SUSANNA CENTLIVRE: SUCCESSFUL CHAMELEON

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in English.

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DEDICATION

To my sweet sister, Kristeen: KOTC
and my dear friend, Patty
also to you, Dr. G
We gain strength, and courage, and confidence
By each experience in which we really stop
to look fear in the face . . . we must do that
which we think we cannot.
Eleanor Roosevelt
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ABSTRACT

Susanna Centlivre, active in the post Restoration Theater, wrote nineteen plays from 1700 to 1723. A few of her plays were popular until 1900, but thereafter fell into limbo. By studying three of her plays, *The Perjur’d Husband*, *The Busy Body*, and *The Wonder, A Woman Keeps a Secret*, one can decide whether she can receive the classification of a protofeminist. This topic is important in helping to trace the evolution of women’s writing, and their movement toward the development in the novel. One must understand the issues involved for women writers as they struggled for recognition in the field of literature.

Centlivre’s history prior to 1700 remains shadowy. Her early life is oft repeated with little or no substantiation of the facts. The study of situations and characters in her plays reveal attitudes of the interactions between men and women. The ideas about forced marriages and paternal attitudes toward children reveal themselves through both comedy and sorrow. Though Centlivre married three times no children came from those marriages; the plays she wrote reflected the manners of those times.

Assigning the arbitrary label of protofeminist or feminist to Centlivre at this time might place her into a genre from which she could not escape. She should receive the same treatment as any male writer: a fair and balanced approach to her words based on equality between the sexes.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Susanna Centlivre: Successful Chameleon

**Simon Pure. colloq** Also Simon-Pure, Simon-pure, simon pure. [The name of a Quaker in Mrs. Centlivre’s comedy “A bold stroke for a wife” (1717), who is impersonated by another character during part of the play.] a. the (real) *Simon Pure*, the real genuine, or authentic person or thing.

The Oxford English Dictionary

A chance visit to the dictionary acquainted me with a female playwright I had never known existed. The actual word I sought faded; Susanna Centlivre and her play expanded to fill the entire page. I copied the definition in my notebook and after I applied some thought, a fascinating conundrum emerged: further research revealed an astonishing absence of information regarding both Centlivre’s life as well as her plays. The little I knew of the post-Restoration years never mentioned any female playwrights, let alone one who had created a word adopted as a dictionary entry. I cannot describe the pleasure and joy of my discovery. My goal of simply finding information about her turned into a friendship with a long dead woman. Centlivre’s elusive personal life remains a shadow, but her words reveal a woman striving for equality in a patriarchal society. Approaching Susanna Centlivre when she emerges for public view in 1700 with her first and most ignored play, *The Perjur’d Husband*, coupled with two of her later plays *The Busy Body* and *The Wonder, A Woman Keeps a Secret*, I will track her growth as a playwright. My interest concerns Centlivre’s diminishing Rake and evolving self-empowering female heroines. In Centlivre’s case, I believe her quest for simple equality between the sexes drove her to challenge the idea of forced marriages in seventeen of her nineteen plays. The trio of plays I chose reveals her unique methods of challenging the treatment of women without firing incendiary invective.
An early twentieth-century text by Allardyce Nicoll extends a thought which might explain the absence of Centlivre from all but a dictionary: “it may be said that the drama of the years which followed, from 1700 onwards to the middle of the nineteenth century, had been almost entirely forgotten by scholars and critics” (1). The lack of interest in the entire genre indicates boredom with that type of playwriting and acting. Archaic language from the plays causes the modern playgoer confusion: words and expressions employed during the Restoration and into the early eighteenth century no longer retain their original meaning, and the plays refer to political concepts which are foreign to current audiences. In my attempt to understand the plays and their place in the chronology of the theater, another issue arose: the comedies of manners adhere to a proscribed formula. Tastes and audiences evolved, but the playwrights did not. Centlivre, in her last play, attempted to return to the Restoration rake of thirty years previous and her effort failed.

The slow extinction of the Restoration and early eighteenth-century theater cannot totally attribute its demise to static playwrights. Mercantilism allowed a different class of people to access plays. Their tastes no longer favored the rakes; they wanted to see themselves as characters with morals and integrity and not unprincipled rogues. Nicoll proposes an argument that deserves mention:

In no wise can it be denied that, as we watch the drama progressing from 1610 to the end of the eighteenth century, we see in general only a retrograde movement, arrested at moments, . . . but moving nevertheless relentlessly along the one inevitable path. The study of an art form in its decay is not a pleasant thing. (1-2)

The candid remarks by Nicoll lead to an explanation, but not an answer as to why Centlivre became relegated to a dictionary entry. Though Nicoll admits that playwrights such as Dryden,
Congreve and Steele provided moments of lucid work, the downward spiral to playwriting contributed to its descent toward oblivion. The author allows that some inventive drama struggled to surface; he mentions, in particular, Steele’s *The Conscious Lovers*, Lillo’s *The London Merchant* and Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* (2). Of course the plays he lists only included male authors, and though I would like Nicoll to include at least one Centlivre play in his above list I will accede to the choices he made. Centlivre, a female playwright, brings a gender perspective to the Post-Restoration stage, and I cannot simply allow her place on a roster because of the anomaly of her sex. If she contributed concrete changes according to Nicoll’s criteria for men, then I must argue for her inclusion as one of those “retrograde” authors who created a brief spark before extinguishment and relegation to a dictionary. Nicoll, with his unique insight into why Restoration and Post-Restoration drama faded from the world’s stage focuses the reader toward an approach to criticism that equally discusses the male dramatists during the first quarter of the eighteenth century, but downplays the influence of women playwrights.

Nicoll does not ignore Centlivre in his book. He briefly discussed her plays as does her biographer and other authors. A singular statement Nicoll made in regard to *The Wonder: A Woman Keeps a Secret* revealed admiration tempered with a dismissal of her last five plays, The end comes in *The Wonder: A Woman Keeps a Secret* ([D.L. April 1714]), but this play is truly a triumph. Owing its contemporary success partly to the magnificent acting of [Mrs] Oldfield as Violante, it was so excellently constructed and so full of buoyant grace that it held the boards until well into the nineteenth century. (Nicoll 168)

After praising *The Wonder*, Nicoll’s abrupt dismissal of the balance of Centlivre’s work which included the 1718 hit play *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* seems puzzling, but he makes an observation which might account for a fraction of her enduring reputation. He refers to “The Comedies of
Intrigue” in the following:

Unquestionably, of all the writers of this particular school, [Mrs Susannah] Centlivre is the most important, both for the intrinsic merit of her works and for the influence which she exerted. The career of this authoress is to be compared with that of [Mrs] Behn, many of whose characteristic qualities she seems to have inherited. (Nicoll 166)

Centlivre’s biographer, John Wilson Bowyer helps explain the continuing popularity of her plays when he cites Lord Byron’s words:

I also know that Congreve gave up writing because Mrs. Centlivre’s balderdash drove his comedies off. . . .Nothing so easy as intricate confusion of plot, and rant. Mrs. Centlivre, in comedy, has [ten times the bustle of Congreve;] but are they to be compared? [a]nd yet she drove Congreve from the theater.

(Bowyer 97)

Lord Byron’s words supply clues as to why Centlivre still has her plays performed in the twenty-first century. As one reads her first play The Perjur’d Husband, the ancient language seemed cumbersome with few flashes of inventiveness; however, when the reader moves to Centlivre’s two later plays her dialogue loosens and brightens. Reading A Bold Stroke for a Wife, one can see the crispness of the repartee between the characters. Lord Byron’s two words “balderdash” and “bustle” perfectly describe her impact upon plays after 1700. Those words may also describe Centlivre: her actual personality resides in her plays and transcends the years. The indefinable quality of charisma surrounds her.

In the above quotation Lord Byron mentions Congreve and Centlivre, “[B]ut are they to be compared?” (Bowyer 97). Byron actually contrasts the two playwrights in this brief quote. His compact analysis derides Congreve’s comedy and enhances Centlivre’s talent. Intertextuality
expands from Byron’s words to Emerson’s thoughts in Wendell V. Harris’ dictionary entry where he quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson:

> The generating metaphorical notion behind this usage is found in Emerson’s ‘Every book is a quotation; and every house is a quotation out of all forests, and mines, and stone quarries; and every man is a quotation from all ancestors.’

