

Epistolarity, Audience, Selfhood: *The Letters of Dorothy Osborne to William Temple*

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ABSTRACT Dorothy Osborne wrote letters to William Temple during what some consider the zenith of epistolarity. Due to her awareness of the surveillance of their illicit correspondence, her epistles offer a peculiar blend of intimacy and inhibition. In spite of her conflicting audiences, Osborne, although traditionally viewed as reserved, nevertheless emerges in her writing as spirited, flirtatious, and deeply self-aware. While the content of Osborne's letters is often commented upon, it is rarely critically assessed: here her work is treated as a narrative and Osborne herself as a writer whose authorship continues to be both hindered and furthered by the legacy of the epistolary pact forged between herself and Temple.

Sir, more than kisses, letters mingle souls;
For, thus friends absent speak This ease controls
The tediousness of my life: but for these
I could ideate nothing
(John Donne, "To Sir Henry Wotton")

Donne's description of the epistle has a long history, to which Erasmus makes reference in "A Formula for the Composition of Letters": "The letter is variously defined by Latin writers, but with essentially the same meaning ... A letter is a conversation between two absent persons" (1985a, p. 258). Aside from their practical application as a means of long-distance discourse, letters are, as Janet Gurkin Altman argues, useful indicators of human nature, "always reveal[ing] as much about the writer's esthetic values as they do about the form itself" (1982, p. 188). Altman likens epistolary revelations to the view from a window, in which what is visible to the reader or onlooker is determined, even as it is made possible, by the frame that is the letter itself. In her analogy, Altman does not explicitly position the reader, but it seems evident that s/he must occupy two places simultaneously: standing beside the author, sharing the view framed by

the letter-window, but also voyeuristically gazing in at the self revealed – consciously or otherwise – by the author’s text. This dual perspective is uniquely afforded by the personal letter, an epistolary form that reached what some consider its zenith at the end of the early modern period. In the medieval era, letters were primarily formal, even public, documents, but “[d]uring the seventeenth century, the classical epistle was being transformed into a means of personal communication, and letters became a symbol of access to the self, to the inner person” (Jagodzinski, 1999, p. 76). Thus the letter came to frame both internal, private, as well as external, public space. Both views are cogently offered in the letters of Dorothy Osborne to William Temple, written between 1652 and 1654.

Osborne and Temple are thought to have shared a private correspondence of the most authentic kind: their intimate style and tone suggest that neither wrote with a view to publication. But inscription denotes readership, as Elizabeth Goldsmith contends: “it is argued that in any act of writing a public is implied” (1989, p. 54). This public may be limited to Osborne and Temple and their closest associates, in which case it remains a fairly private audience. However, the couple correspond at a time of increasing demand for the publication of private letters – authorised or not – and as a result, they feared not only their family’s awareness of their exchanges, but also a very conceivable exposure to a much larger audience. This sense of external surveillance informs and influences their acts of letter writing, a reality blatantly evinced by Osborne’s frequent references to family members opposed to their marital union. More positively, this hovering audience functions as one of the primary catalysts for their continued correspondence.

The letter restrains lovers’ discourse because its very materiality makes it susceptible to the hands and eyes of those to whom it is not addressed. But the letter also liberates, facilitating Osborne and Temple’s shared communication over vast spans of distance and time. Their writings provide the forging of what Altman calls an “epistolary pact”: the exchange of letters by which reader (or audience) becomes writer (or performer) and vice versa (1982, p. 89). The written word – with its formality, opportunities for editing, and double meanings – appears to have been particularly liberating for Osborne, whose character was imbued with a strong sense of the circumscribed behaviour considered appropriate to a woman of her era. Osborne’s caution has formed the crux of most critical assessments of her work, as demonstrated by Carrie Hintz’s “All People Seen and Known”: “in [Osborne’s] love letters, she frames the central dilemma in her courtship as a choice between maintenance of a spotless reputation (one she values highly) and her devotion to Temple” (1998, p. 365). But a close read of the content of Osborne’s writing suggests she is not quite as reserved as has been surmised. She is often quite flirtatious with Temple, insisting he clarify his allegiance via tests that include the gauging of his response to the line of suitors she parades before him, as well as repeated

demands for material items charged with a symbolism to which neither is insensible. In short, while Osborne may experience an occasional attack of nerves, she is not a reticent performer on the epistolary stage she and Temple share.

As a couple, Osborne and Temple participate in a single epistolary pact, but they are also individuals within it. As such, Osborne is not only writer to Temple, but reader of her own text: letters represent an opportunity to construct and review her own person, both for the man she adores, and for her own purview. She observes this process in her letters, as in the following, written in September 1653: "I read it over often enough to make it Equall with the longest letter that was ever writt and pleased myself in Earnest" (Osborne, 1928, p. 88; all subsequent quotations are from this edition). Although their correspondence offers great insight into the character of each writer, its one-sidedness – only two of Temple's letters to Osborne are extant – makes it particularly ripe for an analysis of Osborne's construction of self, a construction guided by her own perceptions and those of her lover. In *Privacy and Print*, Cecile M. Jagodzinski considers "[s]elf-consciousness ... the malady of the spied-upon" (1999, p. 91); Osborne's letters exhibit both the inhibited and the aware self this statement implies. Themes to consider in this regard include Osborne's anxieties, desires, dreams, self-analyses, and assertions. The content of her letters is often commented upon, but rarely critically assessed: here her work will be treated as a narrative, and Osborne herself as an author hindered and furthered by the legacy of her letters.

