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# DRAMA

C R I T I C I S M

V O L U M E

25

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# DRAMA

C R I T I C I S M

Criticism of the Most Significant and Widely Studied  
Dramatic Works from All the World's Literatures

VOLUME 25

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## Drama Criticism, Vol. 25

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## Preface

**D***rama Criticism (DC)* is principally intended for beginning students of literature and theater as well as the average playgoer. The series is therefore designed to introduce readers to the most frequently studied playwrights of all time periods and nationalities and to present discerning commentary on dramatic works of enduring interest. Furthermore, *DC* seeks to acquaint the reader with the uses and functions of criticism itself. Selected from a diverse body of commentary, the essays in *DC* offer insights into the authors and their works but do not require that the reader possess a wide background in literary studies. Where appropriate, reviews of important productions of the plays discussed are also included to give students a heightened awareness of drama as a dynamic art form, one that many claim is fully realized only in performance.

*DC* was created in response to suggestions by the staffs of high school, college, and public libraries. These librarians observed a need for a series that assembles critical commentary on the world's most renowned dramatists in the same manner as Thomson Gale's *Short Story Criticism (SSC)* and *Poetry Criticism (PC)*, which present material on writers of short fiction and poetry. Although playwrights are covered in such Thomson Gale literary criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, *DC* directs more concentrated attention on individual dramatists than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries in these Thomson Gale series. Commentary on the works of William Shakespeare may be found in *Shakespearean Criticism (SC)*.

## Scope of the Series

By collecting and organizing commentary on dramatists, *DC* assists students in their efforts to gain insight into literature, achieve better understanding of the texts, and formulate ideas for papers and assignments. A variety of interpretations and assessments is offered, allowing students to pursue their own interests and promoting awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Approximately five to ten authors are included in each volume, and each entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that playwright's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Thomson Gale's literary criticism series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a *DC* volume.

## Organization of the Book

A *DC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** consists of the playwright's most commonly used name, followed by birth and death dates. If an author consistently wrote under a pseudonym, the pseudonym is listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the introduction. Also located at the beginning of the introduction are any name variations under which the dramatist wrote, including transliterated forms of the names of authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.

- The list of **Principal Works** is divided into two sections. The first section contains the author's dramatic pieces and is organized chronologically by date of first performance. If this has not been conclusively determined, the composition or publication date is used. The second section provides information on the author's major works in other genres.
- Essays offering **overviews and general studies of the dramatist's entire literary career** give the student broad perspectives on the writer's artistic development, themes, and concerns that recur in several of his or her works, the author's place in literary history, and other wide-ranging topics.
- **Criticism** of individual plays offers the reader in-depth discussions of a select number of the author's most important works. In some cases, the criticism is divided into two sections, each arranged chronologically. When a significant performance of a play can be identified (typically, the premier of a twentieth-century work), the first section of criticism will feature **production reviews** of this staging. Most entries include sections devoted to **critical commentary** that assesses the literary merit of the selected plays. When necessary, essays are carefully excerpted to focus on the work under consideration; often, however, essays and reviews are reprinted in their entirety. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- A complete **Bibliographic Citation**, designed to help the interested reader locate the original essay or book, precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
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# Susanna Centlivre

## 1669-1723

English dramatist and poet.

### INTRODUCTION

In terms of number of performances, Centlivre could fairly be called the most successful English dramatist after William Shakespeare and before the twentieth century. Only three other pre-1750 playwrights—Shakespeare, Phillip Massinger and Colley Cibber—had plays still regularly staged in the nineteenth century. Like her more famous counterpart, the Restoration playwright Aphra Behn, Centlivre suffered the prejudices, slights, and outright attacks peculiar to the station of the woman writer, but her plays lasted much longer and were performed much more frequently than those of Behn. Because her works are better performed than read, she was long dismissed by critics. Recent recognition of her theatrical skill and interest in her unique perspective as a female Whig dramatist have returned Centlivre to prominence as a major playwright of the early eighteenth century.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The facts of Centlivre's birth remain in dispute, but the standard version of her origins identifies her as the child of William and Anne Freeman of Lincolnshire, baptized in 1669. According to some accounts, Mr. Freeman was a supporter of the Cromwellian party prior to the Restoration, placing the family in Ireland as exiles at the time of Centlivre's birth. A dissenting story of her parentage first appeared in an obituary written by a journalist personally known to Centlivre: Abel Boyer believed that Centlivre was born to a Mr. Rawkins, of lower estate than Mr. Freeman was thought to be. Documentary evidence exists to support both stories but confirm neither. Her early years are clouded by legend: Boyer refers provocatively to the "gay Adventures" of her youth ("over which we shall draw a Veil," he adds), and John Mottley includes in her biography a story in which a young Centlivre, fleeing a wicked stepmother, is picked up weeping at the side of a road by a Cambridge student. The young man, Anthony Hammond, secreted her away in his college rooms, according to Mottley's narrative—an arrangement that allowed her to get a brief, second-hand university education before venturing on to London to establish herself in



