

DOROTHY OSBORNE

1627–1695

Dorothy Osborne met William Temple early in 1648, when she was twenty-one and he a year younger. Both came from “gentle” families that had suffered financially during the civil wars—hers on the royalist side, his on the Puritan. Since both William and Dorothy were attractive young people, conventional wisdom supposed they would renew the family fortunes by marrying, somewhere, anyhow, large sums of fresh money. Accordingly, when they fell in love with each other, the families were scandalized and made every effort to separate them. (The overriding weight of business interests in making marriage treaties was deeply rooted in English social life of the seventeenth century. Extended families were organizations of defense, alliance, and support; in important decisions all the kinfolk had their say. No doubt Dorothy’s brother John took his obligation too seriously, but it *was* his obligation to protect his sister and the rest of his family from an interloper.) Not until the very end of 1654 were they able to marry. In the meanwhile, they had been forced to communicate by clandestine letters; and while Temple’s side of the correspondence is lost, Osborne’s in large part survives. Among many other points of interest, it shows how during those uncertain years of the Interregnum different political, religious, and social opinions accommodated to one another within the spacious bosom of the English family.

As for Osborne herself, her style, wit, and poise in the presence of difficulties speak for themselves. Like most women in those days, she was the prisoner of her family; all she had to fight with was her wit and subtlety of spirit. But she was a fierce and in the end successful fighter. A point to be especially noted is the lightness of her ironic touch, for example, in describing negotiations with the “Emperor Justinian”; a little later in the century, this style, under the name of “raillery,” would become generally popular. And in describing the great fight with her brother, how ready and natural is her access to the emotions! Neither John Osborne nor any other man of his day could have written such an account of a family quarrel.

To complete the story, we should recall that during the second half of the century, Sir William Temple became the ablest and most respected diplomat of his day; his married life was long and (except for the deaths of his seven children) happier than either of the busybody families would have predicted. The Osborne letters were not published until the late nineteenth century.

From The Letters of Dorothy Osborne

[“SERVANTS”]

Saturday 11 June 1653¹

Sir,

If to know I wish you with me pleases you, 'tis a satisfaction you may always have, for I do it perpetually; but were it really in my power to make you happy, I could not miss being so myself, for I know nothing else I want towards it. You are admitted to all my entertainments, and 'twould be a pleasing surprise to me to see you among my shepherdesses.² I meet some there sometimes that look very like gentlemen (for 'tis a road), and when they are in good humor they give us a compliment as they go by; but you would be so courteous as to stay, I hope, if we entreated you. 'Tis in your way to this place, and just before the house. 'Tis our Hyde Park, and every fine evening anybody that wanted a mistress³ might be sure to find one there. I have wondered often to meet my fair lady Ruthin there alone, methinks it should be dangerous for an heir.⁴ I could find in my heart to steal her away myself, but it should be rather for her person than her fortune. My brother says not a word of you nor your service, nor do I expect he should; if I could forget you, he would not help my memory. You would laugh sure if I could tell you how many servants⁵ he has offered me since he came down, but one above all the rest I think he is in love with himself, and may marry him too if he pleases—I shall not hinder him. 'Tis one Talbot, the finest gentleman he has seen this seven year, but the mischief on 't is he has not above fifteen or sixteen hundred pound a year, though he swears he begins to think one might bate £500 a year for such a husband. I tell him I am glad to hear it, and that if I were as much taken as he with Mr. Ta: I should not be less gallant, but I doubted the first extremely.

I have spleen⁶ enough to carry me to Epsom this summer, but yet I think I

1. Written from her parents' home at Chicksands in county Bedford, about forty miles outside London. The first sentence picks up a phrase in a previous letter of Temple's.

2. Handmaids and daughters of the household, also mentioned in a previous letter. They used to sit in the open fields of an evening, gossiping and singing songs.

3. Obviously, in the 20th-century sense of “girlfriend.”

4. I.e., an heiress, hence a likely victim of abduction if outdoors and unprotected.

5. Possible husbands. Her brother John had been in the house only a week, but was already busy rounding up alternatives to Temple.

