

"Attached and Loving Sister," "Constant Unalterable Friend," and "Loving and Dutiful Daughter:" Elizabeth Phelps Huntington Conceptualizes Her Identity

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Elisabeth B. Nichols
University of New Hampshire
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The goal of this paper is to explore the different ways in which Elizabeth Phelps Huntington (1779-1847) expressed herself to others. Since we're here at Forty Acres today, I have organized this talk in terms of her reflections on her home in Hadley as a young woman. The letters were written from and to Hadley, Boston (where her brother Charles lived), Newburyport (where his fiancée Sarah lived), and Litchfield (where Elizabeth moved after marrying). I am curious about how this young rural woman understood herself. How did she situate herself, talk about herself? What kind of vocabulary did she invoke? And specifically, in this case, why did her descriptions of Hadley change so remarkably from early complaints about Hadley as "obscure," "solitary," and "rustical" to later celebrations of Hadley as "beloved," "serene," and "dear?"

I would like to start by being explicit about the assumptions underlying this approach. I am arguing, as have others, that identity is socially constructed, that language is socially constructed, and that language and context act upon each other.¹ Letters enable correspondents to express themselves and describe their lives in their own terms, more or less, given that language is socially constructed. Letters allow one to elaborate upon and celebrate certain events and they also invite one to ignore or condense others. They also permit the articulation of different voices, different

Nicola, E.W. Phelps, Identity, draft-2

selves, which enables correspondents to affirm or construct new selves, or refine and situate already existing selves.²

Elizabeth's letters are also written over time and space and in the context of interactions with others which also effects identity construction. Elizabeth's letters reflect contexts (plural) and identities (plural), all of which belong to her. My goal then is to restore complexity, multiple dimensions, and mystery to one young woman who came of age in rural Massachusetts at the turn of the nineteenth century.

In spite of how much I have narrowed the focus of this paper--to expressions to three people about Hadley--the quotes I invoke will touch on a number of different themes. I've mentioned identity and identities. A useful way to listen to Elizabeth's words as I read them might be to think in terms of spaces, both literal and figurative. Elizabeth negotiates the literal spaces between Hadley, Boston, and Litchfield. But she also negotiates at least three different kinds of spaces that are not geographic. She negotiates literary space, domestic space, and commercial, refined, polite space. Some of these are connected to geography--the commercial, refined space, for example--and some are not. And, although the trope of spheres has perhaps outlived its usefulness (as Laurel Ulrich, Linda Kerber, and others have argued, and with whom I usually agree), there is also a sense that she negotiated private and public spaces, revealing that spaces are gendered.

Let me begin with the letters to her brother, Charles Porter Phelps (1772-1857). Seven years Elizabeth's senior, Charles was a practicing lawyer in Boston and courting Sarah Parsons in the late 1790s. The letters start in 1796, when Elizabeth was 17 years old, and are generally cheerful and playful.³ The first that refers to Hadley asked, "Will you permit me dear Charles once more to greet you in the language of affection and friendship? or

Nichols, E.W. Phelps, Identity, draft--3

have you quite forgotten your kindred in this western world?" (EWP to CPP, September 17, 1796⁴) Future references to Hadley did not always maintain this teasing tone. Several months later, in a letter sent via her mother who was traveling to Boston, she complained, "I wish very much to see you, but am going to be left at home alone--in solitude." (EWP to CPP, May 30, 1797) And when asking for goods from Boston, she reminded him, in reference to a beaver hat for example, that "a cheaper one would answer as well as any here in the country." (EWP to CPP, May 30, 1797)⁵ Refinement in Hadley is different than refinement in Boston. In another letter, she wrote to Charles asking about the propriety of accepting a silver hat band from Sarah, and she hastened to assure Charles, "I have not accepted it--wish you would tell me what to do." (EWP to CPP, September 30, 1797) Although she belonged to an elite family, she was unsure about herself in eastern Massachusetts and turned to her brother, long a resident in sophisticated Boston, for advice on matters of social etiquette.⁶

To Charles then, Elizabeth's Hadley was "western," "country," solitary, and potentially ill-mannered. As these examples suggest, she self-consciously compared urban Boston and rural Hadley and found notable differences in terms of companionship and politeness. She found Hadley wanting.

