

the changing profession

The Letter of Recommendation as Strange Work

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On the one hand, the gift presents itself as a radical Other of the commodity—and therefore also of work, insofar as the latter is understood as an investment of time and energy made in the expectation of wages or profit. On the other hand, the idea of the gift seems constantly to be drawn back under the horizon of rational exchange, and to be thus endlessly re-revealed as a secret ally of both work and the Work.

—Scott Cutler Shershow, *The Work and the Gift*

I have put together all these details to convince you that this recommendation of mine is something out of the common.

Quae ego omnia collegi, ut intellegeres non vulgarem esse commendationem hanc meam.

—Cicero, *Epistulae ad familiares*, book 13

LAST FALL I FOUND IN MY OFFICE MAILBOX AN ENVELOPE FROM A SOPHOMORE ENGLISH MAJOR WHO HAD ASKED ME DURING THE SUMMER

for a last-minute letter of recommendation for a scholarship competition. The envelope contained a handwritten thank-you note—and a gift certificate for a local restaurant. I e-mailed the student to thank her and to tell her that I couldn't accept the gift certificate since the letter I had written for her was part of my job as a teacher. She insisted; I insisted. She said that several teachers had turned her down before I agreed (from a hotel in Germany) to write for her. I felt rueful, as well as grateful to her for the token of gratitude that I couldn't accept. Eventually she won the debate: I accepted the printed piece of paper and took my daughters out to a free lunch.

The lunch wasn't really free, however. I paid for it with an ongoing unease about having taken the gift certificate; moreover, it was not free because in some sense my student was correct in her judgment that I had earned the gift certificate by doing work that was extra to the tasks for which I am officially evaluated and paid by my employer, a public university in California. There are, of course, many kinds of extra work that teachers routinely do, in various kinds of educational institutions:

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extras include making lengthy comments on papers and purchasing teaching materials from one's own pocket to help students do well and, less altruistically, to strengthen the teacher's performance review. Such activities, like most of the letters of recommendation we write for students and colleagues, do not fit neatly into the category of work that Scott Cutler Shershow defines in the passage quoted in my first epigraph: "an investment of time and energy made in the expectation of wages or profit" (5). Instead, such activities occupy an ambiguous territory that Shershow locates in a "fatal conjunction" among ideas of "work," "the gift," and what he calls "the Work" (1). Ideas about "the Work," a category that includes works of art, works of scholarship, and other projects that contribute significantly to their creators' sense of self-worth, are the main focus of my argument here. I propose that some but not all letters of recommendation constitute intellectual projects that engage our professional egos in significant ways. Such letters fit Shershow's definition of "the Work," and I contrast them to types of recommendation that seem like easy work (in the lower case). Both types of recommendation, moreover, can look like gifts, on occasion, by virtue of their belonging to cycles of patronage involving debt, gratitude, reward, and further debt. These contrasting types of recommendation illuminate several gray areas in our professional modes of being today. Often viewed by colleagues in the natural and social sciences as occupying a wavy border between knowledge workers and service workers, teachers in the humanities hold values shaped by guild or "craft" ideologies as well as by a humanist ideal that defines "education as culture, and sets it in opposition to the training of specialists or technicians" (Bourdieu, Passeron, and Saint Martin 6, 99). Our "Work," in Shershow's sense, matters to us despite, and sometimes even because of, its often modest financial rewards.

Each of Shershow's three terms inhabits and defines the other two; the shifting rela-

tion among them offers a useful lens through which to reflect on the letter of recommendation as a form of epistolary writing that both transfers and withholds information as it travels on a triangular path among parties with complex and shifting relations to one another. The parties are writer, addressee (usually a single person in the past but often a plural entity today), and subject. The latter, typically a historical person whose qualities the letter interprets and materially represents, is also a potential reader of the letter; the subject's imagined responses shape the letter's rhetoric whether or not the document is sealed (as it frequently was in Cicero's day) or defined by institutional readers as "strictly confidential" (as were the letters William Clark examines in his study of the origins of academic charisma and the research university in eighteenth-century Germany).¹ The asymmetries of power and knowledge endemic to the letter of recommendation in its long and multicultural history contribute substantially to its strangeness as an instance of "the Work" in Shershow's sense, an activity that may be undertaken not "in the expectation of wages or profit" but nonetheless in the hope of future reward, including an increase in the letter writer's *cultural capital*. That phrase, which has been central to recent theorizations of educational institutions as sites for social reproduction, is an apt modern English analogue for Cicero's term "dignitas" (98–99). Cicero sought to increase or at least maintain his *dignitas* in his letters of recommendation, which also aimed to do a "material service" for the recommendee (104–05).²

