

NO SLIP-SHOD MUSE: A PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS OF SOME OF
SUSANNA CENTLIVRE'S PLAYS

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In 1982, Richard C. Frushell urged the necessity for a critical study of Susanna Centlivre's plays. Since then, only a handful of books and articles briefly discuss her—and many attempt wrongly to force her into various critical models.

Drawing on performativity models, my reading of several Centlivre plays (*Love's Contrivance*, *The Gamester*, *The Basset-Table* and *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*) asks the question, "What was it like to see these plays in performance?" Occupying somewhat uneasy ground between literature and theatre studies, I borrow useful tools from both, to create what might be styled a New Historicist Dramaturgy.

I urge a re-examination of the period 1708-28. The standard reading of theatre of the period is that it was static. This "dry spell" of English theatre, most critics agree, was filled with stock characters and predictable plot lines. But it is during this so-called "dry spell" that Centlivre refines her stagecraft, and convinces cautious managers to bank on her work, providing evidence that playwrights of the period were subtly experimenting.

The previous trend in scholarship of this cautious and paranoid era of theatre history has been to shy away from examining the plays in any depth, and fall back on pigeonholing them. But why were the playwrights turning out the work that they did? What is truly representative of the period? Continued examination may stop us from calling the period a "dry spell." For that purpose, examining some of

Centlivre's early work encourages us to avoid the tendency to study only a few playwrights of the period, and to avoid the trap of focusing on biography rather than text.

I propose a different kind of aesthetic, stemming from my interest in the text as precursor to performance. Some of these works may not seem fertile ground for theorists, but discarding them on that basis fails to take into account their original purpose: to entertain.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In Book III of *The Dunciad*, as the goddess Dullness marshals her forces, the following description occurs:

Lo next two slip-shod Muses traipse along,
In lofty madness, meditating song,
With tresses staring from poetic dreams,
And never wash'd but in Castalia's streams:
Haywood, Centlivre, Glories of their race! (141-
45)

Susanna Centlivre (1669?-1723) has the dubious pleasure of receiving multiple attacks from Pope. In Book II of *The Dunciad*, she's described briefly as one of the company of dunces ("At last Centlivre felt her voice to fail" 381); in his 1715 "Further Account of the Condition of Edmund Curll" she is closely associated with the Grub Street hacks. Perhaps fortunately, she died in 1723, and never saw the unflattering description of herself in *The Dunciad*. But she was not unaware of Pope's dislike of both her unfeminine practice of writing and her Whig politics, and was not above sniping at him in her own works.

Ironically, criticism of *The Dunciad* can serve to illuminate the critical stance I wish to take in my study of Centlivre. Robert Kilburn Root points out that "From the beginning, one of the objections most frequently urged against the *Dunciad* by hostile critics has been the insignificance of its victims" (13-14), while more recent critics counterclaim that "The truth is that nearly all the writers satirized in *The Dunciad* had either distinguished themselves or were to distinguish themselves in some particular field of intellectual effort" (Lounsbury 259-60). It is an interesting exercise for the student to attempt to place Centlivre in one of these two categories: is she insignificant? Or is she distinguished? This conundrum, simply put, is the current state of Centlivre scholarship.

In a way, modern scholars have shifted to one side of the question in agreeing that she was representative of the period, and that her plays can be pleasing entertainments even for current audiences—hence, she must be distinguished in some fashion. However, many of them spend a great deal of ink still attempting to boost her aesthetic reputation by way of reading her work in overtly theoretical ways, hence forcing readings of the plays which would disappear

into a vapor under the harsh lighting of the stage. This seems to me to be an exercise in fallacious reasoning; in particular, that of applying aesthetic standards to her work which do not at all reflect the atmosphere in which she wrote. I will go on to argue that forcing overtly Whiggish readings of her work does not take into account the paranoid and extremely cautious atmosphere of the period between 1699-1728, but will mention briefly here that turning *Centlivre* into a feminist *cause celebre* seems equally as wrong-headed.

It is for someone else to examine gendered rhetoric in her dedications, prologues, and epilogues. I do not argue that it is a non-issue, as many of those particular pieces concern themselves quite vehemently with a defense of female authorship. However, the discussion of the conditions under which women playwrights of the period labored, and the choices they made in how to address their audience on that subject, has been undertaken by far better scholars than myself.¹ And such issues do not generally find their way into the plays themselves, so to join the scholarly feminist conversation does not serve to illuminate what I want to say about how these plays function in performance. I prefer to steer clear of the

tendency of "feminist scholars who would rather find their writers preoccupied with their marginality than playing hardball in the marketplace" (Pettit 7), as Centlivre clearly is.

Nor do I feel the need to delve into biography. What we know for sure of Centlivre's early life is sketchy at best, and documented exhaustively (insofar as that is possible with such a dearth of material) by both John Bowyer in *The Celebrated Mrs. Centlivre* (1952) and by F.P. Lock's *Susanna Centlivre* (1979). Both her biographers are careful to present the salacious and specious details of her early life with a grain of salt; later commentary plays up the risqué "details" of her origins as if it were gospel truth. James R. Sutherland's meticulous scholarship in his article for *Review of English Studies*² relieves me of the necessity of either pointing out the practitioners of such egregious error, or of correcting it. The most helpful discussion of Centlivre biography to date is that of Nancy Copeland, in her introduction to the recent critical edition of *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*. Copeland argues that the early focus on possible liaisons and assignations was "thoroughly gendered", and demonstrates "the persistent mystery of female authorship"(8,9).

One such story bears repeating, at the risk of joining the ranks of the salacious and egregious: Centlivre is said to have left home because of the stereotypical wicked stepmother, and is found weeping by the roadside by Anthony Hammond. Smitten, Hammond carries her off to Cambridge, where she stays for several months disguised as his cousin Jack, and, tellingly, attends university classes, as well as whatever "cousinly" duties took up her time. This story, first attributed to John Mottley in 1747's *A Complete List of All the English Dramatic Poets*, is fascinating on several levels.

First, as Copeland points out, it is typical of the way that criticism of this period focused on women's lives rather than their livelihood (8). Moreover, the story's basis is masquerade, costume, disguise; tropes that Centlivre turns to again and again in her work. Whether or not there is a shred of truth to it (which is highly unlikely, to my mind), I find it fascinating that a theme of her drama becomes so ingrained in the story of her life. Interestingly, several of the contradictory accounts of her early life seemed to come straight from her—she gave out several versions of her early marriages, for instance. By this example, we can see how difficult assembling a

coherent life narrative is in this case, as well as noting that what I will argue is a tendency to equivocate seems to extend to her personal life as well as her work.

So far I have defined my study of Centlivre in the negative. Let us then proceed to what it is I would like to accomplish by this study. In 1982, in the introduction to the facsimile edition of Centlivre's complete works, Richard C. Frushell urged that "a critical study of [Centlivre's] dramatic-and nondramatic-works is very much needed" (ix). I couldn't agree more. Turning a critical eye on her works has not been a very popular choice among scholars, however. There are a handful of books which discuss her in passing, as well as a few articles--most of which focus on *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*, and many of which attempt to force her into critical models where she doesn't comfortably fit.

As an amateur director and actress, I was first attracted to Centlivre because of what I perceived to be her stageability: when I read *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*, the production scheme was obvious, and it was clear to me that the humor had withstood the test of time. Add to that Milhous and Hume's strident proviso that "Plays come to life only in performance, and to insist upon analyzing them

in terms of text alone is methodological cowardice" (7), and my *modus operandi* clarified—a reading of Centlivre's plays which is driven by the question, "What was it like to see these plays in performance?" My critical approach occupies somewhat uneasy ground between literature and theatre studies. I hope that I have borrowed useful tools from both, in order to create what might be styled for lack of a more creative term, a New Historicist Dramaturgy.³

It is my intent to urge other scholars to re-examine the period 1708-28 in particular. The standard take on the period is Hume's: "the theatre was in an unhealthy state, and even after the permanent reestablishment of a second company in 1714 the managers remained stodgy, careful, and unventuresome. Staging new plays was always an expensive gamble, and in periods of stasis and noncompetition the new plays were few and mostly unexperimental" (*Rakish* 215). This "dry spell" ends with *The Beggar's Opera*: but previous to this radical departure in stagecraft, the plays, most critics agree, are filled with stock characters and predictable plot lines.

But it is during this so-called "dry spell" that Centlivre ends her apprenticeship and begins to master the stage. She is able to convince stodgy and cautious

managers to take a chance on her work, despite the fact that her first commercial success (1705's *The Gamester*) is only a moderate financial success. And, as I will argue further in chapter three, her plays may provide us with an example that playwrights of the period were experimenting—just not in ways that are immediately obvious.

The trend in previous scholarship of this cautious and paranoid era of theatre history has been to shy away from examining the plays in any depth, and fall back on attempting to pigeonhole them, mentioning their "sameness" (which Hume rightly points out is specious), and moving hastily on. Recent work by Oney and Collins, to name a few, seems to me more fruitful, and informs my study of this play: why were the playwrights turning out the work that they did? What is truly representative of the period, in whatever terms of popularity one chooses, rather than the few works anthologized? What can those choices tell us about the stage? Continued examination may lead us away from calling the period a "dry spell," much in the same manner that, for an earlier time, the term "Dark Ages" has been abandoned by careful scholars. For that purpose, examining some of Centlivre's early work, as she hones her craft, and then moving on to one of her great successes,

gives us a way to shake us out of our tendency to be "content to ignore all but a tiny minority of the relevant playwrights" (Hume *Development* 13), and to avoid the trap of focusing on biography rather than text.

In short, I propose a different kind of aesthetic, again stemming from my interest in the text as precursor to performance, and from my interest in escaping what Alexander Pettit has termed "the stultifying boxiness of old models of period" (5). Granted, some of these works may not be terribly fertile ground for theorists, but discarding them on that basis fails to take into account their original purpose: to entertain. Comedy, as any professional can tell you, is hard work.

In Chapter Two, I examine *Love's Contrivance, or Le Medecin malgre' Lui*, Centlivre's fourth play, and the first play which had a run which lasted more than a week. It is a pastiche of three Moliere plays, and is the first time that Centlivre works with several major players; some of whom she remains closely associated with for many years. In analyzing this piece, I'll look at her borrowings from the French, the attempt she makes to define "English humour", and her early efforts at positioning herself in the Collier debate on stage reform.

Chapter Three looks at *The Gamester*, her first major commercial success. I'll argue that the play exhibits the anxiety caused by the shift from a landed to a cash economy. Moreover, it is a subtle form of experiment in which Centlivre pays lip-service to the Collier camp, while calling into question the efficacy of the reform comedy.

The follow-up play, *The Basset-Table*, is the subject of Chapter Four. It's not a great stage piece. My reason for examining it lies in my belief that it is an excellent working model for a way to use the plays to center our discussion of theater history in this period.

A Bold Stroke for a Wife is one of Centlivre's greatest successes, and is the most written about of all her work. However, my argument in Chapter Five is that most criticism of this piece tends to focus on ideologies which do not lend themselves to what Milhous and Hume have termed "producible interpretations," thereby neglecting a vital and vibrant area of drama criticism.

¹ See, for instance, Gilbert and Gubar's excellent chapter "Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship" in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Although dealing with work a good deal later in time, it is nonetheless informative on the subject of the socialization of the woman artist. Dale Spender's work on women writers, *Mothers of the Novel*, while giving somewhat short shrift to dramatists, provides a careful look at the growth of the tradition of women's writing. Her *Living By the Pen: Early British Women Writers* is also worthwhile. A very short list of other authors on this general subject includes: *Re-Dressing the Canon: Essays on Theatre and Gender* by Alisa Solomon; *The Iron Pen: Frances Burney and the Politics of Women's Writing* by Julia Epstein; *Broken Boundaries: Women and Feminism in Restoration Drama* ed. Katherine M. Quinsey; *Ends of Empire: The Prostituted Muse: Images of Women and Women Dramatists 1642-1737* by Jacqueline Pearson; *Feminism in Eighteenth-Century England* by Katherine M. Rogers; *Women and Ideology in Early Eighteenth-Century Literature* by Laura Brown; *Narrative Transvestism: Rhetoric and Gender in the Eighteenth-Century Novel* by Madeleine Kahn; *Women Playwrights in England, c. 1363-1750* by Nancy Cotton; *The Sign of Angelica: Women, Writing and Fiction, 1660-1800* by Janet Todd; *Raising Their Voices: British Women Writers 1650-1750* by Marilyn L. Williamson; and *Women and Comedy: Rewriting the British Theatrical Tradition* by Susan Carlson.

² "The Progress of Error: Mrs. Centlivre and the Biographers." *Review of English Studies* 18 (1942): 167-182.

³ I believe Robert D. Hume's latest critical term, archeo-historicism, could most likely be applied to my method.

CHAPTER 2

"I OWN MY SELF OBLIG'D TO THE FRENCH": CENTLIVRE REVISES MOLIÈRE

Centlivre's fourth play and third comedy, *Love's Contrivance, or, Le Medecin malgre Lui* (title page spelling), opened on 4 June 1703 at Drury Lane, and was performed approximately twenty-four times, although most of those performances were sandwiched in between other plays.¹ Nor does this figure account for the entire performance history of the play. In July 1703, Drury Lane presented just the play's last act, along with acts from several other plays, along with musical interludes². As Centlivre's script was a pastiche of three of Molière's plays—*The Forced Marriage, The Forced Physician* (which modern audiences generally know as *The Physician in Spite of Himself*), and *Sganarelle, or The Imaginary Cuckold*, it became an easily-portable part of the repertory of any company wanting to put on what amounted to a theatre variety act. Managers seemed to have no compunction at using it as "filler" in between the runs of other plays; hence, Centlivre did not make much profit by it financially. However, it served her well as a "practice"

piece: we find experimentation in this play with what will become familiar tropes, and it also served to keep her name before the managers and thereby, before the public.

The amount of criticism dealing with *Love's Contrivance* is hardly overwhelming. Frushell focuses on "the unusual variety of playing places" (xvi), while Jay E. Oney cites the unusual timing of the second author's benefit (nearly a year after the first one) in order to argue for the strength of Centlivre's relationships with the personnel of both companies. Centlivre's chief biographer F. P. Lock gives the play the most thorough treatment to date. He places it as the first successful piece of her "apprenticeship" period (her first four plays, 1700-1703), and includes a fairly thorough analysis of what Moliere material Centlivre had planned to use as a three-act farce, which ultimately she fleshed out to present as a five-act comedy.³ Lock devotes a long paragraph to an analysis of which elements he believes are most Centlivre's own; comments favorably on the "proviso" scene between the ingenue' and her elderly suitor. He proceeds to compare the characters to Centlivre's second play, *The Beau's Duel* (1702), in order to argue that the overall structure of

Love's Contrivance is closer to that play than it is to any of the Moliere works.

My purpose in analyzing this early piece is first to examine how closely Centlivre followed Moliere's lead, and to see what the nature of her departure from Moliere can say about her stagecraft in general. She makes some interesting claims about the nature of English comedy in the dedication to the piece, and I will discuss both line and thematic variations in order to explore what I see as a certain ambiguity between what her dedication claims, and what the work actually does. I'll argue that this discrepancy between ideology and practice sets the stage for her position in the Collier controversy, during which she balanced precariously between satisfying some very vocal critics and the paying public. I will also examine her early stagecraft along the way; this play shows the preliminary working-out of practices that will become standard.

"When first I took those scenes of Molier's [sic]", says Centlivre in her preface, "I design'd but three Acts; for that reason I chose such as suited best with Farce" (n. pg.). The piece is highly farcical, as one might expect, given the source material—yet, at 68 pages it is almost the

length of every other piece I have examined for this work. Rather than three acts, there are five; Centlivre claims that she expanded the play on the advice of "some very good Judges", a claim which at once lends her support and attempts to relieve her of some authorial responsibility.

There are thirteen scenes in the play, five of which are of Centlivre's invention. Appendix A illustrates an approximate line disposition for authorship of the material, while Appendix B illustrates the overall percentage of the play for which each author is responsible.⁴ As those totals show, Centlivre wrote over half of the material, while the rest is identical with specific Moliere scenes. The figures for Centlivre's authorship are somewhat misleading, as many of the scenes are modeled closely on Moliere in as plot and theme, yet fleshed out differently in detail. But nonetheless, these figures give at least a preliminary sense of what it actually means when Centlivre states, "Some scenes, I confess, are partly taken from Molier [sic]" (Preface n. pg.).

This is clearly a slight equivocation on Centlivre's part—or at least, a semantic obfuscation; my first example of how Centlivre's commentary on her method doesn't always

match up to what she actually does. Note that Appendix A does give a fairly clear picture of her organizational technique: she alternates between her own work and Moliere's; often her original material provides logical transitions to link two separate plays—never does she put two Moliere pieces back-to-back. The statistics also raise the question of why the piece's French subtitle is *Le Medecin malgre Lui (The Forced Physician)*, as a larger percentage of material actually comes from *The Forced Marriage*. There is nothing in the Preface to indicate Centlivre's reasoning, but I would assume she was using the popularity of the former play as a drawing card for her own.

Moving from overall organization to matters of plot, we find that Centlivre follows fairly standard practice in her *dramatis personae* and plot structure. The play involves one romantic couple, blocked by a tyrannical, greedy father, and one "gay" couple, blocked by their own misgivings about the marriage state (harking back to the Restoration stage). An ancient suitor who fancies himself a young lover and a pair of comic servants finish up the cast.

Selfwill (William Bullock, Sr.) has first promised Lucinda (Jane Rogers) to Bellmie (Robert Wilks), but rescinds in favor of Sir Toby Doubtful's (Johnson) far larger fortune. Octavio (Mills) hears of this switch from Sir Toby, who confides in him because Octavio's father was his close friend. Octavio is Bellmie's best friend however, and so attempts to assist him in recovering Lucinda. After a rocky start, involving some miscommunication with Lucinda's cousin Belliza (Anne Oldfield), with whom Octavio falls in love, the young people conspire to baffle Sir Toby. They are assisted in their plot by Bellmie's former servant Martin (**Norris), who gets involved in part because of his termagant wife (**Mrs. Norris). The play ends, predictably, with Lucinda and Bellmie happily married, and the wedding of Octavio and Belliza presumably not long to follow after. The cast is fairly strong: as Frushell notes, it "was more than competent in its growing acting experience, with most of the players having already appeared in a Centlivre play and most to appear afterwards" (xvii).