6. Fits of ill temper supposed to be caused by an ailing spleen. The waters of Epsom Wells in Surrey were alleged to ease the condition.

shall not go. If I make one journey, I must make more, for then I have no excuse, and rather than be obliged to that, I'll make none. You have so often reproached me with the loss of your liberty that to make you some amends I am contented to be your prisoner this summer; but you shall do one favor for me into the bargain. When your father goes into Ireland, lay your commands upon some of his servants to get you an Irish greyhound. I have one that was the General's,⁷ but 'tis a bitch and those are always much less than the dogs. I got it in the time of my favor there, and it was all they had. H. C. undertook to write to his brother Fleetwood for another for me, but I have lost my hopes⁸ there. Whomsoever it is that you employ, he will need no other instructions but to get the biggest he can meet with. 'Tis all the beauty of those dogs or of any, indeed I think; a Mastiff is handsomer to me than the most exact⁹ little dog that ever lady played withal. You will not offer to take it ill that I employ you in such a commission since I have told you that the General's son did not refuse it; but I shall take it ill if you do not take the same freedom whensoever I am capable of serving you.

The town must needs be unpleasant now, and methinks you might contrive some way of having your letters sent to you without giving yourself the trouble of coming to town for them when you have no other business; you must pardon me if I think they cannot be worth it.

I am told that R: Spencer is a servant to a lady of my acquaintance, a daughter of my lady Lexington. Is it true? and if it be, what is become of the £2500 lady?¹

Would you think it, that I have an ambassador from the Emperor Justinian,² that comes to renew the treaty? In earnest, 'tis true, and I want your counsel extremely what to do in it. You told me once that of all my servants you liked him the best; if I could do so too, there were no dispute in 't. Well, I'll think on 't, and if it succeed I will be as good as my word, you shall take your choice of my four daughters. Am I not beholding to him, think you? He says that he has made addresses ('tis true) in several places since we parted, but could not fix anywhere, and in his opinion he sees nobody that would make so fit a wife

7. I.e., Oliver Cromwell's.

8. "H. C." is Henry, Cromwell's youngest son, once mentioned as a husband for Osborne but now discarded—hence her "lost hopes" there.

9. Dainty. "Mastiff": mastiff.

1. These matters were also discussed in a previous letter. Note how Osborne, in a phrase like "the £2500 lady," mocks the commercial standards of her social class.

2. Sir Justinian Isham, an elderly widower with four grown daughters, had previously been offered to Osborne as a husband, and now reappears.

for him as I. He has often inquired after me to hear if I were not marrying, and somebody told him I had an ague,³ and he presently fell sick of one too, so natural a sympathy there is between us. And yet for all this, on my conscience, we shall never marry. He desires to know whether I am at liberty or not: what shall I tell him? or shall I send him to you to know? I think that will be best. I'll say that you are much my friend, and that I have resolved not to dispose of myself but with your consent and approbation, and therefore he must make all his court to you; and when he can bring me a certificate under your hand that you think him a fit husband for me, 'tis very likely I may have him—till then I am his humble servant, and your faithful friend.

[FIGHTING WITH BROTHER JOHN]

Saturday 4 February 1654

'Tis well you have given over your reproaches. I can allow you to tell me of my faults kindly and like a friend. Possibly it is a weakness in me to aim at the world's esteem, as if I could not be happy without it; but there are certain things that custom has made almost of absolute necessity, and reputation I take to be one of those. If one could be invisible, I should choose that, but since all people are seen and known, and shall be talked of in spite of their teeth, who is it that does not desire at least that nothing of ill may be said of them, whether justly or otherwise? I never knew any so satisfied with their own innocence as to be content the world should think them guilty. Some out of pride have seemed to contemn ill reports when they found they could not avoid them, but none out of strength of reason, though many have pretended to it—no, not my lady Newcastle with all her philosophy.¹ Therefore you must not expect it from me. I shall never be ashamed to own that I have a particular value for you above any other, but 'tis not the greatest merit of person will excuse a want of fortune. In some degree I think it will, at least with the most rational part of the world, and as far as that will reach, I desire it should.

