Governed by Gossip: The Personal Letters and Public Purpose of Philip Ludwell in Early-Eighteenth-Century Virginia

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Now Sir, I value my Reputation more than my Life And I thank God I have hitherto kept it untainted by any but his Excellency’s fowle tongue, And tho’ I do not value what he says of me here where we are both known yet perhaps his Slanders may finde Credit where we are not; Wherefore I earnestly intreat you to make diligent inquiry, And if you find he hath given me any base Character, endeavor to vindicate me.¹

In March 1703, Philip Ludwell wrote to his father in England about the unseemly behavior of Virginia’s governor, Francis Nicholson. Ludwell’s correspondence revealed his concern over Nicholson’s allegedly foul tongue and slanders as well as Nicholson’s aggressive pursuit of Lucy Burwell, to whom Ludwell was related. Because of this relationship, the governor’s treatment of Lucy Burwell escalated into a battle between the two men and, through Ludwell’s family connections, became part of the contest between the governor and his Council of State. A powerful body politic, the Council was the upper house of the legislature as well as the general court. The Crown appointed its members, including Philip Ludwell in 1702. From his councilor’s rank, Ludwell the scribe became narrator, witness, and judge of Nicholson’s actions and policies. Thus, Ludwell’s letters to his father cast him as protagonist and
protector of young Lucy from the determined governor. Despite the familial character of Ludwell’s interactions with Nicholson on Lucy’s behalf, their private relationship was conducted on a public stage and orchestrated according to a score of gentility. This genteel code guided social ritual and defined comportment; how effectively it was mastered reinforced the political position of Virginians within eighteenth-century society. Nicholson’s ungentlemanly behavior toward Lucy Burwell, and toward Ludwell, proved a costly miscalculation. As the colony’s highest official, Nicholson’s spiteful speeches made his language heard; however, they lessened the degree to which those to whom it was directed listened. Instead, his opponents transformed the governor’s language into a weapon that eventually brought down his government in 1705.

Although gossip has long been associated with feminine strategies for accommodation and negotiation within a patriarchal society,