Centlivre was beginning to forge working relationships with both the Lincoln's Inn Fields and the Drury Lane companies; as Milhous and Hume point out, "attached

professional writers were extremely conscious of the performers available to them in any particular company" (51). One casting challenge in particular faced her with the Drury Lane company, and dictated the structure of the play—what to do about Jane Rogers and Robert Wilks?

At this time, playwrights working to cast the personnel of Drury Lane had quite a challenge in writing for Rogers and Wilks. Somewhere near the turn of the century, the two had had a much-publicized affair which ended badly, some time after the birth of their daughter (Highfill 69). Rogers, the classic "woman scorned," went so far as to bite Wilks on the cheek during a performance of *Venice Preserv'd*, the play which had previously celebrated their status as lovers on and off-stage. Theatre personnel now had to think twice about writing any scene which might bring Rogers within biting range—so much for any love scenes between the two.

Nonetheless, Rogers and Wilks are the romantic leads of the piece, thanks to a clever piece of stagecraft by Centlivre. Not only are the romantic couple blocked by a cruel father, they are so blocked that they don't even manage to appear together until the last scene—and even then, they merely kneel together and ask for Selfwill's

blessing. There is next to no interaction, keeping the risk of flare-ups very low. Centlivre takes very little from Moliere's work that involves dialogue between lovers, and doesn't take the risk of making Wilks and Rogers play the sparring "gay couple".⁵

While this is a savvy move on her part, the casting of the two male leads shows that she wasn't quite as confident in choosing what actor should play which role. The part of Bellmie is technically the male lead; it is not until late in the play that the character shows some sign of being the precursor to the *tour de force* role of Fainwell in *A Bold Stroke for A Wife*. The role of Octavio, the best friend, is consistently more entertaining, because his lines are far more witty. Wilks and Mills are the two male leads, but Mills has more stage time in general, and is a more interesting character in particular, because he is responsible for moving the plot along.

Such casting runs counter to how Centlivre and other dramatists would use the two in the future: Wilks turns out to have real star quality, while according to the available commentary, Mills garners the reputation of being a reliable, competent, but somewhat pedestrian actor.

According to the *DNB* he was a "graceful, careful actor" (446) who generally got higher praise for his tragic roles.

As the *DNB* also describes Mills as an actor possessed chiefly of "mediocrity and propriety of conduct" (283), it seems clear that he was not considered the lead actor of the Drury Lane company. That honor belonged to Robert Wilks. Apparently, the less talented Mills often served as a foil for the more showy Wilks—Colley Cibber describes their working relationship thus:

[Mills] was an honest, quiet, careful Man, of as few Faults as Excellencies, and *Wilks* rather chose him for his second in many Plays, than an Actor of perhaps greater Skill that was not so laboriously diligent. (qtd. in Highfill 247)⁶

So far, this seems an appropriate description of the primary and secondary leads. But as mentioned previously, Centlivre's emphasis seems askew. Octavio enters first, and plunges directly into a scene with Sir Toby Doubtful, which is amusing slapstick taken from *The Forced Marriage* almost word-for-word. Sir Toby asks Octavio whether he should marry—Octavio sticks his foot in it with a frank declaration that Sir Toby is far too old. Most of the scene is quite appropriate for an actor of Mills's type: a

page or so is spent in calmly and carefully establishing Sir Toby's age. But near the end of the scene, the actor is called upon to make faces, and to address asides to the audience making fun of each of Sir Toby's lines—Wilks's particular talents seem far more suited for such a physical scene. While William Bullock, Sr. is the best choice for Sir Toby, skipping and dancing around the stage attempting to prove his sprightliness, it seems that Wilks would have most likely picked up on the possibility of mugging to the audience far earlier in the scene.

Bellmie and Octavio enter together in Act Two, Scene One, but Bellmie is only onstage for eighteen lines before he surrenders the boards to Octavio and Belliza, meeting for the first time. This scene is charming because it is full of witty sexual tension and miscommunication, as the two take each other's measure on various levels. Belliza is on an errand to Bellmie on behalf of her cousin Lucinda, and Octavio mistakenly assumes that she is Bellmie's mistress. In an attempt to help Bellmie, he answers untruthfully when Belliza questions him about Bellmie's feelings for Lucinda: "Ha! She's jealous, I must not discover the Truth, lest the Consequence be prejudicial to my Friend" (18), he exclaims. Octavio's verbal gymnastics

are astounding in this scene: he simultaneously attempts to keep his friend out of hot water with a jealous mistress, and to court that mistress for himself. Not exactly an easy task for an actor who is judged to be somewhat staid in manner—far more a part for an actor who portrays reprobates and rakes, as Wilks was wont to do in later plays. When Bellmie returns to the stage, he spends most of his time bewailing this unfortunate turn of events in a parody of heroic style; his language ornate and overblown. Octavio, in contrast, moves rapidly between teasing, blustering, trying to think of a solution, and confessing his attraction to Belliza while disparaging the married state.

Octavio appears again in Act Three, Scene One, brashly inviting himself in to Selfwill's lodgings because he knows that Sir Toby is there. On the strength of his friendship with the old suitor, he is admitted, and is able to deliver a message to Lucinda. He is present when she feigns a fit, which leads to her counterfeit dumbness, and is thus able to set up the plot involving the imaginary, or forced, physician. Thanks to Octavio's direct intervention and assistance, Lucinda is able to sneak out of the house to eventually marry Bellmie. In this scene, Octavio is the

master of the situation, as he assists Lucinda's deception, and gets in some good words for himself with Belliza, reversing her interpretation of what occurred at their first meeting. This sort of action is quite similar to what Sir James Courtly is called to perform in *The Basset-Table*—that role was played by Wilks, rather than Mills.

In Act Five, Scene 2, Bellmie finally gets a star turn, as he impersonates a fluff-headed philosopher whom Sir Toby calls on for advice. This scene, and Act Five, Scene Four (an encounter with another philosopher), are very little changed from their originals in *The Forced Marriage*. The rapid-fire philosophical hodge-podge that Bellmie spouts is very funny, and calls for an actor who is quick and sprightly: perfect for Wilks. Moreover, the two philosophers are very different in approach and temperament, so Wilks is here able to stretch artistically.

The play ends in Act Five, Scene Four, with Octavio delivering the bulk of the lines to explain to the older characters how they have been duped. He has seventeen lines, including the play's last two rhymed couplets, while Bellmie has only eleven (four of which are "Ha ha ha", shared with the company as a whole). The dramatic focus is skewed toward the "clever best friend," rather than the

leading man; given her emphasis, Centlivre would have been better served to revise the role, or switch the actors.⁷

As I will discuss in later chapters, she becomes much more adept at suiting the role to the actor.

Centlivre is politic, almost effusive, in her discussion of the actors in the Preface:

I must own myself infinitely oblig'd to the
Players, and in a great Measure the Success was
owing to them, especially Mr. Wilks, who extended
his Faculties to such a Pitch, that one may
almost say he out-play'd himself; and the Town
must confess they never saw three different
Characters by one Man acted so well before . . .

(n. pg.)

Such a compliment was indicative of Centlivre's generally good relationship with company personnel—it doesn't hurt one's career to fulsomely thank the director of rehearsals. Centlivre later weathers some of Wilks's temper tantrums; he goes on to figure largely in her comedies.

The Preface, as so often happens in this period, serves not only as a vehicle for puffing the piece and its cast, but as a piece of literary criticism. Centlivre begins to position herself in the Collier debate by

indirectly attacking him on what can be interpreted as pragmatic, even economic, grounds. It is not so much a theoretical attack, as some of her later work attempts, as it is a prediction. She characterizes the stage reformers as critics who "cavil most about Decorums, and crie up Aristotle's Rules as the most essential part of the Play" (n. pg.), and goes on to remark "they'll never persuade the Town to be of their Opinion, which relishes nothing so well as Humour lightly tost up with Wit, and drest with Modesty and Air" (n. pg.) Here is one of the first voices of the period arguing that the Stage primarily models what society wants, rather than creating a model of a different society. Centlivre further predicts that the reformers won't triumph because pieces which follow the preceding standard make more profit than those who observe strict Aristotelian unities: a very pragmatic argument indeed.

After setting up this opposition, she makes the claim that "I took peculiar Care to dress my Thoughts in such a modest Stile, that it might not give Offence to any" (n. pg.) This seems somewhat disingenuous, especially if we examine some of her emendations to the French text in light of her alleged reasons for those changes. For the sake of a close reading, I quote her argument in full here:

I thought [the scenes from Moliere] pretty in the French, and cou'd not help believing they might divert in an English Dress. The French have that light Airiness in their Temper, that the least Glimpse of Wit sets them a laughing, when 'twou'd not make us so much as Smile; so that where I found the Stile too poor, I endeavour'd to give it a Turn; for who e'er borrows from them, must take care to touch the Colours with an English Pencil, and form the Piece according to our Manners. (n. pg.)

Some confusion here is caused by her stipulative definitions. First, it is not altogether clear how she is using the term "Wit." If it is meant to signify the rapid-fire dialogue filled with puns and double entendres associated with the rakish stage, then it is true that this play is far more mild in that regard. However, scenes from Moliere which could easily be pointed to as examples of wit are present, almost untouched, in Centlivre's work. Two good examples include Martin and his wife sparring (a popular scene from *The Forced Marriage*), and the two "dialogues" that Sir Toby has with the fake philosophers. Moreover, one of the scenes Centlivre creates involves the

snappy, risqué dialogue between the gay couple Belliza and Octavio, including a version of a "proviso" scene during their very first encounter. And the discussion that Octavio and Bellmie have after Belliza has left is not only quick and witty, but quite salacious. Octavio straightforwardly asks for the loan of Bellmie's mistress for a night: he is quite unabashed at requesting what amounts to a one-night stand, and there is no moral commentary leveled at him for his profligacy.⁸

¹ This figure somewhat colors Centlivre's claim, "I confess it met a Reception beyond my Expectation" (Preface n. pg.). However, as her previous play, *The Stolen Heiress*, was only performed once, perhaps it is true that her expectations were quite modest indeed.

² See Frushell pp. xv-xvii for the performance history of the last-act excerpt. Drury Lane mounted the last act, along with other acts, six more times. Tony Aston included the last act as part of the medleys he performed during a 5-month long "tour" of the taverns of London. Frushell also emphasizes how this play is one of the early Centlivre works that seems custom-made for the "entire theatrical evening" (xvii), as the structure of the play lends itself well to many musical interpolations and set-pieces.

³ I use "thorough" in a tongue-in-cheek fashion here—Lock gives the play eight paragraphs (pp.42-47), while in all other sources, a mere paragraph is the norm.

⁴ A note on my method: The Twayne edition of Moliere's complete works does not include line numbers, so the count (and any error) is my own. I did not include lines that were merely stage directions as part of my overall line

count, as I am primarily interested in content. Those lines occur, for the most part, at the beginning and ending of scenes. Stage directions that occur in the midst of scenes (and lines) are sometimes another matter—I will discuss some of those instances in the body of the chapter.

⁵ She goes on to take that chance in *The Basset-Table* (1705), as I discuss further in Chapter Four. Perhaps by 1705, Jane Rogers was no longer considered a physical risk on-stage.

⁶ For a further discussion of the working relationship of Wilks and Mills, see Chapter Four.

⁷ One has to wonder why a "lead" role such as Bellmie has so little actual stage time. It is tempting to speculate that backstage forces had something to do with this peculiarity: 1702 was the year in which Christopher Rich replaced George Powell with Wilks as director of rehearsals—perhaps Wilks wanted a role which assured him his usual top billing without too much actual effort.

⁸ Bellmie does protest, but it is at Octavio's mistake, not at the request itself—he is far more upset that the understanding between himself and Lucinda might be ruined because of Octavio's meddling. In a further display of rakishness, when Octavio is convinced of his mistake, he exclaims, "What then! Is my charming delicious Harlot dwindled into a virtuous Woman at last" (23)?

CHAPTER 3

" 'LUCK BE A LADY TONIGHT,' OR AT LEAST MAKE ME A GENTLEMAN:

ECONOMIC ANXIETY IN CENTLIVRE'S *THE GAMESTER*

John Dennis, in a 1704 response to yet another of Jeremy Collier's attacks on the immorality of the stage, criticizes Collier for neglecting to discuss what he sees as a more tangible, and therefore more serious, vice:

But how does [Collier] propose to himself, to bring this [reform] about? Why, not by suppressing Vice, but the Stage that Scourges and exposes it. For he meddles not with that Vice that is in the World, let it be never so flaming and outragious. For example, the crying Sin of England next to Hypocrisie, at this time is Gaming; a Sin that is attended with several others, both among Men and Women, as Lying, Swearing, Perjury, Fraud, Quarrels, Murders, Fornication, Adultery. Has not Gaming done more mischief in England within these last Five Years than the Stage has done in Fifty? (29)

Susanna Centlivre's dedication to her 1705 comedy *The Gamester*, an adaptation of Jean Francois Regnard's *Le*

Joueur (1696),¹ aligns Centlivre with Dennis in calling gambling one of the great vices of England, and nods to Collier in its recommendation of morality "according to the first intent of Plays" (qtd. in Bowyer 59). In so doing, Centlivre manages to associate herself with both the reformers of the stage led by Collier, and her fellow playwrights, who somewhat cagily asserted that the stage could be an amusing and palatable instrument of reform, rather than an evil. Modern readers have recognized the gambit. The few critics of the play agree with Jay E. Oney's analysis of Centlivre's sense of what the market would bear, in her production of "a strong script on a timely topic with just the proper mixture of fun and moralization" (192-93).²

But the "moralization," in this case, is not merely an anti-gambling diatribe. Another topic very much in the minds of the contemporary audience was the fall-out from the 1695-96 Recoinage Act, which inspired a flurry of debate that James Thompson characterizes as a questioning of the possibility of controlling or mastering money (47). *The Gamester's* title character, Valere, is mastered by money and chance. By tracing this rake's progress, Centlivre explores a fundamental economic anxiety brought

on by the shift from a system based on land to one based on ready money. In this new arrangement, social station could conceivably rise and fall as quickly—and randomly—as the roll of a gamester's dice. Most critics of the play agree in passing that this story of a gamester's redemption is an exemplary comedy.³ I would argue, however, that the play as a whole, including the fore- and after-pieces, transcends the formulaic "reform comedy" structure. Rather, it is a cautionary and pessimistic portrayal of a social system struggling to come to terms with the move away from the conservative Lockean model of the possessive individual to the more modern model of the economic subject. Ultimately, *The Gamester* rejects this proto-Marxian model, but not without raising doubts about the impossibility of returning to a more stable system. These doubts are raised by a uniformity of stage action, and the rarity of fronts- and endpieces which are directly related to that action.

Written as it was during the height of the "second" Collier controversy (1703-08), the play is often overly didactic. Centlivre allows much on-stage time for the audience to witness the comic vagaries of Dame Fortune, and the havoc she wreaks on the various hopeful couples, before the rakish Valere is perfunctorily redeemed at the end of

the play. Acting in contradiction to Collier's claim that "these Sparks generally Marry the Top-Ladies, and those that do not, are brought to no penance, but go off with the Character of Fine Gentlemen" (142), Centlivre portrays Valere's penance and remorse graphically, whether or not the audience—and the other characters—really believe that his repentance is sincere. But gambling within the play is not simply one of the obligatory plot devices providing the obstacle for the stock "young lover" characters. It is also a means of illustrating the tension caused by the nominalization of the concept of inherent or intrinsic value during the period after the Recoinage Act. This shift in the definition of value is capable of redefining the very nature of things; as Marx puts it, "since money, as the existing and active concept of value, confounds and exchanges all things, it is the general *confounding* and *compounding* of all things—the world upside-down—the confounding and compounding of all natural and human qualities" (169). In *Valere*, *ancien regime* notions of gentlemanly behavior are confounded because of his gambling addiction, and the effects of his behavior visibly ripple outwards through his social circle.

During its fourteen-night run at Lincoln's Inn Fields, all the stalwarts of the Rebel Company appeared in *The Gamester*, in their usual pairings. Valere the gamester (played by John Verbruggen) is in love with Angelica the heiress (Anne Bracegirdle), who loves him but despises his gambling. Also in love with Valere is Angelica's sister, the widowed coquette Lady Wealthy (Elizabeth Barry), who is in turn pursued both by the upright Mr. Lovewell (Thomas Betterton) and the Marquis of Hazard (William[?] Fieldhouse), who is a footman masquerading as a French nobleman. Valere's uncle, Dorante (John Corey), is in love with Angelica and has bribed her servant Favourite (Hunt) to advance his cause. The plot centers on Valere's relationship with Angelica; Angelica banishes Valere each time she learns he is gaming. His reaction to this banishment depends on his current streak of luck: at the beginning of the play, when informed that Angelica has cast Valere off yet again, his valet Hector (George Pack) pronounces, "If he has lost his Money, this News will break his heart" (1.1).

One of Valere's early speeches, given as he is riding high on a big pay-off, sets up his utopian idea of the gamester's milieu:

Who is happier than a Gamester; who more
respected, I mean those that make any Figure in
the World? Who more caress'd by Lords and Dukes?
Or whose Conversation more agreeable—Whose Coach
finer in the Ring—Or Finger in the Side Box
produces more Lustre—Who has more Attendance from
the Drawers—or better Wine from the Master,—or
is nicer serv'd by the Cook?—In short, there is
an Air of Magnificence in't—a Gamester's Hand is
the Philosopher's Stone, that turns all it
touches into Gold. (3.1)

While Valere can think of nothing better than the gambling
life, virtually all the other main characters condemn him
for his profligacy, their various objections calling to
mind Collier's general definition of a stage libertine: "A
fine Gentleman that has neither Honesty, nor Honour,
Conscience, nor Manners, Good Nature, nor civil Hypocrisie"
(144). His long-suffering manservant, Hector, succinctly
delivers the majority opinion on the dangers of gaming;
when Valere claims that he, as a gamester, has mastered
alchemy with the Midas touch "that turns all it touches to
Gold," Hector responds, "And Gold into Nothing" (3.1).

Suspicion of such alchemy is particularly applicable to the era following the Recoinage Act, as the play illustrates the change in the way wealth was judged and circulated, and what Thomas M. Kavanagh calls the "increasingly ubiquitous phenomenon of money" and "how different societal groups related to this circulation of money—how they responded to being redefined, at least within the context of the game, by the cards they drew and the points they threw" (29-30).

