Franks and Friendship: Eighteenth-Century Postal Practices in *The Mary Hamilton Papers*

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Abstract: Eighteenth-century postage was comparatively expensive and usually paid for by a letter's recipient, although Members of Parliament could post free of charge by adding their signature to the address (a 'frank'). This privilege was intended only for MPs; nevertheless, franking fraud was widespread. This article uses evidence from letters in *The Mary Hamilton Papers* to explore how postage and franking aided correspondents' politeness and identity work. It finds that Hamilton and her correspondents exploited their social networks to get free postage, and that 'frank talk' (discourse about obtaining and using franks) played an important role in promoting and maintaining friendships.

Keywords: correspondence, historical pragmatics, historical sociolinguistics, material culture, networks, politeness, postal system, sociability

1. Introduction

This article explores the role of social networks in the exchange of personal correspondence relating to the eighteenth-century courtier and diarist Mary Hamilton (1756–1816). It investigates how the practicalities of postage and franking, and the discourses surrounding them ('frank talk'), promoted and maintained friendships among Hamilton's circles. Sociolinguistic and pragmatic analyses interrogate material and textual evidence to establish the practices and attitudes of the writers represented in *The Mary Hamilton Papers* (*MHP*), revealing that free postage and 'frank talk' played an important role in building and maintaining friendships among Hamilton and her correspondents.

MHP is a digital edition and linguistic corpus incorporating approximately 875,000 words of correspondence and diaries related to Mary Hamilton. Its ego-documents[1] include thirty-eight volumes of diaries and travel journals, seventeen of which were written by Hamilton at various times between 1776 and 1797, as well as some 3050 letters and notes from over 260 identified individual correspondents, around 1540 of which have been transcribed. Most are in-letters, written to Hamilton, her husband John Dickenson (1757–1842), or, in the case of the earliest letters, her parents. They cover her childhood, life as sub-governess to the royal children (1777–November 1782), independent life as a member of the Bluestocking circle in London (December 1782–July 1785), and married life in Derbyshire, Berkshire, and London (1785–1816).[2]

Before 1840, postage was usually paid by a letter's recipient and was comparatively expensive. Members of Parliament (hereafter MPs) could obtain free postage when parliament was sitting; the rules around this privilege varied, but after 1764 MPs were required to add their signature (a 'frank') to the address of a letter (Alcock and Holland 1960: 53–54).[3] This privilege was intended only for MPs, not their families and friends; nevertheless, fraudulent use of franks was widespread (Lovegrove 1978: 12–13). *MHP* includes

several letters sent to Hamilton free of charge. While some are from sitting MPs with legitimate access to free postage, several are from correspondents who used their social networks to acquire franks for personal use.

Recent works have investigated the development and social role of correspondence and the post in the modern period, from the perspectives of social history (Beale 2005, Daybell 2012, Caplan 2016) and literature (Koehler 2016), while personal letters have made excellent sources for sociolinguistic and pragmatic enquiry (Hernández-Campoy and Conde-Silvestre 2015). Although some studies touch on franking (Caplan 2016), there is a lack of research into frank usage in relation to friendship, politeness, and identity. To fill this gap, I explore two research questions: (1) how do writers in *MHP* use franks? and (2) what social functions do franks perform, especially when usage is self-consciously discussed (i.e. metacommunicative discourse) within the letter?

To answer these questions, the article is structured in three sections. Section 1 introduces postal practices and franking during the second half of the eighteenth century and outlines the methodology and research context. Section 2 addresses the first research question, scrutinizing material and textual evidence from *MHP* from a sociolinguistic perspective to reveal the networks involved. Section 3 addresses the second research question through a pragmatic textual analysis, uncovering the attitudes of Hamilton and her correspondents to franking and showing how 'frank talk' was used in different ways to build and express friendships.

1.1. Historical Background: The Cost of Post

Before the 1840 introduction of the uniform penny post, options for sending letters depended on the status of the sender and recipient and on the distance and amount of material sent. Originally designed to transport government correspondence, after 1635 the royal mail also carried letters from private individuals (Beale 2005, Brayshay 2016: 48). By the late eighteenth century, the service was becoming quicker and more reliable through the construction of new turnpike roads and the introduction of the mail coach, while a series of 'cross roads' augmented the network, connecting more towns and routing letters more cheaply and efficiently (Whyman 2009: 57). Previously, a letter from York to Chester would be routed via London, incurring a mileage charge for both legs of the journey. A letter sent by the cross post travelled more directly, incurring a lower mileage charge. *MHP* contains several letters from John Dickenson (1757–1842) marked 'x post' to ensure the speediest and cheapest delivery (e.g. HAM/1/2/15, from Bath to Taxal in Derbyshire; see Fig. 1).

The post was run partly to raise government revenue, and charges were successively reformed and raised in 1784, 1796, and 1801 (Robertson [1961]: 58). Costs were high; Mary Hamilton paid 7d to receive HAM/1/20/129, which Francis Scott Napier (8th Lord, 1758–1823) sent from Roxburghshire to Manchester in 1794, while John Dickenson's 1813 account of his Somerset travels cost Hamilton 10d to receive in London (HAM/1/2/43). To put this into perspective, a late-eighteenth-century agricultural worker's average daily cash wage was between 12d and 22d (Muldrew 2019). The expense of receiving letters meant that '[e]ven the rich kept detailed costs of amounts of postage paid' (Whyman 2009: 63).

Further factors in postal costs were the 1 oz weight limit for a single sheet letter (Robertson [1961]: 57) and charges according to the number of sheets sent. A letter comprising two sheets of paper was charged double; three incurred a triple charge. In practice,
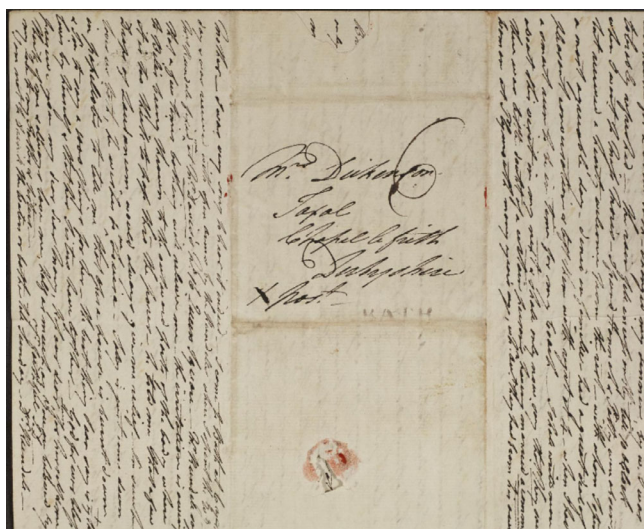
1. HAM/1/2/15, John Dickenson to Mary Hamilton, 1789, with address panel in centre of writing sheet, 'x post' instruction at the bottom, and postal charge calculation (a figure '6') written by an official across the address. Zooming image © John Rylands Research Institute and Library, all rights reserved [Colour figure can be viewed at]

