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Beginning Again in Heroics: The Waste of Rhetoric in Centlivre's *The Busy Body*

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Abstract

In this essay, I argue that Susanna Centlivre's *The Busy Body* (1709) actively concerns itself with the very distinctions between literature and theater, art and entertainment, mind and body, and the verbal and the visual that would ultimately result in Centlivre's cultural eclipse. What became apparent to me while working on the play with a company of professional actors was not only the different registers of the comedy's theatrical language—we might almost say its different genres—but also the manner in which the recurrent and bathetic discordances between these competing registers work to disclose their varying orientation to the body's capacities and presence. Its comedy unfolds through the repeated ludic collision of, on the one hand, an ornate and avowedly male rhetoric that seeks chiefly to advertise its own virtuosity, and, on the other, the inventive, practical, and somatically centered mode of interacting and reacting consummately modelled by the play's heroine. *The Busy Body* may not exhibit the kinds of word play so often (and problematically) regarded as the quintessence of Restoration comedy and indeed the basis of its literary value, but it does play with words and the very idea of what they do or don't do. In short, it is a play about what we have come to call "literariness."

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> Words and verse to the dramatist are only stammerings in a foreign language…(Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy During the Tragic Age of the Greeks*)[1]

The title of this essay is also its chief provocation, for it seems to invite a notion of literariness that is at odds with the exegetical emphases of most scholarship on Susanna Centlivre. Where, as recently as the late 1970s, and in the first and only monograph dedicated to her plays, Centlivre was judged to be a "minor figure," a Restoration dramatist "of the second rank," the recovery work undertaken since then has revealed a playwright deeply committed to the formal affordances of theater as a live, embodied, commercially embedded practice.[2] We now know Centlivre as the writer of plays of unusually adroit stagecraft and emplotment, a writer who negotiated both her authorial persona and the protocols of genre with playful care, and who, in the post-Collier climate, wielded and adapted the materials of the theatrical past in canny and self-reflexive ways. The most forceful articulation of this image of Centlivre remains that provided by Jacky Bratton at the beginning of this century, in an essay that uses her plays to adumbrate the concept of "intertheatricality," which understands scripts and performances to be necessarily constructed of and through a complex mesh of allusions, agencies, and traditions. "To take Centlivre's work seriously," Bratton avers, "…would challenge the way in which plays are read as literature, and undermine the division between art and entertainment that protects literature from the market-place."[3]

There's no question that Centlivre has long failed to be a "literary" playwright. In 1820 Lord Byron wrote that "Congreve gave up writing because Mrs. Centlivre's balderdash drove his comedies off" (there is no foundation to this claim),[4] while a century later F. W. Bateson conceded the "vitality and technical *finesse*" of her comedies but witheringly described them as "the railway reading of Georgian England" and as lacking "'intellectual or literary significance."[5] Bateson gives voice, in 1929, to the governing logic of the institution of "literature." As Jason Curtis Geiger has shown, the emergence and professionalization of literary studies as a discipline in the late nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, and with it the proliferation of classroom-oriented anthologies, privileged a model of the play as a printed, literary artefact over one heuristically framed through constellations of performers and repertoires. Though Centlivre's key works had remained popular on the stages of Britain and America into the final decades of the nineteenth century, scholarship nurtured a canon that excluded her in favor of Etherege, Wycherley, and Congreve, the verbal intricacy of whose plays better fitted the retroactively constructed genre of the "comedy of manners."[6]

In this essay, however, I want to suggest that her most successful play, *The Busy Body* (1709), actively concerns itself with the very distinctions between literature and theater, art and entertainment, the verbal and the visual, and mind and body that would ultimately result in Centlivre's cultural eclipse. That is, its comedy unfolds through the repeated ludic collision of precisely the opposition to which Bateson gives such strikingly and troublingly lucid expression: on the one hand, the material, the technical, the corporeal ("vitality"); on the other hand, the poetic and the rhetorical. And in *embodying* this opposition, as we'll see, Centlivre perforce discloses its inherently gendered architecture.

The Busy Body may not exhibit the kinds of word play and badinage so often (and problematically) regarded as the quintessence of Restoration comedy and indeed the basis of its literary value; but it does play with words—with the very idea of what they do or don't do. In short, it is a play about what we have come to call "literariness."

This is a reading that focuses especially on a character largely overlooked in Centlivre criticism, the urbane and wealthy Sir George Airy, and it's also one that emerges directly from my experience of *The Busy Body* in the rehearsal room. In January 2025, in a project coproduced by Oxford University's Cultural Programme, Creation Theatre, and the Orange Tree Theatre, I spent a week working with director Gabriella Bird and a cast of professional actors to mount a script-in-hand performance of Centlivre's play, first at St. Hugh's College, Oxford, and then at the Orange Tree in Richmond, London.[7] I have been partnering with Creation since 2022 to revive plays by Restoration and eighteenth-century women, under the auspices of my participation in the R/18 Collective's larger initiative to work with practitioners to explore the period's repertoire. *The Busy Body* was our sixth such play, but the first for which we had a rehearsal period longer than a day, with the full week giving us more time and space to explore the mechanics of the play's physical comedy, its pacing, its deft engineering of character clash and contrast, and its language. The collaboration was not about reconstruction or museum theater. Rather, its express aim was to find ways of making Centlivre's comedy resonant and, above all, funny for a twenty-first-century audience. Our collective concern was thus revival in the multivalent sense of that term elaborated by Gilli Bush-Bailey and Bratton, who at once embrace its "implication that director and cast bring their contemporary world into fruitful dialogue with the author's work from an earlier time," while also leaning into how the word conjures the possibilities of remembering and renewing.[8] In this latter sense, revival orients itself to Joseph Roach's work on the transgenerational, kinesthetic mnemonics of performance, and to Diana Taylor's understanding of how the repertoire of embodied practices and knowledge constitutes an alternative archive to that comprised of texts and artefacts.[9]