the theater. Mottley was also an acquaintance of the playwright, as was William Chetwood, who agreed that Centlivre fled her stepmother but wrote that she joined a troupe of traveling players.

Most scholars concur Centlivre was married, "or something like it," in Mottley's words, three times. Her first marriage was to the nephew of Sir Stephen Fox; it ended within a year, due to unknown circumstances. She soon married again, this time an officer of the army named Mr. Carroll, but she was widowed within a year and a half. The legitimacy of both marriages is a common problem for biographers; in Centlivre's day marriage laws were not clear and the common stereotype of the authoress as a loose woman made hers more suspect than usual in the eyes of her critics. Her third marriage, however, is fully documented. She wed Joseph Centlivre, a Yeoman of the Kitchen, on April 23, 1707, having already achieved a measure of success through what all her biographers agree was a large measure of skill and hard work.

Centlivre's journalist friend Boyer helped her launch her career in 1700, with the production of the tragicomic play *The Perjur'd Husband* at the Drury Lane Theatre. For the next two decades Centlivre worked steadily at playwriting, though she published her first several plays anonymously. Even her first major success was released without her name attached; *The Gamester* (1705) did so well at Lincoln's Inn Fields that it was used two months later to open the new Haymarket Theatre. In 1706 Centlivre offered her play *Love at a Venture* to Colley Cibber, who was managing the Drury Lane Theatre, but Cibber rejected it. When Cibber produced a very similar play, *The Double Gallants* (1707), under his own name, Centlivre had little recourse, but when Cibber's plagiarism was publicized he was roundly criticized. In the meantime, Centlivre had taken the play to the Duke of Grafton's servants, a troupe of strolling players then at Bath. Evidence suggests that she joined the troupe herself as a traveling performer. Legend holds that the players performed *Alexander the Great* (some say *The Rival Queens*) for the court at Windsor, with Centlivre herself taking the title role. It was as Alexander, the story goes, that Centlivre first attracted the notice of one of the Queen's cooks, Joseph Centlivre. After their wedding the couple lived at Buckingham Court, Spring Gardens, which was Centlivre's home for the rest of her life.

Although she was now financially secure, Centlivre continued to write plays, though not without difficulty. Her next play, *The Busie Body* (1709), was nearly rejected by Drury Lane, and contemporary newspapers document the actors' contempt for "a silly thing wrote by a Woman." Centlivre's confidence in pressing the play was well-founded; it became one of her most successful works, winning the praise of Richard Steele in *The Tatler* and enjoying command performances at court in the subsequent decade. Her next few plays were beset by further tensions with actors, exacerbated by remarks attributed to her in *The Female Tatler*, complaining of their lack of respect and gratitude. Centlivre denied ever making such statements, but the damage was done. Centlivre's Whiggish politics, about which she became increasingly open, further created problems for theater companies eager to avoid censure from Queen Anne's Tory government. In 1714 she dedicated her *The Wonder* to Prince George Augustus of the House of Hanover, Duke of Cambridge, in another show of Whig sympathies. Her faith was well-placed: the Duke soon became King George I, and the play became one of the most popular of the eighteenth century. She wrote two political satires in 1715, both of which were repressed by the Master of Revels, and a tragedy, *The Cruel Gift*, in 1716. Her Whig sympathies, anti-Catholic beliefs, and commercial success also made Centlivre a target for the era's keenest satirist, Alexander Pope. He alluded to her in his attacks on the publisher Edmund Curll, another member of the Whig literary circle, and lampooned her

in the character of the playwright Phoebe Clinket in the farce *Three Hours after Marriage* (1717), which he wrote with John Gay and John Arbuthnot; five years after her death he included her in his catalogue of dullards, *The Dunciad* (1728). Pope also accused Centlivre of participating in an attack on him in the poem *The Catholic Poet*, but this accusation is likely incorrect. Centlivre produced her final major comedy in 1718; *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* successfully played at Lincoln's Inn Fields that year, and continued to be a favorite actor's vehicle well into the next century. Her health began to decline in the next year, and she wrote only one more play, the stridently political comedy *The Artifice* (1722), which was not a popular success. Centlivre died on December 1, 1723, and was buried at St. Paul's in Covent Garden.

