

# I Will Carry You with Me on the Wings of Immagination: Aerial Letters and Eighteenth- Century Ballooning.

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## "I Will Carry You with Me on the Wings of Immagination": Aerial Letters and Eighteenth-Century Ballooning

Clare Brant

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**"I Will Carry You with Me on the Wings of  
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*Clare Brant*

Postal historians are keen on firsts: they're tied to philately. The first airmail stamps commemorate heavier-than-air machines. According to Rick Miller of *Linn's Stamp News*,

Four countries, India, Italy, Austria, and the United States, lay claim to the most significant firsts in airmail history. The first official airmail flight by a heavier-than-aircraft was a truly international affair. Authorized by the Indian government, the flight was carried out in a British-built and British-owned aircraft flown by a French pilot.<sup>1</sup>

This was in 1911. Airmail has a longer history if you view it through lighter-than-air flight. It is well known that citizens in the Siege of Paris in 1871 turned to balloons to get letters out—sixty-six balloons in all left the city, mostly at night, with a total of eleven tons of mail or two-and-a-half million letters, plus four hundred carrier pigeons for return postings, demonstrating, in the words of one historian, that "flight meant communication. This was the harbinger of enormous change."<sup>2</sup> That change, however, had been foreseen earlier. The first official airmail delivery in the United States was via a balloon called the Jupiter, piloted by one John Wise, to whom the [End Page 168] postmaster of Lafayette, Indiana, entrusted a bag of mail, all of whose contents had to include in their address the phrase "Via Balloon Jupiter, 1858."<sup>3</sup> Light winds meant the aeronaut flew only thirty miles before landing; he handed his bag to a railroad postal agent who put it on a New York-bound train. It was a nice act of faith by the Lafayette postmaster—but not a new one, for the history of airmail begins with balloons themselves, in the 1780s. If flight means communication, then how balloons furthered communication is a story in itself. As Jan Golinski has observed, the dispersal of Enlightenment ideas was assisted by increased publication of printed materials and by the intellectual activities of numerous clubs and societies, in which "experimental science and literature were frequently pursued in parallel."<sup>4</sup>

The association between letters and balloons can be read in parallel.

Most simply, aeronauts took letters aloft, either for airborne dispersal or land-based delivery on arrival, demonstrating how epistolary communication joined up with balloons. Letters stood in for experiment, metonymically, as they did on the ground, providing descriptions of experiments and reporting proof. By this reading, airmail letters materially extend the general function of eighteenth-century letters as vehicles of news. In addition to proposing that epistolary history should be adjusted to extend airmail back to the 1780s, I wish to argue that there is more to the intersection of letters and flight than material congruity. Letters were not ideologically incidental cargo; they were a vehicle in which imagination sailed aurally—for aeronauts literally, for readers at one remove. Aerostation was a new hub for dispersing scientific ideas through texts; the popularity of epistolary texts in the literature of ballooning shows that what is also being dispersed is a medium of imagination. Letters by aeronauts and by spectators of balloon voyages made readers think of flight literally, and about flight imaginatively. Readers were invited aloft to share fears, joys, vicissitudes, and triumphs that draw on epistolary articulations of humanity as much as on science. Letters dissolve distance by bringing writer and reader into a shared communicative space, the written page; that shared space then also doubled for the airspace in which aeronauts and writers could come together communicatively.

Eighteenth-century ballooning provides much material of cultural significance, and its import is beginning to attract scholarly attention. The subject obviously invites discussion by historians of ideas and of science, but the historical importance of early aeronautics, intellectual networks, instrument **[End Page 169]** making, and late eighteenth-century chemistry should not obscure the presence of a strong literary component. My focus here is on the association between balloons and letters, on the symbolic exchanges between experiences of flight and letter writing, an association subliminally reinforced by the presence of pigeons. Taken aloft...



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King's College London

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