This dramaturgy of revival, in concert with the attenuated rehearsal period, made for an environment of immediacy and contingency in which our collective attention was overwhelming focused on the practical dynamics of putting a play on its feet at speed. But these conditions in fact were highly conducive to genuine epistemological openness on my part. I did not, and could not, use the rehearsal room as a laboratory for testing or addressing preformulated lines of inquiry. Nor would I wish to do so; as Baz Kershaw has argued, to predicate practice-based research on predefined research questions is fundamentally to misunderstand performance's ontology. An appropriate methodology should instead be alert to and ready to embrace the uneven rhythm, contingency, and revelatory failures of the process itself.[10] In the case of *The Busy Body*, the rehearsal room became a space that generated and incubated unanticipated discoveries precisely because it was governed not by a conscious spirit of scholarly investigation but, on the contrary, by the urgent task of determining *how* to stage the play, of arriving at a sense of what did and didn't work as an embodied imperative. What gradually revealed itself, as this process unfolded, was not only the different registers of the comedy's theatrical language—we might almost say its different genres—but also the manner in which the recurrent and bathetic

discordances between these competing registers work to disclose their varying orientation to the body's capacities and presence.

It was our workshopping of Centlivre's "dumb scene," above all, that yielded these insights, for it's at this crucial point in *The Busy Body*, when a particular and emphatically male form of rhetoric meets with silence, that the stakes and limits of self-conscious literariness are most immediately and comically exposed. Sir George Airy (played in our revival by Patrick Fusco), wishing to court Miranda (Boadicea Ricketts), has paid her covetous guardian one hundred guineas in return for just ten minutes (or one hour: on this, the play is inconsistent) with her, in Gripe's presence (Robert Maskell). Gripe, as is common knowledge, aims to marry Miranda himself, attracted at once by her youth and her fortune of £30,000. But this paid-for interview poses two problems for Miranda. First, though she is drawn to Sir George, she has been feeding her guardian (her "Gardee," as she calls him) promises of marriage as a stratagem for acquiring control of her own estate; she cannot, therefore, be seen by him to encourage Sir George's advances. Second, Miranda has already flirtatiously encountered Sir George on several occasions in St. James's Park, her identity protected by a mask; though he has never seen her face, he would certainly recognize her voice to be that of his "Incognita." Added to these complications, Miranda is determined to "fit" both men for treating her as nothing more than a transactional object.[11] The plan she devises—one Sir Francis regards as a further sign of her affection for him—is to greet Sir George with silence: "I'll not answer him one word, but be dumb to all he says" (2.1.42).

As various critics have noted, Centlivre may have modeled this scene on 1.6 of Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass*, in which Wittipol gives his cloak to the foolish Fabian Fiztdottrel in exchange for fifteen minutes with his wife, with Centlivre revising the distribution of agency in the scene. Unlike Frances Fiztdottrel, who is under an injunction from her husband not to speak to Wittipol, Miranda very much owns her silence.[12] Yet the intertheatrical configuration of this scene in *The Busy Body* is far more elaborate than has hitherto been recognized, for Sir's George's florid rhetoric recalls the idiom of Restoration tragedy and tragicomedy: "Shake off this tyrant guardian's yoke, assume yourself, and dash his bold aspiring hopes. The deity of his desires is Avarice, a heretic in love, and ought to be banished by the Queen of Beauty" (2.1.187-90). We might trace the literary genealogy of particular phrases here. For instance, "heretic in love" perhaps looks back to Roger Boyle's 1664 heroic drama *Henry the Fifth* ("I was Loves Heretick till you I saw"), which in turn may well be thinking of the "Poore Heretiques in love" of John Donne's "The Indifferent" (1633).[13] The formulation "Queen of Beauty," meanwhile, recurs in tragedies of the 1680s and '90s by the likes of Thomas D'Urfey, John Banks, and William Phillips, as well as appearing in Nahum Tate's libretto for *Dido and Aeneas* (1688-9). Congreve uses it in his masque *The Judgment of Paris* (1700), as, tellingly, does Centlivre in her first comedy *The Beau's Duel*, in which she struggles to craft her own grammar of stage comedy following the hybrid, tragicomic form of her first play, *The Perjur'd Husband* (1700).[14] But the theatrical effect of Sir George's address to Miranda isn't a matter of specific allusions, if these can be said to be allusions at all. Rather, as became readily apparent to us in the rehearsal room and subsequently to the audience in performance, it depends on the arrival

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of a metaphor-laden register that is situationally misjudged and dramatically incongruous. As Laura Rosenthal has observed, the opposition between "an elite masculine reliance on the authority of books" (for instance, the pedant Sancho in *The Stolen Heiress* and the virtuoso Periwinkle in *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*) and the "savvy comprehension of the world that distinguishes many of her women characters" is a signature feature of Centlivre's comedies.[15] Yet in *The Busy Body* the problem—the joke—is less a matter of male learning and more specifically one of male language, for Sir George's chosen rhetorical guise (what, tellingly, he calls his "shapes" [2.1.169]) is comically out of place. He casts himself in the wrong play.