### MAJOR DRAMATIC WORKS

*The Busie Body*, *The Wonder*, and *A Bold Stroke for A Wife* have long been regarded as Centlivre's major works. Comedies of intrigue, these are the plays that were longest lived and most frequently performed. As in many comedies of the time, they feature heroines crossed in marriage by their guardians and plots focused on tricking those guardians out of their plans. *The Busie Body* is unique in adding a comic central character as the focus of the action: Marplot, the "busy body" of the title, is a classic "humours" character, one whose absurdly exaggerated character traits are the source of his jests. Unlike the earlier humours comedy of Ben Jonson or Thomas Shadwell, however, Centlivre's treatment of Marplot is more gentle: Marplot is a friend to the lovers, and he retains many good qualities. His actions are laughable, but he is never the butt of satire; in many ways he is the hero of the play, making possible the happy resolution. *The Wonder* focuses more on the heroines and their lovers: Felix, the jealous hero whose sweetheart's father wants to place her in a nunnery, was a favorite role for David Garrick, one of the greatest actors of the eighteenth century. Set in Lisbon, the play gave Centlivre the opportunity to express her political views by contrasting the despotism of the southern nations with the liberty of England, and by addressing, through the tyrannical behavior of the heroines' fathers, the issue of the limits of authority. The theme of the despotic guardian is dramatized most fully in *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*, in which the suitor Fainwell faces the impossible tasks of winning the consent of four very different guardians for the hand of Ann Lovely. It is notable that although Centlivre's critics frequently accused her of excessive "borrowing"—a practice all playwrights participated in, but one that was easy to criticize in a woman—her most successful plays were her most original. She used stock comic situations and common "humors" characters but, as with the character of Marplot, she often used them in new ways and for

different effects. Her treatment of familiar comic types shows her debt to Restoration comedy, but also points toward the sentimental comedy of the eighteenth century, making her a transitional figure in the development of English comic drama.

Critical opinion of Centlivre as a minor dramatist restricted the study of her works to *The Busie Body*, *The Wonder*, and *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* well into the twentieth century, but modern reassessments of her talent and importance have begun to increase the standard Centlivre canon. Two of Centlivre's earlier plays, *The Gamester* and its companion piece *The Basset Table* (1705), are now more widely read, especially because of their attention to women's relationship with money in the early eighteenth century. Her first popular hit, *The Gamester* is Centlivre's adaptation of Jean-François Regnard's *Le Joueur* (1696), with more substantial roles for the women and a happy ending in keeping with the fashion of "reform comedy." *The Gamester* is more didactic than Centlivre's other successful comedies: she makes the effort to correct a social vice through satire, an effort not evident in the comic roles of Marplot or the foolish guardians. *The Basset Table* was less successful, though very similar in plot, character, and intention. A significant difference in *The Basset Table* is Centlivre's emphasis on the "learned lady" character, typically the butt of comedy but here portrayed sympathetically. The restraint of the educated women towards gambling supports the value of women's education, while the folly of the uneducated women demonstrates the dangers of their ignorance to themselves and others.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Centlivre struggled for acceptance as a dramatist despite—and in some cases because of—the popularity of her plays. Richard Steele's frequent admiration of her in *The Tatler* was a significant mark of success, but Steele's comments also underscore the difficulties she faced. His defense of her as a woman playwright obliquely points toward the very real prejudice she faced from critics, actors, theater managers, and others who felt that a woman had no place writing for the theater. F. W. Bateson contends that her comedies are the eighteenth-century equivalent of a "railway reading"—that is, without intellectual or literary significance. Whatever Centlivre's reputation as a literary figure, she was appreciated in the theaters well into the nineteenth century: in sheer number of performances, she outlasted all of her contemporaries, with plays still in repertory as late as 1887. Nonetheless, scholars tended to view her more as a curiosity than a serious dramatist. The first significant critical study of Centlivre is John Wilson Bowyer's biography of 1952, which continues to be a