For Cicero such letters pose a potential challenge to the writer's dignity because they make the writer subservient to the reader; they also pose a challenge because of their routineness, which makes them seem like "vulgar" ("vulgarem")—that is, lower-class or common—work (104–05). An active aristocratic patron himself and a dexterous practitioner of what Jon Hall calls "affiliative

politeness,” Cicero wrote recommendations for many people; some 130 are extant, of which 79 were collected after his death into a book (bk. 13) of his influential *Epistulae ad familiares* (Hall 29; White 46–51; Cotton). As a petitioning gesture that he often repeated, Cicero’s letter writing dramatizes a problem: the writer’s normally “distinguished” style, a key aspect of “the Work” and important to professional selfhood, may come to seem common in this genre dedicated to rhetorical work for someone else—a problem still important for certain species of recommendation letters today. Cicero’s term “vulgar” clearly denotes a writing style as well as a class status. In many of his letters, including the one cited in my second epigraph, he insists that he has worked to make the letter extraordinary; he has devoted time and energy to seem different from a mere worker in his society. He shows us a scene of recommendation writing in which a person who might be hard to distinguish from other candidates needs help from a writer whose own social and literary distinction is threatened by the act of repeated petitioning.³

For many writers around the world who regularly produce letters of recommendation today or did so in the past, however, the writer’s dignity or prestige is not at stake in the composition or circulation of such letters. Indeed, I surmise that for most recommendation writers past and present, questions of reward and regard—two terms that were synonyms in medieval English and French—are not relevant to the task.⁴

It is important to have this contrasting view of the letter as relatively easy and typically short work for the writer (though not for that reason lacking in complexity as cultural work) if we want to appreciate the strangeness of the modern species of letter I examine below: the type of letter that teachers in language and literature fields in United States and Canadian universities with graduate programs write for students attempting to find employment in academia. This epistolary

genre may seem minor, but its problems are significant in themselves and have implications for how we write letters for tenure and promotion cases (“barrier promotions,” as my university forthrightly calls them) and also for how (or whether) we train graduate students in the complexities of the modern academic letter as a hybrid genre containing multiple, and sometimes competing, concepts of its purpose. Its obligations to the recommendee do not, as we will see, always coincide with its obligations to readers, who have frequently, since the eighteenth century, represented institutional interests in measuring and comparing candidates for academic employment and quantifying their achievements.

Returning to the “short” type of recommendation mentioned above, I want to consider it not simply as a document that contrasts with the modern letter for graduate students—though it does provide instructive contrasts—but also as a form that illuminates and, perhaps, performs some of the many tasks the modern graduate recommendation letter arguably attempts to accomplish in a confused and confusing way. At stake in this look at the short letter of recommendation (which, in modern times, might be a preprinted form we quickly fill out) is a phenomenological question with epistemological and economic dimensions: what counts as meaningful work, in all Shershow’s senses, for recommendation writers? For some, producing a recommendation doesn’t count for much because the actual labor of writing is minimal: the time expended is brief, like the epistolary document itself. Many recommendations in the present and past have indeed functioned like passports, enabling a recommendee to change places, geographically or socially. The Arabic genre of the *ijaza*, a document authorizing a student to teach an Islamic text or texts that the student has learned in the presence of a master, belongs to the large category of recommendations that serve to testify to a person’s credentials and, by implication, au-

thentic identity (Makdisi 148). Such letters have often been carried physically from the writer to the reader; so they are when I present an affidavit from my chair to an official barring my entrance to the Bodleian Library; so they are in the People's Republic of China when a student carries with him or her an "informal note" from a former teacher testifying to the student's suitability for admission to an academic institution (Liu).⁵ A finer taxonomic discussion than I have space for would consider differences between documents prepared for a reader known (to some degree) to the writer and documents addressed, as it were, "to whom it may concern." In the latter category we still often find, even in academia, the short letter from a celebrity testifying that he or she knows a certain person and strongly implying that the mere fact of acquaintance should carry weight for the judging body.