Confounded by Miranda's silence, Sir George himself begins to realize that his "address" may be "too grave" and that he ought therefore to "be more free" (2.1.199-200). Yet his speech remains in an essentially tragic key:

> With snoring only he'll [Gripe] awake thee, but I, with ravishing delight, would make thy senses dance in consort with joyful minutes. [*Aside*] Ha? Not yet? Sure she is dumb. [*To Miranda*] Thus would I steal and touch thy beauteous hand (*takes hold of her hand*), till by degrees I reached snowy breasts, then ravish kiss thus. (*Embraces her in ecstasy.*) (2.1.205-10)

We find male rhapsodies on the "snowy breasts" of women in the likes of Delarivier Manley's *The Royal Mischief* (1696), Thomas Southerne's *The Fate of Capua* (1700), and Nicholas Rowe's *The Royal Convert* (1707), but the point, once again, is the enunciation and accretion of a recognizable stock vocabulary of late seventeenth-century tragic desire.[16] Sir George's attempt to woo Miranda, to solicit her attention and her response, is an exercise in theatrical cliché. There is, though, a precise self-citation on Centlivre's part, for she is here recycling dialogue that appears in *The Stolen Heiress* (1702). Though billed as a comedy, that play reads, as Misty Anderson observes, as a "muddled" tragicomedy, with one plot unfolding in blank verse and the other in prose.[17] The first of these encompasses false accusations of rape and the very real threat of death as the cruel and tyrannical Gravello seeks to force his daughter (Lucasia) to marry against her will and then pursues both her and her lover (Palente) when they take flight. It is to the heightened tropology of this part of her earlier play that Centlivre returns in the rhetoric of Sir George, for his over-wrought rapture repeats lines spoken by Palente to Lucasia ("Give thy labouring Sorrows vent, / That like Convulsions heaves thy Snowy Breasts") and by Lucasia when she is told, disingenuously as it quickly emerges, that it's within her power to save Palente from execution ("My Sences all dance in the cirque of Joy. / My ravish't Heart leaps up to hear your Words").[18] That Centlivre so conspicuously self-borrows from the verse strand of her earlier tragicomedy signals the extent to which she builds this crucial scene in *The Busy Body* around the comic dislocation of an avowedly poetic language. Sir George plays (at) high drama when he is the unwitting participant in a "dumb show" (2.1.47) that rather has the contours of farce.

Even when he does, belatedly, realize that the language of the body might be a route out of the impasse, his attempts to "instruct" Miranda in a legible gestural vocabulary

further expose the fundamental literariness of his model of social and sexual relations: "when I ask anything, to which you would reply in the affirmative, gently nod your head thus [*nods his head*]; and when in the negative thus (*shakes his head*); and in the doubtful a tender sigh, thus. (*Sighs*)" (2.1.230-33). The brief possibility that Sir George might shift to a pragmatic mode of interaction is immediately undercut by the final direction here, which indicates his continuing determination to script this whole exchange, as well as Miranda's body, in tragic or heroic terms. While Miranda, for her part, finds that his "every action charms" (2.1.234) she remains in control, announces in an aside (for she does speak to the audience) that she'll resist the choreography Sir George seeks to impose—"I'll fit him for signs" (2.1.235)—and responds to his questions with a cryptic gesture, the holding up of her hands, that leaves him just as baffled as before.

That this meeting then culminates in Sir George acting out exactly the passionate encounter that has *not* happened—playing both himself and Miranda—makes fully apparent the logic of his address throughout the dumb scene: first, that the elaborate, self-conscious metaphorics of his speech from the moment he meets Miranda is more concerned with advertising its own wit and rhetorical sophistication, with what he calls a "quick fancy" (2.1.280), than with actually attending to the reality of the woman before him; and second, that his speech operates under the misguided fantasy that Miranda will be rhetorically compelled to adopt the role of beautiful but vulnerable heroine in which he has already cast her. "I'll suppose your mind and answer for you" (2.1.263-64), Sir George declares in a line that describes what, in implicit terms, he has been doing from the start. His improvised scene-within-a-scene ventriloquizes Miranda as a writer of lyric, has her respond in kind to his language of heroic love. Giving (as Miranda) a billet-doux to himself, Sir George proceeds to sing "the flowing numbers" of the verse contained therein (2.1.286). To be sure, there is an almost Wildean form of self-parody to this moment on Sir George's part, but this very ironic self-reflexivity must be understood as an extension and not a rejection of his studied, verbally ornate approach. He retreats to travesty precisely as an ostentatious display of the wit that has been called into question by Miranda's silence, and his concomitant failure to woo her. What's at stake for Sir George here is his cherished sense of his own mastery of the language game and arguably his whole conception of the social realm as essentially literary.

In the rehearsal room, we quickly came to understand that the comedy of the dumb scene depends, at least initially, on the absolute sincerity with which Sir George speaks in the incongruous register of Restoration heroic tragedy, mistaking the nature of both the situation and the lady. The clue resides in the character's name: he is *Airy*, a word that can mean, as Samuel Johnson tells us, "spirited" and "full of mirth" but also "without reality; without any steady foundation in truth or nature."[19] For this latter definition, Johnson cites a couplet from the Earl of Roscommon's 1680 translation of Horace's *Ars Poetica*: "Nor (to avoid such meanness) soaring high / With empty sound, and airy notions fly."[20] That Sir George *soars high with empty sound* in this scene may explain the reported disgruntlement of Robert Wilks, the actor who first took the role, who is said to have "had so mean an Opinion of the Part … that one Morning in a passion he threw it off the Stage

into the Pit, and swore that no body would bear to sit and hear such Stuff."[21] This is, of course, precisely the point.