therefore, most people wrote one sheet only, and numerous letters in *MHP* are marked 'single sheet' to avoid double postage (e.g. HAM/1/13/42, 1786). Hamilton's correspondents were aware of what Whyman (2009: 63) calls the 'taboo' on sending multiple sheets. For instance, in a 1782 letter, Lady Charlotte Finch (née Fermor, 1725–1813) apologizes not only for making Hamilton pay for her letter — she evidently did not have access to the MP she had previously relied on for free postage — but for its cost: 'I am sorry my <u>Franker</u> is gone or you sh^d. not have to pay for a double Letter' (HAM/1/12/49). Although Finch's letter consists of only one sheet, she alludes to an enclosure for Hamilton to pass on to Princess Charlotte, one of the royal children in their care. Despite its inconvenience, the status of the note's royal recipient and Finch's position as royal governess (and hence, as Hamilton's superior during her time at Court) were sufficient for Finch to override normal considerations and make this imposition.

Paper was used economically, and instead of making an envelope or cover from a separate sheet, letters were usually folded, sealed, then addressed on the back of the sheet. Mary Anne Napier (née Cathcart, 1727–1774) writes self-consciously about avoiding added costs, telling Hamilton 'I wont make you pay double by putting this in a Cover' (HAM/1/19/2, 1768). Fig. 1 shows the usual letter folding method in *MHP*. Note how the letter text continues above and below the address panel, on parts of the sheet which formed the inside of the letter when it was folded.[4]

London had had its own internal penny post since 1680, though few letters bear stamps evidencing this method of carriage (e.g. HAM/1/6/6/3, 1788). To avoid a recipient paying postage, the sender could pre-pay, though this is uncommon in *MHP*. In example (1), William Napier (7th Lord, 1730–1775) chastises Hamilton for pre-paying because he does not want her to go to the trouble of paying postage herself, though he also worries pre-paid letters will go astray:

(1) Apropos I have a quarrel with you, how comes it that you pay the post in y^r letters to me I dont take that well from <u>you</u> so I beg no more of that when you have franks Good, when none pray let letters be delivered before they are paid for, as the Postage is nothing & when sent post p^d- they are com̄only smugled[5] for the money and I would much rather pay five thousand times for yours as have one miscarry. (HAM/1/19/25, 1772)

Servants hand-delivered letters for wealthy writers, and many letters and notes Hamilton received from nearby London friends bear no evidence of going through the postal system. Hand delivery may be indicated by a lack of external postal marks, or by internal evidence, where writers allude to a note's method of delivery: Elizabeth Murray (later Finch-Hatton, 1760–1825) asks Hamilton to '[b]e so kind to send me a line by the bearer' (HAM/1/5/2/4, 1781). The royal family had their own messengers; George, Prince of Wales (1762–1830), mentions to Hamilton that 'on Wednesday Morning [the messenger] will call for an Answer' to his letter (GEO/ADD/3/82/36, 1779).

Letters were also sent postage-free via franks. This privilege was introduced in 1652, and in the period covered by *MHP* it allowed any sitting MP in the Houses of Commons or Lords to send (and receive) correspondence free of charge (reduced to ten out-letters per day after 1795). To qualify, the address had to be written in the MP's own hand and bear his signature. Although intended for their own use, MPs could and did frank covers for others, often in batches for future use. In June 1773, William Napier tells Hamilton, 'I have got a dozen of franks from Sir P. Warrender derected [*sic*] for you, one I now send' (HAM/1/19/48). To prevent further abuse, the rules were tightened in 1784, after which MPs had to add the date and place of posting as an anti-fraud device (Lovegrove 1978: 13). Fig. 2 (HAM/1/20/146) shows an address panel reading 'London, Eighth April 1799' on the top line, the signature of the Scottish Representative Peer Francis Napier in the bottom left-hand corner, and the post office's red inked 'FREE' frank over the address. The post office investigated suspicious letters, and those flouting the rules incurred a charge. In HAM/1/4/2/5, Charles Francis Greville (1749–1809) emended the date of posting from the 'Sixteen' to the 'Seventeen' of June 1789. The frank was queried, and a charge of 1 s 6d levied. Nevertheless, the corpus shows that abuses of the franking
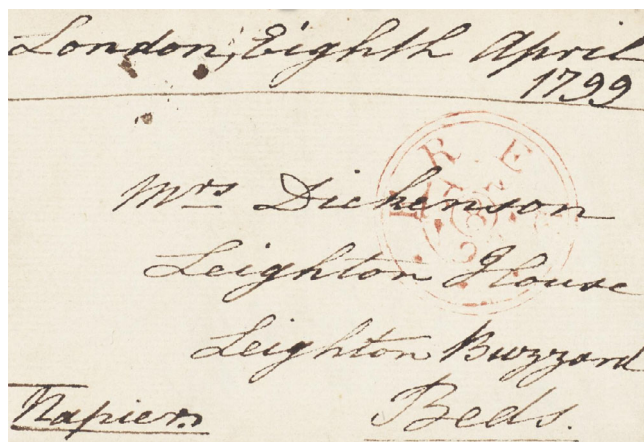
2. Address panel of HAM/1/20/146, Francis Napier to Mary Hamilton, 1799. Zooming image © John Rylands Research Institute and Library, all rights reserved [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

system continued. Finally, senders could include multiple pages or enclosures up to a weight of 2 oz (1 oz after 1795) in a frank, which Hamilton's correspondents take full advantage of.

1.2. Methodology

This study examines two types of data. First, material evidence of franks from address panels (signatures, dates, and official post office stamps) can show how frequently franks were used by Hamilton's correspondents, who used them, where the letters were sent from, and the franker's identity. Second, internal evidence from the letter's text can supplement the address panel findings about the volume of franked letters, and also illustrate attitudes to letter writing, postal charges, and franking. Metacommunicative discourse around franking performs important politeness and identity functions, in addition to conveying practical information about the circumstances of a letter's composition. The *MHP* edition and corpus allow researchers to combine material and linguistic analysis; facsimiles accompany each diplomatic letter transcription; therefore, information on material aspects of the text corpus is easily collated and verified by comparison with the facsimile.

