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

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Widowhood, 1683–1688

William’s death was a shattering experience for Lady Russell. Lord Russell had feared that the “quickness of her spirit” would bring on a terrible reaction after he was gone, and he was right. Rachel suffered torrents of grief and “wild and raging” thoughts which seemed to increase rather than diminish for several years and brought her close to an emotional breakdown. Yet, even in the depths of her despair, she was not so distraught as to be incapable of conducting her affairs intelligently and effectively. Sustained by the counsel and comfort of clerics, family, and friends, by deepening religious piety and the very act of writing, and by the responsibilities of raising her young children, Rachel developed into an even stronger and more independent person than she had been before.

Despite her grief, she gave first priority to political and business matters. She was immediately drawn into a dispute with the government over William’s scaffold speech. That speech had enraged the court. York fumed that there could not be a “greater libel on the government,” and a swift, powerful, and well-orchestrated campaign against it followed. The court interrogated people suspected of assisting with the speech. The day after Russell’s execution, July 22, 1683, the Privy Council, with the king and the duke present, examined Burnet, Johnson, Tillotson, and the printer John Darby to determine what part they had played in writing and publishing the speech. The interview with Burnet further angered the court, because in the course of it Burnet won permission to read his journal of Russell’s last days, and deeply offended the assembled company with a eulogy stressing William’s piety, devotion to Protestantism, love of wife and family, and willingness to die for his beliefs. Burnet was so alarmed by their displeasure that he went to the Continent for awhile. The next day the Privy Council, again with the king and the duke of York in attendance, ordered that Lady Russell should be interrogated about whether she had sent 2,500 copies of Russell’s *Speech* into Bedfordshire. Unfortunately, a record of the interrogation has not survived, but such an encounter with authorities
who had just executed her husband was surely a threatening experience. The government also encouraged, if it did not originate, the rumor that Lord Russell was *not* the author of the speech that bore his name. It would have been in Lady Russell’s interests to remain silent, but in conformity with her spirited nature, courage, and love of her husband, she escalated the dispute. A “few days” after the execution, she wrote a strong, indeed a bold, letter to the king. Beginning preremptorily, “I find that my husband’s enemies are not appeased by his blood, but still continue to misrepresent him,” Rachel declared that it increased her grief “to hear your Majesty is prevailed upon to believe” that Russell’s final speech was written by someone else. She averred that she was “ready in the solemnest manner to attest” that such a charge was untrue. Dismissing as “an argument of no great force” that some of the expressions in the paper had appeared in other pieces, she insisted that she and others who had visited him in prison had heard him say the things that appeared in the speech. Describing her husband as a man “who in all his life was observed to act with the greatest clearness and sincerity,” Rachel begged the king to believe that William would not at his death “do so disingenuous and false a thing as to deliver for his own what was not properly and expressly so.” Lady Russell also seized the opportunity to “avow” that the papers Burnet read to the council were “exactly true” and written at her request. She declared that Burnet himself had been a “tender and conscientious minister” to William and also a “loyal subject” to the king. Describing herself as incapable of consolation except to have Charles think better of her husband, she adverted to her “impor­tune” interview when she pleaded with the king to spare her husband and reminded him once more that she was the “daughter of a person who served your Majesty’s father in his greatest extremities.” She excused anything in the letter that might displease him as “coming from a woman amazed with grief.” She used her sex to protect her. Nothing about this letter could have pleased Charles, neither its strident tone nor its bold affirmations, but no record has survived of his reaction. He did not think better of Russell nor moderate the government’s public efforts to dis­credit him.

It is possible, however, that the evident distress the letter conveyed helped to soften Charles towards Rachel’s private situation. He granted her request not to confiscate Lord Russell’s private estate, legally forfeitable to the state. And, urged by Lord Halifax, he also agreed in early August to her request to be allowed to set up an escute­cheon in William’s honor. To place an escutcheon on the door of the deceased symbolized that a man of honor had died; to place an escutcheon on the door of a condemned traitor was unheard of, absolutely contrary to heraldic practice. An attainder voided a person’s arms. In his careless
way Charles was clearly insensitive to the significance of what he had granted, but Lady Russell almost certainly was not. Nor were people at court, who made such a “stir” about the matter that Lord Halifax advised her in October to adopt a low profile.6

The court and its friends also took the case against Russell’s Speech to the public, using the pulpit and printed and iconographic material. On July 28 Charles II ordered to be issued a Declaration that described the conspiracies, summarized the evidence, and justified the government’s actions.7 The Declaration was read in all churches on a day of Thanksgiving set for Sunday, September 9. Sermons accompanied the reading in many churches and reinforced its message.8 Moreover, within five days of William’s execution, two pamphlets appeared and by the end of the year approximately fifty procourt tracts were in circulation. Their style and approach were various, and thus they appealed to many different people. For example, one “C.P.” offered a poem congratulating the king on escaping death, while another writer composed a dialogue between a Whig and a Tory and laced his title with sarcasm.9 Someone arranged for a new edition of the Eikon Basilike to appear in 1684, clearly for the purpose of reviving memory of Charles I, with obvious lessons for contemporaries. A versifier composed a ballad titled “Lord Russels Farewel,” to be sung to the tune of “Tender Hearts of London City.” The musical score and three illustrations, one depicting the execution in grisly detail, adorned the broadside, whose essential message was that ambition had drawn Russell into a “base inhumane plot.”10 Even a medal was cast to convey the terrible danger to the state posed by Russell and his associates in treason. The medal showed Charles II as Hercules warding off Hydra, whose seven heads included those of Russell, Howard, Essex, and Sidney.11

Other writers focused on denigrating Russell and besmirching his former reputation. Sir Roger L'Estrange, licenser of the press, sneered that Russell’s Speech was a ridiculous attempt to “draw the character of a seraphical resigning Christian from the copy of a stomachful, huffing Cavalier.” Another author called William a “Protestant-Jesuit” because of the “equivocations, tricks, and evasions” that he found in the speech.12 Further condemnation of Russell appeared in unlikely tracts, as in the misleadingly titled A Vindication Of The Lord Russell’s Speech and Paper, etc., From The Foul Imputation of Falsehood, which was, in reality, viciously anti-Russell.

Among the most effective tracts were those that dissected William’s speech. Perhaps to assist pamphlet writers marshal a response, Francis North, the lord chancellor, prepared an eighty-point, nearly line-by-line critique of the speech, and probably another lengthy paper entitled “A Discourse of High Treason.”13 The substance of many of his
comments appeared in printed tracts. Of them the most powerful were *An Antidote Against Poison*, probably written by Sir Bartholomew Shower, and *Considerations upon a Printed Sheet*, written by Sir Roger L'Estrange.  
Expressing doubt that Russell himself had written the speech, these authors insisted that the purpose of the paper was to embarrass the government by painting William as a victim, to protect Whigs by dismissing the conspiracy as nothing more than talk about “making some stirs,” and to encourage Whigs to remain true to their principles. In fine, the speech was intended to “do the work of the conspiracy” and to arouse the “seditious rabble” to acts of “public vengeance.”

William’s language was deliberately evasive and misleading. Further, procourt writers asserted that anyone who understood the law concurred that the evidence was incontrovertible. The author of *Antidote* emphasized that the actions to which Russell admitted in his speech were treason, not misprision of treason. Insisting that the trial had been conducted in an exemplary manner, L'Estrange ridiculed Russell’s defense and denied emphatically that his prior political activity had influenced the proceedings.