When Sir George next meets Miranda, which isn't until the final scene of Act 4, he continues to speak "such Stuff," willfully inhabiting an entirely different genre of play. Centlivre first sets his rhetorical guise against the demotics of Scentwell, Miranda's maid, who covertly ushers him into Sir Francis Gripe's house via the garden gate. To Scentwell's warning (which Sidonie McLaren, who played the part in our revival, delightedly mined for innuendo) that "you must go through many a dark passage and dirty step before you arrive," he responds, "I know I must before I arrive at Paradise" (4.4.8-10), in a line that recalls Dorimant's couplet—taken, as always, from Edmund Waller—as he enters Loveit's chamber in Etherege's *The Man of Mode*: "They taste of death who do at heaven arrive; / But we this paradise approach alive."[22] Then, in the play's most explicit satire of literary language, Sir George meets with Miranda only to find her still more resistant to his rhetoric in her speech than she was formerly in her silence:

> *Sir George.* And do I once more behold that lovely object, whose idea fills my mind, and forms my pleasing dreams!
> *Miranda.* What, beginning again in heroics! Sir George, don't you remember how little fruit your last prodigal oration produced? Not one bare single word in answer.
> *Sir George.* Ha! the voice of my incognita. Why did you take ten thousand ways to captivate a heart your eyes alone had vanquished?
> *Miranda*. Prithee, no more of these flights, for our time's but short, and we must fall into business. Do you think we can agree on that same terrible bugbear, matrimony, without heartily repenting on both sides?
> *Sir George*. It has been my wish since first my longing eyes beheld ye.
> *Miranda*. And your happy ears drank in the pleasing news I had thirty thousand pound. (4.5.14-26)

In its bathetic rhythm, this exchange enacts *The Busy Body*'s anatomy of language in microcosm. Miranda at once names Sir George's default register ("heroics") and also repeatedly punctures it with her ludic cynicism and insistence on practical action ("business"). The key notion here is that of prodigality. Sir George's expressive model of language as that which makes itself known through its self-conscious excess approaches the baroque; he wields words as ornament. But for Miranda such rhetoric willfully ignores the very object or situation it addresses in pursuit of its own intricacy; it constitutes a form of waste. Her model of language, by contrast, is stridently pragmatic and has recourse to metaphor ("that same terrible bugbear") only to undercut the persistently figural grounds of Sir George's "oration."

To see *The Busy Body* performed is to understand that while its title refers to the character of Marplot, whom the dramatis personae describes as "*a sort of silly fellow, cowardly, but inquisitive to know everybody's business*," it also touches upon Centlivre's concern dramatically to parse the ways in which women's bodies especially are always and already busied. They are so, most immediately, by the men (the guardian, the father, the would-be

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husbands) who seek to control and take legal and/or sexual possession of their bodies. But in Miranda's case she deftly manages the busy-ness, the *business*, of her own body—and that of others, too. In the dumb scene, she opposes to Sir George's "heroics" her body's stubborn and irreducible presence, we might say its refusal to be textualized. Elsewhere, she shows herself to be, as Anderson observes, a "very effective rhetorician" precisely because her language is always oriented towards the reality of her body's capacities, needs, and above all legal status.[23] Her verbal world, Anderson argues, is very much one of contracts and official documents, to the extent that for our performance of the play we trimmed some of Miranda's lengthy discussion of lawyers, estates, and papers, especially in her scenes with Sir Francis, on the grounds that an audience today would find such dialogue close to illegible. But such discourse, insistently practical and prosaic and alert to the demands made on and by her body, is diametrically opposed to the "heroics" of Sir George.

Where Sir George's attempt at improvisation in the dumb scene aims at nothing other than the demonstration of its own rhetorical virtuosity, Miranda is a deft and habitual improvisor whose verbal and gestural orientation is always outward, always focused on how to calibrate (or recalibrate) in three-dimensional terms the situations she inhabits: to create the space and time for her to wed Sir George, she "plant[s] emissaries" that draw her guardian to Epsom to act as the executor of "a brother usurer" (4.5.41-42); to prevent Sir Francis from discovering the concealed Sir George she summons, on the spot, the story of a yet-to-be-tamed pet monkey shut behind a chimney board (4.5.94-98); and by the close of the play, she has gained legal possession of her own estate, secured for Charles (Sir Francis's son) the estate that's long been his due, and promised to do the same for Marplot (Sir Francis's ward). Her talent resides not only in consummate performance but, to invoke what Giles Jacob said of Centlivre herself in 1719, in "the Contrivance of Plots and Incidents," and Suz-Anne Kinney is thus right to read Miranda as an "image of the woman playwright."[24] Specifically, the character acts and scripts action (for herself and others) in ways that mobilize ideas of facture and physical labor, of making something with one's hands, that lurk etymologically in that word *playwright*. The words "invention," "invented," "contrivance," and "contrived" constellate in *The Busy Body*, together appearing sixteen times. Though rarely used by Miranda herself, they nonetheless signal both the governing concern of the play of which she is the generative center and also the manner in which it arbitrates between different—and differently gendered—forms of creativity: the prodigality of male verbal sophistication, what Sir George calls his "extempore" (2.1.280), against the spatially and somatically responsive dramaturgy that is Miranda's very reflex.