The original XML/TEI files were searched for hands tagged as 'frank-signatory', to collect instances of address panels signed by MPs. Results were manually sorted, and any ambiguities checked by a visual inspection of the online facsimiles. Corpus searches for the terms 'frank*', 'cover*', and 'postage' returned instances where correspondents discuss the attempted or actual acquisition or use of franks, or where such terms appear in Hamilton's diaries. These textual selections were examined through close reading, and pragmatic functions and common thematic categories were identified for further analysis. This study covers all diary material by Hamilton, and those letters which had been transcribed at the time of writing (August 2023), amounting to seventeen diaries (213,897 words) and 1537 letters and notes (659,722 words).

1.3. Letters, Politeness, Identity, and Friendship in the Eighteenth Century

This study draws on linguistic frameworks of politeness and identity to explore 'frank talk' in *MHP*. Bax and Kádár (2011: 4–5) note the importance of grounding historical studies of politeness in contemporary understandings of what constituted polite behaviour (first order politeness, or politeness$_1$), advocating 'thick descriptions' which take account of the historical and social contexts of the data analysed. The changing nature of eighteenth-century politeness is interrogated by Watts (1999), who shows how earlier notions of politeness as a unity of character and external action, and an ability to please others, were 'interpreted ambiguously to justify shifts in the behavioural patterns of the gentry and the nobility [...] and held up to those who aspired to the membership of higher echelons of society as being a desirable and imitatable [*sic*] form of social behaviour' (1999: 17). Fitzmaurice discusses the challenges of defining eighteenth-century politeness as it developed from an ethos of gentlemanly interaction, to being 'regarded as an accomplishment that could be acquired by attending assiduously to the advice proffered in the courtesy literature' (2010: 110).

Second order politeness (or politeness$_2$) is the framework used by linguists to analyse interactions. It distinguishes between *positive politeness*, that is, actions 'directed to the addressee's positive face, his perennial desire that his wants [...] should be thought of as desirable' (Brown and Levinson 1987: 101), and *negative politeness*, that is, actions

'addressed to the addressee's negative face: his want to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded' (1987: 129). In contrast to Brown and Levinson's framework, Watts distinguishes between *politic* behaviour, described as 'that behaviour, linguistic and non-linguistic, which the participants construct as being appropriate to the ongoing social interaction' (2003: 276), and *polite* or *impolite* behaviour, which goes beyond or falls short of the interactant's expectations, respectively. In Section 3, I examine the extent to which franking (or talk about franking) falls into behaviour that might have been perceived by the writers in *MHP* as either politic or polite.

This investigation uses Bucholtz and Hall's (2009) identity framework, viewing identity as 'a relational and socio-cultural phenomenon that emerges and circulates in local discourse contexts of interaction rather than as a stable structure located primarily in the individual psyche or in fixed social categories' (2009: 18). Linguistic resources are, therefore, deployed by speakers and writers on an ongoing basis to create and shape individual and interpersonal identities (Hernández-Campoy and Conde-Silvestre 2015: 15); identity is here understood as 'an active discursive process' (Coupland 2007: 106).[6]

Personal letters are a fruitful source of evidence for changes in pragmatic features, politeness strategies, and identity work in Early and Late Modern English. They provide ample data for linguistic variation according to factors including social distance, audience design, and identity work (Nevala 2004, 2009), or the ways epistolary friendship is performed according to the nature (political or intimate) of the correspondents' relationship (Fitzmaurice 2012). Hernández-Campoy and Conde-Silvestre demonstrate how the Paston Letters shed light on 'the motivation(s) for variability in individuals and their stylistic choices for the construction of identity' (2015: 20). Relationships and identity have also been explored in Hamilton's own correspondence. Yáñez-Bouza (2023, 2024) investigates forms of address as an index of politeness, while Oudesluijs and Yáñez-Bouza (2023) compare Hamilton's diversity of address forms in negotiating relationships with her close friend Charlotte Margaret Gunning and would-be suitor George, Prince of Wales (later King George IV). Gardner (2022) focuses on the negotiation of Hamilton's and Dickenson's relationship during two periods of crisis in their courtship, while Wallis (2025) investigates Francis Napier's mock-impoliteness as a strategy for performing his own identity and maintaining his close relationship with Hamilton. At the heart of the latter three studies is the concept that 'identity is a discursive construct that emerges in interaction' (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 587); identities and relationships are not static entities but evolve through continual performance.

Historical studies on the materiality of Late Modern letters include Larsen's (2020) 'archaeological' approach to Georgina Carlisle's correspondence, in which gilt-edged paper, long letters sent via franks, and archiving practices are interpreted as part of a conspicuous consumption of letters as a 'performance of aristocratic identit[y]' (2020: 78). The letter-writing practices of the eighteenth-century Hamburg merchant Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens reveal 'how people of the 18th century used their paper and the material of their letters to shape and anticipate courses of action and negotiation conducted through letter writing' (Haasis 2020: 177). Luetkens exploited the persuasive potential of sending unsealed letters nested inside each other to multiple recipients; everyone knew his overall plan, and through in-person requests delivered by his brother, he exerted maximum pressure to bring about his desired outcome (2020: 176–77). The present article builds on these studies by examining the social, material, and metapragmatic role of franks in the politeness strategies and identity work of Mary Hamilton's correspondents.

2. The Ins and Outs of Franks

2.1. Franks in *The Mary Hamilton Papers*

This section exploits *MHP* and its facsimiles for evidence of the networks involved in obtaining franks, including material and textual evidence that writers had obtained franks (or planned to) to avoid paying postage. Table 1 shows the number of franked letters in *MHP* as a proportion of the whole.

This is certainly an undercount. Around half of the letters and notes in the corpus have no address, and while some were probably hand-delivered by servants or friends, others may have been enclosed in a frank, either direct to Hamilton herself or via a third party. For example, William Napier frequently used franks when writing to Mary Hamilton. Although only six of his letters survive with a franked address panel, his frequent mention of them and a reluctance to let Hamilton pay for his letters (see example (1) above) suggest that his longer epistles (eighteen contain two or more folio sheets) were most probably sent in franks. Similarly, most of Wilhelmina Murray's (née King, 1738–1795) letters have no address, though internal evidence suggests that she also used franks whenever she could. Three of her letters have an address; two are franked, while the unfranked letter apologizes for incurring postage (see example (2)).