Finally, throughout the fall of 1683 the government continued to keep the public informed about its progress in dealing with the conspiracy by issuing accounts of the trials and executions, a report on the conspirators in *A List of all the Conspirators That have been Seiz'd, (and where Committed) since the Discovery of the Horrid and Bloody Plot*, and an “official” account of the plot under the lurid title *A History of the New Plot: Or, A Prospect of Conspirators, their Designs Damnable, Ends Miserable, Deaths Exemplary*. The striking pictures illustrating this tract must have excited interest. One shows a frog and a mouse “at variance which shall be king,” while over them a kite prepares to swoop down and destroy both. An explicit moral was drawn: “So factious men conspiring do contend / But hasten their own ruin in the end.”

In sum, these pamphlets presented a carefully reasoned, logical rebuttal to the points offered by Russell.

Lady Russell must have read many of these tracts, for she concluded that *An Antidote Against Poison* was the most damaging of them all and sought ways (without success) to counter it. Writing in great secrecy at the end of November 1684 to Sir Robert Atkyns, she asked him to send her his opinion respecting the “law part” of *An Antidote Against Poison* and promised to use it only privately and show it to others as he would approve. Presumably out of fear of being searched, she wrote, “I do engage, upon my honour, and all can bind a Christian, I will be secret,” and she promised to transcribe any paper that he should send and either destroy or return the original, measures that would shield Atkyns’ identification. She said that she had been so cautious that
Bedford did not know that she had written or meant to write him. But Atkyns, who in July had expressed concern that his correspondence with Hugh Speke would endanger him, did not, apparently, respond to this entreaty and certainly did not publish anything in the fall.

There really was very little that Rachel could do alone to combat effectively such an onslaught of the government and Russell’s political friends were in no position to help her. Indeed, his friends confronted a disastrous situation in 1683. The Whig party was in near-total disarray, its leadership variously dead, in prison, in exile, or plea-bargaining with the state. The revelations of the conspiracies shocked many people and prompted an outpouring of devotion to the king. Moreover, Charles II continued to harass persons who were associated with Russell’s speech and/or expressed approval of Russell and Whig principles. For example, Darby, the printer, was summoned again before the Privy Council in September and in February 1684 was “tampered with” to name the author of a tract, Julian the Apostate, which he had printed. That pamphlet, written in fact by the Reverend Samuel Johnson, was a powerfully expressed affirmation of the right of resistance. The government fined Darby twenty marks and warned him to “take heed what he printed in future.” He asked what rules he should follow and was told “not to print anything against the government.”

Also in February Sir Samuel Barnardiston was brought to trial before Judge Jeffreys on a charge of seditious libel. The evidence was four printed letters which described the Rye House Plot as a “sham” and defended Russell and Sidney. Jeffreys, deploring that “such bloody miscreants, such caterpillars, such monsters of villainy” as Russell and Sidney should be regarded as martyrs, fined Barnardiston the enormous sum of £10,000. Clearly, the dangers of criticizing the government were very real.

There were compelling reasons for memorializing William even if it meant risking the government’s displeasure. Denying the reality of the plot and labelling Russell an innocent victim of Stuart despotism, as his Speech had implied, helped to preserve the integrity of the party, maintain interest in its principles, continue subtle criticism of the government, and imply the innocence of Whigs still present. Accordingly, Russell partisans nourished William’s memory in private and in public. One anonymous admirer composed a Pindaric ode on William’s death, which began with “Hush! And the dismal tidings shall be told,” and wisely left it in manuscript.

Russell partisans managed also to take a few inconsequential public steps to counter the court’s offensive. A paper found in the Guildhall as early as July 30 calumniated the government for entrapping and murdering the “eminent Protestants of England.” L’Estrange received a “poison-pen” letter dated August 20 vilifying him for writing Considerations upon a Printed Sheet.
Rumors circulated in Holland in August that the Rye House Plot was “invented” by the government.26 And talk flourished for over a year in England and on the Continent of “projects” to revenge Russell’s death.27 In addition, printed tracts appeared. One was purportedly William’s last “affectionate and pious exhortations” to his wife and children, with an illustration showing the family in an affecting pose.28 Further, at least six unofficial accounts of his trial and execution were published, notwithstanding the government’s order that none was to be printed without permission.29 Such accounts nourished Russell’s memory, but they could cut both ways. The court also published a record of the trial in the expectation, James said, that it would persuade all readers of William’s guilt.30 For the same reason, James, who became king in February 1685, ordered Bishop Thomas Sprat to compile and publish information and papers about the late “horrid conspiracy” against his brother.31

The most powerful pamphlet, however, remained Russell’s Speech, and try as it might, the government was unable to deflate the pamphlet’s wide popularity. Upon first appearance it sold “prodigiously” and continued to do so.32 It had three editions in 1683 and was also printed in London in 1683 under three other slightly variant titles, each by a different printer. Twenty-five hundred copies of the original pamphlet appeared in Bedfordshire by July 22, sent there, it was suspected, by Lady Rachel.33 There must have been at least 25,000 copies in circulation during the last five months of 1683.34 Such a quantity virtually assures that the speech reached people in all social categories. No wonder the government was outraged.

Still further, Rachel kept in touch with William’s former friends and helped them financially. She remained especially close to Gilbert Burnet, storing his books for him while he was in exile, corresponding with him, sending him money, relaying greetings through her sister, and perhaps responding positively to his earnest appeal to help Lady Argyle, said to be living in destitution in London.35 Circumspection in the correspondence was necessary; it was only when Burnet was confident that the bearer of the letter was “sure” that he felt comfortable in writing freely.36 Rachel also gave at least £40 to political friends in Holland and provided the Reverend Samuel Johnson with a pension of like amount, a bold gesture in view of the government’s burning of his books. In fact, her support of Johnson became known.37 Other friends also kept in touch with Rachel and suggested steps that might be taken. For example, a letter of November 29, 1683, from an anonymous correspondent, thought to be Sir Robert Atkyns, brought Lady Russell the rumor that the duke of Monmouth, restored to his father’s good graces, had told Charles that he had lost in William the “best subject he had” and that the
The correspondent recommended that if such an intimation were made directly to Rachel, she should ask the government for permission to publish a book about William. Rachel received no such intimation. However, a flattering polemical biographical sketch of William was printed in 1684. There is no evidence of the author or that Rachel was consulted, but presumably a friend of Russell’s wrote the account.

In truth, from 1683 to 1689, Lady Russell’s life-style was more effective than anything else as a visible criticism of the government and a memorial to Lord Russell. As we shall see, she went into deep mourning, suffered loss of weight and a near emotional collapse, and engaged in voluminous correspondence devoted largely to her grief over her husband’s death. That correspondence was so powerful as to provide the basis for renewing Russell’s martyrdom at the end of the eighteenth century. But until the Glorious Revolution, the Stuart government triumphed over the unhappy Lady Russell and the remnant of the Whig party.

Financial and business affairs also laid claim on Lady Russell’s attention, and despite the sharpness of her grief, she was able to conduct them effectively. Although she could have asked others to supervise her affairs, she gathered such matters into her own hands, and drawing upon her earlier experiences and the example of her father and father-in-law, she became a shrewd and careful manager throughout the rest of her life. Such a role was not new; from the time of her second marriage she had actively engaged in property management. But as a widow, her status at law was different from that of a married woman. No longer a femme couverte, Rachel needed no legal instrument to enjoy the same rights and powers over her property that men possessed. Lady Russell was not the only aristocratic woman to oversee her property; Anne, countess of Pembroke, is an example of another. But such women were a minority in late-seventeenth-century England, and Rachel Russell is not usually included among them. She should be.