To begin: a defence of the letter as literature. Unlike poetry or novels, the letter is a genre that has been long overlooked, in large part because critics remain bewildered by its role in the realm of the written word (Barton & Hall, 2000). In her essay on Osborne, Virginia Woolf carefully describes letters as "a form of literature ... distinct from any other" (1967, p. 61), and many of her contemporaries similarly qualify epistolarity, entitling letter collections *The Gentlest Art* (Lucas, 1925) or *The Personal Art* (Wayne, 1949). When George Saintsbury introduces *A Letter Book* (1922) by suggesting that the letter is "a branch of literature", we suspect that "real literature" is to be found in the tree's trunk. Critics continually identify particular aspects of the epistle, including its materiality – "it is difficult to think of letters except as material things, placed upon inventories with the old cabinets and boxes in which they are preserved" (Lloyd Irvine, 1932, p. 3) – and unique temporality: "Interrogatives, imperatives, and future tenses – rarer in other types of narrative – are the vehicles for expressions of promises, threats, hopes, apprehensions ... Letter writers are bound in a present preoccupied with the future" (Altman, 1982, p. 124). The letter also challenges authorial autonomy. Genie S. Lerch-Davis observes the letter's "subservience to real human conditions" distinguishing it from literature proper: while portraying the individual, the letter is not consciously constructed as an art form (1978, p. 409). This assertion starkly

counters Renaissance thinking; for Erasmus, letter writing is no formulaic craft, but requires “the Muse’s spring” (1985b, p. 22). Erasmus argues for an epistolary structure akin to narrative, climax, and denouement, underscoring the contemporary sense that personal writings – letters, diaries – function as proto-novels. Altman draws a linear evolution from letter, to epistolary novel, to contemporary novel (1982, p. 5), and Woolf places Osborne and her peers along this trajectory, noting that “into [their] innumerable letters ... went powers of observation and of wit that were later to take rather a different shape in *Evelina* and *Pride and Prejudice*” (1967, p. 60).

Critical thinking about Osborne’s letters as literature is often ambivalent. While Susan Wright and Genie Lerch-Davis deny that Osborne’s letters are literature, the former acknowledges that Osborne’s letters “tell a story” (Wright, 1989, p. 563), while the latter suggests that Osborne wrote “literary letter[s]” distinct from newsletters due to their discursiveness (Lerch-Davis, 1978, p. 397). Within the exigencies of postmodern narrative theory, Osborne’s work occupies a more definite place; her letters are an example of Susan Snaider Lanser’s “personal voice”, a term used “to refer to narrators who are self-consciously telling their own histories” (1996, p. 190). Under Sidonie Smith’s suppositions, letters might be considered both narrative and fiction: “The autobiographical text becomes a narrative artifice, privileging a presence or identity that does not exist outside language ... embedded in text lie alternative or deferred identities that constantly subvert any pretensions of truthfulness” (quoted in Simons, 1990, p. 11). For Smith, all writing – regardless of the guise of truth in which it was conceived – is fiction. Here, postmodern theory intersects with Renaissance interpretations of the letter as art, and with modernist critics who laud Osborne’s writing as classic literature, replete with charming literary style (Parry, 1914, p. 9; Moore Smith, 1928, p. ix; Cecil, 1948, p. 60). In keeping with these cross-period perspectives, Osborne’s missives will here be considered literature.

As with all forms of literary production, audience factors largely in the generation of the epistle. While today we take for granted the belief that a smaller audience guarantees a greater degree of individual authenticity, the certainty that truth lies within “the rhetorical organisation of space” that is the private realm only began in Osborne’s period (Peters, 1998, p. 346). Jagodzinski argues that a shift in perspective emerged in early modernity, wherein the private self was gradually perceived as “real”, while the public self became a persona; this augmentation of boundaries between private and public occurred alongside “the realisation that print could (and would) erode them” (1999, p. 79). Altman considers inevitable the passage from internal private reader, to internal public, to external public, a figurative pathway made literal with the publication of King Charles I’s correspondence in 1645, marking a high point in the period’s burgeoning demand for publications of private letters, often unsanctioned (Wright, 1989, p. 556).[1] Shaun MacNeil argues that “it is

the real acquisition of information which constitutes a reduction in privacy, rather than simply having access to such information" (1998, p. 448), but the *possibility* that others may access the private realm inevitably alters the construction of the private self and space. John Donne proffers a cogent example: a generation before Osborne, his correspondence depicts an author perpetually anxious about mislaid letters, untrustworthy carriers, and unauthorised readers (Jagodzinski, 1999, p. 87).

These same concerns haunt Osborne. She and Temple exhibit a deep suspicion of letter carriers, who must pass muster to warrant their trust. In letter 18, Osborne mentions one notably scrupulous man: "The Carrier has given mee a great charge to tell you that [the Oringe Flower you sent] came safe and I must doe him right ... I shall expect your diary next week" (Osborne, 1928, p. 39). Osborne labels Temple's epistles "diary" on only two occasions, and her euphemism speaks to the deeply confidential nature of his writing. Her segue from diligent carrier to Temple's "diary" is causal: because the carrier is honourable, their shared diary can be safely resumed. They are not always so lucky: on one occasion, the seal on Temple's letter "did not look like [his], but lesse, and much worse cutt" (p. 48), and Osborne chides the carrier until he is on the verge of tears; he frees himself by claiming illiteracy. Osborne's carrier mistrust is indubitably related to her dislike of the gaping of strangers that "[puts her] soe out of Countenance [she] dare not look up for [her] life" (p. 81). She is constantly surveyed by servants, who are keenly aware of her every desire: hence the maid awakens her early in the morning to announce the mail's arrival, a gesture betraying knowledge of Osborne's eagerness for missives from her supposedly secret lover (p. 94). Osborne lives amongst a household of people with whom she is familiar, but not intimate, and they are in turn connected to even wider circles of strangers. The extended length of this chain of surveillance is underscored when a stranger informs her that her love affair is news in Ireland – Osborne considers this remarkable, but unsurprising (p. 124).