(Harris 175)

Emerson offers a total infinity of comparisons not only in life, but also in written texts. Both Byron and Emerson offer the reader permission to explore texts in the current century and compare them with the past. In this way one can notice touches of Centlivre’s Comedy of Intrigues propel laughter even into our century.

What Nicoll appears to brush over in his critique of the demise of creativity concerns the effect that Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans had when they closed most of the theaters. The Protectorate’s contribution to this theatrical dearth of talent and the general decline to drama during their rule of the republic stifled new playwrights. From the inventory list of George Lillo’s library I imagine pre-Restoration published plays—though never acted—existed and formed a pool of work from which not only Aphra Behn drew, but which her successor Susanna Centlivre also accessed. The harshness Nicoll exhibits toward the years after 1610 do not include any mention of repression during the Cromwellian dictatorship. His comments do not take into consideration the lack of prospects for actors or playwrights in those years of Cromwell’s reign. The puritanical ethics of Cromwell seem as an invasion of woodworm, taking the strong oak of England’s theater tradition and leaving the institution with hollow tunnels—eaten and fragile. Authors Emmet L. Avery and Arthur H. Scouten discuss other issues about Restoration plays and the seeming lack of original material after the genius of Shakespeare. Presenting a theory about the lack of ideas they say, “pre-Commonwealth theaters
had been closed, destroyed, or converted to purposes other than theatrical” (535). If one does not have a role model, not only for playwriting but also for acting; the skills will not transfer to future generations. Behn and Centlivre, hampered by their sex, tried to fit themselves into the male world of the Rake and the Comedy of Manners. Though Behn’s plays became successful, she still struggled financially. By contrast, in 1700, The Perjur’d Husband, Centlivre’s first attempt to copy the tragedies and comedies of Behn and the male Restoration playwrights, closed after one performance. The failure of her play may trace back to the effects of Puritanism and Cromwell.

Not until Cromwell’s death in 1658 did the theater begin to rejuvenate. I believe that while acting continued evolving with the use of female actresses and painted, moveable scenery flats, playwrights could not pull themselves from a morass that glorified the rake and his proclivities. Writing against the grain would not profit the playwright, and in some ways not only did the public dictate the themes, but the actors refused to act in plays they considered unmarketable. If an author wanted to imagine a different venue, as Centlivre did with her first play, actors and managers would reject the work. In this case The Perjur’d Husband combined tragedy with comedy written in old-fashioned seventeenth-century blank verse and a more concise use of prose. The character of Count Bassino continued the “rake tradition” so popular in the Restoration, but which faded in the late decade of the 1600’s. The obscene actions and words by Placentia and Lady Pizalta disturbed the audience. The Glorious Revolution and the second conservative movement also impacted Centlivre. Stirred into this mercurial mix, beginning in 1698 and lasting for a decade, Jeremy Collier berated the stage for lewdness and profanity. Within this atmosphere, The Perjur’d Husband inevitably folded.

After the failure with her first play and even after she had experienced some success with her plays prior to 1709, John Wilson Bowyer reports this incident with The Busy Body:
At rehearsal one morning, [John Mottley says,] Wilks felt so badly of his role of Sir George Airy that “in a [P]assion he threw [the script] off of the Stage and into the Pit, and swore that [no body] would bear to hear such [S]tuff. . . .Those who had heard of the play in advance knew only that “‘it was a silly thing wrote by a [W]oman’” and that the players “‘had no [O]pinion of it.’” (Bowyer 96)

In 1709 and eight plays after *The Perjur’d Husband*, Centlivre still received criticism because of her writing and her sex. Fortunately, at about the same time as she abandoned the overt use of the Rake in her plays after 1700, Centlivre began a correspondence and friendship with George Farquhar that might have salvaged and helped influence her future theater career.

Prior to the debut of *The Perjur’d Husband*, Centlivre carried on a correspondence with several personages that Abel Boyer published in a collection of letters (Bowyer 18). Everyone used a false name. Centlivre’s sobriquet of “Astraea” had belonged to the deceased Aphra Behn. Her friend, George Farquhar wrote under the name of “Damon.” I suggest that from the exchange of letters in early 1700 until his death in 1707, the two became friends and his skill as a playwright helped propel Centlivre into the spotlight of fame.

The novice playwright attempted a black tragio-comedy with *The Perjur’d Husband* and addressed women’s problems in the balance of her eighteen plays: gambling and forced marriages. “Retrograde” may describe the male authors Nicoll discussed, but the elusive and chameleon-like Centlivre defies anyone who writes a criticism of her plays. Those who undertake to pin her down in a “biography” actually know nothing of her antecedents.

Centuries of accumulated written material give an appearance of “facts.” Any incidents in her early life cannot support any form of corroboration. This includes location and conflicting dates of her birth, how she learned to read and write, and her two marriages prior to Joseph Centlivre. No written documentation has yet surfaced regarding the above claims. They are fables, I
suspect, Centlivre invented about her life and spread about defy belief. Writing about her, James R. Sutherland adamantly states, “One of the few certain facts about her, apart from her authorship of the nineteen plays, is that she died on December 1, 1723, and was buried three days later in St. Paul’s, Covent Garden” (168). The search to discover this forgotten female playwright—also by some accounts a strolling actress—led to much parroted material compiled over the years with fragments of recent scholarship that still repeat the rumors of her birth, childhood and early adult life. Many of the statements made by her biographer and critics seem based on repetitive conjecture as the mysterious Centlivre preferred to smother her life not only prior to her emergence as a playwright, but after she became a known figure in the theater.
CHAPTER 2

Nymph, unjustly you inveigh;
Love, like us, must fate obey.
Since 'tis Nature's Law to Change,
Constancy alone is strange.

John Wilmot

In October of 1700, Centlivre’s first performed and published play *The Perjur’d Husband* combined tragedy with comedy to yield a flop, not only by eighteenth-century standards, but by modern theories as well. However, surveying this work with a less jaundiced eye at a novice author who attempts to present a play that does not follow the popular Restoration comedy formula, one can glimpse the future Centlivre wit and style. Written under her assumed name of Carroll, the word “Tragedy” in huge letters on the title page informs the reader that her play will not end happily. F. P. Lock, an Australian biographer of Centlivre and critic of her plays tells his readers of the following admonition sent in a letter by Abel Boyer to Centlivre in March 1700, “‘Mr. B—has perus’d your [P]lay, and thinks the [C]atastrophe too abrupt’” (32). Apparently, Centlivre’s streak of independence would not allow her to tinker with the play’s conclusion because the printed version contains the “abrupt catastrophe” Boyer alludes to. Action and movement filled the stage and the murders of two women and one man with no requisite happy ending satisfied my version of reality.

But, the play has other problems besides the ending. Some modern critics devote little attention to this particular work except to briefly describe the plot, comment on the Dedication, or discuss a tiny fragment of the Preface. Through a modest observation on the Preface, while attempting to understand what Centlivre tried to accomplish with her crudely honed writing skills, I will seek to reveal her struggle to find her niche in drama. Instead of concentrating on one or two issues, the author tied herself in a Gordian knot with mixed elements of feminine trials: male infidelity, wobbly social and economic ranks, betrayal by other women, and the
muzzling of vocal and physical utterances. Dialogues voiced by her female characters seldom include men in the conversations. Silence between the sexes becomes broken only when Placentia masquerades as a man. Wearing male clothing allows her the courage to speak to Bassino’s sham second wife. Still, Placentia cannot reveal her true sex and marital status until fury loosens her tongue. Centlivre’s natural bent toward humor causes a confusing blend of genres vacillating between tragedy, comedy, and protomelodrama. Mirroring her characters, the author struggles with finding her personal style.

