

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Dr. Joy Wiltenburg, Professor Emerita at Rowan University, and author of *Laughing Histories: From the Renaissance Man to the Woman of Wit*, to talk about the life and letters of Dorothy Osborne, Lady Temple.

JW: She is a member of the gentry class during the 17th century. Her family were royalists during the upheaval of the civil wars in England, and so she is someone who is trying to uphold certain kinds of standards of behavior, but there also were a lot of expectations about women and about suitable marriages that kind of placed her in an awkward situation since she fell in love with William Temple, and their families did not agree that this was going to be a great match, at least for quite a few years, until they finally came around.

AT: So why didn't they want the marriage? Because I'm sort of confused about like, look, here's two rich families (I assume) - get together.

JW: Yeah, well, evidently her family was not rich enough for his family. I mean, yes, they were gentry, and yes, they had an estate, but their fortunes had come down a bit, and they did not have a big enough marriage portion to satisfy the family of William Temple, at least for the first seven years or so that they were wishing they could get married.

AT: The majority of their courtship, as I understand it, is carried out by correspondence, correct?

JW: Well, they met when, I don't remember how old he was, she was in her late teens, and obviously they became fond of each other. The letters that we have from her come from the last couple of years before they got married, so they knew each other for quite a while, but I guess they lost touch, and she might have been worried that he was going to go off and marry someone else, and meanwhile, her family was bringing all sorts of suitors. What her family wanted was for her to marry somebody richer, so that that would pump some money into their fortunes. It's only in those last two years that we have this series of letters, and we only have her side of the correspondence, not William Temple's, who clearly was writing back to her, but we don't have those letters.

AT: And so she would have been in her mid-20s by the time they actually got married, which I believe is, is approaching spinsterhood for the day.

JW: Well, you know, it's interesting about marriage ages. For a long time, people assumed, from having read *Romeo and Juliet*, they assumed, "oh, everybody got married really young back in the day." And then a bunch of historians went and did actual demographic research into parish records and reconstituting families, and found that most people actually didn't get married until their mid-to-late 20s, because they needed to have a chunk of money and resources in order to set up a new household. Now, people did tend to get married younger in the gentry and aristocracy, because the families were trying to finagle these deals of exchanging wealth. So, at her social level, it might have been a little on the late side, which is, I guess, why she was

having trouble pushing back against all these ideas that she should marry the people favored by her family.

AT: Now that we've established the context, let's talk about the letters themselves, because that seems to be what's really captivated you in your research.

JW: Yeah, I'm not the first to be captivated by her letters. They were not published during her lifetime, and we can come back to that point later, but they were saved by her family and then eventually published in the 19th century to great acclaim from the literati of the day. They read these and thought, "oh, look at the wit, look at the intellect that these letters are reflecting here." This was remarkable, and she never became famous for them in her lifetime, but she became famous then in the 19th century for them. And I was writing about laughter for my laughter book, and I was also interested in issues of gender and how women were able to negotiate relationships using humor or sometimes suffering from humor, and that's another side of it. And so she kind of became a focal point for me for thinking about women and gender and how these things relate to each other. I said she was famous in the 19th century, and then a lot of people may be familiar with Virginia Woolf's writings about women and about the limitations on women, and when she was looking for the history of women's writing, she looked at Dorothy Osborne and said, "oh, well, she was so scared to death of publishing." She described her reluctance to publish as "scarcely sane." She thought she just was paranoid about being exposed to ridicule. And in fact, she does talk about her fear of ridicule. One of the most famous instances of this is her comment, and this was in 1653 about a book that was written by another woman, this was Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle. She actually, unusually for a woman, and especially for a woman of high class, she signed her name to her books, and she was known to be writing this stuff. And she wrote a book that was in verse. She says, "surely the poor woman is a little distracted," which means crazy. "She could never be so ridiculous else as to venture at writing books and in verse too! If I should not sleep this fortnight, I should not come to that." So she thought that this woman had made a laughingstock of herself by publishing this book and exposing herself in that way to the public. Now, it is actually true that the Duchess of Newcastle was ridiculed, not just by Dorothy Osborne, but by other people. There's an entry some years later in the famous diary of Samuel Pepys, in which he talks about how people were all talking about her eccentricities and craziness. She was unusual not only in her writings, but she also didn't want to conform to standard ideas of fashion and what women should wear. So she kind of made up her own designs and looked strange to people. And he talks about how he wanted to get a look at her, but her carriage was being followed by a whole bunch of other carriages and then by a whole bunch of boys and girls running after her to try to get a glimpse. So she's kind of made herself a public spectacle there. And one might understand why another gentlewoman might not want to do that. She was willing to put up with a whole lot of notoriety.