Ironically, Osborne's voyeurism concerns are legitimised by her own participation in the spread of personal information. Her letters are gossip-laden, and as such she furthers as much as she decries the "noise and talk of the worlde" (p. 58). In letter 42, she traces the bewildering array of associates who know about her last meeting with Temple, thanks to a single disclosure on her own part:

Mrs. Franklin's husband was proposed by one that is our Neighbor and has some interest in the Famely as a Trustee for the estate I think ... I have been studying how Tom C. might have come by his intelligence and I verily beleeve hee has it from my Cousin Peetres, and in all liklihood for want of Other discourse to Entertaine him withall she has come out with all shee know's. the last time I saw her she asked mee for you before she spoke sixe words to mee and I whoe of all things doe not love to make Secretts of Trifles told her I had seen you that day. (p. 97)

The passing along of this information frustrates Osborne, yet even as she deplures it, she notes Mr Franklin's financial aspirations, and describes her cousins as listless and dull. The same letter includes a rumour "tolde by one" (p. 97) regarding her Cousin Thomas. Osborne contributes still further to the spread of personal information by exchanging other people's letters with Temple. A package to Temple is wrapped in a letter from her brother and contains an anonymous love letter; in turn, he sends her letters from his father and an Oxford scholar. Lerch-Davis contends these letters are exchanged primarily to provoke discussions of epistolary style (1978, p. 387), but the commentary frequently includes evaluations of character. Thus, Osborne writes a review of a letter from one Lady Carlisle praising her style and good breeding while effecting surprise that a person so widely known for disloyalty could write of faithfulness. Given her willingness to impart this kind of commentary, it is hardly astonishing that Osborne asks Temple to leave her letters "in safe hands" when he travels; she knows their contents – of her, him, and "others besides" – "will almost loade a horse to carry" (p. 141). Osborne walks a fine line between fearing and encouraging social judgement, one she often crosses.

While Osborne almost carelessly inscribes her opinion of others, she carefully maintains her reputation within the Osborne and Temple families. Self-preservation offers some motivation here, as the two families opposed the match between herself and Temple.[2] Family loyalty explains the lengthy duration of Osborne and Temple's courtship; for neither party was there any overtly posed "question ... of defying the family ban" (Cecil, 1948, p. 36). Osborne is by turns cautious, curious, laudatory, and indignant about William's father, Sir John, who similarly oscillates between asking after her and denouncing her pursuit of his son's inheritance. Through it all, Osborne urges Temple's complicity with his father's wishes, and states desire for Sir John's approval, deferring to and accepting his paternal authority. While Sir John casts a long and cooling shadow over the couple's passionate correspondence, Sir Henry Osborne is so ill that his daughter dares to write letters to her illicit lover at his bedside – blatantly defying his patriarchal authority, and in the presence of his servants, no less. Osborne's aunt, Lady Giffard, writes in the family biography that Sir Henry's death ultimately freed Osborne to marry Temple (Moore Smith, 1928, p. 184). While this is largely true, it did not free Osborne from the full gamut of patriarchal obligation: in her father's absence, her brother stepped in to create still more boundaries to circumvent the union.

Lord David Cecil describes Henry Osborne as "the most formidable of all Temple's opponents", a young man who "produced suitor after unattractive suitor ... spied on [Osborne] during her visits to London ... questioned the servants as to what she did when alone, [and] searched her drawers for letters" (1948, pp. 65-66). There are incestuous undertones to his watchfulness: Osborne writes that Henry expresses hope she will have authority in her marriage, but no desire for her husband, as this might disrupt their sibling

relationship; she also confesses he writes her letters better suited to a mistress (Osborne, 1928, p. 48). Osborne reciprocates Henry's voyeurism, as when she assures Temple that although one of his letters has been waylaid, she is certain her brother does not have it because "as cunning as hee is, hee could not hide it soe from mee, but that I should discover it some way or other" (p. 117). This statement underscores her assertion that they are "two hermits conversing in a Cell they equally inhabit" (p. 140). The distinction, of course, lies in a gendered power imbalance: Henry *hopes* that Osborne will live in "a house where [she] had some power" (p. 47), but Osborne is constantly forced to acquiesce to her brother's authority.^[3] Osborne strategises to elude him, disguising letters with false addresses, penmanship, and seals; she also organises covert meetings, and lies outright when necessary. "Disguises," she writes to Temple, "[look] like guilt" (pp. 56-57), and in her brother's eyes she is guilty – of loving passionately, poorly, and covertly. Henry gleans his role as judge and executioner via an authority that is not cultivated but assumed from his father, and his father before him; paradoxically, his surveillance encourages the duration and some of the confidential subject matter of Osborne and Temple's correspondence. Thus, Henry strengthens the forging of their literary relationship, even as his abuse of power fulfils Jagodzinski's maxim that "the flow of personal information is always opposite to the flow of authority" (1999, p. 5). This authoritative flow extends beyond the circle of immediate family: Osborne complains that her cousin Mollie, among others, is unimaginably "Cruell" in pestering her about marriage (Osborne, 1928, p. 40). Hintz suggests that for Osborne, "[t]he experience of being watched [by family] functions as both violation and protection" (1998, p. 382), but it is primarily frustration, not gratitude, that imbues Osborne's inscriptions of family behaviour, near monomaniacal in its preoccupation with preventing her marriage to Temple, or procuring matches to which she is not amenable. Osborne sighs and submits (Osborne, 1928, p. 40), wishes she could "live in a hollow Tree, to avoyde them" (p. 43), and considers herself "bayted by them all by turn's" (p. 64). She placates her family, and stays as close to propriety as possible. But most importantly, she writes – secretly and persistently – to a lover of her own choosing.