Despite the flaws pointed out by critics, one should consider the effort Centlivre invested in her work. I extend her some credit for her tenacity in not only writing the play, but getting the work produced and then published in a male dominated playwriting world. Lock writes that her first four plays “must be judged as the experiments they were. They show us an inexperienced dramatist gradually working toward the kind of play that would satisfy both her artistic conscience and her desire for popular success” (31-32). Of course Centlivre wanted her plays to succeed monetarily, but even with this first setback her determination carries her forward. The main reason for the failure of this play might have to do with her trying too hard to create a form different from comedy: after the abysmal reception for this initial attempt, she did not write another tragedy. Although I thought the play a good invention for someone who may have had a very limited education, Lock presents a different view: “The Perjur’d Husband is technically original but morally derivative. The main plot is in the tradition of the ‘love and honor’ tragedy, and the subplot is a variant on the cuckolding intrigue characteristic of restoration comedy” (32). Here we have a man writing and criticizing a woman’s play; Centlivre considered nothing ethically wrong in borrowing from other popular works. Plays written by men repeated variations on the same plot. If Centlivre, as a strolling player in the country, acted in works that she admired, her first inclination as a playwright might attempt to reproduce a play
that she felt comfortable with and akin to. She imitated what she thought popular motifs that might appeal to an audience; only the London population had sophisticated tastes and wanted plays that catered to their current mood. The odd combination of laughter and murder that Centlivre devised repelled them and stunned both actors and playgoers. Walter and Clare Jerrold describe this blending in their terms:

That tragedy was not Susanna’s medium was evident; *The [Perjured] Husband*, written partly in prose and partly in very poor blank verse, presents a somewhat ridiculous romance of a young husband unable to tear himself away from a lovely lady other than his wife. (152)

The Jerrolds do not consider that in this love triangle the husband, Count Bassino, intends to marry his paramour, thus committing bigamy. They assume the husband’s age as “young.” Normally a man wants to replace an older wife, or one he has soured on. This “ridiculous romance” has a much more sinister undertone. The reader puzzles over the implications as to how Bassino plans to implement his “marriage” to Aurelia. Centlivre does not address this issue directly as she has other plans in her startling conclusion for taking care of this dilemma.

One can agree with both Lock and the Jerrolds that tragedy did not suit Centlivre’s style that developed during her career. Now we can all look back to 1700 and track her progress. The trick remains to ferret out what circulated in her thoughts before the first play. The following examples reveal just a few of the assumptions regarding her antecedents, and, as “facts” remain totally unsubstantiated: in her “hometown” no record of her birth exists, where and how she received an education and no documentation of the two (or three) men Centlivre claimed she married. I cannot know what precipitated her interest in playwriting or how Centlivre gained her knowledge prior to 1700.

The critics I have read apply the term “feminist” not only to her, but to Aphra Behn and
Mary Astell. This modern word—first used in 1895—should not blanket these three women, as well as every other woman, who attempt to possess some degree of parity with men. Placing a “feminist” label upon a person or work tends to silence and hinders progress. I believe calling a woman a feminist seeks to denigrate and devalue her writing and perpetuates a modern form of silencing women who seek to publicize the plight of their sex. Margarette R. Connor cautions on overuse of “feminist” in regards to the writings of Centlivre as well as other women of that era. Connor cites the work of Joan Kelly:

> Early feminists would use a term like “‘defender’” or “‘advocate’”. . . “The immediate aim of these feminist theorists was to oppose the mistreatment of women, that they might have the knowledge and confidence to reject misogynist claims. (qtd. in Connor 47)

Defender, advocate, or feminist, Centlivre worked with subtle words attempting to change the male dominated, and old-fashioned Rake plays.

In *The Perjur’d Husband* Centlivre portrayed Count Bassino as the rake even though he is married to Placentia. Normally a single man would fill this role. Bassino pursues and promises marriage to the already betrothed Aurelia who loves both Bassino and her future husband. Alonzo seems unaware of the romance between his fiancée Aurelia and Bassino. On a separate level, Lady Pizalta employs Ludvico, a gigolo, in cuckolding her husband, Pizalto. Armando, Bassino’s friend acts as a mediator and as a conscience for Bassino. The two maids along with Ludvico have their intrigues that provide comic relief. Centlivre seems to have attempted to pack as many diversions as she could into this first endeavor, including masks and disguises.

An essay by Anne Righter presents some ideas as to what Centlivre might have based her first play—if indeed *The Perjur’d Husband* had no ancestors. Righter discusses the basics of
Restoration tragedy and imparts the following information:

> It was characteristic of the Restoration, with its love of paradox, of contradiction and false faces, that it should have created a tragedy that was less serious than its comedy. . . . Tragedies produced between 1660 and the formal end of the Restoration in 1685 were essentially frivolous. Plays in rhyme dominate the first part of this period; after 1676 they were gradually replaced by the blank-verse tragedy of pathos. (135)

Centlivre’s writing in her play resembles the description above. I believe, if Centlivre did act in the country, the familiarity she had with older plays influenced her early style of writing. Most critics posit that Centlivre borrowed her plot and the location from Aphra Behn’s play *The Rover* written in 1677. *The Rover*, a very popular, successful play and perhaps much admired by Centlivre, probably gave her an artificial idea that her success would bloom out of her copying a Behn play. Appropriating ideas from earlier playwrights appears a common practice in most writers during this time. An original attachment to *The Perjur’d Husband* includes Centlivre’s acerbic preface addressed to her reader. Her remarks begin with the following:

> I should not trouble my Reader with a Preface, if Mr. Collier had taught Manners to Masks, Sense to Beaux, and good nature to [Criticks,] as well as Morality to the Stage; . . . the Beaux usually take a greater liberty with our sex than they wou’d with their own, because there’s no fear of drawing a Duel upon their hands.

*(Perjur’d)*

As a woman beginning a career in the theater her words reveal courage about expressing her thoughts in the face of male domination. Collier and the critics demand change from the licentious Restoration; Centlivre persists in putting forward a play that mocks morality as Behn did in her plays. She acknowledges the power men have in her society: women have no physical
means of defense. A woman’s only resort at times remains compliance or retreat.

Centlivre chose neither for Placentia. Looking for a possible correlation from an ancient protofeminism to a modern form I find an essay written by Michelene Wandor that discusses Socialist Feminism:

In terms of its theory, it aims to analyze and understand the way in which power relations based on class interact with power relations based on gender—again, at both the individual and social level. Socialist feminism recognizes that there are times and issues over which solidarity between women can cut across class cultural barriers, but it also recognizes the importance of struggles based on class, which necessarily involve men, and that women can have important differences among themselves, based on class difference. (265)

These words speak directly to the Restoration and the eighteenth century and possibly to The Perjur’d Husband. Viewing this play not as a cloned copy of Behn’s The Rover because of the carnival atmosphere or location, the reader contemplates a group of individuals struggling within their classes. The frothy hunt for a rich heiress does not exist in this work. Lucy and Ludovico provide some comical moments, but even as a lower class gigolo he sets his cap higher than Lady Pizalta’s maid. They take the place of wealthy woman and penniless suitor. Lady Pizalta does the usual cuckolding. However, the personalities of the main characters remain trapped in their fixed class positions.

Centlivre gives the theater a vision of the Bassinos as adults. She devises a scenario for the consequences of bigamy that envelop an unhappy upper class purchased marriage. By setting the action in Venice, Centlivre releases the British aristocracy from any personal involvement. Within the Bassinos’ marriage I see a class division as well as a gender schism. Though Bassino protests his admiration for his wife to his friend Armando, the Count seems to
find Placentia repellent in some way. The answer suggested on the page entitled “Persons Represented” shows that Count Bassino forever retains his title. Placentia simply remains Bassino’s wife; she has no regal title of Countess. Nor does she appear to have any sort of identity at all. Placentia brought no noble blood to the union—instead she brought money. When the confrontation occurs between Placentia and Aurelia in Act V.ii.39-53, the idea of Placentia lacking patrician blood boils over into murder. Placentia’s disguise as Bassino’s brother-in-law signifies a youth, and this costume permits Aurelia to feel comfortable disclosing her love for the Count. To Placentia’s credit, she does try to dissuade Aurelia from the bigamous marriage:

Aur.: Ah! How I tremble!
   Say, is he dead? has any murderous Villain
   Kill’d my Bassino?
Plac.: No—he is well in health: but his distemper’d mind
   Is of wild and feverish Disposition,
   Longing to taste, what tasted will undo him.
Aur.: Your speech is all a Riddle: Pray speak plainer:
   But yet, e’re you proceed, if Count Bassino lives
   I care not what must follow, since he’s mine.
Plac.: No, he’s not yours—Nor ever must.
Aur.: Tis false—There’s not a Pw’r on Earth can part us:
   Perhaps
   You think my Blood too base to mix with yours—
   But, Sir, your Brother loves me, and in Love
All Ranks are equal—(35)
The crux of this speech identifies Aurelia as a very naïve young woman, and now the reader can see the true duplicitous Bassino. He has convinced this young woman of his love even though she comes from a lower class. A sham marriage to Aurelia would allow her to part with her virginity and then she would learn love does not bestow equality; Bassino has the ethics of a rake. As a female Aurelia’s worth lies in her supposed purity. No exchange of a personal fortune or inheritance explains Bassino’s actions other then a desire to exert droit de seigneur.