Only twice in the play does Miranda really lean into the descriptive, figurative, or inferential affordances of language, and on both occasions she does so for strategic ends, for the purposes of an invention that is situational rather than verbal. As the masked Incognita in St. James's Park in the first act, she prevents Sir George from uncovering her true identity by asking that he turn his back to her while she recounts her story; she then employs elaborate, impassioned rhetoric and even (for the only time in the play) couplets—"And when you left the place, grief seized me so, / No rest my heart, no sleep my eyes could know" (1.1.375-76)—in order to distract Sir George and escape undetected,

effectively using the language of lyric as a second and more effective mask. Then, in the third act, she conscripts Marplot as an unwitting go-between by telling him to "advise" Sir George "to keep from the garden-gate on the left hand … about the hour of eight" or face "a pistol or a blunderbuss" (3.4.128-31). In a comedy of few double entendres, all depends here on Sir George understanding what she really means by a "warm reception" (3.4.136) and so recognizing the threat as a coded invitation. The imperative, once more, is one of plot and contrivance. Put simply, Miranda cannot afford to be wasteful or indulgent in her speech. She wields language in a direct and instrumental way; she is far too *busy* for wordplay.

We find the same satire of male "prodigal orations" in the play's other plot, which revolves around the romance of Charles and Isabinda (played in our revival by Herb Cuanalo and Bea Svistunenko), whose father—the merchant and Hispanophile Sir Jealous Traffick (Kevin Golding)—keeps her under lock and key until he can marry her to a Spaniard. In the first meeting between this second pair of lovers, Charles, having gained entry to Sir Jealous's residence, asks Isabinda to seize the moment and elope with him, couching this invitation in figural terms: "If you'd consent whilst the furious beast is abroad, I'd free you from the reach of his paws" (3.2.6-7). But Isabinda is unmoved: "Come, come, Charles, I fear if I consult my reason, confinement and plenty is better than liberty and starving" (3.2.10-11). Male metaphor and hyperbole are immediately undercut by female pragmatism and attention to the exigencies of the body in a comic pattern that the audience by now recognize as one of the play's leitmotifs. Indeed, Isabinda goes so far as to tell Charles that his fine words won't put food on the table: "I know you'd make the frolic pleasing for a little time by saying and doing a world of tender things, but when our small substance is once exhausted, and a thousand requisites for life are wanting, love, who rarely dwells with poverty, would also fail us" (3.2.11-15). Critics have often regarded Isabinda as Miranda's passive foil, yet in rehearsal it was evident that she is nothing of the sort: she knows that "confinement sharpens the invention" (2.2.35-36); in encouraging Charles to "write in characters" (3.2.35-36), that is in code, she demonstrates, like Miranda, an implicit understanding that language is best deployed strategically; and her declaration that she acts according to "Spanish contrivance," learned from her "father's severity" (3.2.37), aligns her with the very form of the play itself (Spanish intrigue comedy).

Likewise, later in the play, Patch, Isabinda's chambermaid (played for us by Claire Redcliffe), deflates Charles's posturing as he responds to news that Don Diego Barbinetto, the man Sir Jealous intends for his son-in-law, has arrived:

> *Charles.* He dies! Yes, by all the wrongs of love he shall! Here will I plant myself, and through my breast he shall make his passage, if he enters.
> *Patch.* A most heroic resolution. There might be ways found out more to your advantage. Policy is often preferred to open force.
> *Charles.* I apprehend you not. (4.3.16-21)

Charles—like Sir George before him—slides into a different genre, into "heroics," here rehearsing a stock vow of Restoration high tragedy (compare the King in Elkanah Settle's *Love and Revenge* [1675]: "That blow their Impious hands dare aim at hers, / I through

my Breast will intercept").[25] This isn't to suggest that the two male lovers are the same; from the first, Charles's want of hard cash gives him an impatience and impetuosity at odds with Sir George's studied urbanity. Yet, Charles, like his friend, defaults to the cliches of Restoration poetics whenever he is confronted by a challenge. Only in the final act of *The Busy Body* do Charles and Sir George show themselves to have learned "policy" from the women of the play when they enter the house of Sir Jealous Traffick in the respective guises of Sir Don Diego Barbinetto and his associate Meanwell (and we might once more take our cue from the names: Sir George finally ceases to be *airy* and instead *means well*). Acting with due sense of strategy and exhibiting the kind of improvisational dexterity and language keyed to economic reality hitherto reserved for Miranda, the two men succeed in rescuing Isabinda from the fate of a forced marriage. As they do so, they pull her back into the generic precincts of comedy, too, for it is now her speech that is conspicuous in its tragic register and occasional lapses into blank verse, as she pleads with Sir Jealous to relent ("Let this posture move your tender nature. / Forever will I hang upon these knees; / Nor loose my hands till you cut off my hold" [5.2.93-95]).

In this reading, Centlivre's play self-reflexively parses rival paradigms of dramaturgy. Its scenes act out the gendered distinction between literariness (as Centlivre sees it, an autotelic language which aspires only or primarily to its own complexity) and busy-ness/business (associated with direct, embodied speech and action, and the "contrivance" of spaces and interpersonal relations to serve specific, material ends). *The Busy Body*'s narrative arc sees the two male lovers insistently mining an elaborate rhetoric of baroque tragedy and tragicomedy before they recognize, finally and belatedly, the social and sexual inefficacy of this language and turn instead to a more inventive, practical, and somatically centered mode of interacting, and reacting—consummately modelled throughout by Miranda—that enables them to defeat Sir Jealous Traffick and the tyranny of the parental generation for which he stands. What emerged in rehearsal was an intertheatrical negotiation of the idea and limits of particular registers of language, a negotiation that ultimately enacts the triumph of Centlivre's own theatrical form, rooted as it is in a conception of the play as a collaborative, situational, material happening rather than as a curation of verbal sophistication.

