

AN EARLY CHARMER DOROTHY OSBORNE (1627-1695)



In Dorothy Osborne, we meet another royalist, and though we can only follow her thoughts and experiences during the years 1653 and 1654, when England is under the rule of the Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell, we come to know her more intimately than we do any earlier English letter-writer. Corresponding with the handsome young William Temple, the man she longs to marry but can only write to secretly, she declares, “I am apt to speak what I think; and to you have so accustomed myself to discover all my heart, that I do not believe ’twill ever be in my power to conceal a thought from you.” In most of her letters, she writes of her struggles to put off the far richer suitors that her relations press on her. William’s father, too, Sir John Temple, the Master of the Rolls in Ireland, has an eye for a much wealthier bride for his son. When she inwardly mourns the apparent futility of their hopes, Dorothy insists, “I do not know that ever I desired any thing (earnestly) in my life but ’twas denied me, and I am many times afraid to wish a thing merely lest my fortune should take that occasion to use me ill.” She considers that,

This world is composed of nothing but contrarities and sudden accidents, only the proportions are not at all equal, for to a great measure of trouble it allows so small a quantity of joy that one may see ’tis merely intended to keep us alive withal.

Such passages recall the voice of Dr. Johnson’s spokesman in the eleventh chapter of his *Rasselas*: “Human life is everywhere a state in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed.”

The strongest opponent of Dorothy’s wishes is her elder brother Henry, a bachelor who continually warns her that love matches never prove happy. She tells William,

You are altogether in the right that my B[rother] will never be at quiet till he sees me disposed of, but he does not mean to lose me by it, he knows that if I were married at this present, I should not be persuaded to leave my father, as long as he lives, and when this house breaks up, he is resolved to follow me if he can, which he thinks he might better do to a house where I had some power, than where I am but upon courtesy my self.

In their strange relationship, Henry's letters seem to her more like a lover's than a brother's—"I cannot but tell him sometimes," she complains, "that sure he mistakes and sends me letters that were meant to his mistress." It is difficult not to believe that he is jealous of William.

Early in 1654, Dorothy reports the outbreak of a furious quarrel with her brother:

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 L[isle]'s principles, that religion or honour were things you did not consider at all, and that he was confident you would take any engagement, serve in any employment or do any thing to advance yourself.

When brother and sister are reconciled, Henry promises not to raise the subject of Dorothy's obstinacy again, but this does not prevent him from spreading scandalous stories about her passion and painting her conduct, she says, "in such colours as will amaze all people that know me, and do not know him enough to discern his malice to me."

At one point, Dorothy, unwilling to bear the reproach of all who know her for a hopelessly imprudent match, tells William they will never be able to marry, but declares that her love for him will be lifelong and pledges, "I shall never change my condition but with my life." Something in the reply she receives—probably a threat of suicide—makes her renounce her resolution, even as she warns William,

for the love of God consider seriously with your self what can enter into comparison with the safety of your soul, are a thousand women or ten thousand worlds worth it?

Eventually Sir John Temple yields to his son's importunity and after the death of Dorothy's father, Sir Peter Osborne, in March 1654, he negotiates with her kindly brother-in-law, Sir John Peyton, and her still reluctant brother Henry, and the couple are married on Christmas Day, 1654. It is

to be hoped that Dorothy's relatives recognize their mistake: William becomes Sir William, a distinguished diplomat and essayist and a confidant of King William III.

A reserved and handsome young woman of a serious turn of mind, Dorothy despises the frivolity of most men and women of her own class and generation. "'Tis strange," she protests, "to see the folly that possesses the young people of this age, and the liberties they take to themselves"; she regrets that even the restraining influence of a court, which is admittedly "no perfect school of virtue," is absent. Her remark suggests that beneath the frowning face of Puritanism the libertine ways of the Restoration are already present in the germ.

Though she is a gifted writer, Dorothy Osborne is no feminist. She shares the widespread contempt for the delightfully eccentric author Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, and exclaims, "Sure the poor woman is a little distracted, she could never be so ridiculous else as to venture at writing books and in verse too." Dorothy is conformist enough to tell William that it is her duty not to marry without her father's consent; she adds, "if I should do otherwise, 'twould make me unworthy of your esteem." She insists he owes a similar deference to his own "very indulgent Father," and writes, "if you have not much more than an ordinary obedience for him, I shall never believe you have more than an ordinary kindness for me."