The question remains why Aurelia felt she could cuckold Alonzo and disregard their impending marriage. Here we have both male and female characters that signify inconstancy in their actions. If Centlivre tried to exhibit both sexes as perfidious, she succeeded. When Centlivre gave a male disguise to Placentia she bestowed a symbol of freedom to her and enabled the character to commit murder. However, despite the ability to hide Placentia’s shape under a man’s garments the audience seems to have rejected the murder by a woman of a woman. I contend women in society, not working as prostitutes, remained locked up emotionally as well as physically. Encased in yards of fabric, and underneath crushed into a corset, their physical selves could not function with ease. Men also had a way to restrict a woman’s speech. A book review I read on Mary Astell contained a picture of a device named a “Branks” or a “Scold’s Bridle.” This iron cage fit over a woman’s head and a metal piece—sometime with spikes—fit into the mouth. With a cord attached to the head gear the husband would walk his wife like an animal. He could jerk the rope which would drive the nails into his wife’s tongue. I imagine when women viewed this legal practice in action, the lesson observed ensured silence toward the men in their lives. Centlivre allowed a female character to express rage by simply donning male garments, thereby eluding the constraints on speech men demanded of women. A figurative “Branks” confined The Perjur’d Husband to one performance, and effectively silenced Centlivre’s attempt to give women’s anger a voice.
An interesting idea which conforms to Placentia’s disguise as a “boy” and possibly enforces the idea of protofeminism in all of Centlivre’s plays emanates from Donald E. Hall. He suggests that “the visible ‘signs’ of gender reflect and work to control our worldviews” (210). Perceiving Placentia as a “boy” with a sword protecting his “sister’s honor” created in Aurelia a vision of a child. Placentia’s masquerade did not inspire credibility, authority, or a patriarchal aura despite the sword she carried. Hall continues to say,

As Jane Eyre or any other heroine struggles for self-determination and self-expression, crises of gender definition may be displayed in ‘body language,’ in changes of clothing and adornment, and in physical reflections [(such as illness, weight change, exercise, or inertia)] of the larger social battles that she wages. (210)

Placentia could have chosen any costume she wanted. In The Rover Hellena, Florinda, and Valeria chose gypsy disguises. She could have hidden a knife within the folds of a dress. A sword places distance between two opponents. The wronged wife wanted to kill, but she did not want to come close to her rival’s physical presence. A young man’s outfit connoted someone unskilled and perhaps more trustworthy than an adult, and so elicited more information about Bassino. In Act V.ii.88-94 Aurelia discounts the tale of Bassino married to the boy’s sister:

Aur.:  Bold Arrogance!

Oh! That he were but here to answer the Affront,

Perhaps he may have wronged your Family:

Debauch’d your sister; for which you would force him

To marry her?—But, I must tell Thee, Boy,

He’s mine already: nor would he forsake me

To hold command o’re all the Universe. (36)
Perhaps by this time Placentia realizes she will not shake Aurelia’s resolve and belief in Bassino’s love for her. Removing her disguise she confronts her rival and reveals her true identity as Bassino’s wife. Aurelia does not believe this new event either and hurls an insult at Placentia in Act V.ii.121-122: “No—he’ll ne’re leave me for a common thing, / For such I’m sure Thou art—” (37). This insult referring to Placentia as “common” impels her to stab Aurelia. Either the remark actually placed the woman into a particular class or Placentia’s lower class filtered through her pronunciation of the language. Even today when women have disagreements the word “common” will occur somewhere in the conversation and cause a rise in tensions. In her first play Centlivre uses women’s words as forces of change. The Comedy of Manners premise explodes when Aurelia actually speaks her mind. Normally I envision a Restoration play as an elaborately scripted minuet with each move never deviating from the pattern. Here two women—one freed by the bounds of wardrobe, one freed from the silencing compliance required by the marriage market—clash in an honest exchange of emotions and language. All at once the stilted conversation placed into the mouths (the “Scold’s Bridle) of women by male playwrights and Aphra Behn vanished. Aurelia and Placentia escape their self-editing silence required by aristocratic manners. They exhibit fury. With this exchange Centlivre removes the drawing room bondage imposed by previous plays. Two women parry with each other: Aurelia no longer employs contrived words, and Placentia removes her vizard. Essentially they bare their masked souls. The sword that Placentia brings into the battle becomes a symbol, not only of her right to speech, but also slices the vocabulary of class that confines and supports Aurelia in her freedom to speak without fear of the “Bridle.”

Continuing with the discovery that Centlivre employed verbal class distinctions in her first play to heighten the action of this play, I return to Donald E. Hall’s commentary on Feminist Analysis. He urges one to think about how women divide themselves into categories:
Feminism has been greatly enriched by the recognition that dramatic class differences exist among women and that an analysis of women’s experiences of oppression cannot be neatly divorced from an analysis of capitalism and class oppression. . . . While there is considerable disagreement among feminists interested in issues of class about whether class or gender should receive primary critical emphasis in a given reading . . . Critics ask questions such as: What class tensions exist in the text under scrutiny? How do economic worries and the effects of specific material deprivations exacerbate gender-related tensions? (208)

In her confrontation with Aurelia a reader can now imagine the fright escalating within Placentia as she listened to the other, and possibly, younger woman. Placentia could lose not only her husband, but also any monetary sum that she had brought into the marriage. Cast aside, she would become destitute. Because this work raises class issues as well as masculine perfidy, I can understand why this first venture remains largely unexplored. I believe that critics do not look beyond the clunky verbiage. Beneath the dialogue Centlivre tackles feminist tribulations inherent within her society. Centlivre has a stake not only in the new eighteenth century dynamics, but since she straddles the seventeenth century with *The Perjur’d Husband* her thoughts may pull older feminist concepts forward. Her appropriation of Aphra Behn’s nickname Astarea pays homage to the earlier playwright and acts as an incentive to possibly carry forward what Behn initiated.

Though I have yet to locate any direct references linking Centlivre to studying Behn’s works, the idea of Centlivre as a strolling actress would have exposed her to the plays which Behn wrote. Robert Markley addresses Behn’s “protofeminist skepticism [and] her ironic questioning of love and marriage” (142). Markley then relates to his readers a statement Behn
placed in the preface to *The Luckey Chance*. As Centlivre utilized opportunities to express protofeminist rhetoric so too does Behn:

In her preface to *The Luckey Chance* (1687), Behn responds to her critics by asserting that ‘unbyast Judges of Sense’ have to acknowledge that she ‘had made as many good Comedies, as any one Man that has writ in our Age.’ (142) Behn’s words suggest that she experienced some of the same prejudices against a female writer that Centlivre met with during her career. A problem that Centlivre encountered with male purchasers of her texts had to do with them not wanting to read or buy her plays because of her sex. As a side note, when first performed many sources purport that Behn did not list her name as the author of *The Rover*. Evidently the same hostility still existed over twenty years later for when publishing *The Perjur’d Husband*, Centlivre had to disguise her sex because the title page bears her name as “S. Carroll.” Centlivre and Behn struggled to conquer the male controlled theater business. One of the ways that the discrimination probably affected them both came through financial difficulties.