primary reference on the author's life and works. Bowyer accepted much of the received legend of Centlivre's life uncritically, but defended her against the charges of plagiarism and unoriginality that had often been brought against her by earlier critics. As Bowyer notes, being a woman was repeatedly a disadvantage to Centlivre, making her more vulnerable to the common complaints of vulgarity and pandering to unsophisticated tastes. As scholars took more interest in rediscovering women authors, Centlivre gradually became better understood. Two early studies that further established Centlivre's importance are Thalia Stathas's 1968 edition of *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*, with a substantive introduction identifying Centlivre's strengths as a dramatic craftsman, and F. P. Lock's updated 1979 biography. The late 1980s and 1990s, concurrent with the rise of gender studies, saw a significant increase in studies of Centlivre, most often focusing on her status as a female author in a male-dominated society. Centlivre's treatment of women is a primary theme of scholarship, especially her depiction of marriage and how women fare in finding and surviving a husband. Richard Frushell, Margo Collins, and Annette Kreis-Schink are among the critics who have discussed Centlivre's acute sense of marriage tensions; some scholars have even suggested that Centlivre's own life may have influenced her portrayals of gender relations. The topicality of her plays has inspired political criticism; Centlivre's outspoken support of Whiggish causes was matched, according to some readers, by Whiggish values permeating her plays. The intersection of gender and political themes has brought renewed attention to *The Gamester* and *The Basset Table*, which contain some of Centlivre's most progressive female characters. As Victoria Warren suggests, the unsettling combination of women and money in those plays spoke directly to Centlivre's predicament as a woman compelled for much of her life to write for her livelihood.

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

### Plays

- The Perjur'd Husband; or, The Adventures of Venice* 1700
- The Beau's Duel; or, A Soldier for the Ladies* 1702
- The Stolen Heiress; or, The Salamanca Doctor Outplotted* 1702
- Love's Contrivance, or, Le Médecin Malgré Lui* 1703
- The Basset Table* 1705
- The Gamester* 1705
- Love at a Venture* 1706
- The Platonick Lady* 1706



*The Busie Body* 1709  
*The Man's Bewitched; or, The Devil to Do about Her*  
 1709  
*A Bickerstaff's Burying: or, Work for the Upholders*  
 1710  
*Mar-plot: or, The Second Part of the Busie Body* 1710  
*The Perplex'd Lovers* 1712  
*The Wonder: A Woman Keeps a Secret!* 1714  
*The Gotham Election. A Farce.* 1715  
*A Wife Well Manag'd. A Farce.* 1715; first performed  
 1724  
*The Cruel Gift: or The Royal Resentment* 1716  
*A Bold Stroke for a Wife* 1718  
*The Artifice* 1722

### Other Major Works

*The Masquerade. A Poem. Humbly Inscribed to his  
 Grace the Duke d'Aumont (poetry)* 1712  
*An Epistle to Mrs. Wallup Now in the Train of Her  
 Royal Highness, The Princess of Wales. As it was  
 sent to her in the Hague (poetry)* 1715  
*A Poem. Humbly Presented to His most Sacred Majesty,  
 George, King of Great Britain, France, and Ireland.  
 Upon His Accession to the Throne (poetry)* 1715  
*An Epistle to the King of Sweden From a Lady of Great  
 Britain (poetry)* 1717  
*A Woman's Case: In An Epistle to Charles Joye, Esq;  
 Deputy Governor of the South-Sea (poetry)* 1720

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## AUTHOR COMMENTARY

### Susanna Centlivre (essay date 1703)

SOURCE: Centlivre, Susanna. "Preface to *Love's Contrivance*." In *The Dramatic Works of the Celebrated Mrs. Centlivre*, Vol. 2, 1872. Reprint. New York: AMS Press, 1968.

[In the follow essay, originally published in the 1703 edition of *Love's Contrivance*, Centlivre defends her style of playwriting by pointing to her popular success with audiences. The author also mentions her debt to Molière.]