AT: I think there's an interesting correlation here between saying that women are crazy anytime they don't conform to whatever ridiculous social norms have been placed upon us. Because you see this throughout history, especially like queer history, women were institutionalized because they, God forbid, didn't want to marry a man or they were considered shrewish. That's a whole

other topic that we're not going to get into, but there is that definite through line in history.

JW: And the shrew thing has to do with ridicule also. You could get into some legal trouble for being a shrew, but there was a lot of public ridicule. Rituals of dunking you in the water to the accompaniment of laughter and and fun for the men who are doing it, but obviously not for the victims.

AT: Yeah, there was also the scold's bridal, which was a literal muzzle that they would put on women.

JW: It was. it's not clear to me how widely used that actually was, but it did exist. One can find these things mostly in pictures. So I don't think that was terribly common, but it was sometimes used.

AT: It's one of those things that just the fact that it existed is concerning.

JW: Absolutely. Absolutely.

AT: So she had reasonable concerns because she was seeing how Margaret Cavendish, who would have had the power in terms of her rank, in terms of how much money, she had the power to be what I consider bold.

JW: Yes.

AT: Whereas obviously not everyone had that power, but she wasn't the only woman publishing humor. So I'm specifically thinking of Aphra Ben who lived 1640 to 1689 and was a hilarious playwright. I was actually lucky enough to see one of her shows in Sydney a couple years ago. So her work is still being put on and it's ridiculous. Like I would definitely say it could rival Shakespeare's comedies, but that's personal opinion.

JW: Yeah, she was kind of a pathbreaker in that. But in order to do that, she had to not care about her reputation. She was not considered a respectable woman. She was quite successful. And so she could just say, "what do I care about being 'respectable'?" But yeah, if you wanted not to be ostracized by your family, then there were some limits on what you could do. And Osborne too was, she was kind of sensitive. And I think that women of the gentry were kind of especially vulnerable to these strictures and being ridiculed if they didn't follow the assumptions of how not only a respectable woman, but an intelligent woman who wasn't a fool ought to behave. So part of what she talked about in her relationship with William Temple was that she really wanted to marry him. They were in love, but she did not want to go and do something that would be perceived as foolish for love and therefore become a laughingstock. She has another passage in which she talks about, so many foolish people have married for love and with imprudent marriages that were not properly financially supported by their families. And then they become ridiculous. And she wasn't willing to be ridiculous. She says something

like, "I'm willing to put up with not being super rich, but I don't want to be ridiculous."

AT: Well, it seems like there was a certain precarity for the gentry, particularly, as you said, her family wasn't the super rich gentry. And so she is largely relying on her reputation to secure her future, which reflects, I would think, a lot of women of the time. But she's not Margaret Cavendish, who's got the wealth and the rank and can get away with whatever she wants. She's not a commoner who doesn't really have anything to lose. So yeah, it seems like that's a very precarious position. So I wonder how much of her anxiety over her reputation was that understanding that her reputation was largely all she had to secure her future.