> (2) I ought to apologise for making you pay ^{for this}, but, I never have any franks: and you was so obliging to wish to hear, ^{of us;} besides, I flatter myself, you will follow my example, as I shall take it very ill, if you grudge my pence; & think me not public spirited enough, to pay with pleasure, for what I like so much. (HAM/1/7/7/4, 1782)

Therefore, we can conclude from the passage in (2) that at least some of Wilhelmina's other letters were also franked. In fact, many writers allude to letters being sent this way; John Dickenson notes to (his then wife) Hamilton that 'M^r. Lethelier is here as you will see by the Cover' (HAM/1/2/36, 1794). Internal evidence shows that at least fifteen further letters were definitely conveyed in a frank, in addition to those noted above (6.9% of all transcribed letters).

2.2. Social Networks: Who Uses Franks?

Several of Hamilton's correspondents acquire and use franks. Fig. 3 groups them by their relationship to Hamilton.[7] It documents both covers with visible franks and letters whose internal evidence suggests they were carried via a frank.

Evidence for frank usage is not evenly spread across Hamilton's correspondents. This imbalance is partly due to the personal circumstances of individual writers, resulting in different types of correspondence (for example, Francis Napier was a prolific, lifelong

Table 1   *Franked letters in The Mary Hamilton Papers.*

	Total
Letters in *MHP* edition	3048
Letters transcribed (= letters in the corpus)	1537
Letters with address (% of those transcribed)	734 (47.8%)
Letters with frank (% of those transcribed and with address)	91 (12.4%)

correspondent who often lived at a considerable distance, whereas Harriet Finch mainly wrote short notes (probably hand-delivered) during Hamilton's time at Court, and never used franks). Hamilton's Bluestocking correspondents account for rather fewer franks than might be expected, with Hannah More's letters from Bristol providing the main surviving evidence for their use. However, as Hamilton's most intense association with the Bluestockings was when she lived in London, perhaps writers from this group conveyed messages via personal servants, the penny post, or through third parties (see example (4) below). Finally, the Napiers account for almost half of the franks in the transcribed *MHP* letters. Several factors account for this. With two generations in army service, they often lived far away from Hamilton; furthermore, the families were close (William Napier was Hamilton's guardian after her father's death in 1771). Francis Napier spent time as a Scottish Representative Peer and is one of Hamilton's few correspondents to frank his own letters.

Place of posting also affected the availability of franks. Fig. 4 shows that most franks were posted in London — unsurprisingly, given that parliament sat at Westminster, and
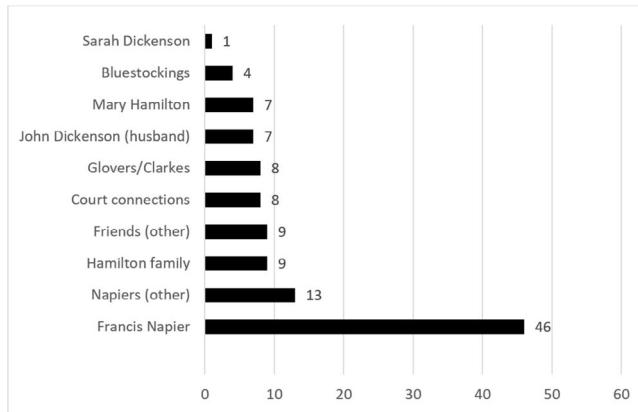
3. Users of franks in *The Mary Hamilton Papers*
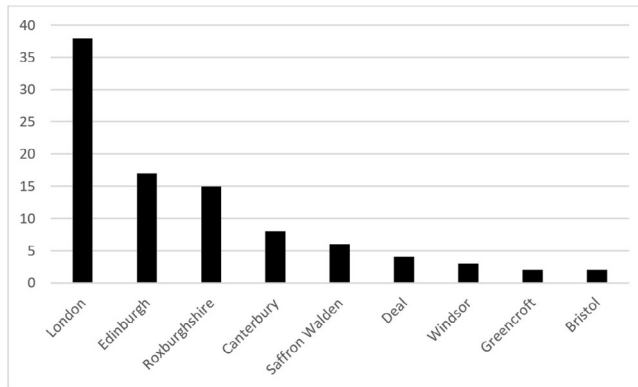
4. Location of posting for franked letters

franks were only valid when it was in session. Importantly, however, non-London posting locations recorded more than once are almost always accounted for by a single correspondent: all letters from Canterbury are from William Napier during an army posting, while visits to friends (whose husbands or other relatives had franking privileges) account for Dorothy Blosset's and Lady Charlotte Finch's franks from Saffron Walden and Deal, respectively.

Material and textual evidence from *MHP* demonstrates that writers exploited a variety of contacts and relationships to source franks. As Table 2 shows, these relationships were sometimes gender-specific: unlike men, women could not frank for themselves; furthermore, there is no evidence in *MHP* of women using political views or friendships to obtain franks (see example (11) in Section 3.2). However, all writers made use of family and friendship connections. Hamilton notes sources of franks in her diaries, with her friends Lord Stormont (David Murray, 1727–1796) and William Wake (8th Baronet, 1742–1785) as regular suppliers. Francis Napier tells her 'I am happy to Frank for You at any time' (HAM/1/20/169, 1802). Writers might source franks from multiple suppliers, and several mention opportunistic acquisitions, sometimes from people they were only slightly acquainted with, as in example (3).

(3) Mʳ C[harles] Greville came in – Mʳ H[amilton] then asked me if I had been introduced to him – when the Rehearsal was over, I asked Mr. Greville to do me the favor to frank 2 Covers for me wᶜʰ. he did very obligingly. (HAM/1/2/8/2, 1786)

In passage (3), John Dickenson recounts to Hamilton how, on first meeting his wife's cousin, he asks Charles Greville for some franks so he can write to her. Greville appears happy to comply with the request even on such a short acquaintance. Thus, a frank could be obtained on the basis of acquaintance between the franker and the *recipient*, and not the writer. On another occasion Hamilton meets a Mr Powis, 'who enquired after yᵉ.

Table 2 *Sources of franks among writers in The Mary Hamilton Papers.*

Frank origin	Correspondent
Self	Francis Napier, Charles Greville, John Fisher
Family	Mary Hamilton (from Francis Napier) William Napier, John Dickenson, Elizabeth Iremonger (from John Hope, Charles Greville, Benjamin Lethieullier)
Close friends (or their husbands)	Mary Hamilton (from Lord Stormont, William Wake, Robert Herries)
People the writer is staying with	Dorothy Blosset, Lady Charlotte Finch, Mary Jackson (from Richard Griffin-Neville, Richard Howe, Samuel Horsley)
Admirers	Mary Hamilton (via Edwin Stanhope)
Political friends or rivals	William Napier (from James Dundas, John Sawbridge)

Wakes & was so obliging to say he would frank me some Covers' (HAM/2/10: 77, 1784). She later records in her diary that she 'wrote a letter & sent it. to Lady Wake. I enclosed franks M^r. Powis had sent for her to my House' (HAM/2/10: 138, 1784). Mr Powis had apparently supplied franks addressed both to Hamilton and to Lady Mary Wake (née Fenton, 1744–1823).