While Markley’s essay concentrates on Behn and her male contemporaries only eleven years separate Centlivre’s first play from the death of her predecessor. The effort to earn a living in the theater probably affected both women in the same manner. Markley points out that “[w]hile Germaine Greer has called attention to Behn’s financial problems at several points during her career, it would be a mistake to attribute her difficulties solely to her gender” (143). He then describes the straitened predicaments that Wycherly, Etherege and Otway often found themselves in during their lives while trying to write (144). However, Markley does admit to the following:

As a woman, Behn was denied access to the kinds of patronage opportunities available to her male peers—she could not, like Wycherly, be granted a sinecure
to tutor the king’s illegitimate son—and the extraordinary output of the last five years of her life (1684-1689) can be characterized, in part, as evidence of her feverish literary efforts to stave off creditors. (144)

I find that Markley’s statement contains two key issues in regards to work and Socialist feminism. He combines “sinecure” that gives a job to a man which requires little production for a salary and “efforts” by Behn characterized by feverish writing. Markley inadvertently dissolves his own argument that the male playwright Wycherly had just as hard a time in his poverty as Behn had in hers. Susanna Carroll also struggled with finances and took employment as a strolling actress. While in Windsor she met and married Joseph Centlivre—yeoman of the mouth to Queen Anne—on April 19, 1707. With this union, her many biographers say the pressure of trying to earn a living relaxed and she could concentrate on her writing. The one comparison that I see between the two female pens and the most admirable trait concerns adaptability. They never gave up. Through all the criticism by male critics and contemporary writers the two women, each in her own century, continued to write. They found a way to circumvent those who wanted them silent.

Harking back to The Perjur’ed Husband, what better way to silence someone such as an older wife inconveniently discovering a plot to replace her than to murder her. Centlivre’s triple homicide at the end of this play caused much consternation and the “Catastrophe” could have ended her barely started career. The way Centlivre presented the audience with two women blasting volleys at each other had to especially disturb the women of quality. From the Comedies of Manners where one sniped and genteelly stabbed with words, here a woman unleashed and masquerading as a “boy,” stalked around with a sword. The ludicrous sight turns ugly when Placentia shouts, “Revenge! Nay, then away with all Disguise” (36). The jaded London playgoers would have howled with laughter because they would have guessed long
before that Placentia “hid” in the male clothes.

But the spectators might not have laughed at Bassino murdering his lawful wife. As Placentia had removed her vizard and perhaps a cap or wig, Bassino had to recognize her when he made his entrance. He might have hesitated a split second, locked eyes with her, and given the audience just enough time to wonder at his next action. Bassino had to kill Placentia; he could not let her denounce him to the world as a bigamist. He arrived too opportune, barging in just after his wife skewered Aurelia. The stage directions state that after Placentia stabs Aurelia, Bassino enters and kills Placentia (37). However, after a goodly amount of dialogue where both Aurelia and Placentia beg forgiveness for the trouble they have caused to Bassino and Alonzo, Placentia dies again (40). From these apparent errors in the text, I wonder if the play, when originally staged, carried a different conclusion than the printed version. The crisp clarity of anger fades after Bassino kills Placentia the first time, and the written finish turns maudlin. I believe that Centlivre planned to silence both women quickly as a protofeminist statement indicting men for restricting women from public speech. Her female audience would have understood that and Abel Boyer had to deliver the message about her abrupt “Catastrophe.” As Centlivre wanted success, she changed her final scene to comply with the individual who provided the funds for printing. Behn’s play *The Rover*, written in a looser time both sexually and intellectually, seems to have survived censorship, but perhaps my reading of Placentia dying twice is fanciful thinking. Centlivre tied to create a new model with this play which could resemble the Black Comedy of the twentieth century.

This play does not fit the standard Restoration paradigm for heiress acquisition for which Centlivre later became famous. In searching for some sort of feminist criticism that will fit the three plays I decided to critique I found an essay by Ross C. Murfin that explained,

British feminists tended to distinguish themselves from what they saw as an
American overemphasis on texts linking women across boundaries and decades and an underemphasis on popular art and culture. They regarded their own critical practice as more political than that of North American feminists, whom they sometimes faulted for being uninterested in historical detail. (463)

Viewing a writer out of her political or historical position would skew the truth of not only of women, but of the opposite sex as well. Taking any historical detail out of context changes the meaning of the artifact. For this reason, I do not understand the following idea by Elaine Showalter that Murfin reported in this same essay:

Showalter . . . admirably began to fulfill this purpose [gynoynocentrism], providing a remarkably comprehensive view of women’s writing through three of its phases. She defined these phases as the ‘Feminine, Feminist, and Female’ phases, phases during which women first imitated a masculine tradition (1840-1880), then protested against its standards and values (1880-1920), and finally advocated their own autonomous, female perspective (1920 to the present). (463)

Showalter appears to disregard the seventeenth and the eighteenth century, and does not mention feminist speech earlier than the nineteenth century. Though I disagree with Showalter’s timeline, I do support the phases she postulates. In the works of Behn, Centlivre and Astell I believe the writers compressed, with delicacy and elegance, the basic concepts of Showalter’s theory of phases. The three authors time period spanned only fifty-three years rather than Showalter’s expanded timeline. They toiled under the threat of the “Scold’s Bridle” in more than just the overt, physical sense. Men could refuse to publish their work so female writers finessed their words and situations to speak covert messages of repression. Robert Markley praises Behn for her ability to compress Showalter’s phases into her plays: “In their ironic treatment of female chastity and masculine constancy . . . her comedies present a sophisticated and sympathetic
understanding of the ideological complexities of women’s existence in a misogynistic society” (142). The statement by Markley aptly describes Behn’s writing ability, but does not address the confusion I have with a female playwright exploiting women to make money by her choice of following the male dominated Restoration theater.¹ In a related way the essays I have read about Aphra Behn cite her feminism. I do not see this. Behn needed to support herself and she utilized her talent of writing to craft plays and poetry. By emulating the male Restoration writers I feel she gave her approval to the genre of the “Rake.” Women who had little voice to question the morals of the stage looked to her as a role model. Behn needed money. She chose a path which glorified the submission of women and especially the actresses engaging in Prostitution with male theater patrons.
“Fools,” said I, you do not know
Silence like a cancer grows.”
“Hear my words that I might teach you,
Take my arms that I might reach you
But my words like silent raindrops fell,
And echoed in the wells of Silence.”
Simon and Garfunkel

_The Busy Body_, Susanna Centlivre’s most popular comedy, debuted in 1709. According to Margarete Rubik, “the comedy was ultimately to become a spectacular success and was to see 475 performances in London till the end of the century, as well as frequent revivals in Australia and America” (101). While Rubik offers no reason for the popularity of this play, Elizabeth Inchbald’s opinion concretely states,

The part of Marplot is the sole support of this comedy. . . .The busy curiosity, the officious good temper[,] and the sheepish cowardice of this mean atom of human nature, are so excellently delineated, that he allures the attention and expectation of the auditors, and makes them bear with patience, the dull and common-place dramatic persons which surround them. (2)

The low opinion of Centlivre’s skill at creating a palatable play for an audience of much different taste escapes Inchbald. Nor does Inchbald acknowledge the formulaic requirements demanded by a post-Restoration audience. Centlivre operated under a restrictive atmosphere that Inchbald could not comprehend and the depth of _The Busy Body_ does not consist of one character.

I choose to discuss this play not just for the humor or Marplot as a forerunner of snoopy, androgynous characters; beneath the hilarity lays two serious concepts: the inability for women to have a voice in their own affairs and the creation of Marplot. Centlivre utilized this play to expose the restrictions on women’s speech and the requirement for their silence. Nancy E.
Copeland presents an idea based on research that explains, “sexual difference—the concept of two ‘opposite and incommensurable biological sexes’ . . . replacing a one-sex model—emerged and was developed in the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries”(2). The jolt of only one sex existing in the minds of writers and changing in Centlivre’s era causes an immeasurable predicament when trying to decipher not only Miranda and Marplot, but the characters in her other plays as well. Miranda exhibits characteristics usually attributed to males. Marplot appears to have homosexual tendencies, yet I suggest he embodies the male and female qualities inherent in every individual. Perhaps Centlivre’s friend George Farquhar anticipated the change from the one sex ideal and adjusted his writing.