In stark contrast to the family members they avoid, Temple and Osborne mention figures with privileged access to their inscriptions, an innermost circle of audience ripple generated by their epistolary plunge. This group consists of Osborne's lady-in-waiting Jane Wright, Temple's older brother John, his servant Nan Stacy, and a parson, Mr Gibson – Jane excepted, they are primarily necessary intermediaries. Generally speaking, the lovers fear rather than welcome an audience, prompting Hintz to suggest that Osborne depicts a "resist[ance to] the total construction of the self" (Hintz, 1998, p. 379), a contention unsupported by the full subjectivity the letters convey. For within the spectre of an unwanted audience lies Temple's highly desirable gaze, and

Osborne proves able to set her anxieties aside in order to forge with him a revelatory epistolary pact. For Altman, this pact is formed by a longing for exchange that manifests itself in the correspondent's call for a reader response; internal readers – of which Temple is Osborne's – shape the writer's consciousness, and ultimately, narration. The love letter best illustrates this concept, as it is here that "letter writing [is] *metaphoric* (a metaphor of the lover is generated by the epistolary situation, which conjures up interiorized images and comparisons) and *metonymic* (the letter itself, by virtue of physical contact, stands for the lover)" (Altman, 1982, p. 19). Trust, fundamental to any correspondence, is even more requisite in the love letter, where it must form in the midst of oscillating anxiety and desire, candour and coquetry. Altman asserts that psychological need motivates confidential exchange (p. 61); the hope behind Osborne and Temple's epistles is the establishment of the foundation for a life lived without the necessity of the written word. And they succeed: in the two years prior to their marriage, they see one another only two or three times, but throughout, there is a discernible strengthening of their bond. Lerch-Davis observes that Osborne's letters incorporate artistic expression to please Temple, and significantly shorten as a once-possible marriage becomes plausible (1978, pp. 398, 404). Another noted indicator of burgeoning comfort includes Osborne's elision of salutation after the engagement is assured; prior to this, her letters open with a very formal "Sir" (Moore Smith, 1928, p. xxxvi). But the epistolary pact is forged not only by style, but also by content: Osborne takes many cautious narrative steps toward a place where she can trust Temple and feel trusted in return, and frames their pact in a system of exchange that echoes the reciprocity of the letters themselves.

The first step toward the establishment of this "mutuall confidence" (Osborne, 1928, p. 5) consists in each correspondent giving an account of themselves and their recent history, a process replicated to a lesser degree in each missive. Osborne quickly becomes dependent upon their exchange, writing in her seventeenth letter: "if you doe not send mee long letters then you are the Cruellest person that can bee". The letter's metonymic function surfaces here, for this assertion is quickly followed by another, which equates Temple's loyalty with the arrival of his letters: "if you love mee you will and if you doe not I shall never love my self" (p. 36). Temple's letters are not only proof of his love for Osborne, but also bolster her in difficult times, as during her father's illness. Osborne uses circumstances to dictate Temple's obligation, even as she adopts the persona of willing prisoner bound by their chain of epistles; when their love is more firmly established, both parties acknowledge that a shared joy and desire sustains their correspondence. But mutual testing remains fundamental to the pact, as Osborne observes in her thirtieth letter: "You are as much pleased (you say) with writeing to me as I can bee to receive your letters, why should you not think the same of mee?" (p. 66). This concern proves to be founded in a greater anxiety: after a London visit, Osborne attempts to break their

correspondence and make her forty-eighth letter their last. The pact is re-established when Temple threatens to end his life if she desists from writing to or caring for him – the terms appear indistinguishable – after which she apologises, declares his hold over her is as strong as ever, and commits to marrying him. Intimacies are again circulated, with commitment only strengthened by “the Crosses that have bin Common to [them]” (p. 134).

In the epistles we discern a movement from confidants to lifelong partners, a process that their restriction to written correspondence both facilitates and hinders. On one level, letters afford a degree of intimacy unattainable in face-to-face social interactions, exemplified by Osborne's closing references to being half asleep, or thinking of Temple sleeping. “[T]is very late & I am able to hold open my Eyes noe longer, good night” (p. 28) and “good night, I am half in a dreame already” (p. 34) are phrases that invite Temple into her private chamber, just before bed. Similarly, her statement “at this instant you are I beleeve more asleep than I” (p. 37) effectively places Osborne beside Temple while he sleeps. In these instances, Osborne assumes a closeness imbued with an illicit physicality. And yet, while the window-letter has the potential to open onto an intimate space, the lovers far more frequently chafe against its frame, lamenting their lack of personal contact. Osborne believes Temple might better view her love by examining her body language, rather than her inscriptions: “tis my misfortune indeed that it lyes not in my power to give you better Testimony on [my friendship] then words, otherwise I should soon convince you” (p. 14). The written word restricts, causing her to withhold anecdotes until she can tell them in person, curtail thoughts with the end of the page, fret that her words are too long or indecipherable, and regret having so many other epistolary obligations. In turn, she derides Temple for letters too brief – “how colde it went to my heart to see it soe short a one” (p. 84) – or missing altogether (p. 94). She responds to his similar frustration: “my Letters tell you I am well and still your friend, they tell you too that I am where you cannot see mee and where I vainly wish you” (p. 77). However lovely, letters are a means to an end, the attainment of which Osborne sometimes doubts: “how much more sattisfied should I bee if here were noe need of these, and wee might talke all that wee write and more, shall wee Ever bee so happy?” (p. 66).