This understanding of the play is very much in line with recent criticism's excavation of the self-consciousness and rich metatheater of Centlivre's practice, a trend that nuances the longstanding recognition of her as a deft and inveterate borrower from the repertoire she (as actress as much as writer) and her audience knew so well.[26] Rosenthal has shown how Centlivre, acutely aware that women writers were more vulnerable to the charge of plagiarism, carefully calibrated her authorial self-representations, actively advertising her reworking of existing material when publishing anonymously but then concealing such intertextuality when publishing under her own name.[27] John O'Brien, meanwhile, finds that her plays, so often dismissed as exercises in the orchestration of plot, deploy plot critically and ironically in ways that summon us to reevaluate its very nature and function.[28] But most pertinent to the argument I'm making here is Rebecca Tierney-Hynes's reading of Centlivre's *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* (1719) as unfolding "a clear opposition between an older form of comedy, humors comedy, and the new intrigue comedy Centlivre is writing."

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In the victory of the shapeshifting Fainwell (representing intrigue) over the four, temperamentally different guardians (the humors) who stand between him and marriage to Ann Lovely, Centlivre is, Tierney-Hynes contends, "allegorizing the defeat of an older political system by a new global mercantilism."[29]

I share Tierney-Hynes view of Centlivre as a playwright unusually attuned to the particular constitution and historicity of the different genres in circulation on the early eighteenth-century stage and who found in the collision of and competition between these genres a deep structure for her own comic form. But if *The Busy Body* invites us to regard it as an allegory of genre, then it also unravels and frustrates that same impulse, both in Isabinda's shift to a "heroic" key in the final act (at the very moment Sir George relinquishes it) and more pervasively in the counter-schematic presence of Marplot. Zak Ghazi-Torbati's ferocious, anarchic, and frequently ad-libbed portrayal of the character in our revival—which brilliantly stretched the notion of "script-in-hand" to breaking point—fully corroborated Bratton's contention that Marplot operates throughout the play as an "anti-dramatist" and in turn as a perfect foil to Miranda.[30] Likewise, for all that it might be tempting to discern a political inflection to *The Busy Body*'s drama of literary words versus embodied actions (we might note the Tory coding of the heroic form, as pioneered by John Dryden), the play first and foremost represents a cultural intervention in the then vexed status of the stage play as a verbal object.

Of course, in the years following Jeremy Collier's *A Short View of the English Stage* (1698), with its unyielding critique of the indecency of theatrical expression, it wasn't possible to write for the stage without being highly conscious of the ethical freight of language, and Centlivre is often regarded as a post-Collier playwright par excellence in the diffused moral tenor and "sanitized" dialogue of her works.[31] Yet she began her career as a dramatist in 1700 with a direct retort to Collier and the precise terms of her preface to *The Perjur'd Husband*—namely, that dramatis personae ought to speak as becomes their personalities and passions—testify to a writer whose conception of language is fundamentally characterological and situational. It isn't "reasonable," she notes witheringly and contra Collier, for an adulteress to "*deliver her Commands to her Confident in the words of a Psalm,*" and, as we've seen, much of the humor of *The Busy Body* spins around exactly this incongruity of address.[32] At a time when the very nature of the words spoken on stage was under unprecedented scrutiny, Centlivre created in Sir George a tempered rake whose decision to woo in "heroics" (something like a discursive ghost of theater past) and whose fundamental faith in the efficacy of ornate language, are marked as comically unreasonable.

But *The Busy Body* directs itself still more pressingly to the question of the ontology of theater. As Julie Stone Peters has shown, towards the end of the seventeenth century playwrights increasingly laid claim to the literariness of their art, a cultural shift most clearly indexed in their use of "the word *poet* to denote a dramatist."[33] For Peters, it is William Congreve who best exemplifies this attempt to align English drama with the prestige of the classical canon and with the logocentric protocols of print that are far more conducive to authorial property and propriety than the collaborative, embodied, ephemeral vectors of performance. Congreve wrote no new stage play after *The Way of the World* in

1700, turning instead to "work on editions and on his own library," while his denigration of "nonliterary theater" is readily articulated in his 1695 essay "Concerning Humour in Comedy," which dismisses "pretended Comedy, stuff'd with such Grotesques, Figures, and Farce Fools."[34] Congreve, Peters argues, opposed a theater of visuality and plasticity "wholly devoted to its physical forms," and instead strove "for a theater that had largely given gesture over to the word."[35]

Centlivre seems to have had little interest in this project. In the preface to the anonymously performed and printed *Love's Contrivance* (1703), she too adopts the appellation of "poet" but she also avers that while "*Criticks cavil most about Decorums, and crie up* Aristotle*'s Rules as the most essential part of the Play … the other way of writing pleases full as well*."[36] As we've seen, this distinction between decorum and the "other way," between playwriting that aspires to the prescriptions of the ancients and playwriting aimed at entertainment and fully acknowledging its modern audience, is scenically rehearsed throughout *The Busy Body*. Indeed, we might well ask Centlivre's question in the preface to *Love's Contrivance*, "*why shou'd a Man torture, and wrack his Brain for what will be no Advantage to him*," of Sir George in the play's dumb scene.[37] We can, though, go still further, for there are grounds on which we might regard the play as a more direct rejoinder to Congreve in particular. The epigraph to *The Busy Body*, printed on its title page, quotes lines that belong to a section in the first of the second book of Horace's *Epistles* in which the poet dwells on the "heavier burden" of writing comedy as opposed to tragedy:

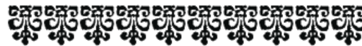
> Quem tulit ad scenam ventoso gloria curru;
> Exanimat lentus spectator, sedulus inflat.
> Sic leve, sic parvum est, animum quod laudis avarum
> Subruit aut reficit
> [The man whom glory carries to the stage in her windy car, the listless spectator leaves spiritless, the eager one exultant; so light, so small is what casts down or upbuilds a soul that craves for praise.][38]

Centlivre wasn't the first English playwright to take these lines as an epigraph: Congreve had used exactly the ones on the title page to *The Old Batchelor* in 1693, as Centlivre and her publisher (Bernard Lintott) are likely to have known, especially as Congreve's comedy (with epigraph) had been reprinted as recently as 1707.