Once back in Hadley, Elizabeth's sense of the contrast between rural Hadley and urban Boston became more pronounced in her letters to Charles. At first still playful and excited about her time in Boston, Elizabeth reported to Charles upon arriving in Hadley that her mother feared her new clothes "should frighten some out of the house of worship." (EWP to CPP, Dec. 18, 1797)⁷ Clearly, what was stylish in Boston might have challenged usual Hadley mores and Elizabeth found this amusing and perhaps enjoyed being a bit

Nichols, E.W. Phelps, Identity, draft--4

of a sensation. But a few weeks later, she reported to Charles that "Nothing has transpired since last I wrote, worthy of being related--our time here, in this obscure corner of the world glides smoothly on." (EWP to CPP, January 2, 1798) Clearly bored, and a bit cranky and anxious, she demanded of her brother: "I should like to know if you ever intend to get married--for I shall want to go to Boston again--in the course of a few years perhaps--and I had almost determined not to--till you had given me a home there--which I shall take advantage of--if have ever an opportunity." (EWP to CPP, March 18, 1798)

In a letter to Charles from Brimfield a month later, she reinforced her distinction between rural and urban by informing Charles, "This town I find much pleasanter than I expected--tho' the inhabitants are unpolished and rather more rustical (if possible) than those of Hadley." (EWP to CPP, April 23, 1798) In this same letter, however, she referred to Forty Acres tenderly as the "abode of our infancy." (EWP to CPP, April 23, 1798) While Hadley compared unfavorably to Boston then, it fared much better in comparison to another rural location. Still, next to Charles's busy and bustling Boston, Hadley was in a different "quarter of the world," "obscure," and "rustical." Her letters to Charles express envy that he lived in Boston and her fervent wishes that he would give her a home there.

Elizabeth and her brother's fiancée Sarah Parsons began corresponding about this time and before leaving Boston Elizabeth wrote to Sarah expressing her sorrow at returning to Hadley and her longing for Sarah:

it is soothing to reflect that after I return home, I shall often be cheered with letters from my friend--do not my good girl withdraw your favors after I leave Boston but consider I shall then need them more than ever--in the country--in solitude." (EWP to SDP, November 12, 1797)⁹

Boston and Hadley are now far distant from each other and she begged Sarah to

Nichols, E.W. Phelps, Identity, draft--5

send consoling letters to her in the solitary countryside.

She also wrote to Sarah about Sarah's anticipated union with Charles but couched her haste for this event in a much more conciliatory tone than she had assumed with her brother ("I should like to know if you ever intend to get married"). "Tomorrow morning, an end will be put to my residence in Boston--for the present," she wrote, "but I anticipate with pleasure the time when I shall have the satisfaction of visiting my friend here--believe me my girl, a great part of my happiness will depend on a certain event." (EWP to SDP, November 22, 1797)¹⁰ Elizabeth expressed her desire to visit Boston in terms of her great affection for Sarah. In the meantime, she continued to beseech Sarah for consoling letters. On an apparently very cold day in January, 1799, she entreated her

forget me not Sarah--girl of my fond affection--but in this cold stormy season, think of me, who, envelop'd in snow--& shivering round the fire, asks the favor of a cheering letter. (EWP to SDP, January 5, 1799)¹¹

A few months later, Elizabeth wrote Sarah apologetically, saying that she "can hardly say whether you will thank me for continuing this uninteresting scrawl--for so unvarying is the stream of life, that nothing occurs the recital of which could give you any satisfaction." But indeed there was excitement at Forty Acres, and Elizabeth continued, "but [we are] in such confusion, you would not know this solitary antique habitation; the house is undergoing a complete repair--and may I not hope you will soon make it your dwelling-?" (EWP to SDP, July 12, 1799) She further enticed Sarah to come to Hadley by referring to Hadley as a "serene retreat." (EWP to SDP, July 12, 1799) At this point, Charles and Sarah were considering living at Hadley and Elizabeth expressed her joyful anticipation of living with Sarah by celebrating Hadley, heretofore a cold, obscure, rustical, "solitary antique

Nichols, E.W. Phelps, Identity, draft--6

habitation," as a "serene retreat."