Writing is a kind of Lottery in this fickle Age, and Dependence on the Stage as precarious as the Cast of a Die; the Chance may turn up, and a Man may write to please the Town, but 'tis uncertain, since we see our best Authors sometimes fail. The Criticks cavil most about Decorums, and cry up Aristotle's Rules as the most essential part of the Play. I own they are in the right of it; yet I dare venture a Wager 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. And I believe *Mr. Rich* will own, he got more by the *Trip to the Jubilee*, with all its Irregularities, than by the most uniform Piece the Stage cou'd boast of e'er since. I do not say this by way of condemning the Unity of Time, Place, and Action; quite contrary, for I think them the greatest Beauties of a Dramatick Poem; but since the other way of writing pleases full as well, and gives the Poet a larger Scope of Fancy, and with less Trouble, Care, and Pains, serves his and the Player's End, why should a Man torture, and wrack his Brain for what will be no Advantage to him. This I dare engage, that the Town will ne'er be entertained with Plays according to the Method of the Ancients, till they exclude this Innovation of Wit and Humour, which yet I see no likelihood of doing. The following Poem I think has nothing can disoblige the nicest Ear; and tho' I did not observe the Rules of *Drama*, I took peculiar Care to dress my Thoughts in such a modest Stile, that it might not give Offence to any. Some Scenes I confess are partly taken from *Moliere*, and I dare be bold to say it has not suffered in the Translation: I thought 'em 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 when I found the stile too poor, I endeavoured to give it a Turn; for whoever borrows from them, must take care to touch the Colours with an English Pencil, and form the Piece according to our Manners. When first I took those Scenes of *Moliere's*, I designed but three Acts; for that Reason I chose such as suited best with Farce, which indeed are all of that sort you'll find in it; for what I added to 'em, I believe my Reader will allow to be of a different Stile, at least some very good Judges thought so, and in spite of me divided it into five Acts, believing it might pass amongst the Comedies of these Times. And indeed I have no Reason to complain, for I confess it met a Reception beyond my Expectation. I must own myself infinitely obliged 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, and I think myself extremely indebted to him, likewise to *Mr. Johnson*. who in his way I think the best Comedian of the Age.

### Susanna Centlivre (essay date 1709)

SOURCE: Centlivre, Susanna. "Epistle Dedicatory." In *The Busie Body*. Los Angeles: Augustan Reprint Society, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1949.

[In the following essay, originally published in the 1709 edition of *The Busie Body*, Centlivre seeks the patron-

*age of Lord Sommers, a highly prominent Whig who had recently been made president of Queen Anne's Privy Council upon the Whigs' return to power in 1708.]*

TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE JOHN LORD  
SOMMERS, LORD-PRESIDENT OF HER MAJESTY'S  
MOST HONOURABLE PRIVY-COUNCIL.

*May it please Your Lordship,*

As it's an Establish'd Custom in these latter Ages, for all Writers, particularly the Poetical, to shelter their Productions under the Protection of the most Distinguish'd, whose Approbation produces a kind of Inspiration, much superior to that which the *Heathenish* Poets pretended to derive from their Fictitious *Apollo*: So it was my Ambition to Address one of my weak Performances to Your Lordship, who, by Universal Consent, are justly allow'd to be the best Judge of all kinds of Writing.

I was indeed at first deterr'd from my Design, by a Thought that it might be accounted unpardonable Rudeness to obtrude a Trifle of this Nature to a Person, whose sublime Wisdom moderates that Council, which at this Critical Juncture, over-rules the Fate of all *Europe*. But then I was encourag'd by Reflecting, that *Lelius* and *Scipio*, the two greatest Men in their Time, among the *Romans*, both for Political and Military Virtues, in the height of their important Affairs, thought the Perusal and Improving of *Terence's* Comedies the noblest way of Unbinding their Minds. I own I were guilty of the highest Vanity, should I presume to put my Composures in Parallel with those of that Celebrated *Dramatist*. But then again, I hope that Your Lordship's native Goodness and Generosity, in Condescension to the Taste of the Best and Fairest part of the Town, who have been pleas'd to be diverted by the following SCENES, will excuse and overlook such Faults as your nicer Judgment might discern.

And here, my Lord, the Occasion seems fair for me to engage in a Panegyrick upon those Natural and Acquired Abilities, which so brightly Adorn your Person: But I shall resist that Temptation, being conscious of the Inequality of a Female Pen to so Masculine an Attempt; and having no other Ambition, than to Subscribe my self,

*My Lord, Your Lordship's Most Humble and Most Obedient Servant,* SUSANNA CENTLIVRE.