The points that Valere throws, or his luck with the dice, redefine his social group, and dictate the complicated maneuvering of the other characters, with various potential pairings of couples appearing and disappearing rapidly. His actions at the gaming table redefine his peers; the points he throws turn social relationships into a high-stakes game. A bejeweled portrait of Angelica serves as a marker of Valere's fortune and his heart; tracking its progress through various hands is a tangible warning of how, once she's invited in, Lady Luck can disorder a previously stable system. The game that Valere plays is not a mere diversion; Centlivre also takes great pains to illustrate that he doesn't play it as a gentleman should, with an air of disinterest in the

outcome. Rather, his obsession threatens the "sense of social order and rank" (Kavanagh 35).

Despite Valere's assessment of gambling as "the genteelest Way of passing one's Time" (3.1), the world portrayed on the stage is in the grip of a crisis caused mainly by the ways that Valere's gambling undercuts the social strata. Valere's physical and emotional state is dictated by his luck throughout the course of the play—he is unable to gamble in typical gentlemanly fashion, and both his honour and his love are subsumed by the quest for more cash to gamble away: "I promis'd to visit Angelica again to Night, but fear I shall break my Word," Valere airily tells Hector after his winning streak. "And will you prefer Play before that charming Lady?" Hector questions. Valere's answer, "Not before her—but I have given my Parole to some Men of Quality, and I can't in Honour disappoint 'em" (3.1), comes not more than several hours after he has received Angelica's gem-adorned portrait as a token of his renunciation of gambling and vowed undying devotion to her in more than usually exaggerated heroic style (2.1).

If Valere has no money, his promises to Angelica are worthless; if he has cash and is ready to play, he follows the genteel code of honor. Valere's conduct is based on

his economic status at any given moment. J. G. A. Pocock states that "in the credit economy and polity, property had become not only mobile but speculative: what one owned was promises, and not merely the functioning but the intelligibility of society depended upon the success of a program of reification" (113). Because Valere's "investments," such as they are, are so overtly speculative, his promises, figuratively speaking, are not worth the paper they are printed on.⁴

The staging of Valere's course of action reinforces this serious attack on the intelligibility of society, and traces the erosion of any notion of intrinsic value in his character. In Act One, Scene One, Centlivre first highlights his bad behavior by having him enter in physical disorder; he has been up all night gaming, and his clothing is the worse for wear. Centlivre proceeds from illustrating his physical disorder to his mental disorder: Hector lists all the people who have called for Valere during his absence at the gaming table: the list includes either tradesmen waiting to be paid, or rakes and profligates ready to teach Valere further bad habits. Valere refuses to pay off his considerable debts, except, as he says, those "honourable" ones incurred at play, and

is more interested in meeting a "shabby-look'd Fellow" named Cogdie (Dickins), who has contracted with Valere to teach him how to throw loaded dice. Centlivre takes pains to place Valere in bad company from the very start of the play.

Immediately following this set-up, Valere's father enters, and through their interaction, Centlivre shows how Valere's bad habits are costing him his rightful place in the familial order, as well as corrupting all notions of decency or gentlemanly behavior.⁵ He clashes violently with his father, Sir Thomas Valere (John Freeman), who has thrown him out of the house for his rakishness. Abasing himself after a shouting match, he promises reform in order to wrangle for more cash: "Money, Sir, is an Ingredient absolutely necessary in a Lover: A Hundred Guineas would accomplish my Design", he pleads. His father refuses to lend him that sum; Valere begs for lower and lower amounts. He prompts his servant, Hector, to join in pleading for cash; Hector even insults Sir Thomas, calling him a "Hard-hearted Jew" to his face. Valere also commands Hector to lie on his behalf, for which Hector is often beaten.⁶ After Sir Thomas leaves, Valere spies Mrs. Security the moneylender, and resolves to get her drunk and "to squeeze

this old Spunge of fifty Guineas" so that he may sit at the gaming table once again. All this occurs in just one scene: Centlivre deftly places her title character almost as low as he can get, and is careful to provide unambiguous commentary on his dissoluteness from all the other characters.

Valere has not quite sunk as low as possible, however—although he is typed as a profligate early on, the stage action continues to show him seemingly inexorably on the way to total ruin. For instance, he nearly capitulates to Lady Wealthy's proposition for his sexual favors in return for her cash, in blatant disregard of his friendship with Lovewell, Lady Wealthy's long-time suitor (4.1), as I will discuss further below.

All the while, Valere protests mightily that the other characters do not seem to place the same value on his honor, pledge, and word as he does. Hector comments wonderingly on this nominalization, "Ah, what a Juggler's Box is this Word Honour! It is a Kind of Knight of the Post—That will swear on either Side for Interest I find" (3.1). Valere is a graphic stage representation of the type portrayed by Dennis, in whom gambling visits with the

attendant sins of "Lying, Swearing, Perjury, Fraud, Quarrels, Murders, Fornication, [and] Adultery" (29).

Casting John Verbruggen in the role of Valere seems to have been an excellent choice on Centlivre's part. The role calls for a character who is nominally a gentleman, raised in polite society, yet who grows increasingly more dissolute and disordered because of his vice. Available commentary on his acting style is sketchy, but indicates that he would be admirably suited to portray a role encompassing such disparate traits. As one of the leading actors at Drury Lane after the secession of Betterton and Co., Verbruggen played mainly tragic romantic leads, and made a name for himself with his interpretation of the role of Oroonoko. Upon moving to Lincoln's Inn Fields, the majority of his roles were men of noble yet impetuous natures.⁷

Contemporary audiences, then, were accustomed to Verbruggen in leading romantic roles, and would expect him to succeed (in this case, reform and get the girl). But he was not a smooth, suave leading man, such as Christopher Bullock or Robert Wilks, stars of later Centlivre comedies. As mentioned before, the role of Valere calls for a certain edge of desperation and a loss of control—apparently just

such an edge was a well-known facet of Verbruggen's style. Anthony Aston claims that the role of Oroonoko was originally given to George Powell, but that Southern was told by the Duke of Newcastle that Verbruggen was "the unpolish'd Hero" (qtd. in Highfill 135) the part called for. Tony Aston compared Betterton's style to Verbruggen's, and concluded that Verbruggen came across as "wild and untaught . . . best at rough-hewn characters" (qtd. in Highfill 136). *The Laureat* (1740) observed that he "had a Roughness in his Manner, and a negligent agreeable Wildness in his Action and his Mein" (qtd. in Highfill 136). In keeping with Centlivre's pessimistic and cautionary departure from the exemplary comedy mode, however subtle, an actor like Verbruggen would highlight the simultaneous necessity for and absurdity of reform—in other words, the gentleman gambler gone bad.⁸

The persona of the gentleman gambler is still with us today, in sources as diverse as the obligatory casino scene in any James Bond film to Kenny Rogers's song "The Gambler." Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (1528) frames in the negative what becomes the long-standing precedent for gentlemanly gambling, in terms that describe Valere perfectly—gaming is not a vice for the courtier

"unless he should do so too constantly and as a result should neglect other more important things, or indeed unless he should play only to win money and to cheat the other player; and, when he lost, should show such grief and vexation as to give proof of being miserly" (127). Valere violates all these rules of conduct—he doesn't know when to hold 'em or fold 'em, and he routinely makes the socially unacceptable mistake of counting his money while still at the table.

Centlivre takes care to establish Valere's violations of the gentleman gamester's code of honor from the first, which leads ultimately to the realization that he is altogether without honor. These violations do not affect just Valere, but spread to his entire social circle, indicating the virus-like power of the new economic system. The first lines in the play are from Valere's manservant, Hector, bemoaning his lot in serving a gamester. He predicts that Valere's luck has been bad, putting him "out of Humour" (1.1), so that Hector doesn't dare ask him for any dinner—the usual state of affairs while Hector has been in his service. Valere's acquaintances and all their servants are well aware of his obsession and the effect it has on him: when Hector tries to persuade Angelica's maid

Favourite that he is at business, her comic mimicry by way of response indicates the emotional involvement with gaming that Castiglione warns against: "Yes, yes, I guess the Business; he is at shaking his Elbows over a Table, saying his Prayers backwards, courting the Dice like a Mistress, and cursing them when he is disappointed" (1.1). The members of Centlivre's audience, no matter what their respective ranks, were well aware of this codification of gentlemanly honor, and would easily recognize the outward signs of Valere's obsession. To make sure the vice is exposed for what it is, Centlivre repeatedly returns to scenes of Valere behaving in ways his rank should forbid, as well as scenes in which other characters describe him.

For example, an exchange between the two servants comparing the merits of Valere with old Dorante indicates the play's pessimistic view of the leveling effect of Valere's gambling. Favourite's description of Valere deliberately invokes an unkempt member of the lower class:

Hector: Ay, but Women generally love green Fruit
best: besides, my Master's handsome.

Angelica: He handsome! Behold his Picture just as
he'll appear this Morning, with Arms across,
down-cast eyes, no Powder in his Perriwig, a

Steenkirk tuck'd in to hide the Dirt, Sword-knot untied, no Gloves, and Hands and Face as dirty as a Tinker. This is the very figure of your beautiful Master.

Hector: The Jade has hit it.

Angelica: And Pocket as empty as a Capuchin's.

(1.1)

And indeed, the stage directions for his first entrance read "Enter Valere, in disorder"; an obvious sight gag would be to precisely match his costume to the "disorder" of Favourite's description. Throughout the scene, Hector chases him around the stage with a gown and assumes from his wild protestations of love for Angelica that he has once again lost heavily: "Ah, Sir, your Fob, like a Barometer, shews the Temper of your Heart, as that does the Weather" (1.1). Valere outwardly manifests his mental disorder.

Further action in the play illustrates Valere's abandonment, which seems to place Centlivre in agreement with Collier's assertion in *The Short View* that enslavement to one's passions is one of the worst of crimes (164). In *The Gamester*, Centlivre is more overtly aligned to Collier's *Short View* on the function of comedy than to the

stance of her own earlier work, such as *Love's Contrivance*, where she had repudiated Collier on various levels and asserted along with Dryden and others that the purpose of comedy was to entertain.

Centlivre sets up a situation in which Valere's lack of control provides Lady Wealthy with the possibility of satisfying her appetite for Valere—an appetite that Centlivre links to Valere's dissipated habits. After a comic scene in act 2 in which Valere is discovered by Angelica on his knees before Lady Wealthy, an easily-misunderstood action which Lady Wealthy attempts to pass off as Valere paying court to her rather than pleading for her help to win back Angelica's good graces, Lady Wealthy sets out to purchase Valere's sexual favors. "Oh, that I could once bring Valere within my Power," she fantasizes, "I'd use him as his ill Breeding deserves; I'd teach him to be particular. He has promised Angelica to play no more; I fancy that proceeds from his Want of Money, rather than Inclination" (3.2).

The letter she sends him, accompanied by a bill for [*L]100, underscores both his willingness to do anything for money and her lapse in moral behavior. She asks Valere to return her affections, and makes it clear that Valere's

greed provides the opportunity for her to pursue him: "I confirm my Words in a golden Shower—'Tis what I believe most acceptable to a Man of your Circumstances" (4.1). Valere's salacious analysis, directed straight out at the audience, "If I accept this Present, I must make my Returns in Love; for when a Widow parts with Money, 'tis easy to read the valuable Consideration she expects" (4.1), is hardly even necessary.

The scene serves as a tangible example of gambling corruption. Because Valere is ruled by "Circumstance," Lady Wealthy can bypass the standard mode of flirtation and turn instead to a straightforward financial transaction, in a singular moment of social disorder and reversal of standard gender roles. An intuitive gambler herself, she has read Valere's hand correctly: despite his assertion to Hector in act 1, scene 1 that he detests the wealthy widow, the sight of what amounts to cash in hand is too much for him. His dilemma is made visible onstage by the two props: Angelica's portrait, versus the widow's promise of gold. He debates, "What must I do now? prove a Rogue, and betray my Friend Lovewell . . . But then Angelica, the dear, the faithful Maid—But then a Hundred Guineas, the dear tempting Sight!" (4.1).

The abstractions of honor, love, and friendship lose out to Lady Wealthy's gift: "Seven or Eleven have more Charms now than the brightest Lady in the Kingdom," Valere cries to the porter who brought the message, "Tell the Lady, I am hers most obediently—It requires no other Answer, till I fly myself to return my Thanks." Only Lovewell's expedient entrance saves Valere—a situation in which Valere seems to recognize that his honor is not an inherent quality: "Ha, Lovewell! thou com'st in good Time; for my Virtue's staggering" (4.1). His response to Lady Wealthy objectifies his honor as a gentleman, to be purchased by the highest bidder; Lady Wealthy's cash trumps the portrait of Angelica and all of Valere's worthless promises upon his receipt of it.

Even though his entrance momentarily saves Valere, or at least temporarily halts his course, we find that by the end of the play, Lovewell is equally as corrupted by the gamester's vice. On the face of it, Lovewell appears to be the model of virtue in the play, as he steadfastly refuses to game with Valere, moralizes on Lady Wealthy's coquettish tricks and the disreputable crowd of admirers surrounding her, remains her faithful, patient suitor, and triumphs by winning her hand in the end. Thomas Betterton assayed the

role and no doubt played the patient lover admirably, even at the age of 70. Highfill summarizes contemporary accounts of this period:

[Betterton] dazzled the town even when he attempted roles unsuited to his age; to all parts he brought a maturity of interpretation that apparently made them memorable . . . [he] continued playing with vigor, sometimes in leading roles, but sometimes in small ones—all, presumably, of his own choice. (85; 87).

Betterton would have served as an admirable foil to Verbruggen, as the older, more stable model of behavior. But even this seeming contrast to Valere is redefined by Valere's economic irresponsibility. Although he has loved Lady Wealthy since before her first marriage, he is incapable of persuading her to accept his hand now that she is widowed: he freely admits that his "long successful Love assures me I have no Power" (2.1). Even while she herself admits that he is the best of her suitors, Lady Wealthy fixes her mind on Valere. When Valere exposes her perfidy in act 4, Lovewell offers to duel with his friend for Lady Wealthy's nonexistent honor. Valere refuses, begging a previous engagement at the gaming-table (yet

another indication that he is no gentleman), and Lovewell realizes that "Something must be done; but what I know not" (4.1).

His solution, as he informs Lady Wealthy, is to falsify the situation, and manufacture honor in her where there is none: "I have since been with Valere, sworn to him the Letter was a Plot of mine, the Hand and Bill all counterfeit, to satisfy my jealous Scruple, if there were Affairs between ye, he believed it, and your Honour's free from all ill Tongues" (5.2). Essentially, he blackmails and purchases her by a falsehood, indicating that old notions of honor are ineffective in a system rendered economically chaotic. The new bond between them is a contract, but it is one based on deception and dishonor, giving the lie to Valere's description of him as "a Gentleman without Exception" (1.1).

Angelica also must find a way to move through this new economic landscape, and to deal with the redefinition of her role necessitated by Valere's flirtation with Lady Luck. Lady Wealthy may have won the trick in act 4, but Angelica wins the round in act 5. She is aware that the odds are against her from the start. The "odds" are not entirely familiar, dramaturgically speaking: Centlivre's

plot departs from the usual comic structure of young lovers thwarted by older characters. In fact, Sir Thomas sees Valere's love for Angelica as being his only redeeming quality: "I know your Love, and [it is] the only Thing I like in you: She's a virtuous Lady, and her Fortune's large" (1.1). The obstacle is clearly framed in economic terms—it is Valere's gambling that comes between him and this virtuous lady.

Anne Bracegirdle as Angelica is another excellent casting choice; even though she was in her early 40s at the time the play was staged, she still commanded a large following amongst the play-going community; due in part to her shapely form. As the plot hinges on an action which requires the actress to don male clothing, Centlivre cleverly assures that Bracegirdle will capture the audience's attention. Colley Cibber called her the "Darling of the Theatre" (qtd. In Highfill 271); this personal sentiment about her comes in handy if the playwright wishes to generate sympathy for the possible plight of a sprightly, smart, beautiful young woman who is in love with an inveterate gamester. "The bewitching effect Anne Bracegirdle had on her male admirers caused a great deal of ink to be spilt" Highfill remarks (275); this

seems to have been true up until her sudden retirement from the stage in 1707. Bracegirdle's brand of comedy (sprightly and energetic, as compared to Barry's stateliness) is perfect for this role.

The character of Angelica carries the play in many ways: she is the moral center who cleverly brings about Valere's reform. It is somewhat pragmatic for her to do so, as it is her jointure that is at stake. A commonplace repeated throughout the play is first stated by Favourite, as she and Hector argue the respective merits of Dorante and Valere: "For she that marries a Gamester that plays upon the Square, as the Fool your Master does, can expect nothing but an Alms-House for a Jointure" (1.1). This view, reiterated by almost every character in the play, is not only a contradiction of Valere's picture of the gamester's life, but also a very real possible fate for Angelica if she does not redeem her occasional suitor. The difference in the women's estates ups the ante for Angelica, as an early conversation in act 2 between the two women points out:

Lady Wealthy: Believe me, Sister—I had rather see you married to Age, Avarice, or a Fool—than to

Valere, for can there be a greater Misfortune
than to marry a Gamester?

Angelica: I know 'tis the high Road to Beggary.

Lady Wealthy: And your Fortune being all ready
Money will be thrown off with Expedition—Were it
as mine is indeed. . . . (2.1)

Although Lady Wealthy's motives are suspect at this point (we discover several lines later that she wants Valere for herself), her business sense is sound. When Angelica turns on her in shock and surprise at this disclosure, given her advice, Wealthy replies, "My Estate's intail'd enough to supply his Riots, and why should I not bestow it upon the Man I like?" (2.1).

Even though the immediate effect her advice has on Angelica is to cause her to forgive Valere once more, Lady Wealthy reinforces Angelica's sense that she must hedge her bets as fully as she can. After castigating Valere in act 2 for playing false and breaking his vow to her yet again, Angelica reveals the steadfastness of her love for him, and asks for what amounts to a business contract, framed conditionally: "I differ from my Sex in this, I would not change where once I've given my Heart, if possible—therefore resolve to make this last Trial—banish your Play

for Love, and rest secur'd of mine" (2.1). She attempts simultaneously to set a new standard of their love, replacing its current economic foundation, and to corner the market. She does so by a Lockean insistence on contract and trust, in which James Thompson observes that "stability or security is dependent on each subject's observing his pledge" (58).