A number of matters required attention after Lord Russell’s execution. Whether or not the king would demand the forfeiture of William’s personal estate, the legal penalty imposed on a convicted traitor, was an urgent question. The bulk of that personal estate was the Hampshire properties that Rachel had brought William at the time of their marriage. It was a lucky circumstance for Rachel and her children that, although Russell was heir to the Bedford properties, he obviously had not inherited them, for his father was still living. William had begged the king in his last letter to spare his wife and children the penalty of forfeiture, and Rachel had reinforced the request in a petition. Within “a very few days” of the execution, Charles sent Lady Russell
word that the personal estate would be hers, justifying the favor on the grounds of her father’s former loyalty and services to the crown. In this case, the evocation of her father’s name had served Rachel well. The king’s grant was of importance to her economic well-being. She would not have been destitute without it, for her marriage contract had reserved certain properties in trust to her, but the properties at issue were of value. In 1669 they had brought in about £1,000 per year, and they were almost certainly worth more than that in 1683.

The legal process transferring Lord Russell’s personal properties to Lady Russell was completed by the end of September. Rachel’s response, two months after the bold letter about William’s speech that she had addressed to the king, is significant. It marks the first step that she took to ingratiate herself with the court, her ultimate purpose being the preservation of the Bedford title for her son. She wrote to Halifax and to Lord Russell’s uncle, Colonel John Russell, asking for advice on the most appropriate way to thank the king and enclosing a letter that might be given him. She had also asked her brother-in-law from her first marriage, Lord Vaughan, to stand ready to assist and had availed herself of the services of an officer in the office of the secretary of state, where the seals of the grant were affixed, promising him “satisfaction” when she had the grant. Halifax recommended that Colonel Russell deliver her compliments orally rather than in writing. He explained that some people about the king were still irritated over the permission given her to set up the escutcheon and were using that to weaken his (Halifax’s) position, so the less said about the grant of the personal property, the better. Her handling of this little project demonstrates her energy in marshalling a number of people in her behalf at a time when she was distraught with grief and illustrates her sound reasoning, which Halifax remarked. Had she not solicited advice, but rather gone ahead with a letter to the king, she might have undermined later steps that she and others took on behalf of her son. Her handling also reveals Lady Russell’s knowledge of the patronage system that existed and her skill in drawing upon personal and familial contacts that had been built up over the years.

Another matter of some urgency was to provide Lady Russell with cash. Steps were taken to draw upon the £2,000 a year due her by the terms of her marriage contract with William. On July 8 and 10, 1683, she received 100 guineas and later, in August, an advance in full of the moneys not due until Michelmas (September 29). On August 8, £100 was advanced her on £400 annual interest due on the loan of £8,000 made in 1682 from the earl of Bedford. It appears that the money was still intact, and Bedford now undertook to set it aside and pay Rachel at the rate of 5 percent per year. Still further, Lady Russell had to make arrangements to pay off her husband’s debts. In the absence of the
Russells’ household papers, the total amount of the debt is unknown, but it was apparently substantial. The earl of Chesterfield (who had declined to testify on William’s behalf) entered a claim of £3,000 on Lord Russell’s estate and petitioned the Treasury lords that the money be paid before the estate was settled. In August 1684 Lady Russell borrowed £2,500 from her brother and sister-in-law, Edward and Margaret, to pay a debt owed to another brother-in-law, Lord Alington. There must have been other creditors, for later, in 1699, Rachel wrote of having “struggled through so great a debt” that William had left.

Rachel also enlarged her power over her Middlesex properties. Just four days after William’s execution, she signed a deed revoking the trusts that had been appointed for the manor of Bloomsbury and the hospital of St. Giles in the Fields and reserving henceforth the “use and behoofe” of the properties to herself, her heirs and assigns. Further to settle her properties in her own and her son’s interest, Sir John Maynard, the well-known Whiggish lawyer, was called in on July 28 and 31 and on August 1 to provide legal advice.

Despite deepening grief, Rachel continued to devote time to business affairs, sometimes giving them priority in her correspondence. Feeling that “some frugality” was advisable in her new circumstance, she reduced the number of officers in her household staff. She also replaced William’s steward, Watkins, whom she suspected of an indiscretion and also a discourtesy to her husband. Still a sympathetic and considerate mistress, even as she had shown herself to be earlier, Rachel went to the trouble of finding Watkins other employment, but he rebuffed her assistance and secured a place on his own, which he kept a secret. Rachel generously insisted that she did not “take it ill from him,” explaining away his behavior on the grounds that he was “not acquainted with the usual way of respectful proceeding in such cases.” The little incident reinforces understanding of an aspect of Rachel’s personality and also provides a rare glimpse into “upstairs-downstairs” relations during the period.

Lady Russell also showed independence of her father-in-law. She opened her own account with Child and Rogers, goldsmith bankers with whom Bedford had dealt for some years. And she appointed her own business manager to assist her in her affairs rather than depending upon Bedford’s staff. The man she chose, in June 1684, was John Hoskins, Shaftesbury’s relative and probably his former solicitor. She had met him some time before at the Shaftesburys’ house and had formed a high opinion of him as a “very worthy and ingenious man.” He admired her too, remarking that she would “require less help [in business matters] than most others.” The appointment of Hoskins was a gesture of defiance to the court, for he was known as a close associate of Shaftesbury’s.
The government had denied him permission to visit Shaftesbury when Shaftesbury was imprisoned in the Tower in early 1677, but Hoskins had attended the earl in 1681 when he was again imprisoned. Such a close link between Lady Russell and Hoskins reinforced other signals she sent of her continued commitment to Whiggish principles. The business relationship lasted until Hoskins' death, and a personal relationship developed between the two families when in 1718 Hoskins’ daughter married Lady Russell’s grandson, William, the marquess of Hartington, son of her elder daughter.

So deeply involved did Rachel become in business matters that she wrote in the spring of 1684 that her “design” was “to converse with none but lawyers and accountants.” At this time she undertook the responsibility of settling the trust that her sister Elizabeth had vested in William to raise portions for Elizabeth’s daughters out of the manors she had inherited from her father. Rachel was anxious to make the proper arrangements for her beloved sister’s children, whose “least concerns,” she wrote in her warmhearted way, “touch me to the quick.” She was also eager to take the steps that she thought William would approve.

To facilitate the transaction, she made plans in May 1684 to visit Stratton, despite reluctance to be in the place where she had enjoyed so much happiness with William. In the event, her plans were cancelled “by the lawyers” and the death of her mother-in-law, but that does not diminish the strength of character she showed in her willingness to go forward with a step that she was sure would cause her acute distress. By the end of July the terms of the new trust were settled to her satisfaction, and the decree filed in the Court of Chancery.

Rachel supervised her properties conscientiously. New trusts for both her Hampshire and Middlesex properties were created in May and June of 1685. She continued to develop Bloomsbury Square, signing twenty-five more leases between 1683 and 1699. The rents ranged from twenty shillings per year for a term of thirty-two years for a stable, to a high of forty pounds per year for a term of twenty-one years for property on High Holborn. She raised ten pounds a year from a twenty-one-year lease of a horse pond adjoining her, specifying that she and succeeding occupiers of Southampton House would have the right to wash and water their horses there.

At the same time that Lady Russell was handling business and political matters, she was also suffering agonies of grief over Lord Russell’s
death. It is testimony to the rationality in her nature that she was able to compartmentalize her emotions and function as well as she did. Rachel revealed the depth of her sorrow and her private struggle to master it in a voluminous correspondence that she carried on largely with male clerics, especially the Reverend John Fitzwilliam, her father’s former chaplain. That she grieved was not, of course, unusual; other widows suffered deep sorrow when their husbands died and expressed their anguish in affecting terms. Rachel’s grief, however, is set apart by its intensity and duration. Accordingly, her letters and private papers and the letters and essays of her correspondents provide a rare picture of grief, its course, and, in twentieth-century language, its “management.”