A further example of the involvement of third parties is Hamilton's acquisition of franks through her admirer Edwin Francis Stanhope (1729–1807), which she used to write frequently and at length to her then fiancé John Dickenson. Hamilton's diaries make frequent mention of Stanhope's promise or actual procurement of franks, and she tells Dickenson: 'You may shew Your Sisters and [your father] Don Quixotes [i.e. Edwin Stanhope's] letter – I think it will divert them – <u>we</u> are obliged to <u>him</u> for the <u>franks</u>' (HAM/2/15/3: 26, 1785). However, Powis and Stanhope are comparatively rare in obtaining franks for others to use, and when writers use franks not obtained through their own efforts they are frequently sent by their interlocutor. William Napier's letters reveal that he regularly and opportunistically acquired franks from local MPs when stationed in Canterbury. Not only did he request franks addressed to his recipients, he also acquired a cache of self-addressed ones: 'I inclose the only two franks I have to myself to you' (HAM/1/19/37). It is important to note, though, that Napier was writing in 1773, and his practices would have been much more difficult after the 1784 rule changes. The franker's obligation to include the date and location of posting in the address and to be residing no more than twenty miles away from the place of posting were rules directly aimed at preventing this kind of abuse.

Writers co-operated to send several letters in a frank. Mary Glover (later Halsey, 1767–1819) tells Hamilton how she and Anna Maria Clarke (b. 1750) take turns to get franks (HAM/1/13/32, 1786). In example (4) Dorothy Blosset offers to convey Hamilton's letter to their mutual friend, the Bluestocking Elizabeth Carter (1717–1806).

(4) I send you a Letter from our dear friend M^{rs}. Carter. I shall write about friday or Saturday if you chuse to send me a Letter for her I will carry it to her thr'o [*sic*] the <u>Medium</u> of my Frank – (HAM/1/8/2/7, 1784)

It is evident, then, that a link with a potential franker was not always important in accessing free postage; sometimes an influential intermediary worked just as effectively. However, this depended on personal or affective ties, whether family obligations (Charles Greville), friendship (Lord Stormont, Dorothy Blosset), or personal admiration (Edwin Stanhope), which Hamilton manipulates to get her franks.

Finally, Francis Napier offers insights from a franker's perspective, as in examples (5) and (6).

(5) When you desire me to frank your Letters, I wish you would write their Addresses in a <u>legible</u> character. M^{rs}- Blisset, Blesset, or Blosset, may perhaps receive the letter you sent me, as I endeavoured to imitate your Chinese Characters as well as I could, and I took this bad pen, for the purpose of making the imitation more correct. (HAM/1/20/156, 1801)

(6) None, but one who has been in Parliament, can conceive the Annoyance of being tormented with Letters inclosed to them. It was a constant source of trouble to myself, and Servants, besides having very frequently the pleasure of paying for these Packages, on account of their being <u>overweight</u>. (HAM/1/20/212, 1807)

These two passages show the demands made on MPs by family and friends wishing to avail themselves of franking privileges. As well as causing the 'annoyance', 'torment', and 'trouble' of frequently receiving and forwarding enclosures, apparently some writers were careless of the weight allowance of franks, the cost of receiving which was borne by the MP. Evidently, Hamilton simply gave Napier unsealed letters and asked him to forward them: he comments drily on the contents or volume of several, e.g. 'I forwarded your enormous Packet to Mʳˢ- De Salis, this forenoon, without reading one single Syllable of it' (HAM/1/20/170, 1802). Perhaps unsurprisingly, given his complaints about acquaintances' imposition on him, Francis Napier is the only writer in *MHP* to voice any restraint about getting others to frank for him. When out of office, he asks Hamilton not to write to him under cover to their cousin, William Shaw Cathcart (1755–1843), since '[h]e has a numerous Correspondence, & the number of Franks are limited' (HAM/1/20/212, 1807).

3.   Discourses of Friendship

In her study of royal holograph letters which mention their creation by the monarch's own hand, Evans (2020: 85) notes how 'metacommunicative features influence and shape a recipient's interpretation of the message'. This section explores what franks meant to Hamilton's correspondents by examining how they talk about franking and the role it plays in building and maintaining relationships. The letters were searched for metacommunicative utterances, where correspondents discussed sending and receiving letters, postage costs, and franking: I call this 'frank talk'. From this data a number of common pragmatic functions emerged, including positive and negative politeness, identity work, and mock-impoliteness; individual utterances were then each assigned to one of these pragmatic functions. Utterances were further categorized according to their theme; e.g. when Hannah More writes 'let me find a letter from Yo[u] on my return to Bristol. Never mind Franks' (MS Eng 1778 153, 1784), and Dorothy Blosset tells Hamilton to write and 'pray never mind a Frank' (HAM/1/8/2/16, 1797), both writers perform an act of positive politeness, in communicating not only their eagerness to hear from Hamilton, but also their willingness to pay to do so. They are therefore grouped under the theme *I'd happily pay to hear from you*. These themes, summarized in Table 3 (here displayed in italics), form the basis of the third part of the study.

3.1.   Negative Politeness

Negative politeness — the desire not to impose upon someone — categorizes themes such as *My letters are not worth the postage* or *It is better to write at an irregular time than have you pay postage*. These sentiments occur in letters from several correspondents, such as Frederick Hamilton, Mary Hamilton's uncle, who asks her 'pray remember to enclose a frank or two for my letters are not worth the postage' (HAM/1/4/1/12, 1780). In example (7), Francis Napier is consciously curtailing his letter writing because his correspondents will have to pay postage after the loss of his seat in the House of Lords. In (8) Hannah More's desire to use her franks before they become invalid implies that her letters are only worth receiving if the reader does not have to pay for them.

(7) Since I have no longer the power of franking, I have abridged as much as possible, the number of my Correspondents, not chusing to put them to the expence of paying for my dull stupid scrawls. (HAM/1/20/209(1), 1806)

Table 3   *Pragmatic functions and themes in* The Mary Hamilton Papers.