En route toward that end, Osborne tests the suppleness of their epistolary pact by writing to Temple about her other suitors. Her depictions of these unnamed men are initially elaborate, even witty, as in: “I had noe quarrell to his Person, or his fortune, but was in love with neither” (p. 6). She is fond of feigning a disarming astonishment when Temple guesses identities. Humour remains her favoured approach, as when she offers him her future daughters, or the wealthy widows of recently deceased suitors. For a while, Temple participates in the joke, choosing his “favourites”; eventually, however, he expresses indignation at the line of men she constantly parades before him. Osborne retreats, but only slightly: though she promises not to speak about her

suitors any more, she continues to do so, albeit less coyly. She severely critiques a man who “would have bin to [her] rather a Jaylor than a husband” (p. 61), throws the letters of one suitor into the fire on two different occasions, and curtly dismisses another, noting that she “can bee severe enough” when she pleases (p. 150). Her last 17 letters to Temple are devoid of any reference to suitors whatsoever. This thread of her narrative thus moves from a testing of Temple’s affections to a more genuine exasperation, a response she shares with, rather than directs at, her lover.[4]

Another means by which the couple fortify their epistolary pact is by a flow of material exchange. The objects passed back and forth fall under what Altman (1982, p. 135) considers “extraverbal signs equivalent to tones and gestures in oral discourse”, which function as part of the epistolary dialogue. Although Altman lists tears, handwriting, and punctuation as examples, packages must just as surely signify. The first letter Temple writes to Osborne anticipates their narrative’s recurrent theme of barter and exchange. According to Moore Smith, “[Temple] had not written for nine months and he had now humorously referred to an old compact between them that she should pay him £10 when she married” (Moore Smith, 1928, p. 207). Osborne responds by informing him that “the ten pounce hee Claimes it is not yett due” (Osborne, 1928, p. 3), thereby assuaging Temple’s need to ascertain her marital status, and reinforcing a history of shared flirtation, concretised by a bet that ensures a future dialogue, if not an exchange of money. This process becomes a *modus operandi*: three letters later, Osborne sends Temple a favourite cold remedy, a gesture followed by an exchange of books. Books become a touchstone of their epistolary pact, as books sent must be returned, preferably with letters enclosed. “You doe not tell mee whither you received the Book’s I sent you, but I will hope you did” (p. 26) – here Osborne’s query necessitates a letter of confirmation. Parts of *Cyrus* are sent on five different occasions, a conveniently inconvenient transfer. Osborne also requests that Temple purchase “Oringe flower water” to demonstrate that she “make[s] noe scruple of giving [him] idle comissions” (p. 30); the implication is that fulfilled idle commissions may beget serious ones. Furthermore, Temple is asked to sample the water carefully, an invitation which fosters long-distance intimacy, as they will share the same sensual experience when she receives his purchase (p. 46). More overt exchanges include Osborne’s portrait and a request for a greyhound, the latter issued also to Henry Cromwell, Osborne’s most appealing suitor. Her stated preference for Temple’s dog over Cromwell’s “troupe” doubtlessly pleased Temple enormously (p. 151). Furthermore, the sending of a ring pattern, ring, and locks of hair acts as a final seal on their fate.

A final seal. The tweezers and seals Osborne sends to Temple are not as overtly symbolic as her other commissions: in case he misses their import, she draws attention to their meaning. “[D]id not you say once you knew where good french tweeases were to bee had?” she asks, continuing: “pray Send mee a

payer, they shall Cutt noe Love" (p. 130). "Tweezers" refers to a case of instruments, among which might be found the contemporary tool by the same name, as well as items such as needles or toothpicks. Osborne asks for a case of sharp objects, but is very careful to distinguish this request from her others: while they may have signified a degree of passion, her desire for the tweezers is purely pragmatic and should not be read otherwise. The seal narrative is not as transparently explicated: Osborne initially wants seals because they are fashionable, and thinks it appealing to have "twenty strung upon a riban like the nutts boy's play withall" (p. 16) – the smitten Temple hastens to send her a large quantity. Later she sends him a broken seal and asks him to have it repaired, and then another to set; he is so zealous to fulfil her latter command that she reprimands him for his severity toward the seal setter. This exchange of seals can be read in many ways: a seal is a symbol "of authenticity or attestation", "a symbol of a covenant", "evidence of a claim to possession; a mark of ownership" – seals also connote irrevocable decisions, bonding, and obligations of silence or vows of secrecy (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The multivalent seal, in other words, echoes in almost every regard the nature of Osborne and Temple's epistolary exchange, a reality to which Osborne is not insensible. Moore Smith includes a diagram of the back of letter 60, depicting not only Osborne's address, but this brief postscript, written beneath one of four seals on the document: "all else is but a circle" (p. 154). For Osborne, the seal is not merely a circle, but a sign of the veracity of her words, and by extension her emotional bond to Temple. Just as she trusts him to mend and choose these highly personal instruments that betoken her, so too does she trust him to scrutinise the seal on her letters. The seal functions as the ideal metonym of their relationship, one built on confidential inscription.