In keeping with her passionate, spirited personality, Lady Russell’s grief was intense and prolonged. Rachel struggled to rein in her emotions, but as twentieth-century studies show us is common in mastering grief, she would achieve some command over them only to suffer a setback. In the weeks immediately following the execution, Lady Russell described herself as “amazed”—meaning crazy—with grief, and her first letter about her suffering reveals the sharpness of her anguish. Dated September 30, 1683, it came from Woburn, where with her children and William’s parents she had retired to mourn. Appealing to Dr. Fitzwilliam for sympathy, Lady Russell began, “You that knew us both, and how we lived, must allow I have just cause to bewail my loss .... I want him to talk with, to walk with, to eat and sleep with: all these things are irksome to me now; the day unwelcome and the night so too.” Christian consolations about the merit of eternal life did not console her; the idea that her husband was in a better, happier place than this world she dismissed for lack of faith. Reason did not help. “My understanding is clouded, my faith weak, sense strong, and the devil busy,” she admitted. Torturing herself with the thought that she was so “evil and unworthy” as to be unable to receive God’s mercy, she wrote distractedly, “I most willingly forsake this world, this vexatious, troublesome world.” Blaming God for not answering her earnest prayers to spare William, she was “very strongly tempted” at this time to curtail her prayers and Bible reading.

Outward signs of her grief, carried to extremes over the years, testified to her inward turmoil. In the first year of her widowhood she neglected her health, losing so much weight as to alarm her friends. She went into mourning, of course. It was virtually obligatory for widows to wear black for a year, but Rachel continued to wear black for the rest of her life. All subsequent portraits of her, which she presumably approved, show her dressed in black. In a portrait by Sir Godfrey Kneller, reproduced here as the frontispiece, her black gown is relieved only by white lace at the cuffs and neckline, her expression is infinitely
sad, her large eyes heavy-lidded and downcast. Further, Southampton House was draped in black, black ribbons were affixed to the trousers of grooms and the bridles of horses, and liveried servants wore black, all customary marks of mourning. But for the rest of her life, Rachel kept black crepe in her private rooms at Southampton House and at Stratton.

Her private expressions of grief were intense and long-lived. She was in virtual seclusion at Woburn for at least a year, vowing, as already mentioned, to see none but lawyers and accountants. Three years later, in 1686, when she had brought herself to return to Southampton House, she refused a proposal that her half-sister and her family live at Southampton House with her for a time on the grounds of her “sad circumstances.” Although initially angry with God, she almost immediately returned to religion and thereafter led a life of piety far more rigorous than anything that she had followed before William’s death. She rose at five o’clock in the morning and followed a regimen of thrice-daily prayers, meditation, and reading of religious texts. She regularly examined her sins and kept a meticulous record of them. Praying, meditating, reading the Bible and religious works, and preparing for and, at the appropriate time, participating in the sacrament became central features of her life. One portrait of her as a widow shows her in a meditative pose, one hand supporting her head, the other holding a book, thus signaling her pious introspection.

In the spring of 1684 Rachel’s sorrow increased rather than abated. She was unable to escape the memory of and longing for her husband. “Where can I dwell,” she cried, “that his figure is not present to me?” Despite her determination to recover her equilibrium in the face of her son’s illness in June, her condition worsened as the first anniversary approached of the three blackest days of her life—June 26, William’s arrest; July 13, his trial; and July 21, his execution. On that first anniversary Lady Russell began a regimen that she followed, with few exceptions, for the rest of her life. She sanctified those days by prayer, reflection, and remembrance, aided by the rereading of Dr. Burnet’s account of Lord Russell’s imprisonment, and for several years saw no one but her children during this period and them late at night. Such a practice revived and sharpened her anguish every year at that time, as modern studies of grief confirm it naturally enough would do.

For the next five years or so, Lady Russell made only faltering progress towards controlling her sorrow. To her embarrassment tears were at the ready whenever she thought of her “calamity,” which was often. When she compared the richness of her former life to her present misery, self-pity overwhelmed her. “All relish is now gone,” she complained in 1685. Never again, she said, would she know happiness.
on earth. 72 In 1686 she began to accept social engagements, but that same year she again expressed a longing for death, admitting, however, that if she really faced death, as in an illness, she would defer it if she could. 73 The separation from her husband was still “bitter” in 1687, but she felt that although “not cured,” her grief was less overwhelming than before. In 1688 when she was negotiating a marriage settlement, she went out to dinner frequently, but only for her children’s sake, not for any pleasure it gave her, so she said. 74 Clearly, her sorrow revealed a high degree of self-consciousness and, it must be said, selfishness. Its persistence tried the patience of some about her, even as it won their admiration and that of commentators later.

Multiple reasons explain why her grief was so inveterate. Her sorrow owed much to her passionate nature. Lord Russell’s death deprived her of companionship and friendly conversation, as she said, and of sexual fulfillment, as she implied. With notable candor, Lady Russell admitted that she had lived so long by the senses that she found it nearly impossible to live by faith alone. 75 The romantic view of her husband that she had created and continued to perpetuate served to heighten her sense of loss. She looked back upon William as an “inestimable treasure,” and upon her marriage as a time when she had known as “much happiness as the world . . . can give.” 76 Social circumstances may have prolonged her grief. As a privileged, wealthy, aristocratic lady, there were few duties that she had to discharge and much time for reflection and self-indulgence. Her grief became a kind of companion which she found difficult to give up. 77 The changes occasioned by the menopause, to which she does not allude, but which coincided with the years of her most intense sorrow, may also have intensified her sense of loss. 78 Further, the suddenness and violence of Russell’s death so appalled her as to suggest that she had heard of the butchery he endured on the scaffold. She tormented herself with the thought that if certain events, such as Essex’s death, had not occurred, or if she had only managed things better, William would have been saved.

Moreover, Lord Russell’s attainder put at risk the social, economic, and political position of herself and her children and destroyed whatever ambitions she had had for her husband and through him for herself. So long as the present Stuarts reigned, there was only the slightest chance of a change in that situation, although Rachel and others took steps prior to the Glorious Revolution to secure the right of her son to inherit Bedford’s title. Furthermore, the public manifestations of her sorrow—the mourning clothes, wasted figure, isolation—were as effective as anything done prior to the Revolution to keep alive the memory of her husband and subtly foster the idea that he was a martyr to a despotic government. If he was martyr, she was mourner, a kind of saint
in her distress. Lady Russell was too sophisticated politically to be unaware of this. Her petition to display the escutcheon testifies to her sensitivity to the value of public symbols. Still further, grieving for her husband, as genuine as that grief was, must also have fed Rachel’s sense of importance. In 1690 she admitted that “there was something so glorious in the object of my greatest sorrow, I believe that in some degree kept me from being...overwhelmed.” Had she “cured” herself of grief soon after William’s death, she would have lost an emotional crutch, a reason for self-importance, and a way to participate in politics.

Yet, she needed comforting to combat the “fierce rages of grief” that she experienced. Lady Russell’s choice of Fitzwilliam as her major confidant sheds light on her personality and character. It might be expected that as a woman Rachel would have chosen a woman to confide in. But her beloved sister Elizabeth, whom she sorely missed, was dead. Her half-sister Elizabeth was in France, and although they corresponded, Rachel did not dwell on her grief, at least not in the surviving letters. None of her women friends possessed her intellectual capacity or knowledge of religion. Her close friend, Lady Shaftesbury, could do no more than write letters of passionate condolences, full of pity and conventional advice, nor could her new friend, Lady Ranelagh. Men who had been friends and/or Lord Russell’s political associates could do no more either. She found companionship and sympathy in her father-in-law, and lived with him at Woburn for much of the time, but Bedford was aging and too grief-stricken himself by his son’s death and by the death of his wife in May 1684 to offer Rachel the kind of assistance she needed.