The short recommendation letter, which we can usefully see as belonging to a large and international species of document that includes passport-like papers (Groebner 161), neatly illustrates a rule for letters articulated in many European Renaissance handbooks on rhetoric: "brevity" should be the "first quality" of good letters.⁶ Letters should "not be treatises, or discoursings, except it be among learned men & even amongst them, there is a kinde of thrift or saving of words," as John Hoskins puts it in his late-sixteenth-century *Directions for Speech and Style* (4–5). It is worth noting in this connection that the German word *Brief* once signified a written document in general, as Valentin Groebner remarks in his fascinating study *Who Are You?* (155). In the late medieval and early modern eras, the noun came to denote a letter in German and a "writing issued by official or legal authority" in English. The adjectival form in English, which came, as the noun did, from the Latin forms *brevem*, *brevis*, denoted "of short duration" by the fourteenth century. The following example from the eighteenth century dramatizes the fact that letters in

this genre tend to be short and sweet when the writer's social goals correspond perfectly with those of the addressee and the subject of the letter. In his popular manual for letter writers seeking self-improvement, Samuel Richardson demonstrates how to recommend a "superior man servant": "The Bearer of this is Mr. John Andrews, whom I mentioned to you last time I saw you; and for whose Integrity and Ability to serve you in the Way you talked of, I dare be answerable. I take the greater Pleasure in this Recommendation, as I doubt not it will be of Service to you both" (42; letter 31). This letter gracefully supplements and confirms a previous conversation; it thus illustrates a common classical and Renaissance concept of the letter as "a conversation by means of the written word between persons separated from each other" ("sermo absentium per litteras"; Vives 23). Moreover, the letter illustrates the recommendation's function as an easy task whereby the writer serves recommendee and reader more or less equally, putting the writer into the position of gift giver to them both in a cycle of debt and gratitude that extends over space and time—and over differences in social status.

Noting the predominance of short recommendations in the past and their continued existence today for certain occasions in and beyond academia sets the stage for estranging (in a Brechtian sense) the subspecies of academic recommendation to which I now turn. These letters, the kind that teachers of language and literature in modern universities write for the next generation of academics, are arguably getting longer even as they become less effective in helping students secure employment in a bad job market. The creep is small but significant: some colleagues estimate that the norm has gone from one and a half or two pages to three and a half or four pages of single-spaced type, often in a small font size.⁷ The length of this type of letter signifies in new ways in a semiotic system that responds both to the market and to pressures

that come from the institutional readers of many types of academic recommendation, including those in graduate student dossiers. One sign of change is that a graduate director at an Ivy League school decided to pull a letter from a humanities student's dossier because it was shorter than the other letters written for students in the department.⁸ If further research supports my hypothesis that many recommendation letters for graduate students are longer than they were five years ago, does this suggest that length is a sign of our concern for the students' welfare in a bad economy—a gift, of sorts, that obscurely compensates for our inability to help the students find work (or create the Work)? The obverse of this question was pithily formulated by Walter Kalaidjian at a recent meeting of English department chairs: is a brief letter for graduate students now “coded as cold”?⁹ If the answer is yes, we should robustly interpret and debate this change; I do not think that length should be accepted uncritically as a sign of sincerity or concern.

In the hope that the MLA might foster a discussion about recommendations and eventually offer suggestions for new and experienced writers, I want to make two observations. First, does lengthening letters really serve students' best interests during a time when jobs are few and competition for them is stiff? If, as I have attempted to demonstrate here, the genre of the recommendation has long been a *mise-en-scène* for asymmetrical and only partially disclosed interests of the writer, the recommendee, and the readers, then it seems high time to ask whether the letter's subject—if she or he were to read the letter—would find a long document filled with thick description a helpful passport to a new job and stage of life. Graduate student dossiers contain more than one recommendation, and it may well be that these letters, usually written by well-meaning faculty members who have not consulted with one another about their letters' goals, are work-

ing at supernumerary odds with the student's own account of his or her intellectual work.¹⁰