The discourse between these lovers establishes not only the nature and extent of their relationship, but also reveals much about their individual characters. In the two preserved letters Temple wrote to Osborne – one a dedicatory letter at the outset of his *A True Romance, or The disastrous chances of Love and Fortune*, another, letter 63 of Moore Smith's publication – he emerges as a passionate, outspoken man. In the first, addressed "To my Lady", he observes that their story is endless, and his feeling for her has "indited whatever is passionate in any line" of his publication. He also alludes to her "taedious absence", and to the fact that he deserves pity for all his travails – Osborne's worthiness in this regard is conspicuously elided. Temple's fine sense of the hardship he endures resurfaces in letter 63, where he hopes Osborne will love him more for his ability to withstand it all. He blames Osborne for their separation, and rebukes her for being "disordered" (p. 160) when she last saw him at Chicksands, although her state may reasonably be explained by his unannounced visit when her brother was on the premises. But Temple resents being "subject to other people's occasions" and is impatient to be "master of [his] owne" (p. 160) – at times he appears anxious to be master of Osborne as well.

Because we have only half the correspondence in these letters, we are especially attuned to Osborne's summaries and impressions of Temple's inscriptions. As Altman notes, the voice of the confidant is always heard through quotation and paraphrase, enabling figures like Temple to become a protagonist in an otherwise one-sided letter narrative (1982, pp. 51-52). Critics have proffered well-developed assessments of Temple based on Osborne's letters: Cecil, for instance, ascribes to him the sensitivity, impatience, melancholy, "egotism and all of the arrogance of the brilliant young man he was" (1948, p. 32), noting also his agitation at Osborne's restraint (p. 69). Similarly, Woolf argues that "there was perhaps something – a little hardness, a little conceit – that justified [Osborne's] brother's dislike of him" (1967, p. 63). Osborne stands firm in the face of Temple's intimidating tactics, regularly rebuking him, and informing him clearly that she is looking for a man whom she can "comande & ... obay alike" (Osborne, 1928, p. 60). Nevertheless, he accuses her of severity, unkindness, and falseness, demanding that she "increase [her] friendship" (p. 14), particularly via visitations. She is chastised by both Temple and his father when she breaks off their engagement after the London visit, yet on one occasion he also offers to release her from their pact, a fact not warranting further mention (p. 40). And Temple is extremely melancholic and ill-humoured. What, we begin to wonder, does Osborne see in him at all?

Certainly Temple, as Osborne's illicit correspondent, takes on the role of confidant as alter ego, defined by Altman as one who assists the letter writer to resist forbidden desires, whilst simultaneously permitting the pleasure of their discussion (1982, p. 56). But the primary pleasure Temple affords Osborne is embedded in and replicated by their epistles: Temple is a good teller of stories. "[W]ith all my Gravity I could not but Laugh at your Encounter in the Parke" (Osborne, 1928, p. 34), she writes appreciatively; or, "What a sad story you tell mee of the little Marquise!" (p. 67). Osborne indicates that the couple delight in story-laden exchange: "i'le tell you story's another time, you retourne them soe handsomly upon mee" (p. 135). On one occasion, she openly questions the veracity of Temple's tales, which are elaborately embroidered for her entertainment:

The lady was in the right, you are a very pritty gentleman ... were there ever such story's as these you tell? the best on't is I beleeve none of them; unlesse it bee that of my Lady Newport which I must confesse is soe like her, that if it bee not true twas at least Excellently fancyed. (p. 142)

Like the lady of the tale, Osborne found Temple physically attractive when they first met, but what sustains her love is not his appearance, but his creation of a literature dedicated to her.

Although Osborne renders Temple well, her letters offer a more comprehensive analysis of self-depiction. All letters proffer "a subjective expression of the writer's image of him or herself" (Wright, 1989, p. 550);

integral to this assertion is the author's participation in the act of reading his or her own letters. As Altman observes: "Rereading one's own letters entails a switch in perspective – from writer to reader – and a consequent distancing that may lead to self-discovery" (1982, p. 92). This shifting perspective is particularly well delineated in an instance in which Temple paraphrases an epistle of Osborne's, thereby causing her to become audience to her own written performance. About this experience Osborne writes that she "read [Temple's letter] over thrice in lesse than an hower, though to say truth I skipt some on't the last time, I could not read my owne confession so often" (Osborne, 1928, p. 81). More often, Osborne becomes a self reader via proofreading, a practice in which she engages so regularly that she makes special note of its neglect, as in "I do not think this is sence nor have I time to look it over" (p. 114). Letters are private spaces widely understood to offer opportunities for "emotional release [and] self-evaluation"; Osborne's letters allow her to engage in the cathartic process of private speech, a conversation "occur[ing] between the self and the inner self", in which a larger "reading audience is the necessary stimulus" (Jagodzinski, 1999, pp. 4, 11). Osborne, then, writes for herself as well as Temple.[5]

Critics repeatedly describe her as melancholy, restrained, terrified of pity, and naïve, summations that scarcely do justice to Osborne's self-portrait. Osborne does struggle with negativity, but uses the epistle to explore surfacing anxieties and desires.[6] Self-deprecation masks her anxiety about her relationship with Temple, as when she suggests that her letters are not worth retrieving, or resists organising visits so he may "make what sally's [he] please[s]" (Osborne, 1928, p. 80). But in a particularly honest moment, Osborne admits that when alone, she is often "[t]orment[ed by her] owne doubts and fear's" (p. 130). The repercussions of excessive passion scare her, as she fears it leads to foolish behaviour, even madness. Thus she derides Lady Izabella Rich, who loves wildly, and is mad "as any thing in Bedlam is mad" (p. 98). Later, as she attempts to break off her relationship with Temple, this concern reappears: "passion gives a Strength above Nature, wee see it in mad People, (and not to fflatter our selves) ours is but a refined degree of madnesse" (p. 116). She draws a similar conclusion about a woman whose excessive mourning of her dead husband bordered on the suicidal (p. 121). Osborne's fear of mental imbalance doubtless stems both from her concerns about reputation and her own tendency toward melancholy – regardless, for Osborne, to be subsumed by emotion is to court insanity.

