

Letters to a Lady of Fortune
The Courting of Elizabeth Hodges of Shipton Moyne, Gloucestershire
Gloucestershire County Record Office, D1571/F127

Preserved in the Sotherton-Estcourt family papers are a small bundle of letters written in the first quarter of the eighteenth century to Elizabeth Hodges of Shipton Moyne by men offering themselves as potential suitors.¹ These letters throw an interesting light on marriage negotiations in the period, involving a mature spinster of independent fortune.

Elizabeth Hodges, the eldest child of Thomas Hodges and his wife Edith Estcourt, was born in 1687. Her father was the head of the second wealthiest family in Shipton Moyne and her mother came from the wealthiest. Elizabeth had two younger brothers. Her father died in 1696 and Thomas, the elder of her brother's, died in 1708. Neither left a will. In 1717 her mother Edith left Elizabeth £2,000 'as my Legacy and in satisfaction of all her part and shares of her Father and Brothers personall Estates who both dyed intestate'.² This was not a large fortune, but the money was under Elizabeth's own control. Four years later the death of her surviving brother, Estcourt, left Elizabeth the mistress of a manor house in Shipton Moyne and an estate worth around £1,000 per annum.³ As is clear from the letters, her independent wealth was a considerable attraction to Elizabeth's suitors.

Letter 1 reveals something of the process of courtship. The potential suitor has heard good reports of Elizabeth, called at Shipton Moyne and looked her over and then writes seeking permission to be accepted as a suitor. This procedure seems to have been short-circuited by Ralph Neville (letters 2 and 3), who apparently proposed himself as a suitor on the basis of third-hand reports alone. These letters are particularly informative, since Neville described his position and prospects to Elizabeth and sought her approval before a personal interview. By contrast John Ellis (letters 4-6) was a former member of the Shipton Moyne household. Of a lower social position than Elizabeth, Ellis claimed the strength of his love as justification for proposing himself as a prospective husband. The final letter is a curious example of doggerel poetry, apparently sent by a rejected lover.

Transcription policy: Spelling and punctuation are preserved, but abbreviations expanded and original line breaks ignored. Supplied text resulting from damage to the original is indicated by square brackets [thus].

Notes

1 Glos.C.R.O. D1571/F127 - catalogued as to Edith Hodges, but the dates make clear that they are directed to her daughter.

2 P.R.O. PROB11/557

3 In the court cases subsequent to her own death in 1724, Elizabeth's income per annum was assessed at between £900 and £1,200 per annum and her personal estate between £1,700 and £3,000.

1 : From an unknown suitor, [before Feb. 1721]

Honoured Madam,

Having heard a very extraordinary Character of your person & qualifications that first inclined me to do myself the honour of waiting on you, & then the advantage I had (tho but short) of your most pleasing conversation raisd & augmented the great opinion I before had conceived of you, it is with true sincerity I apply myself to you in this manner, & therefore desire the happiness of an admission into your favour, which if I shall be so fortunate as to be allowd, I shall always endeavour to pay you that regard your merit deserves, & study that which will mostly contribute to make you happy; I write to your Brother ¹ & therefore shall not trouble you, Madam, with my complements to him, I desire you will please to believe I am with entire respect Honoured Madam

Your most obedient faithful humble servant whilst [remainder obliterated]

[Top right and bottom right corners have been deliberately removed, presumably to obscure the name and address of the sender.]

Notes

¹ Estcourt Hodges died in February 1721. The lack of reference to her mother implies a date after 1717.

2 : From R. Neville, 6th May 1722

Addressed: To Mrs Hodges these present.

Madam,

Your goodness and Candour, are the only pleas for my bold presumption, but hope you'll pardon a Liberty, which your peculiar Temper and many accomplishments encourage me to take: I am sensible so great qualifications, as you may justly boast, cannot but gain you many admirers; and tis your Virtues which induce me to declare myself your Voterie: others perhaps may pride themselves in their great possessions; but I, Madam, att present can only boast a Noble and Honourable Family and a truly Polite and ingenuous Education, attended with very great Reversions; indeed the Honour of a Title I have been frequently offer'd, and several Lords my near Relations promise I shall be created a Baronet, whensoever it shall be for my Interest to accept of it; If therefore Family and Education, good Nature and Sweetness of mind can be engaging, with the future noble Prospects I have, to these without vanity I hope I may lay claim: The Superiority of your Fortune will always make me more grateful, and sensible of the Favour, and not like the Rakes of the World either lavish it away, or despise the Donour, I should be proud to declare my Sentiments and Proposals more att large, if you will be pleased to admitt me to the Honour of a Visit, and inform my Friend and Confidant the Bearer, that such a Liberty will not be disagreeable: I beg leave to depend on your goodness for this boldness, and to subscribe myself, Madam

Your most obedient and most humble servant

R. Neville ¹

Notes

¹ Ralph Neville was 29 years old and rector of Evenlode, Worcs.