JW: Yeah, I think that there's a lot to that. Yeah, you couldn't just throw that away. And now her family thought she was throwing away all sorts of opportunities because she had all these prominent suitors. She had a sheriff from the next county come. She had this very pompous older man, Sir Justinian Isham, who came courting her a couple of times. And he must have had a pretty good fortune because her family really wanted her to marry him. She makes fun of all these people in her letters to William, especially Justinian. She liked to call him the Emperor Justinian coming to court her. And she said he was the most pompous and ridiculous person she had ever encountered in her life. She used the word coxcomb, which is a pretentious fool.

AT: I think we should bring that one back.

JW: Yes, yes. She had a joke in her letters. Isham had four grown daughters. He was quite a bit older than she. And so she made a joke about maybe Temple would want to marry one of the daughters and she could become his mother. Or she made another joke that she thought that what she would do is tell Sir Justinian that he should get a letter from William Temple to certify that he's a fit husband for her. And then maybe she wouldn't marry him. So they had a lot of fun about him. She especially made fun of his letter. She had a letter from him. He didn't write to her in Latin, but you could tell he had studied Latin from the way he wrote this letter because it was full of all sorts of flowery and elaborate language. And she had her own ideas about what letters should be. And she said letters should be the way you would talk to somebody in conversation. They shouldn't be studied with hard words in them so that you have to get a dictionary or something. Actually, there were no dictionaries yet, but they shouldn't be just this pretentious and unnatural kind of language.

AT: She was basically saying he was trying too hard.

JW: Oh, yeah. Yeah. And definitely not admiring his masculine attainment of Latin. Latin was something that men learned and women did not. Latin was the classical education of the male. So there were a very few highly intellectual ladies who learned Latin, but it was considered not very feminine and not a thing to do.

AT: One of the things that piqued my curiosity about this was why she wouldn't have wanted her letters published during her lifetime because certainly, there are a lot of personal

correspondences that I think all of us would prefer remain private, regardless of the era. I don't want anyone publishing my Facebook messages, hilarious though they may be. And so you've sort of touched on one of my assumptions, which was that if she's being snarky about people.

JW: She thought that that the Duchess of Newcastle was being ridiculous, but I don't think it ever crossed her mind to publish these letters. She was writing to William Temple. They want to get married, as you say, it's a personal relationship purely for his eyes. She knew he would understand. And yeah, they could make fun of people who would never ever see these letters.

AT: So obviously women like Margaret Cavendish, like Aphra Behn, were publicly taking ownership of their work, but there were also women throughout the centuries. And even today, who have published anonymously published under a male pseudonym, there's so many. Like, even if Elizabeth was saying like, (*dramatically*) "though I have the weak body of a woman, I have the heart of a man." (laughter) And I'm sure that's exactly how she said it as well. But, I assume that there are still works out there. I think it was Virginia Woolf who said throughout much of history, anonymous has been a woman.

JW: Yeah, and we'll never know how many of those anonymous were women. There are also some anonymous who claimed to be women and clearly were men. So that's another side of it. But into even the 19th century, it was unusual for a woman, especially a woman with a respectable reputation to lose to sign her name. I'm sure you know, some of these famous women authors like Jane Austen, she didn't initially sign her books. Her authorship became known later. She called them "by a lady" and that's already 19th century.

We tend to think that publication is the way of taking credit for what you've done. One of the things that was acceptable for a woman who thought that she was writing something that she considered worth sharing with other people, there was a lot of manuscript circulation at higher social levels, not so much of letters, because again, those are a personal communication meant for the one recipient. But women wrote poems, translations and essays, and it was not all that uncommon to become known among the circle of people you cared about - that is, your little public, as being someone who had these skills and wrote lovely little poetry, or at least people would sometimes flatter the high-born lady saying, "oh, we love your poetry." So there were some women who became known in their circle in that way, but publishing and in print was very much associated with kind of the market and exposing yourself to just anybody. Strangers and low-class people could read your stuff and why should you care that they would because you're a lady and you only care about people of a certain status.

AT: Would there also have been, because you mentioned the market specifically, would there also have been a stigma around, "oh, that's commercial, that's business, that's being a merchant of a sort?"