As a signifier of their bargain, she offers Valere a physical symbol of their business deal, the portrait set with diamonds, and stipulates that if he loses it "thro' Avarice, Carelessness, or Falshood," he loses her heart. Valere's unreliability is so obvious by this point that the foreshadowing is more than a bit heavy when he responds, "I agree; and when I do, except to yourself, may all the Curses ranked with your Disdain, pursue me—This, when I look on't, will correct my Folly, and strike a sacred Awe upon my Actions" (2.1).

All very well, as long as he keeps it, but the audience must observe sarcastically with Favourite that the portrait is "worth two hundred Pounds, a good Moveable when Cash runs low" (2.1). Joanna M. Cameron claims that the portrait "keeps the audience aware of Angelica's influence on Valere in scenes in which she does not appear" (36). I'd

quibble with Cameron's wording, and emphasize that what the portrait does is remind the audience of how little Angelica's influence matters. The movement of the play reinforces this point: as soon as act 3 opens, we discover that Valere has borrowed five guineas from "Honest Jack Sharper" (3.1) and has won 557 ½ guineas. He has already broken the contract, although the portrait is still in his possession. In fact, the structure of the play suggests that he went immediately from Angelica's presence to the sharper.

Hector bets on Angelica when he urges Valere to marry Angelica before his luck changes, but Valere, too taken by his streak of good luck, questions whether he should marry at all. Again, observes Hector, Valere's "Pocket and [his] Heart runs counter" (3.1). It is this state of affairs over which Angelica must triumph, and she ends act 3 with her assessment of the stakes, and her belief that the last hand is about to be dealt. She speaks in verse before her exit, marking the seriousness of the venture:

For when from Ill a Proselyte we gain,
The goodness of the Act rewards the Pain:
But if my honest Arts successless prove,
To make the Vices of his Soul remove,

I'll die—or rid me from this Tyrant Love. (3.2)

Her "honest Arts" (a wonderful oxymoron, in this context, implying as it does the disguise and manipulation she is about to employ) further exemplify the social disorder and gender-role reversals caused by Valere's gambling fixation: in order to gain mastery over Love, the tyrant, Angelica must beat Valere at his own game. In act 4, scene 4, the game is Hazard, a French import and an early form of craps. Centlivre underscores the far-reaching effects of Valere's gambling addiction by featuring a high-stakes game in which, arguably, the only "skill" involved is in throwing loaded dice undetected.

The discovery scene is drawn to display Valere in company with Count Cogdie, the gaming-table attendants, and a shady crowd of gamblers (4.4).⁹ During a vigorous round of Hazard, Valere curses, blasphemes, accuses other players of cheating, and argues petulantly while he is losing. His emotions are at the whim of Fortune; when his luck turns, he laughs and declares, "I have more Manners than to quarrel now I'm on the winning Side" (4.4), a shameful admission for a well-bred man. Into this atmosphere enters Angelica on her mission of redemption. Shockingly, she is disguised as a man—a moment calculated to gratify all of

Bracegirdle's admirers as well as to advance the plot. She further scandalizes and titillates the audience by joining in the game and acquitting herself more than admirably. Although she is perfectly well-mannered, she fits right into the company, strolling in and employing gaming terminology like a pro.

The argument that Angelica and Valere have near the end of the game again illustrates how the changing economy is changing the notion of honor as well. Valere, who has lost his entire stake and then some to Angelica, asks to set a hundred Guineas "upon Honour." Angelica's refusal—"I beg your Pardon, Sir, I never play upon Honour with Strangers" (4.4)—is both ironic and startling, showing as it does a fundamental change in social interactions. Earlier in the play, Valere tries to raise fifty Guineas from the pawn-broker Mrs. Security (Wallis), with nothing more than his good name. She refuses indignantly, her name of course the indication that something more substantial is required. She is quite right to do so; as Hector pronounces, "I'd have you to know, my Master's Note is as good as a Banker's—sometimes, when the Dice run well" (1.1). A gentleman's word, in this system, is no longer good enough; honor built on a foundation of chance is worth

nothing. This chaotic economy is never more clear than when Valere, remembering Angelica's picture, appraises it as worth more than his life, but offers it up as a stake after a minimum of persuasion from Angelica.

Moreover, after having lost the portrait fair and square, he regains not a shred of equanimity, but threatens to cut Angelica's throat if she does not restore it to him. He threatens to challenge her to a duel, as well. Here is an excellent example of how Centlivre uses her knowledge of each actor's style to her advantage: as mentioned before, Verbruggen's roughness serves the plot in this scene. His display can be read as a lover's display of affection, surely, but this is also a case of exceptionally poor sportsmanship combined with immorality.¹⁰

Fortunately he is distracted, allowing her to run away before he can carry through: "Then to conceal your Treachery, you would have committed Murder,—excellent Moralist" (5.2), Angelica later observes. After calling himself a monster and enumerating his crimes (a far cry from his earlier assessment of his life), Valere exits the stage after a verse bemoaning, yet accepting, the justice of his fate. Angelica has won—but only through disguising her gender and blending in with a thoroughly rakish lot.

Because of Valere's lack of honor, she is reduced to a disreputable masquerader.

"Where is the Immorality of Gaming," Valere queries rather disingenuously earlier in the play, "Now I think there can be nothing more moral—It unites Men of all Ranks, the Lord and the Peasant—the haughty Dutchess, and the City Dame—the Marquis and the Footman, all without Distinction play together" (3.1). Because Valere is cowed and discredited by the end of the play, not without some last-ditch efforts at bluffing, it is clear we are not meant to agree with his assessment but rather to recognize the startling negative effect of his purchasable honor. Angelica gives him a scalding rebuke and is only persuaded to take him back through witnessing Sir Thomas's murderous rage at Valere's stupidity; after drawing his sword on his own son, Sir Thomas disowns Valere. Ironically, Angelica uses the terminology she earlier eschewed to extract yet another vow from Valere: "Valere, come back, should I forgive you all—Would my Generosity oblige you to a sober Life.—Can you upon Honour (for you shall swear no more) forsake that Vice that brought you to this low Ebb of Fortune?" (5.2).

This exchange, more than any other, underscores the fact that the concept of honor has become hollow. If we've been paying attention to Valere's actions thus far, the answer to Angelica's question is a resounding "No." It cannot be any other answer, as Centlivre presents him in disorder over and over again. This staging leads us to wonder why Angelica resorts to this useless terminology. She is falling back on old notions of honor rather than realizing that in this new society, "pledges and promises necessitate a reliance on honesty, but invite the opportunity of illicit gain through falsehood" (Strong 1). She asks Valere for a pledge based on honesty, despite the fact that he has failed her again and again. Through his dishonest pledge, then, Valere will gain Angelica's ready money.

While Valere's lines in the last scene are suitably downcast and penitent, and while his father settles two thousand a year on him, the status of Angelica's fortune has not changed. By carefully portraying Valere's previous lack of ability to keep his word, his debased notion of honor, and the repeated warnings from virtually every character about the danger of marrying a gamester, Centlivre sets up Valere's repentance as suspect.

Underneath the trappings of a standard reform comedy denouement and a return to the status quo is the fear that ready money might be "a socially destructive threat to due respect for rank and privilege" (Kavanagh 52). Angelica may have won the round, but Valere is now in possession of more cash; and who knows what temptations may arise after the obligatory country dance?

In his curtain speech, Valere is sanguine on the matter and proclaims his complete redemption:

Now Virtue's pleasing Prospect's in my View,
With double Care I'll all her Paths pursue;
And proud to think I owe this Change to you
Virtue that gives more solid Peace of Mind,
Than Men in all their vicious Pleasures find;
Then each with me the Libertine reclaim,
And shun what sinks his Fortune, and his Fame.

(5.2)

But Valere, as we have seen, has resisted each reclamation that the play's plot twists have presented. Most critics of *The Gamester* agree with Robert D. Hume's remark that the piece is "a highly competent if entirely implausible exercise in reform and reclamation," and with his

categorization of it as a "well-handled didactic play" among the period's "reform comedies" (469).

Criticism of the play is also unanimous in its lack of interest in the prologue and the epilogue. While I am in general agreement with John Wilson Bowyer's claim that for many works of this period, the prologues and epilogues had very little thematic connection to the plays themselves (63), I would argue that in this case, the prologue and epilogue frame the play in a way that emphasizes the impossibility of Valere's reclamation. The play is not a reform comedy in the typical sense of the term: as the chances that Valere will relapse are so high, any reform at all must take place on the part of the audience, making *The Gamester* more didactic and perhaps more realistic than other reform comedies of the period. Hume further notes that "modern critics tend to find [*The Gamester*] self-delusory, or even dishonest" (470). However, an analysis of the framework provided by the prologue and epilogue, as well as an exploration of who might have delivered the pieces, offers a reading that maintains a consistently negative attitude toward the outcome of Angelica's marriage to Valere.

The prologue and epilogue, written by Nicholas Rowe and Charles Johnson respectively, provide the audience with a plausible outcome of the young couple's marriage. Both pieces narrate a sort of rake's progress, leading to the deterioration of a marriage in which one of the partners is a gamester. Bowyer, the only critic to say anything about the pieces other than mentioning their authorship, mentions only the "sermonizing epilogue on the vicious effects of gambling for both men and women" (59). However, his comment that the play "asserts the goodness of ordinary human beings" (62) ignores the overall pessimistic tone of the play, substantiated by the monologues.

The first six lines of Rowe's prologue establish the controlling metaphor of the speaker as a young wife (the stage), who, while formerly "kept fine, caress'd and lodg'd" (9) by her new husband (the town), has discovered that the honeymoon is over. On the face of it, the metaphor plays out as a typical rant against the fickleness of the audience, which is weary of what it once enjoyed and is not so prone to attend the plays: "Sometimes, indeed, as in your Way it fell, / You stop'd, and call'd to see if we were well" (15). The speaker complains of her childbearing (playwriting) efforts and calls her progeny "Toads" (22),

alludes to the gender of the playwright by mentioning a midwife (26), and threatens to abandon the current "toad," or play, to the parish if the neglectful audience forsakes it.

Oddly, from a staging perspective, the first edition of Centlivre's complete works lists Thomas Betterton as the speaker of the prologue. Casting Betterton blatantly ignores the clear identification of both the "Plaintiff Stage" and "humble Wives" with the pronoun "we" in the first six lines. It is possible to justify this choice by assuming that Betterton was given the speech as a nod to his managerial role at Lincoln's Inn Fields, thus making him a fitting "voice" for the stage, despite the gender mismatch. The speaker complains that the audience's "Love [has] dwindled to Respect" (14), but does not identify what new entertainment has taken the place of the playhouse.

I have observed that Favourite's first description of Valere, which occurs not many lines into the first scene, pictures him "courting the Dice like a Mistress" (1.1). Given that the prologue would still be fresh in the audience's minds, it is reasonable to assume that they might imagine the charms of a wife paling beside those offered by a new amour. And as I have shown, the play

illustrates over and over again that Valere's inclination is gaming above all else, placing Lady Luck in ascendancy over his betrothed. This theme is borne out in the epilogue's sad words of advice about a young man ruined by gambling.

Throughout the play, several of the characters have uttered dire predictions about Valere's fate if he refuses to renounce gaming. In threatening to disown his son, Sir Thomas shouts, "then try if what has ruin'd you, will maintain you" (1.1); in refusing Hector the money to pay Valere's debts, he shouts, "Play, hang, or starve together, I care not" (2.2). Hector compares the lives of gamblers to those of highwaymen who were hanged for their crimes (3.1). Dorante points out to Angelica that Valere's "head-strong Courses and luxurious Life, will ruin both your Peace and Fortune" (3.2), and although she quibbles with him over his motives for informing on Valere, she does not argue with his conclusion. Sir Thomas, delighted by the news that Angelica and Valere are finally to wed, announces that he plans to settle two thousand pounds a year on his son. "He shall make thee a swinging Jointure, my Girl" (5.2), he says exultantly to his future daughter-in-law.

The modern sense here, of course, is that Angelica is going to receive a jointure "to die for"—but the slang, given all the previous allusions to hangings and ruin, takes on a more ominous meaning when it culminates in the epilogue. "As one condemn'd, and ready to become / For his Offences past, a Pendulum," begins the speaker direfully in the first line, and plays out the subject of the simile as one "Condemn'd . . . to play that tedious, juggling Game, a Wife" (7-8). The speaker has long deliberated over the choice between the hangman's or the marriage knot and is giving the usual address to the crowd before being carted away for punishment (10). In contrast to Valere's euphoric picture of gambling utopia, the speaker in Johnson's epilogue shows the downward spiral of the gamblers, dismissed as "Fortune's sporting Footballs" (15). The speaker catalogues vignettes from the play itself: the gambler's hopes and fears; his inability to rule his passions; his loss of "his good Dad's hard-gotten hoarded Gain" (20); and his failure to raise more cash from the sharpers. But the epilogue goes beyond the scope of the play—it does not terminate with the joyful wedding dance; rather, it follows the twists of Fortune to their logical conclusion: the gambler observed by the embittered wife

becomes a sharper himself, is still unable to best Fortune, and at last must admit that "this itch for Play has likewise fatal been" (31).

There is some possible gender confusion in the casting of the epilogue as well as the prologue: Bowyer points out that there is some question about whether John Verbruggen or his wife Susanna delivered the epilogue.¹¹ As the first gendered pronoun in the speech is "his," in the second line, it is understandable that one might assume that the dissolute gamester is the speaker. However, since there is such a strong thematic link between the monologues and the play itself, it would be odd for the actor playing Valere to deliver these lines, as he has just ended the play with an edifying speech about his own redemption.

When the speaker of the epilogue uses first person, the pronoun "I" refers to the noun "Wife," as noted above. Furthermore, there is a clear distinction established between the speaker/wife and the group of gamesters/the audience, whom she addresses as "You roaring Boys" at the beginning of the portion of the epilogue comprising the "Word of good Advice" (11, 9). Given that the turning point of the plot calls for the actress playing Angelica to dress in men's clothing, and given that the syntax points toward

a woman speaker, it makes good dramatic sense for an actress to have delivered the epilogue.

The closing lines of the epilogue return to the metaphor established by the prologue: this wife is the same stage who no longer diverts the audience; but here the question of what entertainment has taken her place is answered:

You fly this Place like an infectious Air,
To yonder happy Quarter of the Town,
You crowd; and your own fav'rite Stage disown;
We're like old Mistresses, you love the Vice,
And hate us only 'cause we once did please. (39-
43)

The stage has been abandoned for what Centlivre makes clear in her dedication is one of the reigning vices of England; but it is not only the clever wordplay that is important here. The parallel to what has just occurred in the play—the marriage of Angelica and Valere—is clear as well, and would be further enforced if the epilogue were delivered by the same actress playing Angelica. Pierre Bourdieu notes that “Marriage is the occasion for an (in the widest sense) economic circulation which cannot be seen purely in terms of material goods” (120); Thompson, in examining Bourdieu’s

concept of marriage as economic transaction, concludes that "those texts in which these two, the economic and symbolic (or, in our terms, the financial and the domestic), can be seen to touch are fraught with anxiety" (4). *The Gamester* produces anxiety because of the means by which Angelica's fortune is transferred.

There would be far less tension, for instance, if the pairing were Valere/Lady Wealthy, as the play has made it clear that her fortune is entailed, thereby rendering Valere's obsession manageable. But nothing has changed about Angelica's money by the end of the play—all we are left with is Valere's unbelievable and unsubstantiated change of heart.

Although Bowyer points out how unlikely and unsatisfactory it is that Valere "eats his cake and has it too" (60), he assumes that the audience will join him in hoping "that [Angelica] is right in thinking that [Valere] has reformed forever" (62). But surely Centlivre's audience would have been just as skeptical of his eleventh-hour conversion, especially when it is so closely linked with the despair and futility of the wife of the prologue and epilogue, who has made the mistake of marrying a gamester.

It is nonsensical to attempt to force the play into the reform model in this fashion. To do so is to disregard the hopeless scenario which is foreshadowed by the prologue, is vividly illustrated at Valere's every turn, and concludes with the warning of the epilogue. Valere has shown no inherent honor. He will not remain reformed, but will succumb to the lure of Angelica's ready money. As the audience has seen, Valere is irredeemable: "Few are his Joys, and small the Gamester's Rest" (5.2), which will perhaps inspire them, not Valere, to reform before they come to such a pass. "In this period of extreme social change and the transition to agrarian capitalism," says Thompson, "money and credit come to stand for the potential of liquid assets, to their dangerously enabling capacities" (35).

In this reading of *The Gamester*, then, the play is a reform comedy only in the broadest of senses. If anything, it is a realistic portrayal of what damage an inveterate gamester can cause his social sphere when liquid assets are accessible; and Hector's observation that Valere's fob is the barometer of his emotional state, which changes with his fortune, prefigures Marx's 1844 observation about the true alchemical properties of money:

Money, then, appears as this *overturning* power against the individual and against the bonds of society, etc., which claim to be *essences* in themselves. It transforms fidelity into infidelity, love into hate, hate into love, virtue into vice, vice into virtue, servant into master, master into servant, idiocy into intelligence, and intelligence into idiocy. (168-69)

Just how thoroughly these bonds of society have been overturned is illustrated by a fairly minor character in the play, the Marquis of Hazard (Fieldhouse). He is chief of the foolish suitors who surround Lady Wealthy, and courts her with idiomatic French and mismanaged posturing. He is actually Mrs. Security's nephew, a footman who is attempting to pass as a French nobleman in order to marry a rich woman of quality. While his social blunders seem to give validity to the notion that honor is an inherent quality, it is gaming that admits him into polite society in the first place. As Marx and Valere both claim, money has the power to obliterate former notions of class, and has the potential for reconfiguring notions of value in both the public and the private sphere.

The Marquis is exposed as Robin Skip and ridiculed by the entire company in the last scene of the play, indicating a seeming return to the status quo further enforced by the predictable pairings of lovers, and the usual triumph of youth over age. But because so many of the characters' virtues have been turned into vice by way of Valere's slavish adulation of Lady Luck, Robin Skip's lines—"Who once by Policy a Title gains, / Merits above the Fool that's born to Means" (5.2)—hold both more truth and more realism than Valere's last speech lauding his own reform.