Immediately preceding the lines that both Congreve and Centlivre cite, Horace attacks Plautus for writing purely for money. And immediately after, he condemns those "things" in which "the rabble delights," such as boxing and bear baiting: "But nowadays all the pleasure even of the knights has passed from the ear to the vain delights of the wandering eye."[39] That Congreve would wish to quote this passage is unsurprising; in the dedication to *The Way of the World* he openly aligns himself with Terence, whose "Beauties … the greater Part of his Audiences were incapable of Tasting," rather than Plautus, whose "coarsest Strokes … so severely censur'd by *Horace*, were more likely to affect the Multitude."[40] But why would Centlivre, a writer avowedly committed to entertaining the rabble, to "the other way," adopt the same lines for her own epigraph? Given her adroit and cautious management of her own paratextual persona, the choice is surely significant.

The Busy Body's consistent satire of literary language invites us to read Centlivre's Horatian epigraph as a coded and sharply ironic echo of Congreve, positing him (much like Sir George Airy) as the soul who pursues glory, who craves praise.

What began, then, in the rehearsal room as a collectively felt disjunction between the register of Sir George's address to Miranda and the situational and sensory contours of the dumb scene has thus opened on to a reading of *The Busy Body* as a play that offers at once an exercise in and a vindication of Centlivre's own model of dramaturgy. Staging in the "prodigal orations" of her male lovers the very notion of literary drama that the likes of Congreve were then advocating, and programmatically countervailing the inefficacy and incongruity of such male rhetoric—Nietzsche's "stammerings of a foreign language"—with the muscular grammar of performance and the gestural improvisation and busy-ness of its heroine's body, Centlivre's *The Busy Body* ultimately makes the case for itself: for theater *as* theater, for theater as (etymologically) the site of beholding. That her contemporaries found this case to be compelling is well enough indicated by the play's sensational popularity across the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth; that the audiences of our script-in-hand revival were likewise persuaded was attested by their laughter and the deep surprise of their comments, the most common of which was how "modern" the play felt. Yet, as we continue to assess and push back against the many erasures that attended the construction of the edifice of "literature," to describe *The Busy Body* as a play that dramatizes and indeed strives to shape the trajectory of theater history itself is, for now, to find something elegiac in even this most laugh-out-loud of comedies.



Notes

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Early Greek Philosophy & Other Essays*, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge, ed. Oscar Levy (T. N. Foulis, 1911), 91.

[2] F. P. Lock, *Susanna Centlivre* (Twayne Publishers, 1979), 134.

[3] Jacky Bratton, "Reading the Intertheatrical, or, The Mysterious Disappearance of Susanna Centlivre," in *Women, Theatre and Performance: New Histories, New Historiographies*, ed. Maggie B. Gale and Viv Gardner (Manchester University Press, 2000), 10.

[4] Lord Byron to John Murray, 29 March 1820, in *Byron's Letters and Journals*, vol. 7, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977), 61.

[5] F. W. Bateson, *English Comic Drama 1700-1750* (Clarendon Press, 1929), 64.

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[6] Jason Curtis Geiger, "Susanna Centlivre, Sir George Etherege, and the Invention of the Restoration Comedy of Manners," *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Theatre Research* 27, no. 1 (2012): 79.

[7] Indeed, the insights presented in this essay were made possible through, and only through, this collaboration with a hugely talented director, Gabriella Bird, and cast: Herb Cualano, Patrick Fusco, Kevin Golding, Robert Maskell, Sidonie McLaren, Claire Redcliffe, Boadicea Ricketts, Bea Svistunenko, and Zak Ghazi-Torbati. My thanks to them all, and also to Clare Rich, Helen Eastman (artistic director of Creation Theatre), and Tom Littler (artistic director of the Orange Tree Theatre).

[8] Gilli Bush-Bailey with Jacky Bratton, "Case Study: Memory, Absence and Agency: An Approach to Practice-Based Research in Theatre History," in *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*, ed. Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson (Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 107.

[9] Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (Columbia University Press, 1996); Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Duke University Press, 2003).

[10] Baz Kershaw, "Practice as Research through Performance," in *Practice-Led Research, Research-Led Practice in the Creative Arts*, ed. Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean (Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 112-15. Kershaw instead suggests that we enter the process with "hunches," a word he prefers on the grounds that it troubles exactly the mind-body dichotomy that inheres in the history of Centlivre's critical reputation—and, as I was to discover, in *The Busy Body*'s comedy, too.

[11] Susanna Centlivre, *The Busy Body*, in *Eighteenth-Century Women Dramatists*, ed. Melinda C. Finberg (Oxford University Press, 2001), 1.1.297. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

[12] Lock, *Susanna Centlivre*, 71-72; Nancy Copeland, *Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre: Women's Comedy and the Theatre* (Ashgate, 2004), 102.