Centlivre’s acquaintance, Farquhar, died in 1707, yet I believe his letters, plays and friendship influenced her writing. In a letter he wrote to a friend in 1702 Farquhar establishes a blueprint, not only for Centlivre, but for future writers. He said,

To make the moral instructive, you must make the story diverting. The splenetic wit, the beau courtier, the heavy citizen, the fine lady, and her fine footman come all to be instructed, and therefore must all be diverted; and he that can do this best, and with most applause, writes the best comedy, let him do it by what rules he pleases, so they be not offensive to religion and good manners. (174)

Early in her writing Centlivre did not succeed with *The Perjur’d Husband* as a moral lesson because the blatant action proved too graphic for the spectators. In *The Busy Body* the author has become skillful in her use of implanted metaphor masquerading as witty dialogue. Aside from Marplot, the “Silent Show,” as I name Miranda’s pantomime from II.i.170-301, allows Centlivre an opportunity to inject humor into her observations of women’s required silence.

Sir George, Miranda’s admirer, has already paid £100 for the privilege of speaking to her. Miranda’s guardian, Sir Francis, makes a bet with her that she cannot remain silent in her suitor’s
presence. She participates in her own gagging, “I’ll not answer him one word, but be dumb to all he says” (2.1.42). Through a brilliant selection of signs—some that the reader must imagine—the pair understand that each loves the other. At first Sir George cannot understand why Miranda does not speak, “[aside] Dumb still! Sure this old dog has enjoined her silence. I’ll try another way” (II.i. 220-221). Sir George then does the talking for both of them and tells Miranda how to make certain signs to answer his questions: nodding or shaking the head and sighing. With Sir George dictating the signs he further removes Miranda’s ability to make a selection of her own speech. At the end of the meeting Sir Francis praises Miranda for duping Sir George and gives her the £100. The suitor warns, “Nay more, though you enjoined her silence to me, you’ll never make her speak to the purpose with yourself” (II.i.309-310).

Centlivre’s use of the word “silence” and speaking in signs in this “Silent Show” reveals the pressure women endured in this time period to remain quiet and submissive. Copeland describes Miranda’s behavior, “It is she who decides to remain silent in order to ‘fit [them] . . . both’ for presuming to bargain for her [10;act1] and her subjectivity is asserted throughout the interview”(103). The scene conveys the presence of an imaginary “Scold’s Bridle” wherein women must remain passive and tolerant of men’s regulations towards their sex.

Not only does this scene project intolerance toward women speaking, Hélène Cixous seeks to tell her reader that, “[w]riting has been run by libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy . . . where woman has never [her] turn to speak—this being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely [the very possibility of change]” (311). Centlivre wrote the “Silent Show” but I have not read that she acted in her own play. The playwright/actress may never have had the opportunity to project the intense silence she experienced as a woman. If she had performed the role of Miranda and her own written words in her own voice, what might Centlivre have “changed” in her female audience members? Of
course actresses spoke in public, but they carried the label of prostitute. Cixous comprehends the fear women have of public speech:

Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away—that's how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak—even just open her mouth—in public. A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine. (312)

Centlivre’s words and actions given to Miranda in The Busy Body may have entranced women; hence the popularity of this play. They would have identified with the mute actions and the frantic asides. The playwright had a secret language for the women who came to her plays and the words remained silent and unheard by men.

George Farquhar’s The Beaux’ Stratagem written and preformed in 1707 might have challenged Centlivre to delve more deeply into her friend’s views on the trials and lack of equality for women. His characters Mr. and Mrs. Sullen have conversation issues: he relishes his taciturn nature and she wants to talk. Mrs. Sullen comments on marriage to her silent husband by saying, “[A]nd/since a woman must wear chains, I would have the pleasure of hearing ’em rattle a little” (II.i.1287). Farquhar’s knowledge of human nature pointed out a problem that still exists today: some husbands don’t like to talk to their wives and sometimes wives will not shut up. In the latter part of II.i Centlivre had Sir George speaking both his lines and Miranda’s. He says, “Therefore I’ll suppose your mind and answer for you” (II.i.263-264). One can take this line in a cynical way. Men occasionally have a habit of thinking and answering for a woman before she opens her mouth. Centlivre wrote this scene so that Sir George created a discussion between Miranda and himself. He would ask his question and then move to Miranda’s side and
answer the question. The stage directions do not give enough information on this exchange of places. When he acted Miranda’s part, I envision Sir George pitching his voice higher, opening and closing an imaginary fan, and flicking wrinkles out of a dress. Centlivre created Sir George’s role as part man and part woman to explain that men should acknowledge women and attempt to understand that the rigid controls of silence held over them should relax. Though unsubstantiated through their letters, Centlivre and Farquhar appear to share some protofeminist leanings as well as a position of fostering equality among the sexes. Another statement by Farquhar’s Mrs. Sullen foreshadows Miranda and Isabinda, “[I]n England, a country whose women are its glory, must women be abused? Where women rule, must women be enslaved? Nay, cheated into slavery, mocked by a promise of comfortable solitude!” (1306). Encouraged to speak by Farquhar, Mrs. Sullen actually addresses Centlivre’s pet peeve: forced marriage and the voiceless limbo into which such an institution confines women. Farquhar has no misgivings in using the word “slavery” when writing his dialogue. Since both plays exhibit ideas about female liberation, I surmise both playwrights read Mary Astell. Her writing about “marriage,” though Astell never mentions the word, pertains to both plays:

If [all men are born free,] how is it that all women are born slaves? [a]s they must be if the being subjected to the [inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary, will] of men be the [perfect condition of slavery?] . . . And why is slavery so much condemned and strove against in one case and so highly applauded and held so necessary and so sacred in another? (Astell 2835-2836)

The trio of writers—Tory and Whig—shared an ideology regarding freedom for both sexes. They possessed a dream of equality. I believe Hélène Cixous speaks to each of these writers with her glorious words, “I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs” (309). This particular thought transcends the centuries. Cixous speaks
to the silence and fear of Centlivre and Astell. To Farquhar, Cixous applauds his courage in
giving women a chance to voice opinions in his plays. Each used their talent in an attempt to
enhance the lives of women. With their comedies Centlivre and Farquhar brought more
pertinent and honest dialogue to the stage; however Centlivre employs the “Silent Show” and
Marplot as tricky ruses to trap audiences into laughter thereby implanting delicate lessons of
change through a smile.

In *The Busy Body* Centlivre created the frenetic character of Marplot. His constant
movements disturb the audience as one never knows when he will rush into the scene to “mar the
plot.” The Epilogue written by an unknown person dissuades the audience from the idea that
“Marplot” derived his name from the genre of the forced marriage or “Marriage Plot.” I do not
view Marplot as a comical fellow; his perplexed musings and attempts to comprehend the
other characters’ situations disrupt the continuity of the play making the action discordant.
Centlivre deceives the spectators to lose their concentration. Marplot never understands the
interaction of the people around him. He laments, “Will my enquiring soul never leave
searching into other people’s affairs till it gets squeezed out of my body?” (III.iii.34-36).
Marplot’s anguish speaks for women as they seek a full inclusion into their lives and not
understanding why they exist at the whims of men. His confusion throughout *The Busy Body*
denotes the lives of women in Centlivre’s era. Marplot moves around, but cannot leave or
change his sphere of existence. He lacks power and the necessary tool of education to construct
a productive life. Marplot runs in constant orbits of doubt. Similar to young heiress Miranda,
Sir Francis controls Marplot’s inheritance. I suggest that Centlivre, as Mark Twain does in the
future, created one character torn in two. Twain’s works often have twins or pseudo-twins.
Though never implied here in this play, Miranda and Marplot share Sir Francis as a guardian of
their wealth and they might also share the same deceased parents. Rubik inadvertently posits this
Marplot, curious and gossipy like a stereotypical woman, puts his foot in it whenever he opens his mouth. More importantly, Miranda wields power by refusing to speak, on the one hand, and masterfully manipulating language, on the other. . . . More than in any Behn play, the heroine is in control of the action and can outwit any man. (103)

I can clearly visualize the deft creativeness Centlivre exhibited in revealing two sides of one personality. Marplot exhibits courage even when physically abused, just as Isabinda does when her father Sir Jealous attempts to bend her to his will. Sir Jealous Traffic urges his servants to attack Sir George and Marplot in V.iii.52-55 and Sir Jealous beats Marplot because he has no sword. Suggestive of a woman, Marplot displays his impotence in the face of male anger.