My second observation has to do with the interests of the institutional readers of the modern academic letter written for a graduate student. There is no question that these readers, like the readers of academic promotion letters, want information not only about the promise and accomplishments of a single person—the subject of ancient and early modern letters of recommendation—but also about this person's standing in relation to others in a field of knowledge. The readers require evaluation and comparison, then, in addition to a narrative focused on a single person's qualities. Even if we set out to write a highly positive letter—and our desire to do that is likely to be shaped not only by our knowledge of the student but also by our knowledge that institutional readers count negatives more heavily than positives, at least for the first cut—our rhetorical and epistemological task is complex because we know that to be credible, our praise must be “measured,” as Joe Schall puts it. He means “restrained,” but I mean the adjective to convey the sense of “quantified” as well. Comparative judgments, unnecessary in traditional letters of recommendation, are now required by institutions competing for the elusive quality called “distinction.”

The ancestor of the letters we now write for graduate students is well described by William Clark. He posits a change in the recommendations written in the Enlightenment-era Prussian university from short offerings of “testimony” to somewhat longer offerings of “expert advice.” He attributes this shift to the desire of certain powerful institutional readers, members of provincial ministries such as the Königsberg Preußische Regierung and the central ministry of Brandenburg-Prussia, in Berlin (273, 276), for rationalized information that would allow them to conceive and measure academic capital in new ways beneficial to the university's and the state's prestige (268–73). Although earlier recommendations

had praised academic candidates for such qualities as high birth, handsome demeanor, and wealth (including the number of books owned), the new kind of recommendation that Clark analyzes emphasized the number of a candidate's publications and also, quite wonderfully, the amount of "applause" the candidate had received. The criterion of applause indicated interest in the candidate's success in the lecture hall but also signified fame in the eyes of the world (269). The new letter of expert advice, written in "absolute confidence" to its readers, occasionally mentioned the candidate's faults as assessed in a comparative field of strengths and weaknesses (273). The historical shift Clark discusses is by no means completed but is still occurring, recursively, across an international field of discourse that responds enigmatically and unevenly to economic and institutional pressures.

Leaving aside a serious discussion of the tendency toward quantification in academic evaluation (see Guillory, "Evaluating," and Holquist for thoughtful treatments of this complex topic), I want to suggest in conclusion that we can change some of the unproductive ways we deal with the strange work of recommending graduate students if we begin to discuss the historical, political, and structural tensions in this genre of discourse. The tensions overlap with, but are not reducible to, an opposition between praise and "honest" evaluation. Construing the recommender's task chiefly in terms of a moral choice, this opposition is as familiar as it is reductive. Praise is not necessarily incompatible with truth telling (it depends on the case); and viewing the recommender's task (or tasks) chiefly in terms of a choice between lying (exaggerated praise) and truth telling occludes the disjunction between a narrative that focuses on praising an *individual* and the expectations of those institutional readers who want recommendations to convey comparative judgments and, through them, information about a *field* of knowledge and

its standards of value. Some of us respond to such complexities by papering them over, writing more without knowing or discussing why we are doing so.¹¹

We could begin a professional analysis of our various recommendation-writing practices by bringing British and North American humanities professors together with graduate students—perhaps at a Modern Language Association convention session—to consider various issues including the tendency of British professors to produce what might be called, in the context of this essay, a "short long letter." The British model—longer than the typical Ciceronian letter but often a page or two shorter than the common United States and Canadian recommendation for graduate students—is widely thought to be cooler, less hyperbolic, than the North American version.¹² The British model is of interest for my purposes not because it tilts more toward litotes than toward hyperbole on a tropological scale (although that tendency would be worth discussing) but because it reminds teachers in North American educational institutions that we have some degree of choice in how we negotiate the competing messages, codes, and obligations of this species of recommendation. One of those messages may well have to do with our own performance of intellectual and writerly distinction. That message does not harmonize easily with our obligation to do justice to the candidate's distinctive features while also responding to institutional and ultimately economic pressures to communicate complex, and arguably contradictory, messages about competitions within and among fields. This essay has argued that we should test our powers to think collectively about systemic problems embedded in the minor genre of the letter of recommendation for graduate students. In so doing, we should recall Derrida's argument in *The Post Card* that no letter reaches its destination as a single or singular message (Derrida 443–44; Miller, ch. 3 [28–54]; O'Rourke). We

should also pool our knowledge about the recommendation letter's multilingual histories in order to continue and improve the work I have begun here of assessing changes occurring in this arena of routine professional writing. Whereas Cicero sought to distinguish his recommendation letters from "common" work, I hope, in contrast, to estrange the recommendation letter enough to make it a subject of common concern.