Pragmatic function	Theme	No. of examples
Negative politeness	*My letters are not worth the postage*	4
	It is better to write at an irregular time than have you pay postage	7
	I'm sorry I couldn't get a frank	7
Positive politeness	*I'd happily pay to hear from you*	6
	I'd go to extreme lengths to get a frank for you	2
Identity work	*I'm sending an enclosure*	9
	Use franks so we can write long letters	3
	Let's collude in using franks	18
	You won't mind paying for my letter	2
Mock-impoliteness	*We're such close friends I can be rude about your letter writing*	5
Other	*Being a franker is a trial*	1

(8) Nothing however cou'd set me a prating so soon, but the fear that the threatened dissolution [of parliament] may disfranchise my Cover, and oblige You to pay two pence for that which in my Conscience I pronounce not to ᵇᵉ worth one farthing (MS Eng 1778 141, 1784)

Another frequent theme of negative politeness is *I'm sorry I couldn't get a frank*. Many instances are bare apologies, such as when Hamilton tells Charlotte Gunning, 'I cl^d. not procure franks for this post' (HAM/1/15/2/29(1), 1777), or when Mary Anne Napier writes, 'Im sorry it has not been in my power to procure a Frank for you' (HAM/1/19/12, 1771). Hannah More, however, weighs up the impoliteness of making her recipient pay postage against the inconvenience of losing time: 'I am disappointed of A frank, but won't wait for it any long [er]' (MS Eng 1778 168, 1785). Clearly, this professed reluctance for the recipient to pay postage is rhetorical rather than sincere; if a writer genuinely wanted to avoid recipient costs, letters could be pre-paid, as Hamilton had done in example (1) above, though she provoked William Napier's disapproval for doing so. Yet, the material and textual evidence in *MHP* suggests that this course of action was rarely undertaken by Hamilton's correspondents.

It is helpful to distinguish between the *action* and *talk* of sending a frank. Saving a recipient's postage was not expected behaviour, because a writer could not guarantee having a frank; such behaviour might therefore be classed as *polite* rather than *politic*. Conversely, themes such as *My letter is not worth the postage* have much in common with other self-deprecating phrases in *MHP*; Hamilton is asked to 'pardon', 'forgive', 'excuse', or 'decypher' her correspondents' 'scrawls', which are variously described as 'abominable', 'dull', 'stupid', or 'horrid'.[8] Declaring one's writing not worth the postage seems, for Hamilton's correspondents, to have become just another trope expressing humility or humour, but cannot be said to be exceptionally polite by the late eighteenth century. As Fitzmaurice notes, what is deemed polite behaviour may not be static:

[N]otions of politeness and politic behaviour may interact in an historical fashion, so that what starts out as being polite may become politic behaviour. As discourse forms cease to be unexpected, idiosyncratic or remarkable through repeated and conventional use in predictable settings, so they become merely politic. (Fitzmaurice 2010: 111)

3.2. Positive Politeness

Positive politeness, whereby a writer attends to an interlocutor's desire to be appreciated, is found in two themes, *I'd happily pay to hear from you* and *I'd go to extreme lengths to get a frank for you*. For the former, in example (9) Dorothy Blosset not only expresses her willingness to pay postage, but also compares her 'pleasure' in doing so to the attitude of their mutual friend Elizabeth Carter.

> (9) NB: th'o [*sic*] I had a fair opportunity of a Cover for this & have all the year round – yet I am not M^{rs}. C–r – I never pay money with more pleasure than when the Post office is the gainer (HAM/1/8/2/13, 1792)

A similar sentiment occurs in Francis Napier's: 'When You are idle, remember, I dont grudge postage' (HAM/1/20/209, 1806). Not only is he happy to pay for Hamilton's letters, he also reduces the force of his own demands with his suggestion that she might write when she has nothing better to do. Thus he strikes a bargain, whereby Hamilton's efforts in writing are offset by his payment of postage.

Occasionally, writers mention their efforts to procure free postage; this is the theme *I'd go to extreme lengths to get a frank for you*, illustrated in (10).

> (10) I rec^d. your letters my love as likewise y^e. packets safe – I wish I could procure franks, I think tomorrow I will venture to send to the Bishop for one or two, & then send ^{as I promised} by Monday nights Post. (HAM/1/15/2/2, 1779)

In this passage, Hamilton reassures her intimate friend Charlotte Gunning that her friendship is not only valuable enough for her to write, but also for Gunning to receive her letters free, if Hamilton can manage it. Her plan to get a frank from 'the Bishop'[9] may well be motivated by reciprocity — she had just received 'letters' and 'packets' from Gunning, which could have been in a frank. Hamilton's tentativeness about approaching 'the Bishop', and her declared wish to obtain franks (expressed with the modal *could*), suggests either a lack of confidence in achieving her desired outcome or perhaps an emphasis on the efforts she will go to in order to please her friend. By sharing her anxieties and efforts, Hamilton shows how much Gunning's friendship means to her. In (11), William Napier recounts similar efforts.

> (11) your Correspondance My dearest Girl has made me do a thing I never thought could have happened to me Viz. to court one of your fashionable Patriots (as I have a thorough detestation of them all) look at the Frank this comes in being run out I was obliged to beg a Gentleman to get me a dozen from Mr Alderman ~~Sawbridge~~ had it been ~~Wilkes~~ or even the D[evi]l I would have applied from [*sic*: *for*] frank, rather than not had some for you, so you see my Friendship for you has absolutely changed my Nature (HAM/1/19/22, 1772)

William Napier's letters to Hamilton demonstrate his efforts to cultivate a role as her friend and mentor, as well as her guardian (Wallis 2025). He asks her to confide in him and offers moral advice on suitable behaviour for a young woman of her status. By recounting his extreme efforts to acquire franks, he shows Hamilton how much he values their correspondence. However, as well as privileging Hamilton, he also places her under

an obligation to write frequently and at length, begging her, 'write me long letters & believe me ~~but~~ ^{that} Love and Friendship will always furnish out materials for twenty sheets' (HAM/1/19/23, 1772). Therefore, unlike the themes characterized by negative politeness, those discussed in this section appear to go beyond mere politic behaviour and are designed to flatter or appeal to the recipient's sense of self-worth. Some of these examples also carry an undercurrent of obligation, indicating that the procurement of franks ought to be repaid in kind, or by a lengthy and intimate correspondence.

3.3. Politeness and Identity

Under this category I address themes which appear to be orientated not (as in the previous section) towards the addressee, but towards the relationship between the writer and recipient as a shared experience. Coupland (2007) discusses *targeting* in identity work, by which he means discursive action whose aim is to create or shape the identity, either of a participant (i.e. the speaker or listener) or of a group. Targeting a group allows a speaker or writer to '[construct] meanings for "us" together, "how we are"' (2007: 112). The three themes *I'm sending an enclosure*, *Use franks so we can write long letters*, and *Let's collude in using franks* are ways for writers to perform relationship building and maintenance, creating their own world in opposition to the outside. See (12) and (13) by way of illustration.