The Busy Body contains sophisticated layers and depth of character contrary to Inchbald’s commentary. Centlivre contrived and successfully camouflaged her insights of the eighteenth century beneath humor and pathos. This play has a hybrid as a parent: The Perjur’d Husband. I cannot say Centlivre learned from her errors because I do not see that first play as a mistake. The Perjur’d Husband started a process not only for Centlivre, but for future plays by innumerable writers. Centlivre slyly eased the burden of censorship imposed by Jeremy Collier, and began to skillfully apply gender changes that added depth to her characters.

Despite Centlivre padding Miranda with male characteristics the heroine still married. Shedding some insight into why the women still submit to marriage, Annette Kolodny introduced “the two-suitors convention” invented by Jean E. Kennard. This hypothesis seeks to explain why “[T]he convention, even in the hands of women writers, inevitably work[s] to imply ‘the inferiority and necessary subordination of women’” (501). Although writing of certain nineteenth and early-twentieth century British novels, Kennard words explain the plays of
Centlivre and the forced marriage. Centlivre tread carefully in defining her heroines with spirit and intelligence yet as Kennard states, “‘[the convention] indicates the adjustment of the protagonist [Miranda] to society’s values, a condition which is equated with her maturity’” (501). Nevertheless, this maturity indicates subjugation to masculine rules and the loss of her inheritance to her future husband. The reader leaves with a yearning to know what occurs in the marriage. Maturity of a heroine may not lead to maturity of husband. Cixous expounds on the hidden ending of women and Centlivre’s plays, “Muffled throughout their history, they have lived in dreams, in bodies [(though muted),] in silences, in aphonic revolts” (315). After hundreds of years Centlivre’s whispers of change still urge women a challenge to speech.
CHAPTER 4

Man is the Measure of all Things

Protagoras of Abdera  c.480-410 BC

After the excitement of *The Busy Body* the tamed, domesticated words of *The Wonder A Woman Keeps a Secret* appears to slip and struggle for some sort of footing on the page. The play wants to excite the reader, but just cannot reach out and pull them into the time and place. Perhaps Centlivre’s biographer John Wilson Boyer felt the same for he states, “*The Wonder* is an excellent light comedy. After Garrick had contributed his interpretation of the character of Don Felix, it was often regarded as Mrs. Centlivre’s masterpiece” (171). Sandra M. Gilbert calls attention to Garrick’s casual meddling inadvertently with Anne Finch’s lament, “A woman that attempts the pen / Such an intruder on the rights of men” (486). According to John Wilson Boyer, the actor did more than just act in *The Wonder*, “Garrick made some suitable alterations in the comedy before producing it” (179). Using his “pen” he changed some of Centlivre’s offensive words of which Boyer, Centlivre’s biographer, approved. Both men thought nothing of editing Centlivre’s words out of her own play. Gilbert discusses the “pen” and the “sword” as extensions of male masculinity,

> In patriarchal Western culture . . . the text’s author is a father . . . whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis. More, his pen’s power, like his penis’s power is not just the ability to generate life but the power to create a posterity to which he lays claim. . . .In this respect, the pen is truly mightier than its phallic counterpart, the sword. (488)

Bloodlines become diluted and through wars may end but words exist long after their creators. Since one cannot prove that Centlivre had children, her progeny—her plays—still exist. Yet, both Garrick and Boyer thought nothing of lopping off parts of “her children” with their
swords—the pen. When Boyer acquiesced to Garrick’s omissions or additions to Centlivre’s play he approved, as Gilbert says, “A final paradox of the metaphor of literary paternity . . . he silences [Centlivre’s progeny] by depriving them of autonomy (that is, of the power of independent speech) even as he gives them life” (492). As a conqueror usually kills the former ruler’s heirs to deflect any allegiance to them, so did Garrick effectively remove Centlivre’s speech. *The Wonder* and *The Busy Body* became identified with Garrick’s acting and enforced Centlivre’s silence. However, Gilbert tells the reader, “no human creature can be completely silenced by a text or by an image”(494). Boyer’s text cannot submerge Centlivre’s words nor can Garrick’s acting remove the sight of Centlivre as a “female pen.”

As an actor Garrick’s impact on the popularity of these eighteenth century plays—he also portrayed Marplot of *The Busy Body*—defined the roles. Garrick’s skills at portraying Centlivre’s characters made the plays memorable and set a standard for acting which future actors might have imitated. Bowyer reports that in 1714 *The Wonder*, “ran at first for six performances, and the next season it was repeated by command of the Prince of Wales on December 16 . . . [the play] was not produced again until 1733” (176-177). This comedy of intrigue offers the standard forced marriage premise with Isabella soon to wed an older, wealthy man and her friend Violante slated for a convent. The crux of the problem involves Isabella asking Violante to hide her from her father and the decrepit future bridegroom, Don Guzman. This “secret” leaves Violante in a state of dissembling that rivals any rake and almost causes her to alienate her fiancé Don Felix. Margarete Rubik claims, “Violante lives by a masculine code of honour, insisting that for a woman honour does not merely lie in chastity but in keeping one’s faith and word, like a man” (108). I believe Centlivre set this play in Lisbon as a way for espousing her theory that women have the same moral principles as men. She uses the subtle moral lesson as a prick toward the men of England. The Spanish cannot have any superior ideas
in regards to women’s integrity. Though Copeland does not cite Rubik in her book, she echoes Rubik’s thoughts on chastity, “Through her vow to Isabella . . . [Violante] supplements the conventional female definition of [honour] based on chastity with a central component of the male [honour] code, maintaining a confidence, which in this case explicitly includes keeping her word” (133-134). In *The Perjur’d Husband* and *The Busy Body* Centlivre strives for equality with men and she once again utilizes the aspects of patriarchal power and adds the friendship between women. Still, in her time period, Centlivre’s progressive nature did appeal to everyone.

Arthur Bedford wrote a short essay dated 1719, included in the Broadview version; he adamantly disagreed with Centlivre’s *The Wonder*:


The idea that men do not lie and comparing a woman of quality to maids speaks quite emphatically to the subversive nature of *The Wonder* and to Violante having the gumption to solve problems on her own, lies or not. Isabella “choosing” the Colonel for herself and by herself overturns the institution of forced marriages. Bedford’s essay might explain the probable reason that this play had a hiatus until 1733.

The entertainment of her audience became Centlivre’s premier desire. Victoria Warren reports that, “At the beginning of her career Centlivre stated her ideas about the goals of comedy. She wrote in 1700, ‘I think the main design of Comedy is to make us laugh’” (611). Along with
comedy Centlivre interjected her thoughts about the total influence the male sex had in the lives of her female characters. In this play Don Lopez has a fondness for his son Felix and a rather sadistic streak toward his daughter, Isabella. In the opening scene Lopez and Felix’s friend Frederick discuss the impending marriage of Don Guzman to Isabella. Frederick tries to encourage Lopez to consider his daughter’s wishes regarding the “preposterous match.” Lopez curtly replies, “Look ye, Sir, I resolve she shall marry Don Guzman the moment he arrives. Though I could not govern my son, I will my daughter, I assure you” (I.i.79-81). A short time later in a conversation with Isabella about the impending marriage Don Lopez gives her permission to speak to him, but denies her any protests about the marriage. Isabella objects, “That’s torturing me on the rack, and forbidding me to groan” (I.ii.51-52). Centlivre once again reminds women they have to remain silent no matter how much they desire freedom of speech. Don Lopez then reminds his daughter, “Remember ’tis your duty to obey” (I.ii.71). Mary Astell has a brilliant description of the father as ruler, “The domestic sovereign is without dispute elected” (2835). Isabella’s paternal parent has absolute control over her life. The word “obey” in a Catholic country—this play takes place in Lisbon, Portugal—carries immense power and reeks of the fourth Commandment. The guilt by the order of God and priests enforces complete discipline by the father of the family. Isabella strives to remain firm in her stance against the marriage, “I’ll die before I’ll marry Guzman” (I.ii.79). Now Don Lopez pounces on his victim: he offers his daughter his sword, but he also makes a veiled threat of murder, “Say you so? I’ll try that presently. (Draws) Here, let me see with what dexterity you can breathe a vein now. (Offers her his sword) The point is pretty sharp. ’Twill do your business, I warrant you” (I.ii.80-83). He calls her bluff and frightens both Isabella and her maid. Don Lopez now refers to her as his “little Bell” the diminutive name suggesting a child that needs special coddling or help, and another form of psychological pressure to force her to see herself as less than an adult woman.
He seals the scene by locking Isabella into her room.