While Osborne possesses "an humour [that] will not sufer [her] to Expose her self to Peoples Scorne" (p. 128) that becomes something of a narrative motif, she is not entirely reticent about expressing desire in her letters to Temple. Thus, she wishes he "had the invisible Ring" or she a "Wisheing hatt" in order that they may be together without being seen (p. 24), and expresses longing to have him with her as she walks about Chicksands. These early

indications of romantic desire are slightly ambivalent: in this, she panders to her unknown audience and protects herself from the possibility of Temple's rebuff – perhaps because she cannot reveal the full extent of her feelings even to herself. But nowhere is her desire more carefully displaced and yet simultaneously revelatory than in her rendering of the dream state. Perhaps the best example of this occurs in letter 17, when she tells Temple she cannot love herself if he does not love her, then insists that turning the page has just awakened her, thereby deferring responsibility for what was just written to a state over which she has no control. Furthermore, she offers Temple her dreams, a gesture implying that both her conscious and unconscious self belong to him. If, as Freud asserts, dreams constitute examples of wish-fulfilment, the motivations behind the dream articulated in her fifth letter are abundantly clear: the two envisioned rings constitute a symbol of marriage, while the broken ring represents her anxiety about a union with Temple. In this dream, Temple's mother is still alive; given that fathers Temple and Osborne were so opposed to their union, Temple's mother may have been a desirable ally. Her irreverence for the Scripture inscribed on the gold ring/wedding band – “in Earnest the odnesse on't put mee into that violent laughing” (Osborne, 1928, p. 11) – is telling: the breach of God's law echoes her own epistolary breach of patriarchal law. In relaying the dream, she boldly informs Temple that she dreamt of him *before* his first letter arrived, thereby admitting he has left a lasting impression on her psyche. Finally, the dream is intriguing in that it predicts their literary relationship: Osborne does not see Temple throughout, but receives a “pacquett” from him (Osborne, 1928, p. 11). As their correspondence advances, Osborne becomes increasingly honest about the interrelationship between dreams and her desire for Temple, as in: “I saw you last night but twas in a dream, and before I could say a word to you ... the disorder my Joy to see you had put mee into waked mee” (p. 108).[7] Until she feels comfortable professing hope for their shared future, the dream offers a convenient symbol by which she can defer, yet articulate, her desire.

Cloaked anxiety and desire aside, explicit moments of self-analysis are peppered throughout Osborne's text. Her recognition of her own psychological development is clearly mediated by Temple's influence and developed through epistolary rumination, as when she suggests that they stop thinking how their “friendship grew to this height tis at” and realise how completely they have each contributed to the growth of their relationship. “By this confession,” she writes, “you will see I am past all disguise with you, and that you have reason to bee sattisfyed with knowing as much of my heart as I doe my self” (p. 74). Similarly, Osborne later states she has been in “a longe Strife with [her] selfe” to apply reason to her passion for Temple (p. 115). Osborne uses letters to pronounce emphatically who she is, as in: “if I once finde any body faulty towards mee, they loose mee for ever” (p. 18), “if I am capable of being any thing, tis, a perfect friend” (p. 88), and “I am noe dissembler” (p. 99). But she is

not so dogmatic as to be unchangeable. For while Osborne is derided for her fear of public exposure, there is a discernible and critically neglected movement in her epistles towards abandoning excessive self-pride, partially ascribable to Temple's concerns about her privileging of reputation. Thus she writes:

Tis such an ease (as you say) not to bee sollicitous to please Others, in Earnest I am noe more concern'd whither people think mee hands[om] or il-favored ... then I am whither they think my name Eliz: or Dor: ... I should never desyre to please above one and that one I must Love too.
(p. 110)

Osborne's love for Temple facilitates her awareness that there exist a select few whose impressions of her really matter. Perhaps her greatest revelation comes as a result of her frustration with Temple's father: "Let your father think mee what hee pleases ... i'le begin to practice upon him (what you have soe often preachd to mee) to neglect the report of the world and sattisfye my self in my owne innocency" (p. 146). Similarly significant is her realisation that happiness is individually generated (p. 166). These developments surely precipitate her marriage to Temple as much as her father's death; she may still be disinclined to a public wedding, but she will do as she pleases nevertheless.

Osborne's epistolary narrative climaxes with her public engagement; the abrupt denouement includes only brief notes confirming details of her future life with Temple. After their marriage, Temple placed their shared correspondence in his cabinet, but is assumed to have destroyed almost all of his letters when Osborne died (Moore Smith, 1928, p. xlv). This destruction effectively severs their epistolary pact, and raises a number of issues regarding the legacy of their correspondence. It might be argued that by preserving Osborne's letters, Temple facilitates the creation of Osborne as sole author of their story. But whoever holds the bulk of actual authority can never really grant authority to another, and thus Osborne's authorship is diminished by Temple's role as executioner of his own letters and executor of hers. Osborne did not ask to widen the circle of audience, and may have even resented Temple's decision to preserve her epistles; when young, her description of happiness specifically includes "a retired life" (pp. 86, 147), "free from the trouble of this buissy world" (p. 119). Her longing for seclusion is so pervasive it prompts Woolf to speculate about her acceptance of Temple's very public career after they were married: "Innumerable duties and responsibilities fell to the lot of the girl who had made fun of pomp and ceremony, who loved privacy and had wished to ... 'grow old together in our little cottage'" (1967, p. 64). Osborne wanted a private life, but Temple's career gave her a public one; she wanted a private correspondence, but Temple's management of their letters contributed to a very public legacy. Given the popularity of letter publications in his own time, Temple may well have foreseen that Osborne's letters would continue to make interesting reading for an audience beyond his own descendants. Temple