#### Susanna Centlivre (poem date 1714)

SOURCE: Centlivre, Susanna. "Prologue to *The Wonder! A Woman Keeps a Secret*." In *The Dramatic Works of the Celebrated Mrs. Centlivre*, Vol. 3, 1872. Reprint. New York: AMS Press, 1968.

*[In the following poem, a prologue to the 1714 edition of The Wonder, Centlivre appeals to the ladies of the audience to support the work of a female playwright, urging them to regard the play as a common cause.]*

Our Author fears the Criticks of the Stage,  
Who, like Barbarians, spare nor Sex, nor Age;  
She trembles at those Censors in the Pit,  
Who think good Nature shews a Want of Wit:  
Such Malice, O! what Muse can undergo it?  
To save themselves, they always damn the Poet.  
Our Author flies from such a partial Jury,  
As wary Lovers from the Nymphs of *Drury*:  
To the few candid Judges for a Smile,  
She humbly sues to recompense her Toil.  
To the bright Circle of the Fair, she next  
Commits her Cause, with anxious Doubts perplex.  
Where can she with such Hopes of Favour kneel,  
As to those Judges, who her Frailties feel?  
A few Mistakes, her Sex may well excuse,  
And such a Plea, No Woman shou'd refuse:  
If she succeeds, a Woman gains Applause,  
What *Female* but must favour such a Cause?  
Her Faults,—whate'er they are—e'en pass 'em by  
And only on her Beauties fix your Eye.  
In Plays, like Vessels floating on the Sea,  
There's none so wise to know their Destiny.  
In this, howe'er, the Pilot's Skill appears,  
While by the Stars his constant Course he steers:  
Rightly our *Author* does her Judgment shew,  
That for her Safety she relies on You.  
Your Approbation, Fair ones, can't but move,  
Those stubborn Hearts, which first you taught to love:  
The Men must all applaud this Play of Ours,  
For who dares see with other Eyes, than Yours.

## OVERVIEWS

### Anonymous (essay date 1760-61)

SOURCE: Anonymous. "To the World." In *The Dramatic Works of the Celebrated Mrs. Centlivre*, Vol. 1, 1872. Reprint. New York: AMS Press, 1968.

*[In the following essay, an introduction to the 1760-61 edition of Centlivre's collected works, the author emphasizes the difficulties the playwright faced because of her gender and uses Centlivre's career as the basis for a denunciation of women's oppression worldwide.]*

Be it known that the Person with Pen in Hand is no other than a Woman, not a little piqued to find that neither the Nobility nor Commonalty of the Year 1722, had Spirit enough to erect in *Westminster-Abbey*, a Monument justly due to the Manes of the never to be forgotten Mrs. *Centlivre*, whose works are full of lively Incidents, genteel Language, and humourous Descriptions of real Life, and deserved to have been recorded by a Pen equal to that which celebrated the<sup>1</sup> Life of *Pythagoras*. Some Authors have had a *Shandeian* Knack of ushering in their own Praises, sounding their own Trumpet, calling Absurdity Wit, and boasting when they

ought to blush; but our Poetess had Modesty, the general Attendant of Merit. She was even ashamed to proclaim her own great Genius, probably because the Custom of the Times discountenanced poetical Excellence in a Female. The Gentlemen of the Quill published it not, perhaps envying her superior Talents; and her Bookseller, complying with national Prejudices, put a fictitious Name to her *Love's Contrivance*, thro' Fear that the Work shou'd be condemned, if known to be Feminine. With modest Diffidence she sent her Performances, like Orphans, into the World, without so much as a Nobleman to protect them; but they did not need to be supported by Interest, they were admired as soon as known, their real Standard, Merit, brought crowding Spectators to the Play-houses, and the female Author, tho' unknown, heard Applauses, such as have since been heaped on that great Author and Actor *Colley Cibber*.

Her Play of the *Busy Body*, when known to be the Work of a Woman, scarce defray'd the Expences of the First Night. The thin Audience were pleased, and caused a full House the Second; the Third was crowded, and so on to the Thirteenth, when it stopt, on Account of the advanced Season; but the following Winter it appear'd again with Applause, and for Six Nights successively, was acted by rival Players, both at *Drury-Lane*, and at the *Hay-Market Houses*.

See here the Effects of Prejudice, a Woman who did Honour to the Nation, suffer'd because she was a Woman. Are these Things fit and becoming a free-born People, who call themselves polite and civilized! Hold! let my Pen stop, and not reproach the present Age for the Sins of their Fathers.