Charles and Sarah did finally marry in 1800 but they remained in Boston and Elizabeth enlisted Sarah to purchase goods for her, including shoes, gloves and "a purple and white plaid ribbon for [her] bonnet." (EWP to SPP, November 9, 1800) She also asked for Sarah's counsel with Boston fashions: "If you know of any new way to make gowns, be so kind as to describe it to me." (EWP to SPP, November 9, 1800)¹²

While the references to Hadley in these early letters to Charles and Sarah featured some of the same themes, the language, mood, and appearance of the letters varied tremendously. The letters to Charles were informal, occasionally hurried, and sometimes humble in a teasing sort of way. In one letter, for example, Elizabeth warned Charles that "next Tuesday--will restore me to the attention of my dear brother--don't you dread it?" (EWP to CPP, October 11, 1797) In contrast, the letters to Sarah were formal, often mournful, gracefully written, effusive, and apologetic. She closed one letter, for example, by admonishing Sarah, "When you have perused this letter commit it to the flames--but the writing is such that I fear you will not be able to read it--however I have done with apologies--and commit this to you, as to a friend who is generous to excuse the failings of a friend." (EWP to SDP, October 18, 1797) When writing to Sarah, Elizabeth's Hadley is a "solitary antique habitation" because Sarah is not there, not because it isn't urbane Boston. Should Sarah come, Hadley would be transformed into a "serene retreat."

In the self that Elizabeth revealed to Sarah, Hadley enjoyed possibilities that it was denied in letters to Charles. The sentimental literary language Elizabeth invoked in these letters prohibited crass

Nichols, E.W. Phelps, Identity, draft--7

denunciations of Hadley. Charles could solve the problem of "rustical," "obscure" Hadley by inviting Elizabeth to Boston. The Hadley that Elizabeth presented to Sarah wasn't so tiresome; this Hadley was wrapped in romantic and dramatic phrases, "solitary antique habitation" "envelop'd in snow," and needed only Sarah's letters or Sarah's presence to make it "serene." To Sarah, Elizabeth stressed her relationship with Sarah over geography. She would do this in later letters to her mother as well.

Elizabeth's early letters to her mother fall somewhere in between the matter-of-fact, teasing missives to Charles and the melancholy epistles to Sarah. During her first visit to Boston, she realized that she ought to be homesick but generally found herself quite content. In one letter, she inquired of her mother, "on the whole, madam, don't you think it strange that I have not been homesick?" (EWP to EPP, October 4, 1797)¹³ A month later, she assured her mother, "believe me, my dear mother--I feel happier as the time for my return draws near--think me not homesick--but imagine my heart eagerly anticipating the time when I shall again behold those dear objects of my warmest affection--and make one at the hospitable board--we are called to breakfast--good morning." (EWP to EPP, November 4, 1797) Notice how Elizabeth completely undermined a well-intended, elegant, and eloquent expression of homesickness by closing abruptly in favor of a meal. (Perhaps literary space colliding with the space of the family, or sentimental vision of family colliding with a real family?)