3 : From R. Neville, 19th May 1722

From: From the Crown and Scepter near Norfolk Street London

Madam,

Your illness and my sudden call to Town unhappily concur to deprive Me of the agreeable satisfaction of doing myself the Honour of waiting on you, whom the Voice of Numbers proclaims, good, charitable, and vertuous; I must be deeply insensible, Madam, if not inflamed with so bright a Character, and highly Stupid if not ambitious of so amiable, so desireable a Person; Tis your superiour worth which induces Me to make this bold yet honourable Attempt; and to declare my self unequal in Fortune, tho' great in Birth, I am, Madam, of the youngest Branch of the Ancient and Noble Abergavenny Family; and am therefore forced, like all younger Brothers ¹ to seek my Preferment and Fortune from the Court; in Order to which I fixed upon the Church, ² as the speediest and best way to rise to Grandeur; and have been so succesfull as to procure the Royal Word for Honourable preferment; I have already a handsome Fortune, and am immediate Heir, after two old sickly Brothers, to a great Family Estate of Four Thousand Pounds per Annum and to supply my present Want of Fortune They have agreed to gett me a Title, that so I may deserve a Lady of Fortune. Then, Madam, as to your own Fortune, it shall be all settled on you, and whatsoever other Articles or Terms you can propose or desire they shall be readily agreed to: And as to the Truth of all the Facts mentioned, a noble Lord in your own Country will give a satisfactory Testimony. I humbly beg you will be pleased to express your Mind in a Line or Two, whether I shall have the Liberty of waiting on you, and more fully declare myself, assuring you, Madam, that as my Esteem takes its rise from your noble character, so no Person shall pay a deeper regard or Deference to your Person, than Madam

Your most obedient and most humble servant

R. Neville

Notes

1 Ralph was the second of five sons; he also had seven sisters.

2 In fact Ralph followed his father and grandfather as rectors of Evenlode, to which his family held the advowson.

4 : From John Ellis, 9th May 1722

Addressed: To the Honoured Mrs Hodges. This

From: Bodley in Anglesey

Honoured Madam,

I have acted long enough in Masquerade. The Masque serv'd like the Night, to conceal Blushes, & why may not a 120 miles serve the End as well ? & embolden me to acquaint your Ladyship, that whatever was spoke of the amiable Widow ¹ (except a few circumstances by way of blind to standersby) was directed to yourself. This I doubt not your Ladyship has before Imagined, and perhaps Condemn'd my presumptuous thoughts. However my Impudence may at this distance appear, I believe the Awe your Superior merit imprinted in me, would have kept me ever Silent, If I had continued in your family, whereby if your Ladyship had the least thought in my favour, it would have been frustrated. I have studied hours, days, nay Weeks in the Room above your Kitching, how to Express, what might be uttered properly in three words and all to no purpose. Ovid in his epistles says, that Love made him write such things, as his Modesty would not permit him to Speak. My Case

in respect of the Lovely Widow is the same, but My hand trembles (tho' distance conceals my Confusion) at the event of what it now so Boldly discovers. - I have had the opportunity of observing the Widow in all capacities (Viz) Her Person, Her Temper, Conduct and Fortune; and I shall with Sincerity (upon which I ever Valued myself) declare the most Secret thoughts of my heart of Each. - As for her person, I at all times thought it Agreeable, but Lovely, when set of with dress. As for her Temper, I never knew a Milder, or more agreeable to my Wish; As for her Conduct, in General it pleased me, tho' I could wish in one particular, it were Otherwise, but how ever the agreeableness of the two former, over ballances in my thoughts that Error, If it be an Error. ² As for her fortune it is much superior to what I can expect, but were she so Generous to make me Happy, Gratitude joyn'd with the Value I have for her, would, to all Intents, make me propose it the study of my Life in all Affection & Compliances to make Her's Pleasant. --- After this Plainness, I shall not presume to hope to hear from your Ladyship; but I do intend to wait upon you at Shipton, If you do not suddenly forbid me. [If] you miss above one post to forbid me, it will come to [late. I] shall be upon the Way. I beg you would always believe me desirous to be

Honoured Madam, Your Ladyship's most Obedient and most Humble Servant

John Ellis

I enclosed this to Mrs Chamberlen least it might Miscarry as some of My Other letters have.

