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**The Traffic in Letters: Augustine and the Letter Exchange**

This paper will consider the first phase of the Augustine/Jerome correspondence to illustrate how Augustine exploited the letter exchange--and its ability to speak for the absent author--as a tool for establishing himself as an influential voice in the Christian community of the late fourth and early fifth centuries CE. Through the exchange of letters, Augustine, like many of his contemporaries, was able to maintain a virtual presence in the broader Latin-speaking Christian community. By writing to the "who's who" of the early Christian world, and sending them copies of his theological writings, Augustine transformed himself from a provincial bishop of a relatively unimportant congregation to a serious player on the Christian political scene, all without leaving North Africa.

When Augustine returned to North Africa in 388, following an unhappy year in Rome and a somewhat more successful time in Milan, he undoubtedly felt that he was entering into a kind of voluntary provincial exile. It is difficult to imagine a time when Augustine was not "Augustine"; but, in fact, when he returned to North Africa, it was largely an admission of his failure to penetrate the inner political circles in Rome and Milan. Like many a Roman (and Christian) before him, he withdrew to his estate to enjoy the life of the landed gentry. But plans changed and by 391 he was ordained a priest in Hippo and in 395 was the acting bishop of Hippo. In the *Confessions* (written in this same approximate period, c. 397) Augustine imposes a smooth narrative on this abrupt change of plans; at the time, however, the outcome of this risk was anything but predictable.

Shortly after it became clear that he would be Valerius's successor as bishop of Hippo, Augustine focused his attentions on the Christian world outside of Hippo and Carthage. Already at Cassiciacum he had dabbled rather successfully in philosophy. After his return to North Africa, he continued to write philosophical texts but also tried his hand at biblical exegesis in a reading of Genesis, commentaries on the first 32 Psalms, and in 394/395, commentaries on selected Pauline epistles, and most of the first three books of *De Doctrina Christiana*--a combination theory of exegesis and "how to" manual for potential exegetes. His commentary on Paul's letter to the Galatians provided the pretext for contacting the pre-eminent Christian exegete of the day, Jerome. He sent off a letter to the great biblical scholar Jerome, asking him to clarify and/or defend his interpretation of a difficult passage in Galatians 2. From the outset, the correspondence was plagued by problems. Ultimately, Augustine succeeded in engaging Jerome in correspondence and even got the upper hand. After this point, Augustine could no longer be ignored and the two continued to debate theological issues up to Jerome's death in 420. Not only did his correspondence with the famous scholar Jerome grant Augustine a certain status in North Africa, but it ensured that his theological views would find an audience well beyond his congregation at Hippo. Through his clever deployment of the letter, Augustine managed to write himself into the inner circle of the intellectual Christian elite that eluded him during his time in Rome and Milan.