Rachel wanted someone able to discuss authoritatively the nature of God’s Providence, the meaning of man’s suffering, the relationship of the secular to the eternal, the meaning of eternal life, and the nature of sin. Like many women before, after, and contemporary with her, she looked to the clergy for help. Among the “many” clergymen with whom she corresponded were the Anglican clerics Burnet, Tillotson, and Dr. Simon Patrick, and Dissenting ministers Dr. Bates and the Reverend John Griffith (chaplain to Lord Cavendish). Their letters and essays, she declared, were the only thing that brought “momentary refreshment” to her “wounded spirit.” The exchanges with these men were conducted on a near-equal basis. While the clerics instructed and comforted her, they also admired the sentiments she expressed. Patrick asked her to send him her thoughts on passages in some books that she had recommended to him and declared that he would value her comments as “misers do their treasure.” Burnet praised her highly for her style of writing, which he declared he could not “come up to,” and for her other “talents... [that] distinguish[ed] her from most other women...
in the world.” Such marks of approval gratified her, for she candidly admitted that she coveted the praise of good people and took comfort in finding herself “esteemed by worthy persons.” Her letters helped her to win such esteem and establish herself on an almost equal footing with male clerics. It was unusual for a woman to achieve such a relationship.

She found the greatest solace in corresponding with Fitzwilliam. His ties with her and her family were intimate and long-standing, and he had responded to her first anguished appeal with a letter full of sympathy and advice. Thereafter, until his death in 1699, he regularly sent her letters, essays, prayers, and collects. Not only was he genuinely fond of Rachel, but also, as he said at the outset, he hoped to publish his essays. Social and educational differences obviously separated the mourning widow and the cleric, but Lady Russell sought to bridge the one, and Fitzwilliam ignored the other. He, of course, knew more theology than Rachel, but was not more intelligent than she. He turned to her for advice about lawyers and investments. In his letters about religion he addressed her as an intellectual equal. Drawing upon classical myths and philosophers, the Bible, religious thinkers, and tales of Christian martyrs, he presented his message in vivid, memorable language. Although he offered practical advice—that Rachel should count her blessings, adopt a charity, and devote herself to her children—Fitzwilliam’s message was essentially religious. The basic themes remained the same throughout the long correspondence, but he tailored them to suit Lady Russell’s emotional needs, as he perceived them. He offered comfort, acknowledging that she had every reason to lament her loss; encouragement, praising the signs of faint improvement in her attitude; and understanding. He sympathized, as no one else did, with her stubborn determination to visit her husband’s tomb at Chenies. From the beginning of their exchange, however, his counsel was stringent. Fitzwilliam maintained that in her passionate love for her husband Lady Russell had neglected God, that this was her “secret sin,” and that Lord Russell’s death in so dreadful a manner was her punishment. God’s purpose was to teach her the vanity of loving secular things above Him. For her to question God’s Providence was an offense, encouraged by the devil. God brought good out of evil: William’s death would help to humble her before God, “wean” her from secular pleasures, and fix her affections on God and eternal life. She should thank God for it rather than complain. Her immoderate grief testified to the “sensuality” and “earthiness” of her love, increased the “sin which…brought on the punishment,” and invited further punishment. She must happily accept God’s will, and her comfort must be in the belief that she and her husband would be reunited in eternity. In the meantime, God would “cohabit” with her as husband, unless she obstinately refused.
It was a struggle for Rachel to accept all these points. She resisted the idea that she should regard William’s death as a blessing in disguise to effect her own salvation. She preferred William to God as husband. She insisted upon her belief that philosophers dissembled in saying they felt no turmoil at the death of a truly loved one. She was skeptical of the notion that everything that happened was ultimately for good and alarmed that her grief might bring on a further chastisement, perhaps in the form of the illness or death of her children. She candidly told Fitzwilliam that she might not “always comply” with his counsel.

Yet, none of the discourses she received from others “more suited [her] humour” than his essays. “You deal with me,” she wrote Fitzwilliam, “just as I would be dealt with all.” Insisting that she wanted her spiritual wounds rigorously searched so that “they may not fester,” she repeatedly dismissed his anxieties that his message might offend her. She read and reread his letters, essays, and prayers. Sometimes she marked passages that she particularly liked, such as one about the confidence in eternal life that true Christians should feel. Fitzwilliam wrote that true Christians will “be renewed like Eagles, and like Eagles mount up...to meet the Lord coming in the clouds.” Rachel thought that a “ravishing contemplation.” She also took comfort from Fitzwilliam’s analogizing the death of a person to his “going out of a rotten, weather-beaten house, or putting off rags of flesh and blood, as a dismission from...attendance here, as the Emperor Antonine styles it.” Rachel liked the phrase “dismission from attendance” and used it herself. The assurance of life after death with God particularly comforted her. Gradually she embraced the main thrust of her friend’s argument, agreeing that through God’s grace she was learning to despise this world and long for His glory. In 1687 she wrote Fitzwilliam in terms that must have gratified him: “Tho’ I walk sadly through the valley of death, I will fear no evil, humbling myself under the mighty hand of God, who will save me in the day of trouble: He knows my sorrows and the weakness of my person, I commit myself and mine to Him.” She felt that she would have perished without Fitzwilliam’s comfort and counsel in leading her to accept such a view.

Equally important was the role Fitzwilliam played as a faithful correspondent. Lady Russell needed someone who looked forward to receiving her letters, took them seriously, and answered them in a timely way. This Fitzwilliam did, and for years never failed to send a special message and prayer to comfort Rachel during the three blackest days of her life. Prior to her husband’s death, Rachel had loved to write; after 1683, writing became almost an obsession with her. She might write seven business letters one morning and, before turning to her “French” correspondence, dash off a letter to Fitzwilliam. It was not unusual for
her to be still writing personal or business letters at midnight or at one or two o'clock in the morning.\textsuperscript{101} As before, she rarely used an amanuensis or made copies of any but the most important letters. But she kept a log of the dates and addresses of her correspondence.\textsuperscript{102} She suited her style to some degree to the addressee, writing about politics and business matters in a businesslike manner, about domestic affairs, gossip, and the state of her emotions more openly. As before, she wrote with apparent ease, the words tumbling out on the page in a clear, legible script. She did not like to reread what she had written or correct any errors, and her unedited letters provide still further testimony to her intelligence and quickness.

Letters connected her with the wider world when she was living in retirement nursing her grief. Writing letters gave definition to her day, importance to herself, and a sense of being in command of her affairs. In writing to Fitzwilliam, Rachel made him a surrogate for her husband, in that she kept him informed about family affairs, political events, and the condition of her grief. After four years of an almost weekly exchange, she confessed that she was not “easy in [her] mind” until she had written Fitzwilliam once a week. Even when she was doubtful that her letter would reach him, she wrote anyway, saying that she could “willingly lose a sheet of paper of my scribbling.” She also sent him her “own thoughts or exercises” on religion and, when he suffered the death of a close friend, her personal prayers, all of which won his praise.\textsuperscript{103} Fitzwilliam’s patience in the face of her persistent grief gave her confidence that he did not censure her weakness nor regard her as “tedious,” and she wrote him with more freedom than she wrote to anyone else.\textsuperscript{104}

Lady Russell was, of course, aware that she and Fitzwilliam, a High Church Anglican, held different opinions on Anglican church policy towards Dissent. Throughout their correspondence, even at the height of her grief, she was strong enough to preserve her independent judgment, but, at the same time, she contrived not to offend her confidant. Disagreement over her choice of a chaplain arose in January 1684 and moved her to write Fitzwilliam frankly. Assuring him that they could agree as to the “definition of a prudent person” and declaring that she regarded the Anglican church as “the best church, and best offices and services in it, upon the face of the earth that we know of,” she affirmed her sympathy for Dissent. She insisted that she sought a man as chaplain who would be “so moderate, as not to be impatient and passionate against all such as can’t think so too.” She wanted a cleric, she said, “of such a temper as to be able to converse peaceably with such as may have freedom in my family, tho’ not of it, without giving offence.” She held to this view and ten months later selected a chaplain on a temporary basis who was “conforming enough . . . and willing to act that
prudent part” that she had outlined.105 After the Revolution of 1689, certainly in the face of Fitzwilliam’s disapproval, she reappointed the radical minister the Reverend Samuel Johnson, who had served her and William as chaplain from 1678 until the troubles of 1683. She also resisted Fitzwilliam’s efforts to appoint his candidate as a tutor in French for her son, selecting instead a Huguenot refugee. In 1686 she decided on political grounds, after having agreed to the contrary, that she could not approve his design to publish the essays that he had written for her. She pointed out that his authorship and the occasion would become known and that the times were dangerous. “This is my highest objection, and what I will not too easily pass over.”106 As we shall see, at the time of the Revolution she tried unsuccessfully to persuade him to take the oaths and accept the government of King William and Queen Mary.