Therefore, the implausibility of that reform is not the point, as it is certain that Valere's renewed luck will overturn the bonds of love and of honor: rather, it is Angelica's plight, and the near-certain squandering of her non-landed fortune, to which the play anxiously returns. Centlivre resolves *The Gamester* in typical reform comedy fashion, but introduces dramaturgically inescapable concerns about how the individual must function in the rapidly changing economic system of the early eighteenth century.

¹ Cameron thoroughly documents Centlivre's use of both Regnard and Charles Du Fresney's 1697 *Le Chevalier Joueur*. See Bowyer for the most comprehensive bibliographic list of Centlivre's sources.

² See also Hume 469-70, Loftis 65, and Rogers 161.

³ Criticism of *The Gamester* generally falls into two categories: a plot summary in the midst of biography (see, e.g., Bowyer and Lock), or a brief analysis as part of a larger work (see, e.g., Oney, Loftis, and Hume). Most criticism takes the form of Hume's, in that the play is mentioned in a line or two, while examining "exemplary," "reform," or "sentimental" comedies in general.

⁴ Thanks to Kathy Strong of the U of North Texas, who pointed out Ferdinand Braudel's theory that "money is a language. . .it calls for and makes possible dialogues and conversations" (328); that all of Valere's dialogues and conversations can be linked to money; that truth and coin can be analogous in the period; and that Valere is literally, linguistically, and morally bankrupt.

⁵ I'd argue that the play does not equate these two terms in the least, as Valere's notions of gentlemanly "Honour" are consistently shown to be meaningless and corrupt.

⁶ Examples occur with almost monotonous regularity; see 1.1, 2.2, 3.1, 4.3, and 5.1.

⁷ For example, Highfill lists him as Achilles in *Heroick Love*, Castalio in *The Fatal Friendship*, Hotspur in *Henry IV*, Cassius in *Julius Caesar*, Alexander in *The Rival Queens*, and his most notable role, Bazajet in *Tamerlane*.

⁸ The *DNB* comments personally, as well as professionally: "a dissipated dare-devil man . . . Many stories of his wildness and want of conduct are given" (217). Using Verbruggen as Valere allows Centlivre to add the personal subtext of Verbruggen's off-stage life to develop his on-stage character, as she does with the off-stage relationship between Wilks and Rogers in her next play.

⁹ This fully-staged round of Hazard is a perfect example of Centlivre's tendency to give lip-service to a particular ideology (in this case, anti-gambling), and to undercut it for the sake of dramatic effect—part of the success of this play is attributed by Oney to the novelty of on-stage gambling.

¹⁰ It seems, too, that this show of violence would remind the audience of why Verbruggen left Drury Lane for Lincoln's Inn Fields: a quarrel with Thomas Skipworth and violent assault on Boyle (see Highfill 134), as well as

verbal and physical assault on the Duke of St. Albans, behind the scenes (see DNB 217)—again, Centlivre cleverly blurs the line between her actors' personal and private lives.

¹¹ Bowyer compares the record in the *Diverting Post* of 27 Jan.-3 Feb. 1705, which identifies John Verbruggen as the speaker, with the 1725 edition, which attributes Susanna Verbruggen (59n. 13). He neglects to point out that Susanna died in childbirth in 1703. However, the *Complete Works* lists Mrs. Santlow as the speaker, which supports my reading that it makes dramatic sense to interpret the speaker as female. As it is likely that an actress would have done the part in breeches, the audience might call to mind Angelica's appearance dressed as a boy in the pivotal gambling scene in act 4, thereby reinforcing the dramatic connection between the afterpiece and the play itself.

CHAPTER 4

STAGING PROBLEMS IN *THE BASSET-TABLE*

As we have already seen in chapters two and three, Centlivre's involvement in the Collier controversy became more overt during the early stages of her career: several of her early prefaces and dedications took direct shots at his ideology as she sided with Dryden and others in the view that the purpose of comedy is only to entertain. Counter to that stance, her two plays *The Gamester* and *The Basset-Table*, written during the height of the "second" Collier controversy, have been read as seeming concessions to Collier's moral stance that "Indeed to make Delight the main business of Comedy is an unreasonable and dangerous Principle. . . Yes, if the Palate is pleas'd, no matter tho' the Body is Poyson'd" (Collier *Short View* 162). Indeed, Centlivre's rather anxious claim for *The Basset-Table* is that she has attempted "a tender regard to good Manners, and by the main Drift of it, endeavour'd to Redicule [sic] and Correct one of the most reigning Vices of the Age" (Preface A2).¹

The few critics who have written about the plays agree that in adopting this viewpoint, Centlivre detours from her

usual light comic style in these two plays, which are characterized as her only "reform comedies" by Robert D. Hume.

The Gamester was Centlivre's first commercial success, opening with a 14-night run at Lincoln's Inn Fields with an all-star cast. *The Basset-Table*, however, ran for only four nights at Drury Lane later in the same year. The plots of the two plays are remarkably similar, as are their goals: to expose the wickedness of gaming, and, as I've argued in chapter three,² to explore an emerging social system where Honour, once thought of as an innate characteristic of the Quality, becomes almost meaningless as a result of the shift to an economy based on ready cash. But the short run of *The Basset-Table* can't be explained away by accusing it of a lack of originality in plots and staging: it's a commonplace that plays of this period were uninventive, unadventurous, and often derivative; in fact, Jay Oney lauds Centlivre's cleverness in capitalizing on the success of *The Gamester* to persuade Drury Lane to stage a similar piece (243).³ So why didn't *The Basset-Table* do as well as *The Gamester*?

Joanna M. Cameron claims that the play didn't do well because it is an early feminist text; she sees it as a

strident challenge to Collier's views on women, traces the influence of Mary Astell's feminist tracts on the dialogue and the plot, and claims that the 1705 audience just wasn't ready to accept such a militant stance from Centlivre.⁴

While I concede that the allusions to Astell do seem to appear in the play (mainly in one of the subplots), I just don't buy the bulk of her argument. Why? Because, quite simply, it just won't play in Peoria. Defining the work as a feminist treatise reduces it to a mere text, and takes no notions of staging into account. Since Cameron is attempting to address the question of the play's unpopularity, the fact that she merely identifies possible Astell material with one of the characters, and neglects to place it in any sort of rhetorical context by examining how that material is received by the other characters, renders her claim highly suspect.

Part of Cameron's argument is correct, certainly. If Centlivre had presented such a militant feminist work to Drury Lane, I don't think it would ever have reached the stage at all in this period. Too risky—too controversial; as it is clear that the public, while not necessarily buying Collier's critique wholesale, was demanding a certain amount of stage reform: hardly good timing for any

savvy playwright to premiere a groundbreaking piece of feminism.

I'd argue instead that the lack of success for *The Basset-Table* is due in part to staging problems which may very well have been unconscious or inadvertent on Centlivre's part. Firstly, the play lacks a central character who convincingly maintains a moral balance while maneuvering through this new economic landscape--one whose efforts to restore order the audience can unhesitatingly applaud, such as Angelica in *The Gamester*. Secondly, the play also lacks any coherent sense of who must reform, and why. Rather than presenting a unanimous condemnation of gambling, and a concerted effort to reclaim a main character obviously disturbing the social order by that particular vice, the virtuous characters in the play are continuously upstaged and manipulated by a character who recalls the earlier stage stereotype of the rake, thereby rendering any didactic message suspect. Overall, the play is uneven and uncertain--in direct contrast to the unified anti-gambling piece which preceded it. An examination of performativity in the play will indicate that reading the text as a reform comedy reveals gaping holes in Centlivre's stagecraft; that to "fix" those holes commits real violence

to the text; and that ultimately, the play probably didn't succeed for the simple reason that it just isn't well-written.

This examination raises several major questions about the text, which can be answered by looking at how the play might work on stage: What is the actual objection to gambling which appears in the play? How much and what type of stage time is given to that critique, and by whom? Who or what causes the plot to advance? Who reforms at the end of the play, and why? It is the aim of this chapter to piece together the answers to these questions, in order to support my claim that the play is rife with enough ambiguity and poor staging to explain its very brief run and sketchy performance history.

First, the customary plot overview: The basset-table of the title is hosted by Lady Reveller (played by Anne Oldfield), a coquettish widow whom Lord Worthy (John Mills) has long loved in vain. She lives with her uncle, Sir Richard Plainman (William Bullock, Sr.), a former merchant who has apparently purchased himself a title and is trying to take on genteel characteristics. He highly disapproves of his niece's behavior, and is joined in that disapproval by her cousin, the virtuous Lady Lucy (Jane Rogers), with

whom the libertine Sir James Courtly (Robert Wilks) is in love. Rounding out the cast are the ingenue couple Valeria and Lovely (Susannah Mountfort and perennial Centlivre favorite John Bickerstaff), the sea captain Hearty (Richard Estcourt), the merchant Sago and his gambling wife (Benjamin Johnson and Letitia Cross), and the usual wise-cracking, pert servants, most notably William Penkethman as Buckle.

The most obvious anti-gambling commentary in the play is directed against headstrong Lady Reveller, who lives in her uncle's lodgings and pays no attention to his protestations against her basset-table. In the first scene, coming as it does at the end of a long night of gambling traffic, his scolding of Lady Reveller summarizes one of the main objections that the virtuous characters have to the vice—its leveling affect:

Can you that keep a Basset-Table, a public
Gaming-House, be insensible of the Shame on't? I
have often told you how much the vile Concourse
of People, which Day and Night make my House
their Rendezvous, incommode my Health; your
Apartment is a Parade for Men of all Ranks, from
the Duke to the Fidler. . . (205)

The objection is cause-to-effect, and a standard argument of the period: the vain Lady Reveller damages her reputation by keeping a gaming-house; the gaming-house is bad because the quest for cash breaks down the established social order. This reduction of social class is what the characters in *The Gamester* protest against when faced with Valere's analysis of the democratizing nature of gambling. But is this the heart of Sir Richard's objection? His other lines allow for a slightly different interpretation, as does the true focus of his action throughout the play. There is never a point in the action where he speaks against gambling on strictly moral grounds; rather, his objection against the vice is always linked with commentary bemoaning either Lady Reveller's coquettishness, or complaining about the noise caused by the continuous stream of people. Therefore, his commentary is diluted, and serves to categorize gambling as either a public nuisance, or as a vehicle for inappropriate social behavior—not as a vice.

Act I opens in the hallway of Sir Richard Plainman's lodgings, at 4 a.m. The hall is filled with various footmen, sleeping or trying to sleep, and waiting for their employers to leave the gaming table. Without exception,

they bemoan the unnatural hours—as does Sir Richard, who, clad in a night-gown, enters to confront Lady Reveller. Reveller and her servant Alpiew ready themselves to hear an oft-repeated complaint; Sir Richard's first point is the disturbance of his rest: "I must be wak'd at Four with Coach, Coach, Chair, Chair"; his second is that the continuous traffic serves to "incommode my Health"(3). He seems to have no moral objections to gambling, but reviles it for the inconvenience and the noise.

Moreover, his attention is quickly diverted to his daughter Valeria, and the troublesome question of her marriage. After a mere two lines of dialogue on Lady Reveller's gambling, the next two pages of the script are devoted to Valeria, and how Sir Richard wishes for her to marry a sailor. In a catalogue of the affects of her gambling habit, the most serious consequence is tacked on at the end: "Noise, Nonsense [sic], Foppery and Ruin" (5); affects which Sir Richard sees as inconveniences seem to outweigh any actual moral standards. He does leave the scene with a couplet espousing the traditional view of the dangers attendant on gambling, but his preoccupation with the disposal of his daughter far outstrips any in-depth critique on the evils of gambling.

In Act Two, Sir Richard enters with Captain Hearty, whom he hopes will marry his daughter, Valeria. Captain Hearty's attention is immediately captured by Lady Reveller, who is "a gallant Vessel—with all her Streamers out, Top and Top Gallant" (20). Previous action in the play makes it clear that Lady Reveller intends to flirt with this new man in order to spite Lord Worthy, who is eavesdropping on her from the gallery. But it is also clear from previous discussion that Lady Reveller flirts with anything that moves, so her behavior is nothing new. Again, it is this facet of her nature on which the other characters focus—not on her gambling. Sir Richard's introduction of her spends more rhetorical time on her vanity than her gambling: "she values nothing that does not spend their days at their Glass, and their Nights at Basset, such who ne'er did good to their Prince, nor Country, except their Taylor, Peruke-maker, and Perfumer" (20). For the rest of the scene, Sir Richard's lines deal directly with his hopes for the marriage of his daughter, and his despair at her odd ways. Not once does he take the opportunity to pontificate on Lady Reveller's gambling habit, nor does he ever state that her gambling is the cause of her other bad habits. He takes a passing shot at

Lady Reveller as he exits, but it is a general remark in response to her needling, and can be attributed to her flirtation with Captain Hearty, rather than to her gambling:

Lady Reveller: . . .for I'm sure you have
banish'd Patience, ha, ha, ha.

Sir Richard: And you Discretion- (22)

In Act Three, Sir Richard appears in a scene which is amusing because of its farcical elements. He discovers Ensign Lovely hiding under a tub in Valeria's workroom after some slapstick search and discovery; the comedian William Bullock, Sr. as Sir Richard is given the opportunity to rage, stomp, kick the furniture and throw things—and all of that before he discovers the young man. All this energy is expended on Valeria and her eccentric scientific pursuits; Lady Reveller is never mentioned. This scene is another indication that any anti-gambling message in the play is severely diluted. Far more on-stage time is devoted to Valeria's unfeminine habits of mind than to any damaging effects of Lady Reveller's gambling; in fact, when Sir Richard makes his last appearance at the end of Act V, he says nothing to Lady Reveller at all. One might expect that the righteous indignation of the

authority figure would be directed at the moral lapse of the character in need of reform (as it is in *The Gamester*: all of Sir Thomas Valere's speeches to or about his son are condemnations of his gambling). But such is not the case in *The Basset-Table*.

Even if there were such indignant speeches, it would be hard to take them at all seriously, coming from William Bullock, Sr. Known as "an actor of great glee and much comic vivacity. . .with a lively countenance, full of humorous information" (qtd. in *DNB* 255), I doubt that he could have played the role straight. The play gives him ample opportunity to fly into rages, strut and posture, as he is double-crossed again and again. Sir Richard Steele, one of the chief admirers of Bullock's comic talent, notes that he had "a peculiar talent of looking like a fool" (qtd. in Highfill 409); one would be hard-pressed, then, to take seriously any moral speeches from such a character.

The character is not really the same type as that of Sir Thomas Valere (John Freeman), the father in *The Gamester*. In contrast, Freeman's part calls for a stately authority figure, who is given much respect by the other characters. Sir Thomas is never made to play the fool, either in his dialogue, or by any of the other characters'

actions. In contrast, Sir Richard is a typical comedic blocking character. His attempt to thwart the ingenué couple is subverted by Sir James, indicating the total lack of respect for Sir Richard's authority which all the characters exhibit. Not only is Sir Thomas Valere respected by the other characters in *The Gamester*, but he ultimately gets what he wants—the apparent reform of his son. At the end of *The Basset-Table*, the audience's last view of Sir Richard is of him capitulating gracelessly to the marriage of Valeria and Lovely, which Sir James has plotted.

It would seem, then, that in the character of Sir Richard, Centlivre went for comic effect rather than any real anti-gambling commentary: amusing while Sir Richard is onstage, certainly, but a serious detriment to any reform message. I'd argue that this authorial choice aligns more with what is generally considered her usual point of view on the stage reform question: "I think the Main design of Comedy is to make us laugh" (qtd. in Farquhar 260), than it does with any of Collier's notions of what kinds of characters the stage should portray.

Of course, Sir Richard is hardly the only character in the play to comment on gambling: to neglect the two moral

or normative voices in the script, Lady Lucy and Lord Worthy, would be remiss. Played by Jane Rogers, the role of Lady Reveller's cousin is described in the cast list as "a Religious sober Lady"; this character has plenty of speeches which are unambiguous about the nature of gambling, and its evil effects. In my discussion of the relationship between Rogers and Wilks in Chapter Two, I illustrated how Centlivre and other playwrights of the time were understandably loathe to have the two appear anywhere near each other on stage. Indeed, in *Love's Contrivance*, even though they are the romantic couple, they are only together for a very brief period of time during the last scene. Apparently, the volatile relationship had become somewhat more manageable, at least professionally; in this play, Centlivre does give them dialogues. But the character of Lady Lucy spends no time on romance: she is all business. This reflects what Centlivre knew of Rogers personally, and displays her facility in working with particular cast members.

In an attempt to live down what she seems to have perceived as disgrace (whether that shame was due to the illegitimate child, who seems to have been cherished and well-raised, an attack of conscience, or rage at being

spurned, is hardly clear), from the early 1700s Rogers demanded roles which did not compromise her sense of her own virtue. Colley Cibber comments on this revisionism in his typical catty fashion: "Her fondness for Virtue on the Stage she began to think might perswade [sic] the World that it made an Impression on her private life" (qtd. in Highfill 69).

Centlivre solves this dilemma rather cleverly: Wilks and Rogers are still paired; however, theirs is an adversarial relationship.⁵ Rogers spends her stage time chiding Lady Reveller for her faults, and rebuffing Sir James on the grounds that his passion for gambling supercedes his passion for her. Lady Lucy is calm, cool, and well-spoken: her speeches are models of logic; her anti-gambling rhetoric is based on both the rules of civility, and the force of Reputation. For instance, her complaint about the constant noise and traffic is phrased much more reasonably than Sir Richard's tirade—after gently reminding Lady Reveller that her late hours force all the servants to stay awake, too, she states, "there are certain Hours, that good Manners, Modesty and Health require your Care; for Example, disorderly Hours are neither Healthful nor Modest—And tis not Civil to make Company wait Dinner

for your Dressing" (6). She sternly reminds the merchant's wife, Mrs. Sago, of her proper station: "your Husband's Shop wou'd better become you than Gaming and Gallants" (35); and piously urges Sir James to think of posterity and reform: "Wou'd it not leave a more Glorious Fame behind you to be the Founder of some Pious Work; when all the Poor at mention of your Name shall Bless your Memory" (48)?

This portrayal of Lady Lucy might seem to contradict one of my original claims about the play, which is that it has no obviously moral character who presents a clear anti-gambling message, and whose efforts to restore order can be unambiguously endorsed by the audience. Both Lady Lucy's speeches and her actions certainly fulfill one side of that equation; her anti-gambling message is unambiguous enough. But her efforts to restore order are either ignored or laughed at by the other characters who are in need of reform. And ultimately, it is Sir James who directs the action, not Lady Lucy the erstwhile reformer. In the case of Lady Reveller, Sir James's scheme sends her into Lord Worthy's arms; not consideration of any of her cousin's pious speeches. Love does not necessarily triumph over the profligate Sir James, either.

