The writing of letters in Britain during the eighteenth century has been described by Bruce Redford as “the converse of the pen” and by Linda Zionkowski as a “commerce”. But neither of these writers has fully explored the reverse implications of the metaphors they use. For whereas letters may be like conversations or commerce they are certainly not the same as them; and what letters do not have in common with these other forms of human interaction might prove more interesting than what they do have in common with them. The principal difference lies in the medium of transaction. Transactions of conversation and commerce are carried out either face-to-face or by directly appointed agent; whereas the exchange of letters takes place at a distance and within the impersonal network of cross posts, byposts and post roads which constitute the postal system. One of the most important implications of this principal difference is a result of the fact that a postal system always relies upon a centre in order to facilitate sorting and distribution: for such a centre will inevitably mediate or affect what is sent. Richard Rogers reveals the most likely nature of the centre of a postal network when he affirms that “cities ... are the seedbeds of our cultural development ... centres of communication, learning and complex commercial enterprises”. From a supposed postmodernist – the architect of the Centre Pompidou and the Court of Human Rights – such a statement might seem a contradiction, given postmodernism’s concern with what Linda Hutcheon terms “decentering”. And indeed Eric Hobsbawm directly challenges Rogers’s maxim when he identifies the twentieth century as the site of:

a revolution in transport and communications which virtually annihilated time and distance ... and for most practical purposes, abolished the cultural advantages of city over countryside.4

But if such a revolution has indeed taken place, how is it possible to explain what Stephen Bayley terms the continued “gravitational pull of the city”, the phenomenon which accounts for the fact that “half the world’s population now lives in cities and by 2005 it is estimated that fraction will have risen to three-quarters”?5 Perhaps with the advent of information technology such a gravitational pull no longer has anything to do with culture and all to do with social and economic inequality. More to my purpose, the very ground upon which this debate is fought – Hobsbawm’s siting of his revolution in the twentieth century – directly implies that in the eighteenth century, at least, the city was the undisputed centre of culture, transport and communications.

This essay will explore some effects of the centrality of the city upon an eighteenth-century published correspondence: that of the Countesses of Pomfret and Hertford. The correspondence was first published in 1805, and – as in the case of the Turkish Embassy Letters (1763) of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the Letters to his Son and Others (1774) of Lord Chesterfield – its publishers evidently hoped for success on the basis of the aristocracy of the correspondents. Thus, the 1806 edition informs us that the Countesses’ friendship developed at Court in London whilst both were ladies of the bedchamber to Caroline, the wife of King George II. Certainly, on one level the correspondence does satisfy the demand for courtly gossip – in one letter alone there are references to the fact that “the Duke of Marlborough lost 700 pounds ... [and that] Lady Caroline Sackville is to be married”.6 But what neither of the two editions of this correspondence tells us is that Court life at the time was highly politically charged, vindictive and unforgiving; and that from the start the Countesses’ friendship became an act of mutual solidarity (a condition which was later reflected in the letters). On Caroline’s death in 1737, the Countesses retired from London without regret – Hertford to her country estates at Richkings and Pomfret to travel on the continent. This separation is the point at which the three-year correspondence begins. In other words, only a very few of these letters were written from or to London; and probably not one letter would have been written if the Countesses had not first been separated by their retirement from London. How then can the city possibly have any

6 Frances Hertford and Henrietta Louisa Pomfret, Correspondence between Frances, Countess of Hartford, (Afterwards Duchess of Somerset,) and Henrietta Louisa, Countess of Pomfret, between the years 1738 and 1741, ed. William Bingley, London, 1806, I, 75-76.