Lady Russell devoted herself to her three young children: Rachel nine and a half, Katherine six, and Wriothesley not quite three in the summer of 1683 (see the illustrations). Initially, the sight of them made her “heart shrink,” provoking as it did memories of the delight she and her husband had shared in them.107 But she loved them dearly, and the general supervision of their education and health was a powerful antidote to her sorrow. In early 1684 Lady Russell apparently undertook to instruct the girls herself, having turned aside a suggestion by Dr. Burnet that she employ a Frenchwoman, the sister of one of the ministers at Charenton. Parenthetically, Burnet’s recommendation about this domestic matter holds larger interest in illustrating the close connection between the Huguenot community and the English political opposition. The woman’s brother was a “great friend” of both Burnet and Hampden, and Hampden had intended to raise the matter with Rachel himself. Burnet approved of her decision to teach her daughters, saying that it would provide the “best diversion and cure” of her spirit.108 How long Lady Russell served as “governess” for her children is unknown. Miss Berry thought that she did not at any time employ a governess for the girls. But that course seems unlikely, and the probability is that she called on John Thornton, Lord Russell’s former tutor.109 Thornton certainly prepared a catechism for young Rachel and with Hoskins and Burnet put questions to her at several times in 1685, when she was between ten and eleven years old. Her answers, written out in childish script and preserved, reveal how far she had come in handwriting, spelling, and understanding of Christian principles. For example, to the question “If there be a God, why may we not see him?” she answered, “Becose it is not his natur to be seen for he is a spiret.”110 Furthermore, the tutors that Lady Russell engaged to teach her son almost certainly instructed her daughters as well. In January 1686, when Wriothesley was six years old, Lady Russell had the idea of employing a Huguenot
refugee as a French master. She met with resistance from Bedford, who thought the child too young, and, as we have seen, from Fitzwilliam, who had his own candidate for the post. But she implemented her design and, before the month was out, wrote that she and her children were “all well, exercising our French. Master sung a French song yesterday with music, but the girls are all silent.”

Her children’s health was also a matter of anxious concern to Lady Russell. In May and June 1684 Wriothesley was so ill with teething problems and, according to his grandfather, a “humour,” that Rachel and Bedford feared for his life. The illness forced Lady Russell to realize that she had more to lose and caused her to fear that her discontent might provoke God to punish her by her son’s death. She reaffirmed her resolve to dedicate herself to her children, as “their most tender and loving father” would have done. Rearranging her plans, she took her son and elder daughter to Totteridge in Hertfordshire to be close to a London doctor, leaving Katherine with Bedford at Woburn. The boy improved, and putting aside her reluctance, Rachel planned to take him to Stratton to benefit from the country air. But the news that Charles II’s court would be nearby at Winchester deterred her. Although she regarded Woburn as the “most comfortable” place for herself, when a doctor said that London was best for Wriothesley, she decided to return to Southampton House for the first time since her husband’s death for the winter of 1684–85.

That decision was an act of psychological courage, because she looked upon her London mansion as a “place of terror,” a “desolate habitation,” and expected to be assaulted by “several passions.” With that visit her reluctance to live at Southampton House subsided. Plans to go to Stratton the summer of 1685 were cancelled because of her uncle’s arrival from Paris and it was not until the summer of 1687 that she returned to the place where she had been so happy with William. Thereafter Lady Russell fell into a pattern that lasted until old age of spending winters in London and the other months of the year at either Stratton or Woburn.

Public events in 1685 sharpened Lady Russell’s emotional distress. In February the worst fears of former Whigs were realized when King Charles II died and the Catholic duke of York peacefully ascended the throne as King James II. Rachel expressed her dismay over James’s accession and ensuing policies, writing in the fall that “the new scenes of each day” made her think that she was “devoid of temper and reason” to lament that William was dead. The rebellion of the duke of Monmouth in June 1685, its failure, and the execution in July of the duke as a traitor were especially painful. Rachel wrote to Fitzwilliam, “These late confusions have afforded matter of tumultuous devouring
thoughts.” Her avowed tumult over the episode may have reflected her indecision over whether to provide money to unidentified conspirators, as they apparently hoped that she would do. Burnet reported that the conspirators blamed him for “prevail[ing] so effectually” with Rachel that she “resolved” not to have anything to do with them. In the event, it was a wise decision. The identification of her husband with the rebellion caused her anxiety. Monmouth’s Declaration justified the rebellion in part by the “murder” of that “loyal and excellent” Russell, thereby associating him with a treasonable enterprise that attracted limited support and was readily defeated. The Declaration also undermined the effort to paint Russell as a martyr to the tyranny of the Stuart court, a man who abjured the use of violence. In her letter to Fitzwilliam, Lady Russell sought to dissociate Lord Russell from the uprising, writing that she looked upon it as a “wild attempt” and as a “new project” unrelated to “any former design.” Admitting that if William were alive, great suspicion would fall on him, she insisted that he would not have “thought well of the late actings” and “most probably” would not have participated in them.

Another probable reason that Rachel regretted the association of William with Monmouth’s rebellion was its coincidence with her initial effort to remove the effect of William’s attainder on their son. In May Lady Russell arranged for eight well-known lawyers—including Maynard, Pollexfen, Pemberton, Holt, and Williams—to consider the following proposition: “A is baron of England. B, his son, is attainted of treason and dies. C, B’s son, lives. A dies. Shall C have the barony, despite B’s attainder and the barony being entailed?” Several of the legal experts believed that C might inherit A’s title and lands, because B was never seised of the title. The title of “Lord” that B had borne was a courtesy title only, with no legal significance. But others held that an act of Parliament would be necessary to restore C to the blood. A draft petition to Parliament for such an act survives in Rachel’s own hand, and, as we shall see, such a petition was submitted to Parliament in the spring of 1689, following the Glorious Revolution.