I would not have the world believe I married out of interest and to please my friends; I had much rather they should know I chose the person and took his fortune because 'twas necessary, and that I prefer a competency² with one

3. Chills and fever.

1. Margaret, duchess of Newcastle, had published in 1653 her *Philosophical Fancies*. Osborne had no great opinion of her ladyship, and once said that many inhabitants of Bedlam (the madhouse) had better sense.

2. Sufficiency.

I esteem, infinitely before a vast estate in other hands. 'Tis much easier sure to get a good fortune than a good husband, but whosoever marries without any consideration of fortune shall never be allowed to do it out of so reasonable an apprehension. The whole world (without any reserve) shall pronounce they did it merely to satisfy their giddy humor. Besides, though you imagine 'twere a great argument of my kindness³ to consider nothing but you, in earnest I believe 'twould be an injury to you. I do not see that it puts any value upon men when women marry them for love (as they term it); 'tis not their merit but our folly that is always presumed to cause it, and would it be any advantage to you to have your wife thought an indiscreet person?

All this I can say to you, but when my brother disputes it with me, I have other arguments for him, and I drove him up so close t' other night that for want of a better gap to get out at, he was fain to say that he feared as much your having a fortune as your having none, for he saw you held my lord Lisle's principles,⁴ that religion or honor were things you did not consider at all, and that he was confident you would take any engagement, serve in any employment, or do anything to advance yourself. I had no patience with this. To say you were a beggar, your father not worth £4,000 in the whole world, was nothing in comparison of having no religion nor no honor. I forgot all my disguise, and we talked ourselves weary; he renounced me again and I defied him, but both in as civil language as it would permit, and parted in great anger with the usual ceremony of a leg and a curtsy,⁵ that you would have died with laughing to have seen us. The next day I, not being at dinner, saw him not till night; then he came into my chamber, where I supped, but he did not. Afterwards, Mr. Gibson and he and I talked of indifferent things till all but we two went to bed. There he sat half an hour and said not one word, nor I to him; at last in a pitiful tone, "Sister," says he, "I have heard you say that when anything troubles you, of all things you apprehend⁶ going to bed, because there it increases upon you and you lie at the mercy of all your sad thoughts which the silence and darkness of the night adds a horror to. I am at that pass now, I vow to God I would not endure another night like the last to gain a crown." I,

3. Note that Osborne, though clearly devoted to Temple, avoids the sticky word *love* as applied to herself; others may use it, but what she has for Temple is a "kindness."

4. John Lisle earned himself the name of a renegade by an excess of servility to Cromwell. His "lordship" was synthetic as well; he had been a judge at the trial of Charles I, and earned by that service a seat in Cromwell's House of Lords.

5. Masculine and feminine gestures of polite obeisance.

6. Dread.

who resolved to take no notice what ailed him, said 'twas a knowledge⁷ I had raised from my spleen only; and so fell into a discourse of melancholy and the causes, and from that (I know not how) into religion, and we talked so long of it and so devoutly that it allayed all our anger. We grew to a calm and peace with all the world; two hermits conversing in a cell they equally inhabit never expressed more humble, charitable kindness toward one another than we. He asked my pardon and I his, and he has promised me never to speak of it to me whilst he lives, but leave the event to God Almighty, and till he sees it done he will be always the same to me that he is. Then he shall leave me, he says, not out of want of kindness to me, but because he cannot see the ruin of a person that he loves so passionately and in whose happiness he had laid up all his. These are the terms we are at, and I am confident he will keep his word with me; so that you have no reason to fear him in any respect, for though he should break his promise he should never make me break mine. No, let me assure you, this rival nor any other shall ever alter me. Therefore, spare your jealousy, or turn it all into kindness.

1888

7. Belief, or even opinion.