

**ADVICE TO A SON; OR,  
DIRECTIONS FOR YOUR BETTER  
CONDUCT THROUGH THE  
VARIOUS AND MOST IMPORTANT  
ENCOUNTERS OF THIS LIFE**

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Advice to a Son; Or, Directions for Your Better Conduct Through the Various and Most Important Encounters of This Life by Francis Osborne

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**FRANCIS OSBORNE**

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# ADVICE TO A SON

BY

FRANCIS OSBORNE

1593-1659

A NEW EDITION

*WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY*

HIS HONOUR JUDGE

EDWARD ABBOTT PARRY

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## INTRODUCTION

ALTHOUGH Francis Osborne's *Advice to a Son* has been reprinted in this century, the public seem to have called for no further edition of his complete works since 1722. In his own day he must have made a considerable mark, not only among students but also among contemporary men of letters. Aubrey speaks of him as the friend of Hobbes, and Dr. Blackbourne confirms this by setting out a list of the patrons and friends of Hobbes, among whom we find "Francis Osborne, Esq., whose writings are sufficiently known," placed between "Mr. Samuel Butler who wrote that admirable poem entitled *Hudibras*" and "Edmund Waller of Beaconsfield."\* Pepys in later years studied the *Advice to a Son* with affectionate particularity and in that strain of homely vanity which is one of the greatest charms of the Diary records, October 19, 1661, "I not being neat in clothes, which I find a great fault in me, could not be so merry as otherwise, and at all times I am and can be, when I am in good

\* *Life of Hobbes*, 1750, p. xxv.

habitt, which makes me remember my father Osborne's rule for a gentleman to spare in all things rather than in that." And again, Jan. 27, 1663-4, details a literary conversation with Sir William Petty at a Coffeehouse, "who in discourse is, methinks, one of the most rational men that ever I heard speak with a tongue," saying, "that in all his life these three books were the most esteemed and generally cried up for wit in the world—*Religio Medici*, Osborne's *Advice to a Son*, and *Hudibras*." But the taste for Osborne's writings, perhaps naturally, gave place to better things. Swift in the *Tatler* ranks Osborne with some others, who "being men of the Court and affecting the phrases then in fashion, are often either not to be understood or appear perfectly ridiculous." While Dr. Johnson, being moved by Boswell's expression of liking for his works, sums him up in one contemptuous phrase: "A conceited fellow. Were a man to write so now, the boys would throw stones at him." Boswell, however, is not ready to accept this summary criticism of his "favourite author."

When one has formed a liking for a book, quaint and strange in its style, direct and original in its thought, and attractive in its old-world interests, and when, moreover, one has spent many hours in its company and got to love the good in it and cease to be amazed at the evil, as though it were an old friend, it is no easy task to write anything critical of its contents or endeavour to appraise with any accuracy its right to be reprinted at the present

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day. Moreover, it would be stepping aside from the limits I have set myself in compiling this Introduction to intrude upon the readers of Francis Osborne's *Advice to a Son* any critical *apologia* from his editor.

Being far removed from the time in which it was written, the reader of to-day will find it easier to criticise Osborne's writing with sane discretion than those who admired or hated his style in the past. But two things must not be lost sight of in an honest endeavour to appreciate his book; the character of the author, and the society in which he lived. Osborne was, as we shall see, the younger son of a gentleman, a man above his fellows in ability and insight, who never received the reward of office or acquired riches. His practical common sense and want of good fortune made him to some extent an opportunist in morality and cynical in his estimate of mankind. He poses before us as "a Father wearied (and therefore possibly made wise) by experience." He writes complainingly as a man neglected by Fortune, believing himself worthy of nobler things than those to which he had attained. He sometimes impresses on his son the necessity of unworthy actions, writing as he does for a young man in whose worldly success he takes a passionate interest. He has seen for himself the miserable position of the poor dependent in a wealthy household, has experienced the impossibility of gaining place and wealth without Court influence, and the improbability of gaining Court influence without