Another initiative to the same end was undertaken by Rachel’s uncle, Henri de Ruvigny, who came to England in July 1685 for the express purpose of discussing the matter with King James II and his ministers. De Ruvigny met with the king; the lord treasurer, Laurence Hyde, earl of Rochester; and Sidney Godolphin, the chamberlain to the new queen. In arguing his case that the new government should favor Lady Russell and her children, de Ruvigny stressed her father’s distinguished service to the Stuarts and urged repeatedly that she be regarded not as Russell’s widow but as Southampton’s daughter. He described
Rachel as a woman who, in the midst of her tears, well knew her duty, was “very reasonable,” and possessed a “just and wise disposition.” Restoring the right of Russell’s son to inherit the family title would offer signal evidence of the government’s clemency and “facilitate the design...to reestablish the memory of the count of Stafford.” Everyone with whom de Ruvigny spoke expressed admiration for Lady Russell, James II himself saying that she was “a person whom he much esteemed.” Godolphin, however, pointed out that the Bedford family were “great Presbyterians” who had long opposed the king and suggested that it would advance Rachel’s cause if she sent her son to Oxford University. De Ruvigny rejoined that the boy was only four and a half years old and that Lady Russell professed belief in the Anglican church. The conclusion was that it was premature to act, but the court was sympathetic and would take steps at an appropriate time.¹²⁰

Later, the earl of Rochester called on Lady Russell. In their conversation Rachel “positively affirmed” that she had not asked de Ruvigny to intercede for her, but at the same time she confessed that she wanted to do everything in her power to assure the well-being of her beloved husband’s children. She expressed special concern that her son might not complain later that out of ignorance or negligence she had failed to secure the family title for him. She did not tell Rochester that she had obtained legal opinion on the matter.¹²¹

This rather curious episode came to nothing as events leading to the Glorious Revolution overtook whatever favor James’s court might have shown Lady Russell. Presumably de Ruvigny made the petition with Rachel’s approval, and her remarks to Rochester imply that she was willing to be reconciled to the new government. Had these things been known, Rachel would have surely suffered embarrassment with her Whig friends. Moreover, it is possible that William’s brother, Edward, who was, theoretically at least, next in line to the Bedford title and fortune, would have objected. Rachel kept the matter secret.

During de Ruvigny’s visit an event occurred that “hurried [Rachel] into new disorders” and also testified to her fondness for her uncle. De Ruvigny had brought his wife and niece with him to England, and they stayed with Lady Russell at Southampton House. Rachel remained in London to receive them rather than take her children, the eldest of whom was recovering from an illness, to the country as planned. Shortly after their arrival de Ruvigny’s niece was stricken with smallpox, forcing an exodus of Rachel and her “little tribe” of children. The niece worsened and died. In her warmhearted way Rachel hastened back to London to condole with her eighty-year-old uncle, calling him “as kind a relation, and as zealous and tender a friend as anyone ever
had.”

In October 1685 King Louis XIV issued the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, a step that dismayed and angered Rachel. The edict, promulgated almost a hundred years before, in 1598, had afforded protection and provided rights to the Huguenot community in France. With its removal, Protestant churches were razed; one of the first was the Temple at Charenton, which was burned to the ground, destroying the original records of Lady Russell’s mother’s baptism, her parents’ marriage, and the death of her brother, Henry. The Huguenot community was persecuted and dispersed, many French Protestants seeking refuge in England. Lady Russell followed events closely and with mounting horror. Referring to Louis XIV as “that savage man,” she reported that no more than 10,000 Protestants out of a total of approximately 1,800,000 were left in France and that they would soon be converted to Catholicism or perish. Children were separated from their parents, wives sent to monasteries, and husbands to prison or the galleys. “‘Tis enough to sink the strongest heart to read the relations [that] are sent over.” Remonstrating with Fitzwilliam for his insistence that God’s Providence eventuated in good, she exclaimed, “These are amazing Providences, Doctor! God out of infinite mercy strengthen weak believers.”

Kept informed by her sister, French newspapers, and French relatives, Rachel knew more about the consequences of the Revocation and conditions in France than did most English people.

In January 1686, de Ruvigny returned to England with his family and servants. The only Protestant nobleman to win permission from the French king to emigrate, he was well received at court by the king, queen, and dowager-queen. De Ruvigny soon established himself in a house at Greenwich, and there, despite advanced years, became the leader of about a hundred French Huguenot refugees. He obtained the use of the parish church for them and assisted in conducting services. The congregation was conformist—that is, members used the English liturgy translated into French. Later, de Ruvigny was responsible for building a separate Huguenot chapel on London Street in Greenwich.

Rachel saw him regularly, journeying to Greenwich in March 1686 to be with him, thereby reinforcing her identity with Dissent. The presence of de Ruvigny (until his death on August 9, 1689) must have sharpened Rachel’s interest in the plight of the French refugees. Undoubtedly, through him she had access to privileged information about the English government’s policy towards them. The law required that the permission of the king in council be secured before a subscrip-
tion could be raised for charitable purposes. Early in November, the Privy Council approved such permission, but with the provisos that the beneficiaries conform to the Church of England and that the two archbishops administer the fund. Rachel followed closely the progress of this “brief,” or order, and reported that Chancellor Jeffreys was responsible for delaying it in January. In April she learned that Jeffreys was so strict about the qualifications of those who could receive help that many left him with “sad hearts.” She took some steps towards assisting the French refugees. It is likely that she contributed money to the relief fund, but there is no positive proof. It is a reasonable assumption that she encouraged their settlement on Bedford’s property at Thorney, although the number of individual communicants there did not grow.

Finally, despite opposition, as we have seen, from Bedford and Fitzwilliam she hired a French refugee as a tutor for Wriothesley, in part to help out. As she put it, “So shall I do a charity and profit the child also, who should learn French.”

The year 1686 also saw Rachel’s participation in marriage negotiations involving members of her elder sister’s family and of William’s family. That people turned to her for advice and active assistance on such a personally and financially important matter underlines the reputation she had developed as a woman of uncommon intelligence and good sense. In February 1686 Lady Digby asked Rachel to act as intermediary in proposing a marriage between her son and Rachel’s niece, the second daughter of Rachel’s sister Elizabeth and Edward, now earl of Gainsborough. Protesting to Fitzwilliam that she was “unfitted for the management” of such things, Rachel undertook the task. She reported with evident satisfaction that the proposal was accepted and that her brother-in-law had provided well for his daughter.

The following year the Dissenting minister John Howe asked Rachel for her candid opinion of Edward Russell, William’s next younger brother. Howe was interested in promoting a marriage between Edward and a widow whom he knew, but before any steps could be taken, the woman wanted—preferably from Rachel, whom she admired—some testimony about Edward’s character and religious convictions. Those things first, then the size of his estate, concerned her, Howe insisted. Rachel’s response was an enthusiastic endorsement of Edward (as a man of courage and good nature) and of the Bedford family (as the “easiest to converse or live with that ever I have known, or could observe”). In her practical way, she gave Howe the name of the person who could tell him about Edward’s financial prospects and went so far as to vouch for Bedford’s prompt discharge of all his obligations. She concluded by promising to take on any part of the negotiations in the future that properly fell to her and to keep Bedford informed.
Howe’s appeal provides early evidence of Rachel’s emergence as the central figure among Bedford’s children. After all, there were several other blood children—James, Diana, and Margaret, to name but three—who might have been seen as the person to whom a prospective marriage broker would turn. Further, Rachel’s volunteering to keep the earl apprised of developments may suggest a closeness between them on such matters. The closeness was to deepen over time. To anticipate, early in 1688, when Rachel was in the middle of negotiations leading to the marriage of her elder daughter (discussed below), William Wentworth, earl of Strafford, sought the hand of Margaret Russell. Rachel was drawn into the affair from the start and wrote to Fitzwilliam of her desire to “do her duty” to her sister-in-law as “cordially as to [her] children.”

Discussions between Strafford and Bedford dragged on for a year and came to nothing. Apparently Rachel had played a substantial (but unidentified) role in them. In her kind-hearted, warm way she wrote in March 1689 to ease Strafford’s pain over his failure and to advise him to seek a bride in another quarter. He was full of admiration for all that she had done for him and expressed to a friend his particular obligation to her. Such affairs as these gave Rachel experience prior to managing the marriage contracts of her own children. They also add evidence about the role a woman could play in arranging marriages.