Elizabeth also sought to assure her mother that she exercised caution with strangers. Upon describing her journey to Boston, for example, she wrote: "there were three ladies in the stage, and two gentlemen--but you know my reserv'd disposition--and I did not wish to be too sociable, for fear they

Nichols, E.W. Phelps, Identity, draft--8

would be too familiar." (EWP to EPP, August 20, 1797) And again, when about to change lodgings in Boston, "you know too--that I am not the easiest to get acquainted with a person." (EWP to EPP, September 5, 1797) But two months rendered an amazing transformation in her interactions with others and she informed her mother,

You can't think, dear madam, how many new acquaintances we have form'd, ... and I have alter'd so wonderfully that it takes me but a short time to become acquainted now--when I think that I must leave them, perhaps, never to see them more--it makes me almost sad--yet when I reflect that the time which separates me from them, will restore me to you, every sensation but joy, leaves my heart--yet I shall regret leaving my friend Mary. (EWP to EPP, November 4, 1797)

When she failed to receive a letter from her mother, however, Elizabeth became both concerned and annoyed: "Shall I think you have forgotten me? no--for if there is any such thing as sympathy--sure it may be found in hearts which are knit together in bonds of affection like our's." (EWP to EPP, September 5, 1797) And a month later, "O what would not I give for a letter from home--I am afraid I shall have the vapours before long--what can be the reason--but I try not to worry myself about it." (EWP to EPP, October 4, 1797) In later letters to her mother, after she married, Elizabeth would worry very much indeed if she had not heard from her.

Upon moving to Litchfield after marrying Dan Huntington in 1801, Elizabeth's expressions about Hadley changed quite remarkably. Just as Hadley had fared better in an earlier comparison to Brimfield than it had next to Boston, Litchfield offered Elizabeth an entirely new perspective on her home. To Charles, it was now Litchfield that was "this distant land," and upon concluding a recitation of her new life and acquaintances in Litchfield, she continued,

from what I have said, you will perhaps think, that I have forgotten Hadley, but that would be a mistake indeed--how often I think of my

Nichols, E.W. Phelps, Identity, draft--9

beloved home, and those precious friends who reside there--how often this recollection wrings sighs from my heart, and tears from my eyes, is but known to myself. (EWPH to CPP, January 25, 1801)

And to Sarah, "shall I own to you my dear sister, I did not till then know what it was to leave my father's house, and consider myself a resident in a distant country." (EWPH to SPP, June 28, 1801)

While these expressions to both Charles and Sarah reflected the great changes in Elizabeth's life, it was to her mother particularly that she vented her sadness about leaving Hadley and living in Litchfield. Immediately upon arriving in Litchfield, she wrote to her mother, "I cannot forget you, no, my dear parents, I always think of you, and now and then a tear will start when I remember that 70 miles separate me from my beloved home." (EWPH to EPP, January 11, 1801) And an expected to trip to Hadley caused effusions of sentiment: "Ah--with what sensations shall I enter the place, which I left with weeping eyes--just entering upon a new, and a difficult state." (EWPH to EPP, March 7, 1801) In another letter, she assured her mother, "I think much of you at Hadley--is the harvest over?--that used to be a joyful time, and I hope it is this year--you remember how pleasantly we spent it last year--Sally was with us, and partook of our rustic amusements." (EWPH to EPP, July 22, 1801) While "rustical" had been invoked earlier to denounce Hadley in comparison to Boston, it now suggested comforting companionship and amusement.

Her sense of herself as alone in Litchfield was especially pronounced when she failed to hear from Hadley. In one letter, for example, she scolded her mother, "must I repeat that I am far distant from all my natural friends--and were it not for my husband a poor solitary being--must I endeavor to awaken your sensibility?" (EWPH to EPP, July 22, 1801) Unlike an earlier letter from Boston, a call for breakfast would not lightly interrupt this

Nichols, E.W. Phelps, Identity, draft--10

anxious plea.

After her first son was born, she confessed to fatigue and loneliness:

I am really home sick I believe or low spirited, Mr Huntington went yesterday to New Haven and I have been alone so much with my little sick boy--that I can hardly restrain the tears ... in my solitude I think of you, and that dear place where you live, once I could call it my home well it is no matter 'tis but a little while that I shall need a home in this world. (EWPB to EPP, September 8, 1802)

She did, however, plan to go to Hadley and wrote "I hope my visit will be tranquil if I go to see you this fall--I want to be alone with you a great deal." (EWPB to EPP, September 30, 1802) Here the tranquility that she denounced earlier is celebrated.