cunning, energy and self-restraint. But while he seems to enforce much of which we must disapprove, there is in several of these passages an obvious insincerity of evil, which leads us not to take offence too easily. He laughs at the folly of mankind by giving worldly advice that all must condemn when reading it in the study, although we may act upon it in every-day life. Thus he reproves the world. And to those displeased with the earlier chapters of this book, who are desirous of obtaining a clearer and brighter view of the author, I would commend a perusal of the *Conclusion*, in which he casts aside his worldly ideas and cynic utterances, and in a few personal words to his son cancels many pages of unwholesome advice in one short, eloquent, and practical prayer: "To conclude, let us Serve God with what Reverence we are able and *do* all the *Good* we can, making as little unnecessary work for Repentance as is possible: and the Mercy of our Heavenly Father supply all our Defects in the Son of his Love. *Amen.*"

Perhaps he will most offend the modern reader in his chapter on Love and Marriage. Here with the pompous wisdom of a foolish old man he rails against women and their ways in hopes thereby to restrain his son from a love match ruinous to worldly prospects. Woman he says is "a silly creature set by the Institutes of Nature in a far inferior Class of Perfection" to man; and he satisfies his contempt for the clergy and the fair sex at one blow, by noting with a savage chuckle, that "the wily Priests are so

tender of their own conveniences as to forbid all marriage to themselves upon as heavy a penalty as they do Poligamy unto others." But if marriage has to be, then his son is not to marry an "unendowed Beauty," still less a "celebrated Beauty"; and "tho' nothing can wholly disengage *Marriage* from the Inconveniences" he portrays, "yet they are best palliated under a great Estate." Nor does he admit that the intention to perpetuate the family name is a sufficient excuse for marriage, it being, he says, "the poorest way of Immortalising that can be, and as natural to a Cobler as a Prince." Indeed, he finds it difficult to say anything better of wives, in a note to his Women Readers, than to tell them that they are but "the best of Servants." Not to excuse this sort of writing but to understand how it came to be written, one must not forget such love stories as that of Dr. Donne and the poverty and dependence to which they led. An ill-advised match of a young man of position but without means, was a more serious affair in the seventeenth century than it is to-day, resulting generally in a life of dependence for the wife and children, and a greatly decreased chance of place—the gentleman's only livelihood—for the man himself. The poor relations of the seventeenth century did not starve, but they had a bad time of it.

There is much of interest in what Osborne writes concerning Travel, Government, and Religion, but it is in the chapter on Studies that the personal character of the author most betrays itself. He

stands out a practical man of the world, his selfish opportunist sentiments struggling with more liberal and righteous views; a lover of freedom, but at the same time a Courtier, since only at Court was there possibility for a young man to attain material advancement. His literary tastes run counter to the age in which he lived. They are his own, and he is proud of them. "Huge *Volumes*, like the Ox roasted whole at *Bartholomew Fair*, may proclaim plenty of Labour and Invention," but find in him no admirer. He expresses open contempt for the "mean conceits and improbable opinion of *Antiquity*." History, he warns his son, is probably little better than Romance, and the Poets are "*like Ships, of use only for Pleasure, and so richer in Trimming than in Lading*." He is not an extravagant lover of books and thinks good Company is "*a better Refiner of the Spirits than ordinary Books*." But he is wise enough to warn his son that "*a few Books well studied and thoroughly digested nourish the Understanding more, than hundreds but gargled in the Mouth, as ordinary Students use*." His practical nature rebels against his son becoming a mere bookworm, and he begs him not to neglect the honest Improvement of his Estate in "*an over-passionate prosecution of Learning*." Finally, he sums up his practical views on the worldly value of book-learning in the terse sentence, "*Experience is a better Tutor than Buchanan*."

Passing from literature, he recommends the pursuit of Physick. "The Intricacy of the study" he