> (12) And since my return home, I believe about Two months ago, I divided a Copy of the Rev: M^r. Collier's Sonnets in Two Franks, & enclosed them also to You, but I am quite at a loss to know whether any of them arrived safely. (HAM/1/8/1/4, 1789)

> (13) I beg you will <u>immediately</u> let Lady Stormont have a copy of *Le Bas bleue*. I am so much flattered by her desire to possess it, that if it wou'd not have been impertinent I wou'd have enclos'd it in this Cover. (MS Eng 1778 153, 1784; my italics)

In passages (12) and (13), Elizabeth Iremonger and Hannah More discuss sending reading material by post. In (12), Iremonger not only provides a practical favour by sharing new material and opening up new avenues for conversational topics, but also demonstrates her knowledge of Hamilton's taste and a shared appreciation, in this case of Collier's poetry. More's eagerness for Hamilton to share her poem *The Bas Bleu* reinforces Hamilton's position as a member of the Bluestocking circle, an insider who has the means (and author's blessing) to distribute her poem to select recipients.[10] While More professes a reluctance to seem 'impertinent' in sending it herself, she authorizes Hamilton to share or perhaps make a copy for Lady Stormont.

Let's collude in using franks is used by correspondents in particularly close relationships with Hamilton, who scheme to obtain or use franks (e.g. her fiancé John Dickenson, her guardian William Napier, her close friends Charlotte Gunning and Francis Napier). In (14), William Napier instructs his young ward to emend the franks he had sent her; now, he is changing army quarters.

> (14) but as to the franks altho derected [*sic*] here you may do as follows supposing we go to Maidstone or any other place. The derection to Col Napier ~~at Canterbury~~ gone to Maidstone wrote by yourself always passes taking care to just put a stroke only thro Canterbury leaving it legible as I have done in the inside of the Frank I send this in to shew you the method, they have always gone safe & free & I have much experience of it as we change quarters so very often & as you say you have an

oppertunity [*sic*] to get franks get a dozen derected [*sic*] for y^r^self as I have but three left after this one nor do I know where to get any at present no Member being in this Country nor likely to be for some months (HAM/1/19/34, 1773)

William Napier positions himself as Hamilton's advisor, sharing his experience of manipulating the franking system and assuring her that letters posted according to his instructions will be delivered accurately and postage-free. He targets their relationship by making Hamilton party to this restricted knowledge, approving her plan which will allow their continued easy correspondence. In passage (15), Hamilton has hatched an elaborate yet unsuccessful scheme with Charlotte Gunning.

(15) I rec^d^. your letter wch. had travel'd into Essex after my Servt. had p^d^. <u>6^d^</u> postage, so your scheme of Directing to S^r^. W^m^. [Wake, 8th Baronet] at my house did not answer – y^e^. post Man insisted upon being Paid, and M^r^. Wake happen'd to call, the Sev^t^. gave him y^e^. letter – S^r^. W^m^. <u>open'd it</u>, & L^dy^. W. sent it to me ^assuring me he had not read it^ – Now do not imagine I had not given <u>orders</u>, for I had, & had also told S^r^. W^m^. y^t^. your [*sic*] were to direct your letters to me in that manner. therefore till I can procure franks enclose to M^r^. Fraser, or your Maid to whom I suppose you have some. (HAM/1/15/2/26, 1783)

Apparently, Gunning enclosed her letter to Hamilton in a frank addressed to Sir William Wake at Hamilton's London address. However, the ruse failed; the frank was rejected by the post office, which charged a fee upon delivery to Hamilton's house. Worse still, the letter was mistakenly given to Sir William's son and taken to Essex, where Sir William opened it. Importantly, the scheme was known not only to the writers, but also had the agreement of the franker. Hamilton's reiteration of Mary Wake's assurances that the letter remained unread adds to the sense of confidentiality fostered by their private scheme. In both cases, then, collusion cultivates a sense of exclusivity and in-group solidarity.

Targeting a relationship also appears in *You won't mind paying for my letter*, where the writer violates the negatively polite tropes above, explicitly informing the recipient that they must pay, as in passages (16) and (17).

(16) I detained this Letter for a Frank, but as I am not likely to get one – I shall send it away without, & I know you will excuse me for so doing (HAM/1/11/41, 1789)

(17) Your insense [*sic*] was not incense to Me, as the explanation was a direct attack on my knowledge of the English language. I could pun on the word for half an hour, but that would cost you the price of a treble Letter. You cannot grudge to pay double, as the reading the old Lady's Will at D^rs^. Commons would have cost you half a Crown. (HAM/1/20/109, 1789)

In (16), Lady Dartrey tells Hamilton she has no frank. However, unlike earlier examples, she does not apologize; rather, she relies on the strength of their friendship to presume that Hamilton will not mind paying postage. Example (17) employs another strategy to presume Hamilton's acceptance of a double letter. Francis Napier asserts that he *could* have written three sheets, had he let himself be carried away with his witticisms, presenting a worse scenario than that facing Hamilton. Moreover, he appeals to her curiosity about the contents of a relative's will — in providing that information, he establishes common ground, demonstrating his knowledge of a subject that they will both find of great

interest. Finally, he observes ironically that she cannot object to paying postage as it would cost more to read the will in person. Napier therefore utilizes several strategies in his 'frank talk' to underline their positive relationship.

3.4. Mock-Impoliteness

The final type of metacommunication involves mock-impoliteness, and is peculiar to letters from Francis Napier to Mary Hamilton. Mock-impoliteness, where a surface insult is 'incongruent with what one might expect in the particular context' (Culpeper, Haugh and Sinkeviciute 2017: 329), can be a bonding strategy for reinforcing or reaffirming group identity (Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997). It is a key element of the identity work Napier directs towards the building and maintenance of his close relationship with Hamilton (Wallis 2025), here illustrated in (18) and (19).

(18) Since you are <u>saucy</u> and won't write to <u>me</u>, I'll be revenged by writing often & making you pay the Postage (HAM/1/20/11, 1779)

(19) I had hopes of hearing from you before this, but as you did not think proper to gratify my wish & as I had procured some franks from Gen[l]- Skene I determined to be <u>Gracious</u> and to favor you with a Mark of my <u>Condescencion</u> [*sic*] (HAM/1/20/21, 1779)

In both examples, Napier's surface impoliteness forms a humorously ironic expression of his warm friendship for Hamilton. His 'revenge' for her silence takes the form of imposing a cost to receive his letters (Napier was not an MP at this point), which he threatens to write often. Again, a notion of balance and reciprocity appears — since Hamilton has not upheld her end of their friendship contract by writing in good time, she must pay the penalty in postage. Example (19) similarly has its roots in Hamilton's perceived tardiness in writing. By writing out of turn and sending his unexpected letter in a frank, Napier mockingly takes the moral high ground; yet, his playful tone conveys a sincere complaint about Hamilton's lack of contact. In both examples, Napier mockingly attributes impolite motives to Hamilton's actions (she is 'saucy' or 'did not think it proper' to write sooner), which he counters with his own 'revenge' and 'Mark of my Condescenscion'.