In contrast to Angelica's successful plotting of Valere's downfall and redemption in *The Gamester*, there is no sense at the end of *The Basset-Table* that Sir James will give up his profligate ways in order to wed Lady Lucy. After their major scene together in Act Three, he comments, "she's gone, and now can't I shake off the Thought of Seven Wins, Eight Loses—for the Blood of me—and all this Grave Advice of hers is lost" (49).

In the closing scene, during which Sir James explains all his machinations, Lord Worthy expresses a wish that he could assist Sir James in his courtship of Lady Lucy. She refuses to commit to marriage: "My Fault is Consideration you know, I must think a little longer on't", to which Sir James responds "And my whole Study shall be to improve those Thoughts to my own Advantage" (63). Just as she refuses to promise herself, he promises no reform. Although "overtidy endings are the norm in comedy" (315), as Milhous and Hume point out, this conclusion undermines both romantic and reform conventions. If the scene were blocked in order to keep Rogers and Wilks at opposite sides of the stage, Lady Lucy's failure to restore order would be even more obvious.

If we continue searching for a moral center for this alleged reform comedy, we might expect the virtuous Lord Worthy (played by John Mills) to be the hero of the play. A surface reading of the text might lead us to think that he is a model of virtue for the stage; developed by Centlivre to offset Collier's accusation that the male leads promoted libertinism. However, the role of Worthy's good friend, the gambler Sir James Courtly, (the popular Robert Wilks) has better lines, as well as far more stage time. Although Lord Worthy is the upright, honorable character, who gets the girl and triumphs over her vice of gambling in the end, all his notions of honor are undercut by stage business.⁶

Courtly is what I'd call the "pivot character" in the piece: the one who facilitates or stage-manages all the action according to his own design, The character's force of personality causes the rest of the characters to revolve around him: his actions are central to the overall action of the play. In this case, Centlivre created a character whose habits and mannerisms recall the earlier rakish stage. He is an inveterate gambler, and is having an affair with Mrs. Sago even while he pursues Lady Lucy. He is the mastermind of the plan which marries Valeria to

Lovely in direct defiance of her father's wishes, and of the plan which delivers Lady Reveller into Lord Worthy's hands in a less than moral fashion. He drags the other characters down to his level by his thoroughly rakish tactics. This analysis of his course of action is the same as I have made in the previous chapter for the affect that Valere's actions have on his social circle; the difference in *The Basset-Table* is that nobody in the play except Lady Lucy focuses on Sir James as an object of necessary reformation. Sir James is morally far worse than Lady Reveller, but the play's action never comments on Sir James as an object of reform, thereby further undermining the dubious argument that it is a reform comedy.

The casting of the two male leads supports my claim that the role of Sir James is both far more interesting and far more powerful than the role of Lord Worthy. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, the available commentary on John Mills is, on the whole, in agreement that he was reliable, although somewhat staid; a "graceful, careful actor" (446) according to the *DNB* who generally got higher praise for his tragic roles than his comedic ones. Some representative contemporary criticism may serve to illustrate a fault in Mills's style which is relevant to

this play. In 1710, a note in the *Tatler* critiqued Mills on the grounds that his gestures did not jibe with the nature of his roles (*DNB* 248); Aaron Hill also described Mills playing Bajazet in *Tamerlane* in a most unnatural fashion, "full of nods, flings, and jerks" (qtd. in *DNB* 249) instead of any sort of believable rage.

Almost every scene in which Lord Worthy appears includes petulance or outright loss of temper. Perhaps Centlivre was relying on his unnatural mannerisms to increase the comedy: the more Lord Worthy chews up the furniture, the more the other characters—and the audience—laugh. In Act Three, when Buckle, Worthy's manservant, acts out his contrived tale of Worthy's rage and despair at not yet attaining Lady Reveller's hand, the comedian William Penkethman has a perfect opportunity to mimic Mills as he chews up the scenery even more. As Penkethman was known for his ad-libbing, we might surmise that he would probably feed off the audience's laughter and prolong the scene, thereby undercutting the role of Lord Worthy even further. Directly after Buckle's scene, Worthy enters, and has a full-out argument with Lady Reveller. During this scene, he rages and sputters, exactly as Buckle already portrayed. This juxtaposition borders more on slapstick,

and places Lord Worthy's speeches in the realm of melodrama, rather than giving him any real authority to speak against gambling, or anything else.

Mills's "mediocrity and propriety of conduct" (*DNB* 283) virtually assured that he would often serve as a foil for the more showy Wilks, as certainly happens in this play.⁷ If Centlivre was trying to prove that the stage could be a useful agent of reform, she certainly didn't help her argument by creating the role of Sir James for Robert Wilks. "His chief qualities as a comedian," says the *DNB*, "were ease, sprightliness, and distinction of manner, which caused him to be accepted as a model of behavior in fashionable society" (282-3). Certainly the part of Sir James calls for sprightly, fashionable good manners—but what is the model of behavior presented on the stage by this particular character? Hardly one whom Collier would endorse as worthwhile. In fact, his 1703 criticism of rakish heroes seems to describe Sir James perfectly:

A finish'd Libertine seldom fails of making his Fortune upon the Stage. . . Thus qualified there is great Care taken to furnish him with Breeding and Address: He is presently put into a Post of

Honour, and an Equipage of Sense; and if he does the worst, he is pretty sure of speaking the best Things; I mean the most lively and entertaining" (*Dissuasive from the Play-House* 4).

When the two male leads are introduced, the distinction between Lord Worthy's powerlessness and Sir James's competence in this social milieu is apparent: Sir James immediately swings into action--he promises to help young Lovely gain Valeria, and moves on to accurately assess Lord Worthy's situation with what might seem at first an inappropriate metaphor, given Worthy's aversion towards gaming: "My Lord Worthy, your Lordship is as melancholy as a losing Gamester" (210). "Faith Gentlemen, I'm out of Humour, but I don't know at what" (210) Worthy petulantly replies.

The metaphor is apt, although personally abhorrent to Worthy; his notions of behavior are out of place in a situation which requires pragmatism (and ultimately, threatening a lady's virtue, however much in jest); he reveals an increasing sense of impotence when he says,

". . . yet I despair of fixing her, her Vanity has got so much the Mistress of her Resolution; and yet her Passion for Gain surmounts her Pride, and lays her Reputation open

to the World. Every Fool that has ready Money shall dare to boast himself her very humble Servant; S'death, when I could cut the Rascal's Throat" (210). But he's all talk and posturing--he takes no action until Sir James, after belittling Worthy's method, suggests his own, which harks back to the earlier rakish stage:

To gain all Women there's a certain Rule;
If Wit should fail to please, then act the Fool;
And where you find Simplicity not take,
Throw off Disguises and profess the Rake;
Observe which way their strongest Humours run,
They're by their own lov'd Cant the surest Way
undone. (211)

Lady Reveller has no shame--and so far, Lord Worthy's admirable behavior has had no affect on her whatsoever. His disassociation with her lifestyle means that he has no idea how to challenge her on her own turf. He has no idea how to spearhead the reform, in contrast to *The Gamester's* Angelica, and her fairly handy redemption of Valere. She meets him on his own ground and stage-manages to get the results she wants. Since what she wants is Valere's reformation, the play is given an obvious moral center. Even if we doubt the strength of Valere's resolve to

reform, we see that Angelica is in the right—she's a strong character, has lots of stage time, and is a clear model of behavior.

This play, in contrast, provides a strong character who stage-manages largely for his own amusement, and who is himself an inveterate gambler. Sir James uses cash, deception, and ironically, a scene in which he plays the starring role, just as Angelica does. However, Sir James works from within his customary dissolute sphere, whereas Angelica is just as much out of character playing a gambler as she is when wearing men's clothes.

Act II gives us more character development illustrating how our so-called hero is unable to beat Lady Reveller at her own game. Lord Worthy, having quarreled with Lady Reveller the previous day, has sent a letter to her announcing his intention to see her no more. But he has no willpower, and is completely unable to decide whether to stay or to go: a comic scene follows in which Worthy accuses Reveller of "unaccountable passions" while showing just as many of his own. ". . . my Lady Reveller may do what she pleases," he sputters in indignation to Alpiew, "I am no more her Slave, upon my Word; I have broken my Chain—she has not been out then since she rose"

(214)? He spends so much time giving Alpiev contradictory instructions and messages and rushing back and forth, that he is forced to abandon the room precipitously, before Lady Reveller discovers him there. She discovers him hiding anyway, and flirts outrageously with Captain Hearty, in order to "fit [Lord Worthy] for Eves-dropping" (219). Again, Lord Worthy's methods of courtship, although based on the usual rules of conduct, are not effective, and he is once more shown in a position of powerlessness.

When Captain Hearty kisses Reveller's hand, Lord Worthy leaps back into the room in a rage, and more or less challenges the Captain to a duel—the Captain, recognizing Lady Reveller as a first-class flirt, declines the challenge, whereupon Worthy backs down: "How ridiculous do I make myself—Pardon me, Sir, you are in the right. I confess I scarce knew what I did" (222). The Captain's next aside ("I thought so, poor Gentleman, I pity him") shows immediate recognition that Worthy's skills as a suitor are lacking, and that he did not consider Lord Worthy's challenge as a serious threat.

Sir James is not only a far more entertaining character than Lord Worthy, but he is far more facile as well; a good example appears in Act III, where he

commandeers the Captain for a rollicking masquerade to gain Valeria for Lovely, then charms Lady Reveller, Lady Lucy, and Mrs. Sago with his conversation before a game of basset. His social skills are even more impressive in this scene when one considers that he ingratiates himself with the hostess, Lady Reveller, courts Lady Lucy, and successfully placates Mrs. Sago, with whom he is having an affair, almost simultaneously—making his ironic line “I hope I never say any Thing to offend the Ladies” (231) almost more a prayer of relief than a witticism at the end of the scene.

He’s well-versed in how a proper rake should carry off such a sticky situation; as he tells Mrs. Sago to be more discreet about their affair, his comment on his expertise—“I have as much Love as you, but I have more Conduct” (232)—is an important distinction between his method of what type of behavior is more effective and Lord Worthy’s method. Immediately after this smooth performance, Lord Worthy takes the stage again in another disastrous pseudo-parting from Lady Reveller.

In Act IV, our erstwhile hero is so desperate that he begs Sir James for help: “Could’st thou infuse into me thy Temper, Sir James, I should have thy Reason too; but I am

born to love this Fickle, Faithless Fair—What have I not essay'd to raze her from my Breast: but all in vain! I must have her, or I must not live" (237). This impassioned speech is, to my mind, the clearest indication that even Lord Worthy recognizes he cannot accomplish anything without Sir James's help—therefore, the character who is a thorough-going libertine, condemned by moralists of the period, is situated even more squarely in the position of ultimate authority in the play. After a lover's confrontation with Lady Lucy, in which he vigorously defends his gaming lifestyle even in the midst of courting her, Sir James goes in to a basset-game with Lady Reveller's company, in which his cunning plan to maneuver her into Lord Worthy's arms unfolds.

During a fully-staged round of basset, Lady Reveller loses all her money, and Sir James slips a purse of gold into her lap so that she can continue to play. The scene is quite a bit shorter than the pivotal gambling scene in *The Gamester* (barely four pages while Angelica's mastery of the dice and of Valere takes a bit more than seven pages), and focuses more on the bad behavior of the players than it does the game itself—I'd argue there is far less novelty in that bit of staging. The scene functions merely as a way

to get Lady Reveller into Sir James's power: after the rest of the company leaves, Sir James stays behind, and surprises Lady Reveller by professing love to her, while maneuvering himself between her and the door. At first she laughs, but Sir James continues pressing her. When she demands to know the reason why he has locked the door, he replies, "Oh, 'tis something indecent to name it, Madam, but I intend to shew you" (249), whereupon the stage directions state that he "lays hold on her".

Sir James is staging a rape. Lord Worthy, complicit in this extreme measure, is in the next room waiting for his cue to burst in and rescue Lady Reveller. But it is not enough that Sir James struggles with Lady Reveller in an attempt to overcome her; he takes pains to ensure that she knows exactly why she is in this situation:

Can a Lady that loves Play as passionately as you do—that takes as much Pains to draw Men in to lose their Money, as a Town Miss to their Destruction,—that caresses all Sorts of People for your Interest, that divides your Time between your Toilet and Basset-Table; can you, I say, boast of innate Virtue?—Fye, fye, I am sure you must have guess'd for what I play'd so deep; --we

never part with our Money without Design,--or
writing Fool upon our Foreheads;--therefore no
more of this Resistance, except you would have
more Money. (249-59)

On the face of it, this would seem in accordance with John Dennis's speech against gaming with which I began Chapter Three--that the vice carries with it other dangers, one being the assumption that women who gambled had no concern for their reputation and were willing to earn gambling money by rather unorthodox methods. However, consider who is speaking here, and under what circumstances: the rake character, who has just defended the gamester's lifestyle to the woman he loves, and is acting in this scene which he has contrived for the benefit of his friend; making it difficult to take his speech at face value.

Milhous and Hume's discussion of the staging of Farquhar's *The Beaux' Stratagem* is useful in working through this scene. Sir James's plot carries several degrees of seriousness, depending on the physical objects on the stage during the scene. Is there an actual bed, or one painted on a wing? This small detail is vastly important:

A painted bed not only defuses audience anxiety about "rape," but makes their struggle comic because clearly nothing is going to happen. A real bed alerts the audience to the possible consequences of what Mrs. Sullen has regarded as a game. (*Producible Interpretations* 295-6)

The two scenes are not entirely analogous: *The Basset-Table* audience knows that Sir James is "faking it;" however, Lady Reveller most certainly does not. She, too, regards the repartee at the beginning of the scene as a game, but becomes thoroughly frightened as Sir James taunts and manhandles her for over three pages before Lord Worthy comes to her rescue. The men certainly treat the plot as a big joke at the end of the play—but the presence of a real bed, added to the numerous stage directions where Sir James is prompted to "struggle" and "lay hold on her," can turn this titillating moment in the plot into something that Lady Reveller perceives fearfully as actual danger. At best, with a painted bed, this scene is a cruel joke. At worst, I think it raises at least momentary qualms about just how far Sir James will go—as he takes liberties with everyone else in the cast, why not in this case, as well? In either interpretation, the fear that Lady Reveller

experiences seems excessive, given that the play hasn't given us adequate grounds to question her morality.

When Lord Worthy bursts in waving his sword, and spouting moral platitudes, it is very unsettling to hear any words about honor and reputation from the mouth of a man who has agreed to participate in such violence to gain his ends, sham though it may have been. He has succumbed to Sir James's methods, exhibiting at the last no true heroic behavior. In almost his last lines, Sir James crows, "The principal Part of this Plot was mine, Sir Richard" (257), which is more true than Centlivre perhaps intended. Even though in both her dedications to *The Gamester* and *The Basset-Table*, Centlivre tried to align herself with Collier by claiming that she was writing "without the Vicious Strain which usually attends the Comick Muse, and according to the first intent of Plays, [to] recommend Morality" (qtd. in Lock 26), any commentary that this reform comedy tries to make about gambling is severely undercut by both the lack of a strong moral example, and by any real or consistent focal point of reform—perhaps ultimately proving Collier right, as well as explaining in part why the play never became popular.

¹ In this chapter, all citations from the play are taken from the Frushell edition.

² See also my article in the forthcoming issue of *Studies in the Literary Imagination*.

³ There is plenty of textual evidence to support the claim that Centlivre was deliberately riding on the success of *The Gamester*. Not only does *The Basset-Table* follow hard upon the heels of the previous play, but the script is more than unusually full of errors. Characters are misnamed; words are misspelled wildly (even by the admittedly more lax rules of the period); speeches are attributed to the wrong characters in every act; and Act Four is mistakenly labeled Act Three. Apparently the printing, as well as the composition, was rushed. One of the more amusing typographical errors occurs in Act Four, during Sir James's monologue after a set-to with Lady Lucy. She has left the room, and he philosophizes on the topic of Love vs. Gaming. "[Lady Lucy's] an exact Model of what all Women ought to be,--and yet your Merry little Coquettish Tits are very Diverting--" (49). In a recent production of the play at the University of New Hampshire, this line was delivered just so, to the great delight of the audience. However, Sir James is employing classic strophe/antistrophe in this soliloquy—he moves from a consideration of Lady Lucy, to specific scenes of the gaming table, which, under Lady Reveller's guidance, is filled with commoners—including Sir James's current mistress, Mrs. Sago. "Exact Model" here refers to Lady Lucy. The speech then turns to the opposing scenario—if the word is spelled "Cits" it would refer directly to Mrs. Sago, who has already been praised for her jolly temperament and capability of diversion. This reading also foreshadows the end of the play—when the "cits" are all returned to their proper station.

⁴ While I think that Cameron's work tends towards sweeping generalizations about the period, as well as an overall neglect of how plays stage ideology, her M.A. thesis is one of the few commentaries that examine Centlivre's work in any sort of depth..

⁵ See Oney p. 190 for the only other treatment of this relationship, and the effect it had on the stage, that I have been able to find.

⁶ This perversion of a seemingly noble character is prefigured in *The Gamester*, as Mr. Lovewell is both overshadowed and corrupted by Valere.

⁷ See my general discussion of the working relationship between the two men in Chapter Two.