himself never got enough of her stories, and continually asked for lengthy, discursive missives even after their marriage (Moore Smith, 1928, p. 199). Later remembered as an excellent statesman and essayist, Temple perhaps could not commit to the risk inherent to personal narration, which “offers no ... mask or distancing ‘third-person,’ no refuge in a generic voice” (Snaider Lanser, 1996, p. 190). His elision of his own words intriguingly literalises the verse he inscribed inside Osborne’s wedding ring: “The love I owe / I cannot showe” (Cecil, 1948, p. 84). If nothing else, Temple’s eradication of his letters augments our understanding of the public importance of private correspondence: Temple clearly did not want to be remembered as the self conveyed by his private epistles – his lost letters are thus both personally and culturally significant.

Both Temple and Osborne were aware that their letters formed a narrative; Osborne even refers to their correspondence as such, doubting whether there could be “a more Romance [*sic*] Story than [theirs] if the conclusion should prove happy” (Osborne, 1928, p. 130). It is inaccurate to suggest, as does Dale Spender, that “Osborne could have been a writer – if it had been suitable for women to engage in writing” (1986, p. 36). Nor is it entirely correct to consider Osborne simply a foremother of women’s literature. Osborne’s letters are part of the epistolary genre, “writing [that] reflects, betrays, or constitutes the relations between self, other, and experience” (Altman, 1982, p. 212). Like any writer, male or female, Osborne never loses sense of her audience, be it hovering society, upon whom she so articulately comments, or her and Temple’s families, creating difficulties she surprises herself by having the fortitude to overcome. With Temple she shares performative acts of writing and reading: they defer to each other as protagonists, exchange narratives, and continually test the strength of their literary bond. Their pact enables Osborne to construct herself as audience to herself; it also offers her another against whom she can gauge her own behaviour. Writing for an audience frees her from her fear of audience, and allows her to practise “neglect [of] the report of the world”. Jagodzinski writes:

Authors’ literary self-reflections are coded yet are meant to be deciphered by the reader; they are intended to communicate to the reader, but they also promote self-clarification and self-definition for both reader and author ... personal autonomy can only be attained in relation to the group, to the community. The reading-audience is the necessary stimulus, the watcher on the other side of the two-way mirror. (1999, p. 11)

Audience stimulates Osborne’s revelations. And reveal herself she does, in a narrative filled with concerns, hopes, desires, assertions, revelations, and – most satisfyingly – requited love.

When Osborne and Temple first met, there occurred an incident anticipating Osborne’s lot as designated author. Lady Giffard relays in her

biography how the two young people were visiting the Isle of Wight, where Charles I was then imprisoned. Accompanying Osborne was her younger brother Robin, who, outraged by the king's treatment, expressed his sentiments by etching graffiti into a ship's window disparaging those he deemed responsible. Caught in his misdemeanour, he was brought before the colonel in charge. Rather than see her brother punished, Osborne stepped forward and confessed to having written the graffiti herself. Temple witnessed her valorous act, which by all accounts "fanned any flame that may have been kindled before" (Moore Smith, 1928, p. xxii; see also Cecil, 1948, pp. 28-29). Osborne laid claim to her brother's words, and her brother did not deny it; later Temple will feel similarly compelled to have her speak alone for two. Fortunately, her inscriptions – her letter-windows – offer more than sufficient views of their shared performance.

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Notes

- [1] See Jagodzinski (1999) for statistics of Britain's published epistles between 1475 and 1700.
- [2] This opposition was not politically motivated, although Sir Peter Osborne was a fierce royalist, while Sir John Temple was a parliamentarian. The Temples thought marriage to Dorothy jeopardised William's career options and financial solvency, while the Osbornes believed Dorothy could marry someone wealthier (Hart, 1968, pp. 10-11).
- [3] In the epilogue of Osborne's narrative, her brother has her sign a false document giving him authority over her dowry. She takes him to court, an action legitimised by her husband's participation in the suit, thereby underscoring her movement from one male authority to another.
- [4] Osborne's views on marriage develop also: she begins cautiously against it, then depicts her ideal husband, primarily characterised by a most un-Temple-like avoidance of all extremes. Temple becomes anxious in response to her marital manifesto; shortly thereafter occurs the unspecified London conflict, following which Osborne's confidence in love-based marriage never fully resumes – see Osborne, 1928, p. 135 and p. 174 for her references to its unsustainability. The struggle with Temple appears to have opened her eyes to the difficulties inherent to communication, even with the most ideal of partners.
- [5] See also Glenda McLeod's "'Wholly Guilty, Wholly Innocent': Self-definition in Heloise's Letters to Abelard" (1993) for a similar line of argument.
- [6] Osborne tells Temple, "what [Jane] tells you of my melancholy you must not believe" (Osborne, 1928, p. 33), but nevertheless refers incessantly to her

ennui. As for Donne, the tedium of Osborne's daily life is relieved by letters; hence she writes on one occasion: "Your last letter came like a pardon to one upon the block" (Osborne, 1928, p. 22).

[7] Osborne also likens Temple's Chicksands visit to a dream, and dreams all night on his lock of hair. She claims she hardly ever remembers dreams, unless disturbing or morose, and later uses this divulgence to chastise him for a period of epistolary neglect: "all my sad dreams and the severall frights I have waked in would have run soe in my head that I should have concluded something of very ill from your Silence" (Osborne, 1928, p. 117).

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