[Some damage to manuscript at bottom right.]

Notes

1 This and later references to the Widow appear to be the cause of the misattribution of the letters to Elizabeth's mother.

2 The nature of the Error is uncertain, but it may relate to the introduction into Elizabeth's household of Thomas Chamberlain, who was later to make a substantial claim to her estate.

5 : From John Ellis, 3rd July 1722

Addressed: To The Honour'd Mrs Hodges This

From: London

Honoured Madam,

I intend (God willing) to wait upon your Ladyship at Shipton about the 12th or 13th day of this month. If your Ladyship has Occasion to be far from home about that time, you will be so good as to inform me speedily thereof, and if it be your pleasure I will meet you wherever you are, if you name the time and place. I would have paid my Respects at Shipton in my way hither, had not your Ladyship acquainted me of your intention to travel to the Southern parts of England which made me then Despair of the Happyness of finding you at home. I Lodge at Mr Walsh's at the Harp in Catherine Street in the Strand and am Madam

Your most faithfull and most humble servant

John Ellis

6 : From John Ellis, 14th July 1722

From: The Harp in Catherine Street, in the Strand

Honoured Madam,

I had put on my Boots, & ordered my Horses to be in readiness, to Come to Glostershire pursuant to Mine dated the 3rd instant, when I receive'd a letter from Mrs Chamberlen, acquainting me that she had not the opportunity to deliver my letter, & that you were gon to Salisbury, ¹ & not to return till the beginning of next week, which made me deferr leaving till I hear the Certainty of your return; for since I have no Business but to pay my Respects at Shipton, I am loath to run the risque of the Disappointment of seeing your Ladyship.

If the Amiable Widow proves Cruel (as I have great cause to fear she will) it will be a severer shock to me, then any I have hitherto mett. The Sincerity of my Affection for her has been such as to Engage me to a strict Fidelity (from the time I was first acquainted with her) not only of action, but Even of Thought, I have been so far from any Other Courtship, as to resolve not to admitt even the thoughts of one, till such time as I am Convinc'd of the Impossibility of Succeeding with her; and I am so far from having Views of preying upon her fortune any further then to remove the incumbrances my Brother left, that I should Willingly submitt it entirely to her Management and power. - I believe if she knew the steady Resolutions of Gratitude & of Pleasing, that I have form'd, in Case she Condescends to admitt my Love, that she would not longer refuse it.

I hope this will find you return'd safe and in good health, which no one would be more sincerely glad to hear then

Honoured Madam, Your Ladyship's most Obedient and most faithful humble servant

J. Ellis

Notes

¹ Elizabeth had Estcourt relations in Salisbury.

7 : From an unknown suitor, undated

Addressed: For Mrs Hodges at Shippen near Tedbury Gloucestershire

My Dream

Bless me what can it mean I had last night
 A dream that would a Hero sure afright
 shivering Cold ore all my Limbs were spread
 The sight I saw was enough to strick one dead
 A man came in, whom I have often seen
 With his face all Bloody, and his hands did seem
 To hold a Dagger, he looked firce at me
 And clapt his Breast, and swore that I was shee
 Which he had shought through all the world to find
 Then asked me, if to him I would be kind
 I was afraid to make him a return
 For sure his eyes did with strang fury burn
 he saw my fear, then at my feet he fell
 And swore his passion was to great to tell

Fixt on my eyes, tis only you said he
Can from these Plagues, and troubles set me free
Then took me by the hand as he did rise
And said he saw some Pitty in my Eyes
Most true it was his story so did move
That from the minute I began to love
He told me I must not stay behind --
But go with him; w[h]ere I should pleasures find
away wee went swift as the fleeting wind
But in my life I never yet did see --
A place so fine, it Paradise must be
And Lord of all, this Glorious place was he
The joyes I had can never be Exposed --
I thought my soul would ever be at Rest
and I should with this Charming man be blest
But when I waked, my Happyness was fled
and I was left a wrecthd thing in bed.

My Dear your faithfull [obliterated]

[Signature has been deliberately removed.]