'Frank talk' appears in *MHP* in a variety of forms, achieving different ends. While the negatively polite sentiments appear to have the status of rote tropes, the positively polite themes convey genuine warmth of feeling and stake a claim for the importance of the relationship to the writer. Themes targeting the relationship between writer and recipient, however, are the most complex and varied. These range from the expression of shared literary tastes, via private schemes invoking a shared, intimate world, to deliberate flouting of polite postal practices and playful teasing, by correspondents who claim a closeness to Hamilton that goes beyond conventional platitudes.

4. Conclusion

This study of practices and discourses around franking in *MHP* demonstrates the insights available from combining material and textual analyses of historical data. It contributes to our understanding of the social meaning of franks — a hitherto unexplored topic — for writers like Hamilton, and showcases the importance of examining material aspects of letter writing alongside the textual. The abuse of franks was a practice eagerly indulged

in among Hamilton's circles, and evidence from *MHP* suggests that individuals went to great lengths to obtain franks. Franks had a range of practical benefits, allowing senders to write (or demand) longer letters at no extra cost, to share reading materials, or enclose letters for third parties. The *MHP* correspondence demonstrates that Hamilton and her friends used all the network connections at their disposal, however tenuous, to reap these benefits. However, the acquisition of a frank could not be taken for granted, and influencing factors include the social status of a writer — they were only available to those with connections to sitting MPs — as well as the location and time of writing. In addition, the efforts of the authorities to restrict fraudulent franking placed further constraints on their availability. Nevertheless, a frank marked the user as a member of the elite, and may therefore be considered a behaviour that set apart 'polite society' (Watts 2003). Beyond their utility as a sign of a writer's particular regard for their correspondent, then, they functioned as identity markers, presenting the sender (and recipient) as privileged and polite.

An investigation of 'frank talk' reveals some of the varied meanings attributed to the practice by the writers in this dataset. Many chose to talk about franking, though the function of this discourse was not the same for each writer. In some cases, existing self-effacing tropes were adapted to incorporate opportunities offered by franking, while other writers used 'frank talk' for positive politeness work, or to target a relationship they wished to strengthen or maintain. Thus, franks developed pragmatic and identity functions for Hamilton's circle, allowing the sender to demonstrate affection, not only by privileging their correspondent practically, but also by portraying themselves as a friend by discussing the efforts they expend to procure free postage. Franking therefore contributes to a discourse of friendship, whereby esteem for an interlocutor is demonstrated by the use of (or at least the acknowledged attempt to obtain) a frank.

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NOTES

1. First-person writings, e.g. personal letters, diaries, and autobiographies. For their use in historical sociolinguistic studies, see Elspaß (2012) and van der Wal and Rutten (2013).

2. See Barker and Yáñez-Bouza's Foreword and Coulombeau, Yáñez-Bouza, and Denison's Introduction to this special issue; also, see Denison, Yáñez-Bouza, and Oudesluijs (2024).

3. *OED* s.v. *frank* v. 2 '[t]o superscribe (a letter, etc.) with a signature, so as to ensure its being sent without charge; to send or cause to be sent free of charge', from which developed senses under *frank* n. 5 '[t]he superscribed signature of a person, e.g. a member of Parliament, entitled to send letters post free', and '[a] letter or envelope bearing such a superscription' [accessed 26 June 2024].

4. For methods of folding and locking letters, see <http://letterlocking.org/> [accessed 14 August 2023].

5. 'To get possession of by stealth' (*OED* s.v. *smuggle* v. 1, 3.a. [accessed 12 September 2023]). Napier's meaning is unclear; perhaps, he fears letters will not be delivered without the incentive of future payment (Whyman 2009: 62–63). Hamilton's correspondents voice general anxiety about the arrival of previous letters, though I have found no specific evidence of *pre-paid* letters going undelivered.

6. For an overview of approaches to identity in historical sociolinguistics, see Hernández-Campoy (2016); in the field of (im)politeness research, see Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Sifianou (2010).

7. Fig. 3 categories: individuals in **bold** spent periods as MPs in the House of Commons or the House of Lords. Sarah Dickenson (*c.* 1768–1836) was the sister of Hamilton's husband, John Dickenson. 'Hamilton family' includes Hamilton's paternal uncles, the ambassador Sir William (1731–1803) and Frederick Hamilton (1728–1811), Frederick's daughter Jane Holman (1768–1810), and Hamilton's cousins Frances Harpur (1744–1825), **Charles Francis** (1749–1809), **George** (1746–1816), and **Robert Fulke Greville** (1751–1824). Wilhelmina Murray (née King, 1738–1795) was also a distant relative. The Napier family were relatives by marriage of the Hamiltons, and **Francis** (8th Lord, 1758–1823) was a regular correspondent of Hamilton's throughout her life. The Glover and Clarke families were longstanding friends of Hamilton (and possibly her parents) since her youth. 'Other friends' consists of Elizabeth Iremonger (1757–1826) and Dorothy Blosset (1739–1811), regular correspondents of Hamilton's after she left Court. Hamilton's Court connections include Sophia Feilding (1748–1815), Lady Dartrey (Philadelphia Hannah Freame, later Dawson, 1740–1826), Lady Charlotte Finch (1725–1813), **John Fisher** (1748–1825) and her close friends Martha Carolina Goldsworthy (*c.* 1740–1816) and Charlotte Margaret Gunning (1759–1794). Hamilton's Bluestocking friends are represented by Hannah More (1745–1833) and Elizabeth Montagu (1718–1800).

8. For example, George, Prince of Wales (GEO/ADD/3/83/58), Jane Holman (HAM/1/4/3/17), and Charlotte Gunning (HAM/1/15/1/9, HAM/1/15/1/12).

9. As the cover of HAM/1/15/2/2 has not survived, it is not possible to tell whether Hamilton successfully acquired her frank, or to further identify 'the Bishop', possibly one of the codenames used by Hamilton and close correspondents like Charlotte Gunning or John Dickenson when writing about mutual acquaintances (Gardner 2022: 299).

10. See Haslett (2010), Voloshkova (this issue), MS Eng 1778 128, and MS Eng 1778 130 (both dated 1783), for more details of Hamilton's role in the poem's early distribution and reception.

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