CHAPTER 5

"SHE HERSELF BE DAMNED FOR WRITING IT": COMEDIC STAGING IN *A BOLD STROKE FOR A WIFE*

I move forward now some years, in order to discuss a play which encapsulates Centlivre's move out of her apprenticeship period, while at the same time illustrating the challenges to playwrights still being faced during what seems to some to be a "dry spell" of theater history. While the plays of the previous two chapters were being mounted, the London theater world continued its internecine struggle. While hostilities between Drury Lane and Lincoln's Inn Fields seemed to ease off after the accession of Queen Anne in 1702, Christopher Rich and Thomas Betterton were still in no mood to risk their already tenuous returns by attempting any ground-breaking theatricalism. There was a flare-up of competitive ill-will in 1704, as Vanbrugh attempted to complete a new performance space, the Haymarket—Christopher Rich staged a parody of Betterton's production of *Henry IV*.¹ During this time of management and company upheaval, it speaks to both Centlivre's stagecraft and to her careful maintenance of

good will that she was able to stage new plays at both theaters during this time.²

During the period 1708-28, "the theatre was in an unhealthy state, and even after the permanent reestablishment of a second company in 1714 the managers remained stodgy, careful, and unventuresome. Staging new plays was always an expensive gamble, and in periods of stasis and noncompetition the new plays were few and mostly unexperimental" (Hume, *Rakish* 215). This "dry spell" ends with *The Beggar's Opera*: but previous to this radical departure in stagecraft, the plays are filled with stock characters and predictable plot lines. Centlivre's *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* (1718) is certainly such a play. But it is also true that during this period, Centlivre began to come into her own, as evidenced by the number of popular plays she was able to talk the managers into accepting during this time. Both contemporary and modern commentary agree that she deftly worked within the genre to create lively, audience-pleasing comedy. Furthermore, I'll show that this particular play can be produced with a minimum of stage sets, and with costumes the company had on hand already—certainly a selling point for a "stodgy, careful, and unventuresome" manager.

Contemporary critic Richard Cumberland voices the majority opinion when he comments:

It must be allowed that her plays do not abound with wit, and that the language of them is sometimes poor, enervate, incorrect, and puerile; but then her plots are busy and well-conducted, and her characters in general natural and well marked. But as plot and character are undoubtedly the soul of comedy; and language and wit, at best, but the clothing and external ornaments, it is certainly less excusable to shew a deficiency in the former than in the latter.

(Preface: n. pg.)

Here we see the philosophical shift in tone from the Restoration comedy of sharp wit and dueling couples, to what Robert D. Hume calls "humane" comedy. Cumberland's assumption that plot and character outrank language and wit is a radical change in audience expectation pre-1700s, due in part, arguably, to the Collier controversy. Copeland observes rightly that

Centlivre's qualities posed a dilemma for commentators in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The lack of wit and striking language

in her plays meant that they were deficient in the elements that were most highly valued in comic writing, but the excellence of her plotting and the popular success of many of her comedies demanded recognition. (13)

However true this may be, it is far too easy for modern scholars to confuse contemporary critics with a group which vastly outnumbered them: the audience. Commentary on Centlivre critics of the time seems to be somewhat behind the times of contemporary taste, at least when based on the measure of her success. Bowyer characterizes this tendency as a mistaken attempt to "thrust [Centlivre] back into the Restoration" (179).

Clearly, many of Centlivre's contemporaries did not hold her at fault for focusing on plot and characterization—at least not for long.³ The title of this chapter is from a remark which Richard Cumberland attributes to Robert Wilks: "that not only her play [*Bold Stroke*] would be damned, but she herself be damned for writing it" (Preface n. pg.) However, Wilks went on to change his tune and acted in many of Centlivre's plays which he condemned on a hasty first reading.⁴ It is interesting to note that current critics are often guilty

of the same hastiness in ignoring how she kept abreast of the taste of the times, and downgrade her upon reading the script of what amounts to superbly well-informed stagecraft.

For instance, Douglas R. Butler asserts that the "standard critical observation is that [Centlivre] writes highly theatrical plays, full of action, that are quite innocent of thought" (357). My disagreement with Butler—and with the other critics he summarizes—is that he uses the term "highly theatrical plays" as if it were slightly distasteful. So many plays of the period 1708-28, not just Centlivre's, often do not receive critical attention just because they cannot easily support what Robert D. Hume calls "philosophical inquisition," a reduction of the play into mere critical elements (*Development* 1).⁵ I don't wish to throw out critical arguments entirely; however, they are limiting. There is something vital missing in Butler's essay—while his arguments are sound, he doesn't seem to be talking about a piece which is meant to be staged. Case in point: if I hadn't read the play myself, I would have gotten no clue from his essay why the play was billed as a comedy—a result Hume rightly labels "a critical dead end" (*Rakish* ix).

This is an unfortunate oversight. We certainly, in our study of Restoration drama, give lip-service to the idea that these pieces were meant to be seen, not read, but I don't think we spend enough time talking about what it is really like to see. Given that assumption, why not talk about seeing a play which was, by all accounts, seen often during the eighteenth century? Statistics show that *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* was the second most popular play by a woman dramatist staged during the period 1660-1800 (Stanton 332-34), edging out a wide field of plays by male dramatists, as well: what made it so popular then?⁶

A partial answer comes from Centlivre herself. Almost as if anticipating this debate, she comments, "I think the main design of Comedy is to make us laugh. If the Poet can be so happy as to divert our Spleen, 'tis but just he should be commended for it" (qtd. in Farquhar 260). In a departure from her seeming concessions to Collier which I have discussed in chapters 2 and 3, this play is representative of her later work, in which she exhibits a keen sense of humor—and of marketability. She knew the audience wanted to laugh, and she knew how to get the job done.

I contend that *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* is best approached through a model of contextual studies and theater history, as well as in terms of performance analysis. As Judith Milhous and Robert Hume insist, "Plays come to life only in performance, and to insist upon analyzing them in terms of text alone is methodological cowardice" (7).

In this later work Centlivre has clearly abandoned any pretense of pacifying the Collier camp (who primarily read the plays in order to critique them, rather than attending the theater), and focuses instead on stagecraft. In terms of content, the play is, at best, what Hume calls a "social commonplace" (*Rakish* 7). Free of the overt didacticism of *The Gamester* and *The Basset-Table*, the play's lightheartedness indicates the freedom from the strictures which playwrights found themselves fighting in c. 1698-1708, when cries for stage reform rang the loudest. It is a wonderful stage entertainment—asking any more of it, as critics such as Butler seem to be doing, leads to false dichotomies and critical dead-ends.

Of course, the inherent weakness of this sort of argument is that the only way it can really be illustrated is through a performance of the play. However, on paper I

have no stage, costumes, props, nor cast to direct. So let me at least set the stage for my argument as best I can, beginning with a brief discussion of background and a literal "stage setting."

The play was first produced on February 3, 1718, at the Lincoln's Inn Fields theatre under the management of Christopher Bullock and Theophilus Keene. Very little architectural material on this third reincarnation of the Lincoln's Inn Fields building exists—however, we do know that Christopher Wren's design for the Drury Lane theatre, built in 1674, was the standard for most other public theatres built in the eighteenth century, and that productions made use of scenery only for "limited and specific purposes" (Mullin 76, 83).

This design uses the proscenium space for most of the action. The scenic stage is where the backdrops, or shutters, used for various scenes are placed. Centlivre's play calls for at least one "discovery scene", wherein the scene starts out with one background shutter, which is then moved aside to display another setting. Arguably, the play could be produced with only four shutters: two for the discovery scene in the park; with a few props, one shutter doubling as both a tavern and a coffee house; and one

shutter doubling as both Prim's and Periwinkle's houses. However, the tavern scenes seem to take place in a private room, while the coffeehouse scene is in the public room—as such shutters would be readily available for the Lincoln's Inn Fields stage, my disposition of scene calls for five shutters. The only other piece of stage machinery necessary is a trapdoor. By this simplicity of staging, it is clear that the play relies less on stage design and spectacle (which characterized earlier plays of the period) and more on costuming and posturing for comic effect.

Likewise, the plot of the play is simple. Colonel Fainwell (Christopher Bullock) falls in love with Anne Lovely (Jane Bullock), who stands to inherit thirty thousand pounds. In order to win her, Fainwell must also win over her four guardians: Sir Philip Modelove (Knapp or Knap), an aging beau; Periwinkle (James Spiller), a virtuoso, or wannabe scientist; Tradelove (William Bullock, Sr.), a changebroker or merchant; and Obadiah Prim (special Centlivre favorite George Pack), a Quaker. These characters couldn't be more stereotypical—as the Colonel's friend Freeman says, "to have avarice, impertinence, hypocrisy, and pride at once to deal with requires more cunning than generally attends a man of honor" (1.1.129-

31).⁷ Fainwell is more sanguine about his chances, however: "There is nothing impossible to a lover. What would not a man attempt for a fine woman and thirty thousand pounds" (1.1.123-24)? And so the plot is set into motion: with the help of Freeman, Sackbut the tavern-keeper, four disguises, and his own quick wit, Fainwell dupes each of the guardians of the girl and of the money. The cast consists of 11 major players and a relatively small group of attendant characters.

In the preface to the Regents Restoration edition of *A Bold Stroke*, Thalia Stathas argues that the play's success depends on its structural unity and concentrated action: "all the play's incidents center on the protagonist . . . and [his] single concern . . . his intention to win Mistress Lovely" (xxiii). Centlivre creates a protagonist who easily captures the audience's interest. The role of Fainwell is a *tour de force* for any actor, as it requires the comic portrayal of five separate roles, in quick succession. The role of Fainwell originated with Christopher Bullock, and established his reputation as a leading comedian. He was considered by contemporaries as "the only possible successor to Colley Cibber . . . tall, agreeable in his person, with a comic kind of voice, which

vented itself in a shrillness of tone, but never sunk into meanness" (Highfill 401).

The role of Fainwell calls for neither a fop nor a rake. He is intelligent and genial, rather than completely avaricious and manipulative. "This is so," asserts Butler, "because the Colonel's sole purpose is to marry Anne Lovely—and not merely to bed her. Even Anne's money seems to be of little concern. Her fortune is basically a plot to keep the lovers from eloping" (366), which of course would eliminate the comic conflict, ending the play rather abruptly. It would be difficult to sympathize with Fainwell as protagonist if he were only after Anne's fortune, or if his intentions towards her were less honorable, as often occurred in other earlier plays. However, it is not that money is of no concern. Both parties are pragmatic on this issue: "Love makes but a slovenly figure in that house where poverty keeps the door" (1.2.29-31), Anne observes.

A short list of other actors assaying the role of Fainwell would seem to support my interpretation of the role being played as a sympathetic character, rather than as a libertine. It includes Milward, Woodward, and John Philip Kemble, as well as the man that bibliographic

evidence suggests was most popular, Edward Shuter. Thalia Stathas indicates that the play's greatest popularity came during the 1757-58 season at Covent Garden, when Shuter first performed the role of Fainwell.⁸ Shuter's advertisement for the play explains his choice of script:

Mrs. Centlivre's Comedies have a vein of
pleasantry in them that will always be relish'd.
She knew the Genius of this nation, and she wrote
up to the spirit of it; her *Bold Stroke for a
Wife*, was a masterpiece that much increased her
reputation: it established that of Kit Bullock, a
smart sprightly actor. (Stone, *London Stage*).

Garrick supposedly called Shuter "the greatest comic genius he had ever seen" (*DNB* 174). Obviously, Shuter hoped for the same success as Bullock had enjoyed in the role, and apparently he got it, thanks in part to his physiognomy:

. . . with strong features, a peculiar turn of
countenance and natural passion for humor, he has
the happiness of disposing and altering the
muscles of his face into a variety of laughable
shapes, which, though they may border on grimace,
are, however, on the whole irresistible. (*DNB*
174)

This "peculiar turn of countenance" must have stood him in good stead in the role of Fainwell, for there are many moments in the play that call for exaggerated facial expression—again, part of that combination of body language and costume by which Centlivre makes the audience laugh. I am tempted here to speculate on modern casting to give a sense of how I'd want the actor to play: Jim Carrey is probably too manic for the role, although a good possibility if one wanted to send the play straight into farce. I would opt instead for the Steve Martin of *All of Me*: an ability for physical (particularly facial) comedy, an impeccable sense of comic timing, combined with the looks and sensitivity to pull off the romantic "leading man" aspect of the role.

One of the best moments in the play occurs in Act Two, Scene One, when Fainwell conquers the first guardian, Modelove, by assuming the manners of a fop. Thanks in part to Colley Cibber, the fop is by this time already a stock character, harmless and over-exaggerated. Centlivre serves up not one fop but two: Modelove, the "old beau that has May in his fancy and dress but December in his face and his heels" (1.1.110-11), and Fainwell, who claims, "egad, methinks I cut a smart figure and have as much of the

tawdry air as any Italian count or French marquis of 'em all" (2.1.1-3).

How does he carry off this "tawdry air"? The Colonel enters the scene on his way to the Park. He addresses a brief aside to the audience before the scene is drawn to discover Sir Philip on a bench with a woman. The stage direction merely says, "Enter Colonel, finely dressed, three Footmen after him" (2.1.1). If the actor playing Fainwell were to enter stage left, from the lower left-hand proscenium door straight out onto the apron, the effect could be startling. Remember that his aim is to out-fop the fop, by both costume and action. I see two comic possibilities at the beginning of this scene, which depend on the actor's interpretation of the role. First, he could enter perfectly self-assured, and prance through the stylized airs of the fop, to the immediate recognition and delight of the audience. But consider this possibility: managing all the trappings of a fop was not easy. Watching Fainwell practice could be much more entertaining, and in the hands of a gifted physical comedian, the moment could be milked as long as the audience laughs. In a discussion of the Restoration gentleman's props, J. L. Styan lists the following:

In his pocket or sleeve was always a handkerchief awaiting his proper attention, and indoors or out he might carry a cane, his gloves or his muff...the ritual of the snuffbox—tapping the lid, pinching and sniffing, closing the box and flicking the dust from wrist or cuff or sleeve with the handkerchief—would all be timed to punctuate one's speech with grace and aplomb.

(59)

By this point in theatre history, these movements have become conventional for the fop. Add to all the action the monstrous hat, unwieldy sword, and monumental wig which were standard for the fop character, and you can see that Fainwell just doesn't have enough hands. Picture his attendants fluttering around Fainwell nervously as he drops first one and then another object; as he bends to pick up his gloves, he loses his snuffbox; as a servant leaps forward to retrieve it, Fainwell turns around, smacking him with the blade of the sword; he sneezes from a too-large pinch of snuff and sets his hat sailing; and so on.

Just managing the wig itself presented difficulties:

These great perukes were such formidable objects that they acquired a dramatic life of their own,

and it is not surprising to find in many of the plays that the sheer business of wearing them, combing and caring for them, became...a delicious source of comedy. The actor had to know, at the very least, to hold his head upright, and if he must move it from side to side to do so gently, so that his nose and mouth should not be smothered and his eyes should see. Should it be necessary to make a deep bow, a decorous toss of the head was needed. (Styan 60)

The culmination of this "wig wit" is of course Colley Cibber's triumphant entry onstage with a wig so gigantic that it is borne behind him in a carriage. While there's no indication that Fainwell's wig is on such a grandiose scale, there is plenty of precedent to assume that it gives him plenty of comic difficulties.

Part of what makes this scene so charming is that once Fainwell meets Modelove, he is able to pull off the deception. But he is obviously skating on thin ice, and depends on the established mannerisms of the fop to get him through the charade. All the ritual behaviors Styan discusses are present in this scene: asking the time, offering and taking snuff, the introductory bow—a possible

running gag could be that of Fainwell mugging to the audience and trying to regain control of his wig every time Sir Philip glances away.

At one point, after our hero has styled himself as "La Fainwell" to play up to Sir Philip's Francophilia, Sir Philip, in his enthusiasm for such a *homme d'esprit*, rises to embrace "La Fainwell." No director worth his or her salt could fail to see the necessity of facing Fainwell towards the audience, grimacing his disgust at Modelove's mannerisms, while simultaneously playing along. By the end of the scene, however, Fainwell is much more comfortable in his role and attire, thus leading into a classic moment of physical comedy. The two men prepare to exit the scene, presumably through one of the proscenium doors. As they approach the door, Sir Philip says, "Ah, pardonnez-moi, monsieur" (2.2.175): the stage direction indicates that he attempts to give way to Fainwell. Fainwell responds, refusing to go first, "Not one step, upon my soul, Sir Philip" (2.2.176).

Next in the script is Sir Philip's exit, but here is another occasion where the scene could be played out, both men employing ever-increasingly civil language and ever more formal, sweeping bows; to the modern audience, of

course, this bit of staging is reminiscent of Alphonse and Gaston. Fainwell ultimately outfops the fop, difficulties with costume notwithstanding: Modelove leaves the stage with the observation that Fainwell is "the best bred man in Europe, positively" (2.2.176). The audience, however, knows better—and as Fainwell is left in sole possession of the stage, we can imagine that some rather ill-bred celebrating ensues: dramatic irony of a comic sort.

A different type of comedy is presented in Act Three Scene One. Here Fainwell must focus on another type: the virtuoso Periwinkle, obsessed by curiosities, traveling, and oddities.⁹ Whereas with the fop, Fainwell had to focus primarily on mannerisms, he must in this scene tax his imagination to the utmost in coming up with descriptions of objects that will both interest Periwinkle and convince him of Fainwell's feigned identity as a world traveler and collector. They compare their clothes, which allegedly belonged to famous historical figures, and in a nice topical reference, Fainwell claims ancestry with John Tradescant, the traveler and naturalist whose collection became the basis of the Ashmolean Museum.¹⁰

The humor in this scene lies primarily in listening to Fainwell think on his feet, and create a hilarious

catalogue of oddities with which to charm Periwinkle:
Ptolomy; mummies and Chinese nutcrackers; comets and
cinders; gigantic Indian leaves; a muff made of the
feathers from the geese who saved the Roman capitol; and
water from the waves Cleopatra sailed over on her way to
meet Anthony (3.1.40-3; 71; 75; 83-105; 117-18; 113-14;
136-38).

James Spiller was the original Periwinkle, and no
doubt brought to the role his forte' of playing old men.
Riccoboni saw him in 1715 and gave special mention of his
talents in that line. I reproduce the quote extensively,
as it speaks to the deliberate level of masquerade present
in this play:

He who acted the Old Man executed it to the
nicest perfection, which one could expect in no
player who had not forty years' experience and
exercise . . . I made no manner of doubt of his
being an old comedian . . . But how great was my
surprise when I learned that he was a young man,
about the age of twenty-six! I could not
conceive it possible for a young actor, by the
help of art, to imitate the debility of nature to
such a pitch of exactness . . . I knew for certain

that the actor, to fit himself for the part of this old man, spent an hour in dressing himself, and disguised his face so nicely, and painted so artificially a part of his eyebrows and eyelids, that, at the distance of six paces, it was impossible not to be deceived. (qtd. in Highfill 221)

Again, an example of how well Centlivre knew both her public and her personnel. Her plays during this era show a careful regard to the specialties of each actor—in *Bold Stroke*, every guardian gets a scene alone with Fainwell in which they both get to strut their stuff, as well as the tableaux at the beginning and end of the play, in which all the characters interact.