Early in 1687 Lady Russell received a mark of respect from the prince and princess of Orange in the form of a visit from their envoy, Everhard van Weede, Heer van Dijkvelt, who was on a special mission to King James II’s government. Dijkvelt carried specific instructions to pay a call on Lady Russell, which he did on Thursday, March 24, 1687. Rachel recounted that Dijkvelt, speaking in French, conveyed the condolences of the prince and princess of Orange on her loss, asserted that they had lamented Lord Russell’s execution as a “blow to the best interest of England [and] the Protestant religion,” and recounted that Bevil Skelton, then the English ambassador to Holland, had remarked that the king “had taken the life of one man, but he had lost... thousands by it.” Dijkvelt also stressed the prince and princess’s desire, should the power ever lie in their hands, to grant whatever Rachel should ask. With regard to the question of “reestablishing” Wriothesley, Dijkvelt said he spoke not as a private person but as a “public minister” in asserting that what Rachel “should at any time see reason to ask, would be done in as full and ample manner as was possible.”

Dijkvelt’s conversation with Rachel holds significance beyond his professed support for restoring Wriothesley to the Bedford title. The iterated expressions of the prince of Orange’s respect for Russell may reveal a closer connection between William and the Dutch court in the early 1680s than the surviving evidence from those years shows. Be that
as it may, the interview indicates concern to establish a friendly contact with Lady Russell and shows that four years after her husband’s death she was still regarded as a symbol of the former Whig opposition, whom it was advantageous to cultivate. Rachel’s careful notes of the meeting suggest that she thought it important. In the spring of 1687 it was assumed on all sides that Mary, princess of Orange, the presumptive heir of James II, would one day inherit the English crown, and it must have given Lady Russell satisfaction and optimism for the future to hear in what esteem she and her family were held. Perhaps Dijkvelt’s visit also contributed to a lessening of Lady Russell’s grief. At any rate, she was able to report in June 1687 that although she was “not cured, [her] ill was less inveterate.”

Rachel took steps to forward this new relationship with the Dutch court. She had not met Princess Mary before, but she asked Dijkvelt to deliver a letter to her. The princess replied in a letter of July 12, 1687, excusing the delay on the need to send letters safely and entrusting this one to the wife of Arthur Herbert, later earl of Torrington. Repeating the esteem in which she and the prince held Lady Russell and sympathizing with her loss, Mary expressed the desire to do “any kindness” in their power to Rachel and the earl of Bedford. She concluded with the hope that Lady Russell “should be one of my friends.” Significantly, Rachel kept up the correspondence. In February 1688 Mary excused herself for not answering three letters from her. In May 1688 Rachel sent a letter with her kinsman Admiral Edward Russell, who made a secret visit to the Dutch court, and the princess entrusted him with her affectionate answer.

This exchange between Lady Russell and the princess has important implications. It shows that Rachel knew that Admiral Russell was bound for a secret meeting with the prince of Orange, else she could not have given him a letter for the princess. How much more she knew is impossible to say. Her written comments on the deteriorating political scene in England in the spring of 1688—including James II’s Declaration of Indulgence and the trial and acquittal of the seven bishops—are circumspect; and if Admiral Russell dropped any hint that he had secured the prince’s agreement to participate in the English conspiracy against James II, she was too sophisticated to record it. Further, the letters contributed towards the development of a friendship between Rachel and the princess and prince of Orange which continued after the Revolution of 1688–89.

Before that, Lady Russell became deeply preoccupied with a personal matter: the marriage settlement of her elder daughter. Her attitude towards the marriage was, paradoxically, in view of her romantic notions about love, almost entirely conventional. At a time when the trend in
noble families was to give major weight to the personal preferences of their children. Rachel’s major concern was to get the best possible financial and social alliance that she could. She was as serious about such matters as any conventional male head of family would have been. After that she took into account the personal inclination and character of the potential partners. Working out the marriage contract required the talents of a diplomat, lawyer, and accountant, and Rachel showed that she possessed a measure of each. She was so successful in the contracts for each of her children that she secured the social and financial position of their families for generations to come. Whether the unions also secured the emotional and psychological fulfillment of her children it is not possible to say.

Lord Devonshire, Russell’s former best friend, proposed in the fall of 1687 that his son and heir, William, marry young Rachel. The union would unite two families of like social status and political views, and such thoughts, as well as the affection Devonshire and Lady Russell bore each other, must have animated both parties. Five months of hard bargaining over the terms of the settlement ensued. Devonshire wrote her as an equal, and she responded in kind; their letters are the same in tone and reflect equal understanding of the law and the effect of the settlement on their properties. Lady Russell prepared herself carefully for these negotiations, making notes herself on papers regarding Devonshire’s holdings and on a lawyer’s interpretation of his proposals. Despite his “well-bred” manner and friendship, Lord Devonshire was “inflexible,” Rachel said, “if the point [was] not to his advantage. Among the points on which he was inflexible was that the dowry should be £25,000, paid in a lump sum. Rachel said that that figure was more than she had intended and objected to a lump-sum payment. She reported that the lawyers put “hard difficulties” in her way and that she felt alone and sometimes “doubtful,” but she declared that she was determined to go forward slowly so that she would understand every detail in the bargaining. By the middle of March an agreement was reached. In essence, Devonshire undertook to provide the couple an income of £2,500 a year and a jointure of like sum. Lady Russell agreed to a dowry of £25,000; she put up £10,000 herself and persuaded Bedford to match that sum. But she insisted that the remaining £5,000 be paid over a number of years, out of the income from her London properties, and Devonshire accepted that arrangement. As an expression of his pleasure at the union of their two families, Devonshire presented Rachel a present of a pair of diamond pendants.

Both children were underage, the bride fourteen years old and the groom fifteen, younger than the partners in most noble marriages. There is no evidence that their personal preferences were considered. A
legal union would take place, after which the young people would com­
plete their education, Rachel at home with her mother, and William
Cavendish abroad. Young Rachel, who had suffered a severe eye infec­
tion in the fall, contracted measles at the end of March, and therefore the
marriage ceremony had to be postponed. It was celebrated on June 21,
1688, in the chapel at Southampton House. Lord Devonshire had
insisted on the date, probably forgetting that it was the anniversary of
William’s arrest. He had hurried the arrangements along because of
plans to go to Bath, so it was said.¹⁵³ That may be, but political events
may better explain the earl’s haste. A fortnight before, on June 10, a boy
had been born to King James II, thus assuring the perpetuation of a
Catholic monarchy if steps were not taken to prevent it. A fortnight later,
on June 30, a letter inviting the prince of Orange to come to England was
signed by seven men, Devonshire among them. The letter was carried to
Holland by Admiral Russell. This step forecast the landing of Prince
William of Orange in England on November 5, 1688, the opening move
in the Glorious Revolution.

Apart from her dismay over the date, the wedding of her elder
daughter was a happy occasion for Lady Russell and marked a turning
point in the mastery of her grief and in her self-image. To unite her
daughter to the heir of the Devonshire title and fortune was, as she put
it, a “glimmering of light I did not look for in my dark day.” To achieve
it she had engaged in many social activities which she professed to dis­
like but suffered for the sake of her child. Whatever her attitude, the fact
remained that her social life was livelier. Further, Lady Russell was
gratified by her success. “When I contemplate the fruits of the trial and
labour of these last six months,” she wrote to Fitzwilliam, “it brings
some comfort to my mind, as an evidence that I do not live only to
lament my misfortunes.” She was confident that William would have
approved, and pleased at the fulfillment of her belief that the children of
the just are blessed. Reflecting her renewed sense of confidence, she
 candidly remarked that William was among the just, and “if my heart
deceive me not, I intend the being so [too].” Such thoughts were a com­
fort, she said, especially “as the clouds seem to gather and threaten
storms.”¹⁵⁴ Her reference was to the deepening political tensions that
had followed the acquittal of the seven bishops, the birth of a son to King
James II, and the rippling rumor that the baby was a fraud.