[13] Roger Boyle, Earl of Orrery, *The History of Henry the Fifth* (Printed for H. Herringham, 1668), 23; John Donne, "The Indifferent," l. 24, in *The Elegies and The Songs and Sonnets*, ed. Helen Gardner (Clarendon Press, 1965).

[14] Thomas D'Urfey, *The Injured Princess* (Printed for R. Bentley and M. Magnes, 1682), 21; John Banks, *Cyrus the Great: or, The Tragedy of Love* (Printed for Richard Bentley, 1696), 8; William Philips, *The Revengeful Queen* (Printed for P. Buck, 1698), 30; Nahum Tate, *An Opera Perform'd at Mr. Josiah Priest's Boarding-School at Chelsey* (c. 1689), 2; William Congreve, *The Judgment of Paris*, l. 160, in *The Works of William Congreve*, ed.

D. F. McKenzie, 3 vols (Oxford University Press, 2011); Susanna Centlivre, *The Beau's Duel* (Printed for D. Brown and N. Cox, 1702), 43.

[15] Laura J. Rosenthal, *Playwrights and Plagiarists in Early Modern England: Gender, Authorship, Literary Property* (Cornell University Press, 1996), 227.

[16] Delarivier Manley, *The Royal Mischief* (Printed for R. Bentley, F. Saunders, and J. Knapton, 1696), 12; Thomas Southerne, *The Fate of Capua* (Printed for Benjamin Tooke, 1700), 18; Nicholas Rowe, *The Royal Convert*, 3.1.75, in *The Plays and Poems of Nicholas Rowe*, vol. II: The Middle Period Plays, ed. Michael Caines (Routledge, 2016).

[17] Misty G. Anderson, *Female Playwrights and Eighteenth-Century Comedy: Negotiating Marriage on the London Stage* (Palgrave, 2002), 112.

[18] Susanna Centlivre, *The Stolen Heiress* (Printed for William Turner and John Nutt, [1703]), 59, 46.

[19] Samuel Johnson, definitions 7 and 5 of "airy," in *A Dictionary of the English Language* (Printed by W. Strahan for J. and P Knapton et al., 1755).

[20] Wentworth Dillon, Earl of Roscommon, *Horace's Art of poetry made English* (Printed for Henry Herringman, 1680), 17.

[21] John Mottley, *A Compleat List of All the English Dramatic Poets and of All the Plays Ever Printed in the English Language to the Year M,DCC,XLVII*, appended to Thomas Whincop, *Scanderbeg: or, Love and Liberty. A Tragedy* (Printed for W. Reeve, 1747), 189.

[22] George Etherege, *The Man of Mode*, 2.2.142-43, in *The Plays of George Etherege*, ed. Michael Cordner (Cambridge University Press, 1982).

[23] Anderson, *Female Playwrights*, 111.

[24] Giles Jacob, "Mrs. Susanna Cent Livre," in *The Poetical Register; or, The Lives and Characters of the English Dramatick Poets* (Printed for E. Curll, 1719), 32; Suz-Anne Kinney, "Confinement Sharpens the Invention: Aphra Behn's *The Rover* and Susanna Centlivre's *The Busie Body*," in *Look Who's Laughing: Gender and Comedy*, ed. Gail Finney (Gordon and Breach, 1994), 88. See also Bratton, who describes Miranda as "a surrogate for the writer" (19).

[25] Elkanah Settle, *Love and Revenge* (Printed for William Cademan, 1675), 41.

[26] On Centlivre as a borrower see especially Jacqueline Pearson, *The Prostituted Muse: Images of Women Dramatists 1672-1737* (St. Martin's Press, 1988), 203, 208.

[27] Rosenthal, *Playwrights and Plagiarists*, 207. See also Mattie Burkert, *Speculative Enterprise: Public Theaters and Financial Markets in London, 1688-1763* (University of Virginia Press, 2021), 99-102.

[28] John O'Brien, "Busy Bodies: The Plots of Susanna Centlivre," in *Eighteenth-Century Genre and Culture: Serious Reflections on Occasional Forms: Essays on Eighteenth-Century Literature and Genre in Honor of J. Paul Hunter*, ed. Cynthia Wall and Dennis Todd (University of Delaware Press, 2001), 165-89.

[29] Rebecca Tierney-Hynes, "Emotional Economics: Centlivre's Comic Ends," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 45 (2016): 99.

[30] Bratton, *Reading the Intertheatrical*, 19.

[31] See Brian Corman, *Genre and Generic Change in English Comedy 1660-1710* (University of Toronto Press, 1993), 123.

[32] Susanna Centlivre, *The Perjur'd Husband* (Printed for Bennet Banbury, 1700), [A3r].

[33] Julie Stone Peters, *Congreve, the Drama, and the Printed Word* (Stanford University Press, 1990), 71.

[34] Peters, *Congreve, the Drama, and the Printed Word*, 73-74; William Congreve, "Concerning Humour in Comedy," in *Works of Congreve*, III: 65.

[35] Peters, *Congreve, the Drama, and the Printed Word*, 164, 173.

[36] [Susanna Centlivre], *Love's Contrivance* (Printed for Bernard Lintott, 1703), a2r-a2v.

[37] Centlivre, *Love's Contrivance*, a2v.

[38] Horace, *Epistles* II.I, ll. 177-80, in Horace, *Satires. Epistles. The Art of Poetry*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough (Harvard University Press, 1926).

[39] Horace, *Epistles* II.I, ll. 170-76, 182-89.

[40] William Congreve, *The Way of the World*, Dedication, in *Works of Congreve*, II: 98.

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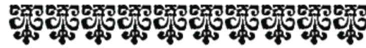

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