NOTES

Many people in addition to the student for whom I wrote the recommendation contributed to this essay. Some wish to remain anonymous, but some who are willing to be named—though they are not to be held responsible for mistakes in the conclusions drawn here from speculation, conversation, and preliminary research—are David Simpson, John Guillory, Peter Stallybrass, Michael Holquist, Elizabeth Miller, Rex Stem, Matthew Stratton, Mary Nyquist, Gina Bloom, Samer Ali, Susanna Ferguson, Debra Ann Castillo, Jane Garrity, Karen Jacobs, Nan Goodman, and David Laurence. I am also indebted to colleagues who participated in a discussion group on recommendation letters on 6 June 2012 at the ADE Summer Seminar West in Boulder, Colorado: John Stevenson, Eva Badowska, Sharon Weltman, Walter Kalaidjian, Ellen Mackay, and Naomi Wood.

1. For a sobering discussion of the ambiguities surrounding the concept of confidentiality in letters of recommendation written in the United States since the passage of the Buckley Amendment in 1974 (also known as the *Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act*), see a document produced by lawyers at the University of Alabama, Huntsville, *Legal Implications*. I believe that the threat of litigation is influencing many academics' decisions about so-called letters of external evaluation for colleagues as well as about letters of recommendation for students. Although many discussions of the former presume that they are confidential documents, this is the norm only in private universities, and even then the confidentiality only obtains to the extent permitted by law. When an evaluation or a recommendation letter is requested, one makes numerous decisions not only about what to say in the letter but also about what to say to the requester. Both types of letter constitute strange work because one sometimes may decline to do it without any consequences to one's standing as a college or university employee. Although neither high school teachers nor professors on a graduate student's dissertation committee can

usually say no to a letter request, other writers can say no and are viewed favorably—as gift givers—for doing so; see Schall on "bowing out" as a "kindness" to students and Kuther on the ways in which students should "read" potential letter writers for signs that the letter might not be totally positive. In such cases, Kuther suggests, the student (like a buyer of goods) should move on to another option.

2. In Williams's translation, *dignitas* is rendered as "respect" and "honor." Hall discusses this term's importance for Cicero and translates it as "prestige" (72), "social standing" (119), and "regard" (188). Cicero wishes not only to do a service but to make it known: he begs his addressee to "convince" the recommendee "without fail that this letter of mine has been of material service to him" ("perficiasque, ut intellegat has litteras meas magno sibi usui fuisse"). See Bourdieu and Passeron; Bourdieu; Watkins; Ohmann; and Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, for trenchant analyses, from varying theoretical perspectives, of educational institutions as sites for socioeconomic reproduction in modern capitalist societies. Watkins analyzes the credentialing and sorting work done, in particular, by departments of English in United States colleges and universities, whereas Guillory is concerned chiefly with the reproduction of class distinctions accomplished through the teaching of standardized English. See Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 375n2, for his theoretical difference from Watkins. See also Ferguson for a survey of debates about education as reproduction.

3. Cicero worries elsewhere in *Epistulae ad familiares* about demonstrating that a commendation letter is not "vulgar": e.g., in letter 16 in book 13, he avers to his powerful addressee—Julius Caesar—that he has adopted a "new style of letter" so that his recommendation for the son of an important man will be seen as "no stereotyped recommendation" ("genere novo sum litterarum ad te usus, ut intelligeres, non vulgarem esse commendationem"; 54–55); in letter 6 in the same book, Cicero conveys a friend's wish that Cicero recommend another man in a way "out of the common" ("nova"); Cicero reports his promise to write artfully in a "style of recommendation that will amaze him" ("mirificum genus commendationis"; 26–27). On the difficulty of distinguishing between a letter "written in earnest"—with marks of the writer's desire for a distinguished or extraordinary rhetorical style—and one that is "routine," see Cotton 331–32. See also White 46–51. Like Cicero, Isocrates wants it known that his letters requesting patronage for a young man have had an effect. Sullivan sees such a desire as "clashing greatly with our modern sensibilities" (10); however, our common inability to discover whether a letter had any effect is part of what makes writing certain kinds of recommendation today such strange and difficult work for those whose professional egos are invested, as Cicero's and Isocrates's were, in a distinguished style.