JW: Absolutely, yes, yes. And you find that even into the 19th century, I'm thinking of a woman named Hannah More who was quite an accomplished intellectual and wrote a lot of stuff, but she said, "oh, no, a woman should never be displaying her talents for the purpose of gain or

even to gain fame because that is detracting from her feminine virtue. She should not be in the market at all, certainly not competing with men, that'd be terrible." That's an idea that goes on for a really long time.

AT: And I think I saw something as well that Ada Lovelace signed her work using her initials because she didn't want to be seen as bragging.

JW: Yeah, right, right, you want to be a nice girl, right? Not put yourself forward, like the pompous Sir Justinian, he's allowed to do it.

AT: There's an interesting triple bind even today that's discussed in the book *The Authority Gap*, which looks at why women are seen as having less authority than men. And essentially, the problem is that we are more likely to be seen as less competent. But one of the most effective ways to offset that is to list our qualifications and say, "I've been doing this for 10 years, I won this award." But if a woman does that, then they are seen as bragging and we're more likely to be seen as arrogant rather than say, confident.

JW: Absolutely.

AT: And an arrogant woman is more likely to be seen as unlikable.

JW: Absolutely. Yes.

AT: And if you're unlikable, you're less likely to be hired, to be promoted, to be chosen for projects. And so there's really no escaping this triple bind of, you're not assumed to be competent. You can't change that by just listing your qualifications. Because if you're unlikable, you're going to fail anyway.

JW: Yes, yes. And part of it is wanting to make the right impression on other people. But of course, we internalize a lot of this too, right? You don't want to be an arrogant so and so. Again, I keep thinking of this Justinian guy, I wouldn't like him, right? I wouldn't want to be like him. So one doesn't want to be like these vaunting braggarts going around, right? But then when you're being modest and underplaying and not mentioning all your accomplishments, then you place yourself in that situation that you've just been talking about.

AT: Yeah, you're reinforcing that initial assumption that, you know, oh, she's just a woman, whatever that means for the context of the setting that you're in, she's just a woman.

JW: Yeah, we're not past all that stuff, unfortunately, yes.

AT: Now, interestingly, so we've talked about the stigma of humor in a woman, particularly of that time, but I think we both know that's also something that has not completely gone away. But you also talk about how humor is used to keep women in their place, but can be used to turn the

tables. So what do you mean?

JW: Yes, well, part of what I see in that vein in Dorothy Osborne is what we've talked about with her making fun of these men, who thought they were showing how wonderfully masculine and accomplished they were. And she's kind of snickering about about them. But also you find not just her, but some other women in this time period, making fun of stereotypes about women. So one of the things that Osborne joked about, there was an idea that women should not be willful. They should be kind of biddable, right? They should be cooperating with everybody and not making trouble, not trying to marry someone who doesn't fit their family's needs. So this was not that long before they got married, but she was being berated by an aunt of hers who was saying that she was the most willful and obstinate woman who had ever, that she'd ever seen. And Dorothy writes this to William saying, "I'm giving you fair warning, my aunt tells me that I am the most obstinate and willful woman ever. So take heed. Know what you're getting into here."

AT: You have been warned.

JW: Exactly, exactly. Yeah. And there are other women. I'm thinking of another gentry letter writer who joked about the stereotype of women as talking too much. There was an idea that when we were just chatter, chatter, chatter, chatter. And there was a common saying about women's tongues being like aspen leaves. And the aspen leaves are just constantly making little noises in the wind and never shut up. The aspen leaves never stop. No matter how small a breeze, the aspen leaves are still making noise. And so in songs and stories and jokes, women's tongues are like the aspen leaves. And there was a folk belief that if you put an aspen leaf under a woman's tongue or something, she'd never shut up. Anyway, women joked about this and said, "well, you may think that I've done the thing with the aspen leaves. But really, I'm just writing to you here." These beliefs that were used to hold women back, they could just kind of make them a joke. They could joke about being shrews. They could joke about telling their husband what to do. They could joke about being considered a fool for doing certain kinds of things and just have a little fun with the stereotype instead of being intimidated by it.

