolved the Parliament.

The dissolution of the Oxford Parliament deprived William and his Whig colleagues of a legitimate forum in which to press for exclusion and for changes in the ministry and in domestic and foreign policies. The new circumstances were exceedingly dangerous to anyone who infringed the law and defied the court. Lord Russell was indiscreet in public and private actions. What we know of Lady Russell shows her profound apprehension for his safety.
Briefly, the story of political developments from 1681 to 1683 is this. King Charles, with the enthusiastic cooperation of some Anglicans and Tories, continued an uncompromising campaign to remove his political enemies. His technique was to use the law to bring them to trial and to employ *quo warranto* procedures to gain control of local government and, through that, control of the House of Commons, should he ever decide to call another Parliament. The high-water mark of the government’s campaign was its success in 1682–83 in achieving control over London by forcing the City to forfeit its charter and by the election of a Tory mayor and of Tory sheriffs, who would control the selection of juries. The court sought to depict itself as the champion of law and stability, whose policies would avert another Civil War.

In the face of Charles’s resurgent control and renewed popularity, Whig leaders sought to preserve the integrity of their party and embarrass the court, and schemed about how to achieve their political goals using nonparliamentary and even violent means. Russell did not retire to Stratton, as his first biography declares, but, rather, took a part in such activities. The role he played invariably aligned him with the radical wing of the Whig party. In May and June 1681 he and a great many people—including Shaftesbury, Lord Howard of Escrick, and Grey—were present at the trial of Edward Fitzharris. William probably had a special interest in the proceedings because during the Oxford Parliament he had served on the committee charged with drawing up articles of impeachment against Fitzharris. At that time the House of Commons had tried to use Fitzharris to further their interests. The court regarded Fitzharris as potentially embarrassing and wanted him convicted, and thus the trial was seen as a test of strength between the court and the Whigs. In the event, Charles won, and the government used Fitzharris’s testimony as grounds for arresting Lord Howard. William was singled out for notice as being present and, thus, marked again as a person opposed to the government. The results of the trial might well have warned a more cautious man.

The next month, July 1681, Russell further irritated the court by meeting with the prince of Orange. The prince was visiting the king for the purpose, it was said, of reconciling him with his critics so that England would be in a position to aid the Netherlands in its ongoing struggle with France. With Charles’s permission the prince had come to London, where Whigs, including Essex, Sir William Jones (the lawyer), and Russell, had approached him and arranged a meeting at Southampton House. William’s father was present and left an account of what he himself said. Painting a picture of the nation’s “most dismal condition” and expressing the idea that the prince’s “interest and ours is the same,” Bedford asserted that “a popish king must destroy
England.” Implying support for helping Holland against France, he declared that England could “never be settled, great, nor considerable, but by being head of the Protestant party.”

Unfortunately, the earl did not report the remarks of either Russell or the prince, but an anonymous letter to William dated August 3 referred to the conversation. The writer noticed that there was much “contentment” to be derived from the “plainness” in Orange’s views on international and domestic issues. But he felt that the prince would “not do us any good,” because Charles’s ministers had convinced him of the merits of the court’s opposition to exclusion. The comment is significant; if the prince opposed exclusion, he could not have won Russell’s approval. Negotiations between Orange and the Whigs came to nothing. The prince declined an invitation to dine with the sheriffs of London, which would have identified him with the Whigs. Instead, he returned to Oxford, as Charles commanded him to do.

The record of this encounter between William and the prince of Orange sheds little light on whom Russell favored as a successor to James. It does not rule out the prince of Orange, even though the talks were disappointing. Lady Russell’s care in preserving the account implies that she regarded the interview as significant and, thus, that William did too. The attentions paid her by the prince’s emissary after Russell’s death, her friendship with Princess Mary, and the honors given the Bedford family after the Glorious Revolution suggest a commitment. Yet, William continued to be a friend of Monmouth and to be seen in public with him.

In the autumn of 1681 William continued to be involved in political contests with the court. In September he was among a small group of men who “conjured” up opposition to Sir John Moore, the court-supported candidate for the position of lord mayor of London. These intransigent Whigs opposed Moore for many reasons, among them their concern about York’s succession to the throne, for the lord mayor of London would play an important role in proclaiming the new king. The Whigs figured that if the king died soon, it would be essential to have a lord mayor sympathetic to their interests. In the event, Moore was elected, his election marking another setback for the Whigs.

Furthermore, Russell became more closely identified with Shaftesbury. The earl had been jailed in early July on a charge of treason, and on July 8 a grand jury, with Russell and other Whig luminaries in attendance, had refused Shaftesbury habeas corpus on grounds that the Tower was outside their jurisdiction. This ruling forced the earl to wait until the Court of King’s Bench began its autumn term in mid-October to take further legal action. Faced with an imprisonment of several months, Shaftesbury attempted in September 1681 to arrange a
deal with Charles for his release. William was in London at about this time and may have consulted with Shaftesbury and his friends about the strategy. Since it failed, perhaps arrangements were then made that William should serve on the Middlesex grand jury. The Westminster panel—the list of names of men from which the grand jury would be chosen—was announced on October 1 by the radical London sheriffs, and it contained Russell’s name.