Isabella’s friend Violante has her own problems with her father, Don Pedro. She reconciles herself to life in a convent at his insistence, and despite her love for Isabella’s brother Don Felix. The nefarious parent tells her a lie of monumental proportions that he discloses to the audience in an “Aside,”

I am glad to find her so willing to leave the world, but it is wholly owing to my prudent management. Did she know that she might command her fortune when she came of age or upon the day of marriage, perhaps she’d change her note. But I have always told her that her grandfather left it with this proviso: that she turned a nun. Now a small part of this twenty thousand pounds provides for her in the nunnery, and the rest is my own. There is nothing to be got in this life without policy. (IV.i.287-294)

Centlivre certainly creates two fathers that exert the ultimate punishment on their female children simply because they have the power of the law and other men to protect them. Mary Astell gave the perfect answer for this perfidy in her Preface, “Men will not be guided by their reason but by their appetites, and do not what they [ought] but what they [can]” (2835). Astell realized that men seemed to have no compunction to enforce any common humanity toward women even if this meant fairness under the law. Men disobeyed the Ten Commandments with impunity since men held the offices of Priest or Clergy. Centlivre must have read Astell because her male heads of households control their women at all costs. In Don Pedro’s instance lying and cheating his daughter out of her inheritance held no sorrow for him.

In Act II.i Isabella jumps out of her window in order to avoid the forced marriage to Don Guzman. Luckily Colonel Briton caught her and carried her to Violante’s house where she begs her friend to hide her. Isabella asks Violante to shelter her and not even tell her brother Don
Felix, who happens to love Violante. Her friend cannot understand the danger and why Isabella must hide from her brother. Isabella says, “He’ll think his honor blemished by my disobedience, and would restore me to my father, or kill me” (II.i.276-278). Aside from the fortune an heiress brings to a marriage, she also brings her virginity. No matter what she swore neither brother nor father would believe her an undamaged commodity. Violante assures Isabella, “Depend upon my friendship. Nothing shall draw the secret from these lips, not even Felix, though at the hazard of his love” (II.i.279-281). One of the problems with the friendship between the women could also focus on male friendships: when does a friend expect too much from friendship? Isabella does not have a right to demand such sacrifice; she may put Violante’s life in jeopardy. This selfish request by Violante’s friend could cause major damage to both families. The Colonel who has fallen in love with Isabella also places an additional burden on Violante, “Be careful of my life, for it is in your keeping” (II.i.372-373). He refers to Isabella who still hides from her brother and father in Violante’s house.

Felix hounds Violante to tell him of the secret she bears. She refuses to disclose anything and he calls her “monstrous.” The point that Centlivre wishes to make about human beings occurs now in Act II.i:

Violante.: Indeed I am not. There is a cause which I must not reveal. Oh, think how far honor can oblige your sex; then allow a woman may be bound by the same rule to keep a secret.

Don Felix.: Honour! What hast thou to do with honor, thou that can’st admit a Plurality of lovers! A secret! Ha, ha, ha! His affairs are wondrous safe who trusts his secret to a woman’s keeping. (394-399)

This argument between a male and a female about trust and honor still survives to this century. Copeland views this comedy as an ancient forerunner pertinent to modern gender thought. She
[T]he rigid concept of [honour] is revised to convey a feminist message through [Violante’s] demonstration, in the face of misogynist assumptions and the extreme provocations made possible by intrigue conventions, that a woman can keep a secret, in the process placing her loyalty to a female friend before her feelings for her flawed lover. (138)

Centlivre brought the situation to the public and this particular play, and once the correct actors could fathom the gender questions she asked, made this play a hit performed until 1897. Now into the twenty-first century *A Wonder* attempts again to capture a new audience with the same human (creature) problems.

I finally found the answer to a problem that plagued me earlier: why Aphra Behn, Julie Campbell of the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue* and to some extent Centlivre, all seemed to support the subordination and exploitation of women by men. Julia Kristeva’s biographical entry contained the following:

> W]omen, given access to positions of power in a male-dominated system, may be taken up into the defense and justification of the system itself. To be thus incorporated is in part to be neutralized or neutered . . . [and] to inaugurate a counter-society. . . .As Kristeva observes, feminism may then become “‘a kind of inverted sexism,’” insulating itself against criticism. (470)

In effect, women become the oppressors of other women. The general consensus of the population, and this includes females, agrees with the exploitation of their own sex, since they receive remuneration and fame. This justification applies, not only to the prostitute-actresses and female playwrights of the Restoration, but to our actors and writers of today. Aphra Behn utilized the same techniques her male counterparts employed to make sexual encounters the basis
of her plays. I consider *The Rover* an exception of the male domination sex genre. Behn delved into female/female relationships and gave the reader a poignant observation of the prostitute, Angellica Bianca. However, Behn abandoned her experiment and continued her exploitive texts.

I would like to think better of Centlivre as she worked and cracked her head against an eighteenth-century glass ceiling. With her last play, *The Artifice*, Centlivre attempted to return to the male Restoration genre; however, the work flopped. She did not realize, close to her impending death, that she had altered the dynamics of the theater. Centlivre’s struggle expanded creativity and dragged thought forward from Cromwell’s stifling acts. She pulled Behn’s thoughts in *The Rover* toward a new century, connected Mary Astell’s essays, and set women’s rights on a path to the future. Protofeminism may not fit the category critics want, but acknowledgement of advocacy, equality and liberty might appease Centlivre and myself.

Susanna Centlivre sought and gave women a chance for change with *The Perjur’d Husband*, *The Busy Body*, and *The Wonder, A Woman Keeps a Secret*. 
I relate a modern television program to demonstrate that the centuries have not changed the fact that women will suborn their own sex to make money. The program “Business Model: Inside the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue” aired on CNBC in June 2010. I thought I would watch just another male sexist worldview of thin half-clad women. As the broadcast unfolded I realized an entirely different idea permeated the premise of the show: the centuries old idea of using women as objects to promote sales, not specifically by men, but abetted by women. The Swimsuit issue brand has generated one billion dollars in revenue since its inception of a five page spread in 1964. A startling fact to me remains that all three editors of this business exploitation of women are women. Julie Campbell produced the spread from 1965 to 1996, and the current editor Diane Smith continues to push “swimsuits that are sexy—never vulgar.” Judging from past issues and current, the words “never vulgar” seems laughable. The closet selection of 25,000 suits to pick from has designers submitting their product—without remuneration—in the hope that their swimsuit will make the issue. The human models receive less than their usual going rate. As Campbell says, “We give them $250 a day. If they don’t like it, we don’t shoot them.” I have heard some highly paid models make $1500 a day for their services. These models vie for the privilege to grace the “cover.” As the years have gone by, I see this cover exposing substantial amounts of flesh. Witness this year’s cover girl: the waxed pubic area leaves little to the imagination. For the models just “landing on these pages means money in the bank.” The disturbing comment I heard throughout the broadcast related to the “consumers” wanting this issue. I assumed male consumers. According to the script, an “estimated 22 million women” look to the pages for ideas on the hottest fashion trend in suits. Modern women ignore the idea of the models as exploited and the Swimsuit issue “thrives because it is socially acceptable.


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