AT: It is a little demoralizing how many of these elements I'm thinking, "And we still have that issue today!" There was a study that found that women are seen as dominating the conversation when they speak, you know, 50% in a group setting, the women speak 50% and the men speak 50%. It is seen as being equal when the women only speak 30%.

JW: Yes, yes, yes, yes. Yeah, that idea that women talk a lot is very old. And in the period, I study, it's very clearly associated with the idea that the women ought to be shutting up and that silence is virtue and that their talking too much is that they're violating that. But yeah, that perception that any kind of, well, assertiveness is seen as as arrogance and aggression and any kind of speech is sort of seen as taking up more space than women ought to have, right?

AT: I think it's founded on the premise that women shouldn't be talking at all. Therefore, any talking you're doing is too much talking.

JW: Right, for sure. Interestingly, another idea that was very common in my period is the idea that women laugh more than men. They talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, and they also laugh more. Now, is it that they really were laughing more or is it that female laughter is noticed more and pointed to as, "oh, look, she's laughing. Should she be laughing? Maybe she's laughing too much. Maybe her laughter means that she's a little bit sexually loose." There were certainly authors who thought that women should control their laughter because if they were too frivolous, they might be thought to be available to the wrong kind of men. Advice writers would say, "oh, women should not laugh when their husband isn't there." Really?!?

AT: I wonder how much of this is also just coming back to wanting to control women's bodies?

JW: Oh, yes.

AT: And that correlation between laughter and sexuality, these are both things that women find joy, hopefully.

JW: Yeah, and they're physical and they involve the body and they might be seen as disorderly and disruptive.

AT: All right, so I don't think it's a spoiler to say that, you know, Dorothy and William did get married. Most of the scholarship on her has really been focused on her courtship letters. So what, what happened to her after that?

JW: Yes, yes. They, I wish that they had lived happily ever after. They had a long marriage and clearly it was a partnership in which she was collaborating with his diplomatic career. And so in that sense, they were very compatible. He was also a writer and quite witty and became known for his essays later that he did publish. He was man. He could publish his essays. And he was actually, for a while, a mentor to Jonathan Swift. But they had a lot of personal tragedy. And this is something that being of a high social class did not protect you against in the 17th century. They lost six children very young, and then a daughter in her teen years. And then the only child they had that survived to adulthood later committed suicide while while the parents were both still alive. So really tragic family life there for them. People have have regretted how, we have these wonderful letters and they're full of a sprightly wit and entertaining and wonderful before they're married. And then clearly after they're married, there's not as much need to write letters because they're together with each other and they can converse. They don't have to converse on paper. And so certainly there's a lot of interaction between them over the years. We know just some snippets about her life later. We know she was admired and considered kind of a wonderful woman by some people who knew them, had success in that way. But she may not have had as much to joke about or had so much grief to deal with in her life later.

AT: It's also disappointing because, as you mentioned, her husband was a diplomat. And my understanding is that they were posted to places like the Hague and Brussels. And you have to think that, in the circles that she would have been in as an Englishwoman on foreign soil, her



perspective would have actually been quite interesting if she'd been in a position to have documented it, like even in a diary or something.

JW: Right. Clearly she was still brilliant through all those other other years, but we don't have more of her thoughts about that. The other thing about marriage, especially among the gentry, but in earlier centuries for both sexes, I think that coming from the 20th into the 21st century, we tend to be thinking about the male breadwinner model in which he's the one working and she's doing homemaking. And there is an element of that. But because of course he's the one with the diplomatic appointments, she hasn't got the diplomatic appointments. But marriage for both sexes was very much a kind of joint embarking on career. You needed to be married if you were man.

AT: So I think what you're getting at here is the importance of the role of the political hostess.