In mid-October Francis Charlton wrote William to urge him to return to London immediately for private business as well as for Shaftesbury’s trial. Russell was back in London by October 20 and surely in court on the twenty-fourth when Shaftesbury petitioned for an immediate trial or release on bail. The court’s ruling—that bail would be granted before the last day of term if there had been no prosecution—moved the government to decide to present evidence against Shaftesbury to a grand jury a month later, on November 24.

These events deepened Rachel’s concern for William’s safety. In September she referred to “our enemies and ill wishers,” and in October when Russell was in London attending the hearings about Shaftesbury’s release, she wrote him anxiously, praying God to “direct” his consultations and saying, “My dearest dear, you guess my mind. A word to the wise. I never longed more earnestly to be with you.” Her remark suggests that she placed value on being present when Russell engaged in delicate political affairs. As the day drew near for the government to present evidence against Shaftesbury, her alarm intensified. On November 22, Lady Russell cautioned Russell in these words, “One remembrance more, my best life: be wise as a serpent, harmless as a dove.”

Her anxiety found further expression two days later when she wrote to Spencer to chastise him for failing to send her news and to express the wish that she were in London.

Russell was not chosen a member of the Middlesex grand jury, but he almost certainly appeared at the proceedings against Shaftesbury when the grand jury brought in a verdict of Ignoramus, that is, refused to find a case against him. When Shaftesbury petitioned for release on November 28 in the Court of King’s Bench, Russell and others put up £1,500 to meet the required bail. The size of his contribution testifies to his commitment to the earl.

On November 26 when William wrote Rachel of his intention to stand bail for Shaftesbury, he remarked that some of Rachel’s friends thought that the “fair man” was “troubled” by the Ignoramus ruling. The “fair man” was almost certainly Monmouth, and his “trouble” may indicate alarm at what steps Shaftesbury might propose once he was released. This letter offers a frank and full accounting of political events
and provides further specific evidence that William not only kept Rachel informed but also confided in her.\textsuperscript{184}

Russell apparently did little in the public sphere in 1682, but his known actions linked him still with radical Whigs. In July he was at Tunbridge Wells with a group of Nonconformist ministers and London citizens known for their vehement opposition to the government. They circulated printed tracts attacking the government. Among the papers was \textit{The Rights of the City}, which was read aloud by a gentleman identified as William’s servant.\textsuperscript{185} It excoriated the Tory lord mayor of London, Sir John Moore, for his alleged “misbehaviour” in the election of the City’s sheriffs and warned him that Parliament, whenever it met, would call him to account.

In September 1682 Russell was again visible, this time as one of many Whigs who joined the duke of Monmouth on his progress through northwest England.\textsuperscript{186} Monmouth attracted large crowds, played the role of prince, and touched for the king’s evil. Charles was incensed and ordered the duke arrested for causing a riot in Chester. Monmouth submitted a \textit{habeas corpus} and was released on bail, which was raised by Russell and other Whigs, who put up £2,000 apiece.\textsuperscript{187} William’s support of Monmouth was, of course, known to the court.

Finally, in the autumn of 1682 and the winter and spring of 1683, Russell engaged in secret conversations with Whig leaders who were considering the use of force to achieve their ends. The talks were either outright treason or close to it, and that William was present at some of them is indisputable. He himself admitted as much, and testimony to that effect comes from multiple sources.\textsuperscript{188} Whether Lady Russell was aware of everything that her husband was doing is doubtful, but she may have known of meetings that were held at Southampton House. And she noted in her diary William’s meeting with Colonel John Rumsey.\textsuperscript{189} Talk about the use of violence was not new, as we have seen. None of the plans was executed, and in angry frustration and to save his life, Shaftesbury fled England for Holland, where he died in January 1683.\textsuperscript{190} In his place, it was said, a Council of Six, of whom Lord Russell was one, continued in the spring of 1683 to engage in conspiratorial conversations, but took no action. In the meantime, in March and again in May, reports of desperate plots against the king, involving Sidney and others, reached the government.\textsuperscript{191} At the end of May, a man identifying himself as privy to the plans of conspirators wrote Sir Robert Townsend an urgent letter begging him to persuade the government to take precautions to protect the king’s life. He declared that the plan was to seize the king and the duke and to issue a declaration showing how the government had violated England’s religion, laws, and liberties. The writer warned that
in every county and in all corporations there were men ready to “break out into a rebellion.” In June one of the conspirators, Josiah Keeling, confessed all he knew to the government. William Russell and other Whig leaders were arrested and charged with treason. Within six weeks, Russell was dead, executed by Charles II’s government as a traitor.