

## 28 December 1812 William Lincolne in Witham to Mary Napier in London

Witham Dec. 28<sup>th</sup> 1812

My dear Mary

If your letter is not exactly of the stamp my more sanguine anticipations had led me to hope for, it is such as I cannot but deem a promising prelude to my wishes. I see nothing to damp the complacency I have indulged since our late interview or to check the confident expectation I have ever entertained that the more readily we entered upon a mutual disclosure of taste and sentiment, the more they would be found to approximate, the more it would endear us to each other. Although in seeking to obtain your affections I am impelled by the most pure and honourable motives yet my sense of the importance of this attainment must be impaired did I find that a less reserved intercourse had tended to develop discordant ideas on subjects where it would be essential they should harmonise – in the propriety of this result you will fully acquiesce.

My attention is pointed to a requisite which you appear to think it possible we may have estimated differently, and believe me that on this or any other topic you may think it proper to discuss I feel that my own interests equally with yours demand an ingenuous reply.

In the first place then, I wonder what can have led you to form such exalted conceptions of my “Literary Knowledge” as all this implies? I was not aware of having rendered myself ridiculous by an ostentatious display of the little information it may have been in my power to obtain, till you really led me to suspect it, and I endeavoured to detect your irony, but in vain, you were throughout too grave. I must therefore tell you plainly – I disclaim such arrogant pretensions.

I know that I have what is called a bookish taste, but as to read much and read well are by no means synonymous, I only view it in myself as a rational contribution to domestic enjoyments. A man of Business is presumed to give mental pursuits but very subordinate attention, it would therefore be preposterous and absurd in me to estimate the qualifications requisite in a Wife by the Scale you have supposed me to have done. Were I in circumstances of Independence my ideas might be different as I should then be able to indulge such a bias, but as this is quite out of the question, we coincide exactly. I have no expectations in life beyond that of a Tradesman, no ambition above the rank of a respectable one, nor have I attempted to mislead you by unfurling Colours more alluring.

I hope after this stating my views it is not indispensable I should take up your pointed interrogatory, but to obviate any appearance of evading it I must remark that you avow my “esteem” without the aid of a “vivid imagination” to adorn you with fancied attractions and I know you have every claim to it, but I will give the question a wider range, I will meet it on broader ground – is it possible under any circumstances that you should sink

in my estimation below the level of a “companion” into the line of a mere “necessary domestic”. No, it can Never Never be.

You recoil at a phantom of your own creating – I with good reason fault at the standard you have distinctly laid down, for I am alarmed at perceiving “elegance of deportment” to be an item in your Criteria – this is a test you must not rigorously enforce, but hope, with me, that if I cannot be brought to a high polish, at least in time the rust may be rubbed off.

I flatter myself you are not indisposed to continue this correspondence, indulging such a feeling I beg to refer you to my last, as were it not for an intimation given me you know I might have suspected it had never reached you, and trust the time is not far distant when our interest (*torn page here*) will establish that mutual confidence and affection to which we shall both eagerly and happily apply the beautiful line of your favourite Poet

“Reserve will wound it, and distrust destroy!”

You concluded with an illusion to this “festive season” but be assured I can have no higher “enjoyment” than would be afforded by a more explicit sanction to my subscribing myself

Your affectionate faithful William

*This letter was written in William’s small, slanted but legible handwriting on a smallish, folded sheet of paper, which was then folded twice more, sealed with red wax and addressed to Miss Napier, Grand Junction Wharf, Whitefriars, London. Mary was clearly staying with her uncle and aunt Harvey because someone else crossed out the address and wrote ‘at Mr Harveys by Charlotte St., Portland Square (crossed out) Portland Chaple.’*

*William makes his feelings about Mary quite clear and wants her to be less reserved when she writes to him. How and why she had got the notion that he was more ‘literary’ than he was is unclear; it may have come from her sister Sarah and her husband Joseph Reeve, who was an old friend of William’s. He seems anxious to emphasise that their sentiments coincide, whereas she seems to stress their differences, real or perceived. William accepts that he may lack “elegance of deportment” but shrugs it off with good humour.*

*Mary’s favourite poet appears to be Revd. Edward Young 1681-1765. The quotation comes from his long reflective poem “Night Thoughts” which was very popular with the public at the time, but little read now.*

*Transcribed from the original letter by Helen Wolvey, 3 x great granddaughter of William and Mary Lincolne, in 2019.*