In antient Days the Men of France, urged by selfish and jealous Fear, made a Law called Salique, but that it has not always insured Safety to their Government my Sex have oft been witness, and particularly when the Statesmen of that Nation were obliged to seek Assistance from *Jane d'Arc*, who gained the Title of Maid of *Orleans*, from the Preservation she afforded that City, and could any old Woman act more indiscreet than their RULER now does with his Colonies, Ships, or Finances? The *English Men*, to give them their Due, have been more sensible of our natural Abilities, and not so barbarous as to exclude us from the Chance of Reigning, and during the Time it has fell to our Lot, as Mrs. *Centlivre* says, "What cannot *England* boast from Women? The mighty *Roman* felt the Power of *Boadicea's* Arm; *Eliza*. made *Spain* tremble; and *Anne*, the greatest of the three, has shook the Man that aim'd at universal Sway."

When I reflect on the French, I cannot forbear mentioning, with Anger, the *Spaniards*, who, since the Time their Kingdom was over-run by the Moors, have immured and shut up their Wives as it were, in Prisons. Is

not this a barbarous Practice? Can the Nation be called civilized, that confines as wild Beasts that Part of the Creation, always acknowledged to be the most mild and gentle, and can it be expected that *Mahomet* shall find a Paradise, who has taught his Followers that Women come not there? These Doctrines are unreasonably inconsistent, and arise only from Prejudices which it is high Time should be exploded, and our Sex enjoy the Liberty which they have a natural Right to.

This Justice I must do the present Race of Mankind, their Eyes now seem open to Conviction, they acknowledge the real Merit of our Poetess, and of some other female Writers. The Nobility of Dublin lately went in Crowds to see the heretofore least regarded of her Plays, viz. *Marplot*,<sup>2</sup> and Miss *Macklin* has long shone in a Play of Mrs. *Centlivre's*, called *The Wonder*.

A Poet is born so, not made by Rules; and is there not an equal Chance that this Poetical Birth should be female as well as male? Women are allowed to have a large Share of bodily Perfections, and if properly cultivated by Education, I believe those of the Mind would equally shine. Let both Sexes be placed at Quadrille, and see if Man has any Claim to Superiority; and are there not many Sciences easier learnt than that, and some other Games at Cards? Do not our Sex best understand the Art of Dress, and the Economy of Household Affairs; or are we deficient in other Matters which we have the same Opportunity of learning. To superficial Observers our Intellects may appear inferior to those of Men, but this can only be from a Comparison of our Skill in Things we have had no Experience in (such as War, Shipbuilding, &c.) with a Man's whose whole Employ has been in some one of these Branches—I could wish that some young Ladies of my Acquaintance, now in Boarding Schools, had classical Education, which would improve their Minds, furnish them with a more general Knowledge, and of course better fit them for Conversation, and the Management of Business. Have not Women Hearts largely filled with Humanity, and other social Virtues, Parts equally bright, a Discernment of Right and Wrong equally acute with those of Men? and of our Oratory, I call to Witness both *Europe* and *America* which have heard Mrs. *DRUMMOND*, with her *New Light*, leading Mankind from Darkness. We are allowed to have more native Modesty, that everlasting Charm, than the Sex that lords it over us, and I have oft observed, that the most ignorant amongst the Men are the most impudent, and from thence conclude that if our Sex had a better Education, it would decorate and add Charms to that Modesty. We have been depressed and taught to entertain an humble Idea of our Genius, which not being exerted, we lose the Influence we might have over our present Masters. Oft have I seen, in private Life, an illiterate churlish Fool of a Husband tyrannize over the Will, and with barbarous Insult, compel the Reason and good Sense of

his Wife, to give Place to his Folly, and this on no better Foundation than Custom, established by Laws, the Handyworks only of Men.

Our Employment is chiefly in Retirement, and private Life, where our Actions, not being conspicuous, are little regarded; but the *present Days* have seen a Genius employed in translating, and illustrating *Epictetus*, and the Empress of *Germany* convinces the World that she is a Politician fearless even of the Horrors of War.