Two years into her life at Litchfield, Elizabeth closed a letter to her mother by writing sideways in the margin, "if a vacancy presents in your part of the vineyard, he (Mr Huntington) is ready to consider himself a candidate for it--if it will afford him and his increasing family a living." (EWPB to EPP, February 9, 1803) Hadley now might offer financial (public) as well as emotional (private) support to the young Huntington family. A few months later, she reflected, "It seems as if an absence of so many months and years might wean me a little from home--perhaps it has--but never shall I be weaned from my parents never do I part with them without tears." (EWPB to EPP, July 18, 1803)

Within the course of a few years, Elizabeth's Hadley changed remarkably. The "obscure corner of the world" of her earlier letters became a "vineyard" where she and her husband might enjoy both economic and emotional sustenance. While she still wrote to her brother and sister-in-law, the letters to her mother were notably long and frequent. A busy woman with insufficient help and infants on her hands, Elizabeth nevertheless invested a fair amount of time, usually late at night, to complain to her mother about Litchfield and

Nichols, E.W. Phelps, Identity, draft--11

share remembrances of Hadley. These letters are tightly written, cramped, and full of details about housekeeping, child-care, visiting, despair about being unworthy of God's blessings, and prayers to correct that weakness. Unlike the letters she penned while visiting Boston or living in Hadley, the letters of her early marriage are very sad. The act of writing itself was now called upon to bridge not only actual distance (isolation) between people, but to ease anxieties about new responsibilities and roles. She complains bitterly in these letters, and if she really cried as much as she claimed to her mother, she cut a morose figure indeed, but presumably the very quantity and length of these letters suggest that they helped Elizabeth affirm her own self in a challenging world of demands and cares by tirelessly reinforcing and confirming a connection to Forty Acres and its inhabitants.

References to Hadley in letters written after Elizabeth's marriage and removal to Litchfield in 1801 are similar to all three of her correspondents. The great variation of the earlier letters converged into a profound attachment to Hadley. To all three, Elizabeth talked fondly and mournfully about "those precious friends who reside there," "my father's house," and, to her mother, "that dear place where you live." It was the people and the relationships that Elizabeth shared with those who lived at Hadley that mattered. It was Sarah that counted earlier as well, but Elizabeth's letters to Sarah then were filled with hope. Later letters were gloomy and despondent. Elizabeth still wrote about Hadley, but Hadley had now become the dramatic, geographic focus of internal qualms and attachments.

ENDNOTES

1. See Lloyd S. Kramer, "Literature, Criticism, and Historical Imagination: The Literary Challenge of Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra," in The New Cultural History, Lynn Hunt, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 97-128; J.G.A. Pocock, "Introduction: The State of the Art" chapter in Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 1-34, especially pages 10-15; Carroll Smith Rosenberg, "Hearing Women's Words: A Feminist Reconstruction of History" in Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 11-52, especially 35, 42-45.
2. For a discussion of women's writing as exploratory and confirming in letters and journals, see Cinthia Gannett, Gender and the Journal: Diaries and Academic Discourse (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1992), especially chapter 4.
3. The first letter we have, for example, begins: "I write now, my dear brother, not because I have anything either new or entertaining to communicate, but merely to improve a good opportunity, which I never aim to let slip (EWP to CPP, May 5, 1796). Here she writes not for his edification, but for her own. There is no sense here that she has important information to convey to Charles. Another letter is even more playful: "Good morning to you brother--don't you think I am uncommonly good-to rise before the sun to write to you? (EWP to CPP, July 1, 1796)
4. All references to letters following quotes in parentheses are contained in the Porter-Phelps-Huntington Family Papers, Amherst College Library, Amherst, Mass. Initials are as follows: CPP: Charles Porter Phelps; EWP: Elizabeth Whiting Phelps; EWPH: Elizabeth Whiting Phelps Huntington; SDP: Sarah D. Parsons; SPP: Sarah Parson Phelps; EPP: Elizabeth Porter Phelps.
5. In another letter she referred to herself as a "country cousin" and hoped she wouldn't embarrass her brother upon visiting Boston. (EWP to CPP, July 12, 1797)
6. Conscious that she was making demands on Charles's time, she closed this letter with some humor and humility: "Now after telling you over, and over, what I wish to have done--to your unspeakable joy--I conclude with subscribing yours as ever Elizabeth." (EWP to CPP, September 30, 1797)
7. She also returned with a "guittar," which was the "subject of conversation many times." (EWP to CPP, Dec 18, 1797)