JW: There's that, but also all the way down the social scale. If you were a candle maker, you needed a wife. You needed the chandler's wife to be doing some of the things that a chandler's wife would do. She'd probably sell some of the candles. If you're a shoemaker, you'd need the wife. She's going to be doing some of the prep of the leather. She's going to be doing some of the ancillary tasks around. Nobody thought of, there no such thing as just being somebody who cooked and cleaned. The wife was a kind of necessary part of the economic partnership at lower social levels. And then at these upper social levels, she's going to be part of the of the political partnership of, as you say, the diplomatic hostess. But part of what makes you a fully adult person in the 17th century is you get married and found a family, and that's true for men as well as for women. So it's not just she needed somebody to support her. They're kind of putting their resources together, which is one reason why those gentry marriages were family affairs. They were trying to put together two fortunes and make a viable new household to carry on to the next generation.

AT: It is fascinating when we're talking about women's unseen and unpaid labor, even today, that, if you remove someone who is a homemaker, someone who is listed as "not having a job" by a lot of people's standards, but if you take her out of the equation, you gotta hire childcare, you've got to hire a housekeeper, you've got to hire a bookkeeper because she's managing the household finances. There's all of these roles that women have always filled, depending on their particular situation, but, you know, it's always been there, and it's almost always been unacknowledged.

JW: Yeah, and not always considered work, even though, of course, it is work.

AT: And we still don't want our personal correspondence published.

JW: Well, yes, although I don't think men want their personal correspondence published either most of them, do they?

AT: I don't know. I feel like Justinian would have been quite proud to have his letter published.

JW: Oh, you're right, because it would have demonstrated his Latin prowess and how, she even makes a joke about she thinks he dumbed it down as much as he could to reach her lower level. But it still was the most ridiculous letter she'd ever seen in her life.

AT: Oh, dear. Well, it's also when we're talking about the education that I assume she would have had, and of course, there's always, what areas of education are appropriate for women. But we've talked about the sexism, but there is also that sort of classism aspect of, she had all these opportunities. She had a choice on whether or not to get married, even the fact that her parents let her turn down her suitors was a privilege of the day.

JW: Yeah, yeah, there's some examples from a couple of centuries earlier of women of that class getting beaten by their families for refusing to cooperate with the right kind of marriage.

AT: Whereas hopefully today it's not so much the physical browbeating, just the emotional.

JW: I know that Margaret Cavendish, this is the Duchess of Newcastle, was very frustrated that she had not gotten a kind of systematic education of the sort that was available to men, right? She was really interested in science. She was invited to visit the Royal Academy one time, but she was not really introduced into all of that. And so education for women, even at the higher levels, was kind of at home, and maybe you've got a tutor in this, and a tutor in that, but it's not going to take you through a rigorous curriculum.

AT: Yeah, and I think where my brain was going with that was we have this idea of brilliance being innate. And again, even today, you have this idea that this guy is successful because he's brilliant. And it's like, well, no, he's successful because his parents were incredibly wealthy, connected him to the right people. He went to the best university, even though he's a moron. He in turn made more connections, and he has the money to start a business and pump all this money into it. And then even if it fails, he's still got plenty of money, not in any way to do with his own brilliance, but because he's had all of these advantages. And I think that we see that here as well, in the sense that she certainly had innate intelligence and wittiness, but a lot of that is also thanks to the fact that she would have had an education. She would not have had the hardships that say someone of a lower class would have been experiencing until, of course, she got married and had all the horrible things happen. But at the time she was writing the letters.

JW: Yes, yes, yes. Although I do think that women at lower social levels might not have had the same kind of pressures to marry the people their family thought they should marry because it was very common for young women and young men to go out to work during their teen years. They would be a servant in somebody else's household or they'd get a job in a craft, be it an apprentice or something, that was mostly for men. But both sexes went out and worked for a while away from their families. They were less likely to be in the family household because their parents couldn't afford to just keep them at home. They sent them out to work. And so they had

a little more independent socializing going on, which of course, moralists worried about. They didn't like the fact that the youth might be able to do their own choosing. But it does appear as though there was more freedom of choice lower in the social scale. One possible advantage of being a little poorer.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember - well-behaved women rarely make history.