Also in this scene is an example of how hassle-free the play is to stage. Aside from Fainwell's Egyptian costume, the use of a simple trapdoor provides the workings of the plot against Periwinkle. Fainwell and Sackbut convince the virtuoso that Fainwell owns a girdle of invisibility: while Sackbut turns his attention elsewhere, Fainwell hops through the trapdoor (standard to stages since the Renaissance) to convince Periwinkle that he has put on the girdle and disappeared. A minimum of special

effect, requiring no elaborate mechanisms behind the scene, and yet the script milks it for all it's worth. Sackbut has asides to the audience commenting on almost all of Fainwell's lines here, too; refer to my previous point about each actor getting his big moment.

Centlivre also displays her superb sense of pacing in this scene. Whereas Modelove is duped fairly easily, Fainwell is at first disappointed in his hope of duping Periwinkle. Unfortunately, a minor character walks in and addresses Fainwell by his correct name and title, forcing him to flee Periwinkle's wrath. Not until Act Four, Scene Three, is Periwinkle's consent obtained, by way of a feigned death and the difficult swapping of a contract with a lease. Difficult, because unlike the other guardians, the virtuoso is highly educated. The Periwinkle episode best highlights Margo Collins's claim that "the conflict between desire and will is played out in a struggle between orality and literacy" (181).¹¹ Masquerade and verbal acuity must combine with a signature, in order for Fainwell to triumph.

And triumph he does, but not before working his way past two other guardians. In the next major scene, Centlivre adds more topical ideology in another display of

her intuitive grasp of contemporary feeling: her portrayal of Tradelove, the stockjobber, is the most harsh of all her characterizations—the figure of the stockjobber was abhorred regardless of political stance. “Stockjobbers were almost universally vilified as gamblers and swindlers,” says Copeland; “Even Whig ideologues such as Steele, who enthusiastically supported trade, condemned stockjobbers as parasites” (26). Contrary to Butler’s argument that Centlivre’s plays were overtly political, her work included politics insofar as it would be accepted by the majority. Her Whiggish politics generally remained overshadowed by plot and character.¹²

Act Four combines the comic trope of foreign dialect with a painstaking accuracy of scene, in order to please. Centlivre was so accurate in her portrayal of what are called “changebrokers” in the script that P.G.M. Dickson analyzes Scene One, set in Jonathan’s Coffee-house, in order to illustrate how the early eighteenth-century stock exchange operated (503-505). Stockjobbers were an early precursor to a form of our current stockbrokers, except that they generally functioned as agents between brokers, and speculated wildly in their own interest (Copeland 26), hence the universal vilification.

In much the same way as she presented live-action gaming rooms in *The Gamester* and *The Basset-Table*, Centlivre took her audience into the high-stakes world of Exchange Alley for a tantalizing glimpse of a milieu the majority of her audience never experienced first-hand. During Act Four Scene One, accurately-used technical terms fly thick and fast as shares are bought and sold with bewildering rapidity—rather like the speed with which Valere loses his fortune in *The Gamester*; in fact, to strengthen the analogy, several of the traders lay side bets on the veracity of a piece of news which will affect the market. Freeman sets Tradelove up for a fall, which needs only Fainwell's entrance disguised as a Dutch merchant, ripe for the plucking, to complete the ploy.

Here again the actor portraying Fainwell must be skillful, indeed. Fortunately, Tradelove is there to interpret for the merchant—who goes by the mellifluous name of "Jan van Timtamtirelireletta Heer van Fainwell" (4.1.102-3). The character's name is not the only phrase Fainwell must be able to pronounce; the Dutch accent necessary to this masquerade is complicated and hysterical: it must be delivered carefully, as it is marginally decipherable (but just barely) to the careful listener.

William Bullock, Sr., a tremendously well-respected senior comic actor whose depiction of Sir Richard in *The Basset-Table* I have discussed at some length in the preceding chapter, is a marvelous choice for this role. The character is gleefully greedy and sly, and must evince no clue that he is the one being duped, rather than pulling the scheme off himself. Bullock's notable elasticity of face would have served him well in this role. Add, too, the audience's delight in seeing all three Bullocks in starring roles—Centlivre again brings in associations outside of the text for humorous purposes.¹³

Act Five cleverly combines costume and stage movement as well, as the Quaker Obediah Prim and his wife are duped. In a previous scene (2.2), poor Anne is set upon by the Prims, who heartily disapprove of her immodest dress (which of course would be exaggeratedly immodest for the stage).¹⁴ In this scene, she has finally capitulated and appears in Quaker dress, and is none too pleased with it. While her guardians congratulate her on coming to her senses, she storms up and down the stage, uncomfortable in her new attire. A clever actress would be constantly in motion—somewhat as Fainwell playing the fop—pulling down the concealing neckline, twitching the sleeves, attempting to

rearrange the skirt, while rolling her eyes at the audience in acknowledgement of the sheer absurdity of her dress. This is the scene where the actress playing Anne gets to shine, as the plot calls for her and Fainwell to combine their histrionic talents.

It seems obvious that indeed, Jane Bullock was admirably suited for the role of Anne. Her appearance in the hated Quaker garb would have caused a stir, as her first title role was *The Fair Quaker of Deal* (Highfill 402). She and Christopher had only recently married in 1717, so their appearance together onstage would still have some novelty. Certainly their marriage didn't hurt her chances at getting lead roles—but by all accounts, she had enough talent to keep getting them even after the honeymoon was over, continuing to act long after his death. Highfill comments that her range was "remarkable", and that "she was apparently capable of playing young coquettes, sweet young ladies, sophisticated women of fashion, and tragic heroines of the pathetic variety" (402; 403).

In the guise of a Quaker preacher, Fainwell is admitted to the Prim's house, where he concocts a tale particularly suited to circumvent Anne's guardians, which

preys on both their Quaker sensibilities and their concern over their ward's immortal soul:

About four days ago, I saw a vision—this very maiden, but in vain attire, standing on a precipice, and heard a voice, which called me by my name and bade me put forth my hand and save her from the pit. I did so, and methought the damsel grew to my side." (5.1154-58)

As Fainwell knows, when the Spirit moves, it is not to be argued with—the Prims need very little argument to leave Anne alone with "Simon Pure" so she can be talked out of her stubbornness. At this point, she has not recognized Fainwell. As Obediah leaves the scene, he says to Simon, "I pray thee put it home to her. Come, Sarah, let us leave the good man with her" (5.179-180). There aren't many outright bawdy moments in the play itself, but imagine Fainwell turning to the audience and raising his eyebrow in recognition of the *double entendre* of Prim's line, or even more obviously, seating himself on the edge of the stage box and doing the same thing to the patrons there.

In the first few lines of the scene, Fainwell continues the masquerade, with the audience in on the joke. Anne tells him to be gone—imagine his voice choking with

laughter as he says, "I am of another opinion, the spirit telleth me that I shall convert thee, Anne" (5.188-89). She replies vehemently, "'Tis a lying spirit; don't believe it" (5.190). Here the Colonel could shrug in elaborate mock surprise, again mugging to the audience, as he responds, "Say'st thou so? Why, then, thou shalt convert me, my angel" (5.191), as he embraces her.

Finally, she recognizes him. He explains his deception to her, but as they begin to express their joy at seeing each other again, the lower proscenium door is opened by Prim. Use of the lower door puts Prim closer to the audience, thus allowing them to witness his expressions of joy at Anne's "conversion." Also, the open door would realistically block his view of the couple, setting up a typical Restoration comedy device—the eavesdropping scene. But Centlivre adds a twist, to allow the Quaker masquerade to continue. Fainwell catches sight of the slightly opened door, hence combining the standard discovery scene to the eavesdropping scene. If he were to turn Anne to face the audience, their facial expressions won't be seen by Prim, but the audience would get the full benefit of their cunning and amusement at duping the solemn Quaker. Softly, Fainwell says:

No more, my love, we are observed; seem to be
edified, and give 'em hopes that thou wilt turn
Quaker, and leave the rest to me.—(Aloud) I am
glad to find that thou art touched with what I
said unto thee, Anne; at another time I will
explain the other article to thee. In the
meanwhile be thou dutiful to our Friend Prim.

(5.222-27)

Anne's response, "I shall obey thee in everything" (5.228),
has delightful layers of double meaning for both Fainwell
and the audience.

The action escalates when the real Simon Pure
(Benjamin Griffin, a competent low-comic actor) shows up.
A frenetic scene follows—Fainwell is once again in serious
danger of discovery, but manages to bluff his way out of
the problem temporarily. Simon Pure leaves, in order to
bring back witnesses to prove his identity, and Fainwell
and Anne know they must move quickly to get the last
guardian's consent. Obviously, the Spirit must move again—
and of course, it does. Our hero and heroine are both
moved to testify, in highly-exaggerated Quaker fashion.
Fainwell's lines are easily delivered in the cadence of a
stereotypical evangelist:

My spirit is greatly troubled, and something
tells me that though I have wrought a good work
in converting this maiden, this tender maiden,
yet my labor will be in vain; for the evil spirit
fighteth against her; and I see, yea, I see with
the eyes of my inward man that Satan will
rebuffet her again whenever I withdraw myself
from her; and she will, yea, this very damsel
will return again to that abomination from whence
I have retrieved her, as if it were, yea, as if
it were out of the jaws of the fiend . . .

(5.320-28)

Anne is allowed to testify as well: "This good man hath
spoken comfort unto me, yea, comfort, I say; because the
words which he hath breathed into my outward ears are gone
through and fixed in my heart, yea, verily in mine heart, I
say . . ." (5.336-40). The Colonel's admiring aside is
"She acts it to the life" (5.342).

They inspire the Quakers so much, that Prim and his
wife are moved by the Spirit as well, and give their
consent after a general lovefest, in a scene conclusion
that could be directed as if it were a revival choir.
Again, if the principal actors are good comedians, they can

ad lib long after the script provides direction (and stage directions are conspicuously absent in this scene); as long as the audience laughs.

The eighteenth-century audience surely laughed at these standard stage devices—as Stanton has shown, they came back to see the play again and again (332-34); Centlivre's comedy was one of the most often revived, requested and commanded pieces in the eighteenth century repertory—and yet, beginning with the nineteenth century, her work has been either ignored or trivialized.

I'd argue that this trivialization arises from unrealistic expectations of plays of the period, or assumptions that reflect overly critical matters, rather than stagecraft. The fact is, *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* is a funny and captivating play. It fulfills all comic expectation in fresh and unusual ways, and remains eminently stageable even now. As soon as Fainwell starts his masquerade and makes his entrance as a fop, it's easy to read with a director's eye and laugh out loud. And the action sustains that level of comedy, despite the fact that the plot is—as many critics have reiterated—extremely predictable.

This consistent humor is why I've chosen to approach the play as I have—by the use of a performance analysis which creates what we could call a "performance text": essentially an attempt to record or recreate that vital moment when the text comes alive on stage; and the audience—with its multiplicity of individual responses—is persuaded to come along as well.

The true measure of Centlivre's success is her acuity in gauging that multiplicity of response. No matter what critics have to say about stereotypical plots and characters in this so-called "dry spell," the fact of the matter is that audiences did not stop going to the theatre. Many plays of the period did cross the line and were too predictable. But those plays never entered any company's repertoire, nor did they make any profit for the company and the author, nor did they get revived. But the case is quite different for Centlivre as she comes into her own as a playwright: despite what Pope claimed in the *Dunciad*, hers was no "slip-shod Muse".

¹ See Oney pp. 165-169; Hume *Development* pp. 460-475.

² Indeed, she may have been cannily weighing her overall career in the balance when she did not protest Cibber's plagiarism of *Love at a Venture* in 1706 (see Lock p. 55; Oney pp.280-82). It is certainly true that his treatment

of her after 1706, both in staging her work and in writing about her, borders on the preferential.

³ A notable exception is, of course, Elizabeth Inchbald's full-scale condemnation of this play in *The British Theatre*, vol. 11, in which she charges that "the authoress of this comedy should have laid down her pen, and taken, in exchange, the meanest implement of labour, rather than have imitated the licentious example given her by the renowned poets of those days" (4). While I don't buy Inchbald's assertion that this play is either indicative of all plays of the period, nor the level of lewdness she assigns to it, I would point out that critics such as Copeland who claim that "the language and situations of the play are without sexual suggestiveness" (16) are quite wrong. Witness Act Two Scene Two, in which Anne, fashionably dressed (see note 14), spars with Mrs. Prim about morality, prudity and hypocrisy, with both Prims over the effect on men of her almost-bare breasts, and blackmails Prim into leaving her alone by threatening to tell his wife that she has observed him fondling the servant girl. Not to mention the concluding couplet of the epilogue: "But yet I hope, for all that I have said, / To find my spouse a man of war in bed."

⁴ The history of this anecdote is a little cluttered. Cumberland says in his preface to *The Busy Body* that Wilks was speaking of *Bold Stroke* in this condemnation. However, Wilks didn't act in *Bold Stroke*, and other sources are unanimous in retelling the tale of Wilks tossing his script of *Busy Body* at Centlivre's face during rehearsal: "in great dudgeon [he] flung his part into the pit for damned stuff, before the lady's face that wrote it" (Fidelis Morgan, intro. *The Female Tatler* 94). No matter which play occasioned Wilks's outburst, both went on to attain great popularity and financial success.

⁵ A related subject is the difficulty of categorizing plays of this period. Hume's critique of Nicoll's terminology (see *Rakish* 233-39) eases somewhat the difficulty of the debate, while at the same time highlighting how immensely frustrated scholars are in looking at theater during these years.

⁶ Stanton's measure of popularity is based on the number of years the play was produced. *Bold Stroke* reaches 75; Centlivre commands the top three positions in this chart, with *The Busy Body* (87 years) and *The Wonder! A Woman Keeps a Secret* (53) in nos. 1 and 3 respectively. Gildon judges

success based on the length of a play's opening run (p. 2). John Downes is responsible for the concept of the "living play"; a successful piece was included in a company's repertory (Milhous and Hume, introd. xi). Oney follows Hume's lead in mentioning author benefits and revivals as a means of judging a play's popularity (pp. 20-1), and most helpfully refines the stipulative definition of stage success by listing six criteria which encompass not only stagecraft but ease in negotiating this tense period of time (26).

⁷ In this chapter, all citations from the play are taken from the Copeland edition, which in 1995 replaced Thalia Stathas's edition as the definitive text.

⁸ See Margo Collins's article "Centlivre v. Hardwicke: Susannah [sic] Centlivre's Plays and the Marriage Act of 1753" for a helpful discussion of why the play seemed to become more popular later on in its long stage history.

⁹ This character is somewhat like the female scholar Valeria in *The Basset-Table*, single-mindedly focusing on scientific pursuits which border on the absurd.

¹⁰ It is worth mentioning, by way of an actual name that seems fake, that Centlivre follows with great success the standard practice of bestowing traits on her characters by virtue of nomenclature.

¹¹ Collins's interpretation, focusing as it does on physical objects on-stage, is a happy example of theory wedded to stagecraft.

¹² For instance, Copeland notes that her choice of a soldier for a hero can be traced to Whig support of a standing army (23); this seems more plausible and overt than her attribution of Fainwell's last lines "'Tis liberty of choice that sweetens life" (5.1.547) to an inherent Whig principle.

¹³ Not only was this triumvirate of Bullocks a novelty, but add to that the sensation caused by the fact that Jane was the natural daughter of Robert Wilks and Jane Rogers—this cast is steeped in theatre associations on several levels.

¹⁴ Copeland points out that costume in this play vividly illustrates the tyranny of the guardians, and that Anne is "fashionably dressed in a low-cut gown with a wide hooped skirt, wearing beauty patches and curled hair . . . At the time Centlivre wrote her play Quaker costume was not yet codified; dress for both men and women resembled a simple version of styles current in the late seventeenth century . . . Women were particularly careful to cover their bosoms

and hair for the sake of modesty" (22). She describes the frontispiece of the second edition of the play, an illustration of Anne wearing a plain dress without a hoop, a handkerchief over her neck and bosom, an apron, and a hood (23).

APPENDIX A

LINE DISPOSITION OF *LOVE'S CONTRIVANCE*, OR

LE MEDECIN MALGRE LUI

ACT ONE, SCENE ONE—74 lines

Lines 1-39 *Sganarelle, or the Imaginary Cuckold* (1.9-11)
Lines 40-74 Centlivre

ACT ONE, SCENE ONE—190 lines

Lines 1-187 *The Forced Marriage* (1.1)
Lines 188-90 Centlivre

ACT ONE, SCENE THREE—175 lines

Lines 1-115 *The Forced Physician* (Combines 1.1 and 1.2)
Lines 116-176 Centlivre

ACT TWO, SCENE ONE—310 lines

Lines 1-310 Centlivre

ACT THREE, SCENE ONE—289 lines

Lines 1-289 Centlivre

ACT THREE, SCENE TWO—49 lines

Lines 1-3 *The Forced Physician* (1.3)
Lines 4-49 *The Forced Physician* (1.4)

ACT FOUR, SCENE ONE—132 lines

Lines 1-132 *The Forced Physician* (1.5)

ACT FOUR, SCENE TWO—256 lines

Lines 1-142 Centlivre
Lines 142-256 *The Forced Marriage* (Scene 2)

ACT FOUR, SCENE THREE—54 lines

Lines 1-54 Centlivre

ACT FIVE, SCENE ONE—39 lines

Lines 1-39 Centlivre

ACT FIVE, SCENE TWO—246 lines

Lines 1-210 *The Forced Marriage* (Scene 4)
Lines 211-246 Centlivre

ACT FIVE, SCENE THREE—45 lines

Lines 1-45 Centlivre

ACT FIVE, SCENE FOUR—205 lines

Lines 1-95 *The Forced Marriage* (Scene 5)
Lines 96-205 Centlivre

APPENDIX B

ATTRIBUTION AND AUTHORSHIP PERCENTAGE OF *LOVE'S*
CONTRIVANCE, OR LE MEDECIN MALGRE LUI

<u>Author/Play</u>	<u>Number of Lines</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Centlivre	1122 lines	54%
<i>The Forced Marriage</i>	607	29%
<i>The Forced Physician</i>	296	14%
<i>Sganarelle, or The Imaginary Cuckold</i>	39	1%

Total Lines: 2064

Note:

Percentages are approximate.

Lines which contained only stage directions were not tallied.

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