4. *Regard* and *reward* are etymologically related in late medieval French, from which both English words derive

(“Regard”). *Recommend*, from the medieval Latin *recom-mendare*, comes into English through French verbs signifying both “command” and “commend”; the sense of “to praise, commend” one person to another is first attested in 1377 (def. 3), and by the early seventeenth century the verb occurs in the specific senses most relevant to work of the modern letter genre: “to commend to favour,” “to name or speak of (one) as fit or worthy to hold some position or employment,” “to present or bring forward (a person) as worthy of notice, favour” (defs. 4a, b, c). In early modern English, *recommendation* is a synonym for *commendation*, but gradually *recommendation* becomes dominant, perhaps because the prefix *re-* serves not only as an intensifier but also as an indicator that the recommending verbal action usually occurs more than once.

5. Dramatizing the dependence of taxonomies on cultural translation and interpretation, my use of this Chinese example contrasts with the author Jing Liu’s view that the “informal notes” common in the People’s Republic of China should *not* be classified as letters of recommendation. Liu is concerned to show how some Chinese letter writers fail fully to grasp United States conventions when writing in English for Chinese students seeking admission to master’s programs in language teaching in the United States.

6. On the relation between instruction in rhetoric and instruction in letter writing, see Mack 228–29. I am grateful to Peter Stallybrass for sharing information from his current research on the letter form; with Robbie Glen, he is writing a history of the single-sheet letter from 1540 to 1910. Stallybrass criticizes the common idea that “letters (in general) used to be long—until the postcard, email, texting etc.” He thinks that “the long letter (including the multi-page letter of recommendation) was largely the invention of the twentieth century.”

7. The academic job market for humanities PhDs has clearly become worse since the recession of 2008, but it had been “dismal for quite some time” when the MLA Committee on Professional Employment issued its final report in 1997 (*Committee*). Average length and effectiveness are both relative matters, of course, and not easy to measure, but the report carried statistical information and predictions that remain pertinent: the “latest job-placement surveys suggest that if present employment patterns continue *fewer than half the seven or eight thousand graduate students likely to earn PhDs in English and foreign languages between 1996 and 2000 can expect to obtain full-time tenure-track positions within a year of receiving their degrees.*”

8. The story was relayed to me in May 2012 by Debra Ann Castillo.

9. Shortness is also often read as a sign of coldness in a letter of external evaluation. On this genre see *Report of the MLA Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion* and “MLA Recommendations on Extramural Evaluations” as well as Guillory, “Evaluating.” There is an interesting historical analogue for inter-

preting a letter’s brevity as a sign of the author’s coldness toward the recommendee: Erasmus’s comments on the “genus” of letter that is defined by the writer’s having been forced to recommend an importunate colleague or friend. The letter thus “extorted” is “vulgar and cold” (“vulgarem ac frigidum”) and also typically ironic and very brief (Morford 186, 188). Vives urges writers who are in this situation of reduced power vis-à-vis the subject of the letter to resort to a formula that only the noble or well-educated reader will understand: “rogo rogatus” (“I petition because I have been petitioned”; 48–49).

10. A colleague who writes many letters for graduate students suggests that writing somewhat shorter letters would allow her to talk more with the students about their own job letters.

11. For one colleague with whom I’ve spoken, a particularly galling sign of the disjunction between the narrative task of the letter (congenial to humanities scholars) and the quantitative-measurement task important to institutional readers is the box on top of many recommendation forms that requires the writer to place the student in a percentile relative to others. “I used to ignore the box,” said my colleague, and write “see attached letter”; “now, however, the computer program prevents me from moving forward until I fill in the box.”

12. See Schneider’s citation of a complaint by an academic philosopher in the United States that the same formulaic phrase—“So and So has done very fine work”—is likely to mean entirely different things in a letter from an Oxford professor and a letter from a Harvard professor. In the Harvard document, the philosopher avers, the phrase may well be lukewarm praise, whereas in the Oxford document it could mean “this person [being recommended] is one of the top three people coming out of the U.K.” The philosopher simplifies the hermeneutical and social issues by identifying meaning with authorial intent and by presuming that the Oxford professor has never visited a United States or Canadian university or talked to students or colleagues about different conventions of recommendation writing.

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