A pleasing Prospect I've lately had, *viz.* the Work of the ingenious Lord *Corke*, and the not less ingenious Mr. *Samuel Johnson*, who have took Pains to translate a large Part of Father *Brumoy's* *Greek Theatre*, and were not ashamed that their Labours should be joined to those of Mrs. *Lenox*. This convinces me that not only that barbarous Custom of denying Women to have Souls, begins to be rejected as foolish and absurd, but also that bold Assertion, that Female Minds are not capable of producing literary Works, equal even to those of *Pope*, now loses Ground, and probably the next Age may be taught by our Pens that our Geniuses have been hitherto cramped and smothered, but not extinguished, and that the Sovereignty which the male Part of the Creation have, until now, usurped over us, is unreasonably arbitrary: And further, that our natural Abilities entitle us to a larger Share, not only in Literary Decisions, but that, with the present Directors, we are equally intitled to Power both in Church and State. To reform the first, was our Author's latest Employ, and she shewed herself Mistress of the Subject in her Treatise which discloses and confutes the Errors of the *Church of Rome*.

In her early Days she was inclined to be very gay, being left an Orphan before she was twelve Years of Age, her Father, Mr. *Freeman*, of *Holbeach*, in *Lincolnshire*, having at that Time been dead, nine Years; thus was the Princess of Dramatic Poets left without a Guide, but her native Wit soon brought her into Fame. The Spirit of Poetry was born with her, for before she was seven Years old she wrote a very pretty Song, and adapted it to a sprightly Tune, which became a distinguished Country-Dance.

Her Education was such as the Place of her Nativity afforded; where tho' she had but small Instruction, yet by Application to Books, she soon became Mistress of the *Latin, Italian, Spanish, and French* Tongues. Before she attained the Age of fifteen she was married to the Nephew of Sir *Stephen Fox*, who left her a young Widow of sixteen, which State she was soon persuaded to change, in Favour of Captain *Carrol*, who was killed in a Duel about a Year and a half after his Nuptials. Soon after, *viz.* in the twentieth Year of her Age, she wrote her Play of the *Perjured Husband*, and in a short Time gained some Eminence in the literary World. Her

Wit procured her the Intimacy of the facetious Mr. *Farquhar*, and her theatrical Knowledge was the Cause of her great Intimacy with Mr. *Wilkes*, and Mrs. *Oldfield*; the latter distinguished our Poetess by speaking the Prologue to her first Play, and generally those great Actors filled the principal Characters in her Comic Performances.

At this Time an Intimacy was kept up betwixt her and the most esteemed Writers of the Time. Sir *Richard Steele*, speaking to the Public in his Tatler, thus mentions her *Busy Body*; "The Plot and Incidents of the Play are laid with that Subtlety and Spirit which is peculiar to Females of Wit, and is very seldom well performed by those of the other Sex, in whom Craft in Love is an Act of Invention, and not as with Women, the Effect of Nature and Instinct." Mr. *Rowe* favour'd her with his Friendship, assisted her in composing the Tragedy called the *Cruel Gift*, and wrote the Prologue to her *Gamester*.

After a Widowhood of about ten Years, Mrs. *Carrol* again ventured on the Marriage State with Mr. *Centlivre*, a *French* Gentleman, with whom she lived comfortably for many Years, rich in Fame and possessed of Plenty, which annually arose from her Poetical Skill; and at her Death, which happened in 1722, when she was near forty-five Years old, she left many and valuable Ornaments of Gold and Jewels, presented to her by the Royal Family, Prince *Eugene*, and Persons of distinction, but these Treasures her Husband did not long enjoy, for about a Year after he died, and was put into the same Grave, in the Parish Church of *St. Martin's in the Fields*. Thus drop'd she, RARA AVIS IN TERRIS, after having by her own Works erected a Monument more lasting than that of Marble.

#### Notes

1. Madam *Dacier*.
2. Revived by Mr. *Woodward*.

#### F. W. Bateson (essay date 1929)

SOURCE: Bateson, F. W. "Mrs. Centlivre." In *English Comic Drama 1700-1750*, pp. 61-77. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929.

[In the following excerpt, Bateson offers praise for Centlivre's ability to write to the taste of her audience, suggesting that her plays were commercially rather than artistically successful. Bateson also remarks on Centlivre's skillful use of disguise and mistaken identity in comic plots.]

#### I

'What a Pox have the Women to do with the Muses?' exclaims the Critick of *A Comparison between the Two Stages*. 'I hate these Petticoat Authors; 'tis false Gram-