8. "Unruffled," she continued, "by the dissipation which reigns in your great town." (EWP to CPP, January 2, 1798)

9. The entire quote to Sarah reads, "and must I quit this quarter of the globe without again embracing her [Sarah]--? the thought is cutting--yet let me live in your memory--and it will alleviate the pain inflicted by the idea of the distance which separates us--it is soothing to reflect that after I return home, I shall often be cheered with letters from my friend--do not my good girl withdraw your favors after I leave Boston but consider I shall then need them more than ever--in the country--in solitude--tho' surrounded by a lov'd family--yet to read the transcripts of your kind heart will afford sweet consolation." (EWP to SDP, November 12, 1797) These letters to Sarah Parsons accord with Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's findings about "the female world of love and ritual" in so far as they invoke romantic, sentimental, and sometimes sensual language. On the other hand, Smith-Rosenberg's description of the purely separate male and female spheres that such letters reveal is belied in this case by the constant presence of Charles (usually explicit but sometimes implicit) and the fact that Elizabeth felt free to write to Charles as well as Sarah about his love for Sarah. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America" in Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 53-76.

10. A few months later, still anxiously anticipating the marriage of Sarah and Charles, Elizabeth reminded Sarah that "it will constitute my chief pride and happiness to be call'd your friend; but as I have often said, there is another title, which as it would add a greater honour, so it would more promote my felicity--. for this event, I cannot help daily offering my petitions to the beneficent disposer of all good." (EWP to SDP, May 26, 1799)

11. She also sought to stir Sarah's heart (and pen) by remembering past shared moments. After calling Sarah, "the sweet friend of my heart," she continued, "with whom I have passed so many pleasant hours--the recollection of which, would add a sting to my heart--did I not indulge a hope--that the same happiness would be repeated--.-- Often, very often, is my memory recurring back, to scenes in which I have been engag'd--which fill'd my bosom with delight at the time--& cast a glimmering ray on my recollecting imagination--forget me not Sarah--girl of my fond affection--but in this cold stormy season, think of me, who, envelop'd in snow--& shivering round the fire, asks the favor of a cheering letter--to be convinced of your continuing love--yet that is not necessary--I will think of you, as I feel myself--& believe you still my friend." (EWP to SDP, January 5, 1799)

Nichols, E.W. Phelps, Identity, draft--14

12. Once Sarah's first baby was born, Elizabeth was anxious to know what motherhood was like: "surely there is some little time which may be spared from the darling boy--to communicate to a loving sister, some of the maternal feelings with which I know your heart abounds ... he is a precious deposit--lent to you for a season--I trust you view him as such--and have long ere this time devoted him to the gracious Giver--" but she also enclosed a list of a few articles she wanted Sarah to purchase for her in Boston. (EWP to SPP, Oct 25, 1801)

13. Although she continued by attempting to assure her mother of her devotion. "You will say I am wean'd from you--that is not the case--for if I did not know I should return again at the appointed time--or near the expiration of the three months, I should be apt to feel unhappy." (EWP to EPP, October 4, 1797).