For all her melancholy, Dorothy, resident in the country, has a healthy appetite for news from the city, and is not above relishing a little scandal. She loves reading and is passionately fond of French romances (having spent years of exile across the Channel, she knows the language well). She takes pleasure in collecting engraved seals and is fond of big dogs: she is ready to let Oliver Cromwell's son Henry, who is among her suitors, seek a suitable one for her, and William's father sends her one from Ireland.

In her letters, Dorothy maintains a satisfying balance between fact and opinion and between observation and introspection. She informs William of her daily routine:

I rise in the morning reasonably early, and before I am ready [i.e. dressed] I go round the house till I am weary of that, and then into the garden till it grows too hot for me. About ten o'clock I think of making me ready, and when that's done I go into my father's chamber, from thence to dinner, where my Cousin Molle and I sit in great state, in a room and at a table that would hold a great many more. After dinner we sit and talk till Mr. B. comes in question and then I am gone. The heat of the day is spent in reading or working and about six or seven o'clock, I walk out into a common that lies hard by the house.

(Mr. B. is Levinus Bennet, Sheriff of Cambridgeshire, whom her cousin Henry Molle wants her to marry.) Dorothy relishes a quiet country life, but feels stifled when, after the death of her father, she finds herself in the always crowded house of a kindly brother-in-law and too sociable sister; here she is compelled to “go abroad all day and play all night.”

Among the pleasures the letters offer are caustic observations in the character sketches with which Dorothy entertains William. We meet Lady Sunderland, who says she has married Mr. Smith “out of pity” eliciting the comment “it was the pitifull’st saying that ever I heard, and made him so contemptible that I should not have married him for that very reason.” Henry Molle is a don and a hypochondriac whose “imagination took him one morning that he was falling into a dropsy, and made him in such haste to go back to Cambridge to his doctor, that he never remembered any thing he had to ask of me, but the coach to carry him away” — which Dorothy was only too happy to lend. Her elderly suitor Sir Justinian Isham, whom she nicknames “the Emperor Justinian,” is a scholarly fool who keeps his daughters “prisoners to a vile house he has in Northampton shire,” so that, had she become their stepmother and “let them loose[,] they and his learning would have been sufficient to have made him mad.” With her eye for the ridiculous, Dorothy Osborne is a forerunner of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Jane Carlyle,

Though the letters are devoted to the private life that continues under the Commonwealth, there are scornful references to such current events as Oliver Cromwell’s dismissal of the Rump — the meagre remnant of Parliament that is still sitting — and the marriage of General Monk to a woman far beneath him, who, however, “will suit well enough with the rest of the great ladies of the times.” In keeping with the spirit of the interregnum, Dorothy can pull herself up short with the caution, “I shall talk treason by and by if I do not look to my self, ’tis safer talking of the orange flower water you sent me.” When she hears that “my poor Lady Vavasor,” though pregnant, is taken to the Tower of London, she remarks, “the less one knows of state affairs I find it is the better.”

It is hardly surprising that this gifted, witty woman captivated William Temple, and it is highly regrettable that we do not have other writings from her hand. Yet her few extant letters to William after their marriage deserve attention. Her love for him appears to endure. While remarking that he is “concluded the arrantest gadder in the country,” she assures him, “I love you for all that so you will make haste home again.” He wishes she would write him the kind of letter she sent him during their courtship, but she says she has not the power — just before giving him a lively account of a quarrel between her aunt and the local Mayor.

Tragically, the couple's sufferings do not end with their marriage. One child after another dies, and the only one to survive into adulthood drowns himself, though not before leaving his parents two granddaughters. Replying to a nephew's letter of condolence after the suicide, Dorothy speaks much as she spoke when she thought she had renounced William forever. She maintained then that such chastisements are sent to show that too much affection, though it seems innocent, can be "greater than is allowable for things of this world." To her nephew, thirty-five years later, she admits her affliction "truly is very great" but concedes that "it seems necessary that I should have a near example of the uncertainty of all human blessings, that so having no tie to the world I may the better prepare myself to leave it."