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Theory and Practice in English Studies. 2021, vol. 10, iss. 1, pp. 103-106

ISSN 1805-0859

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/143988>

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Access Date: 25. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

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ACADEMIC NOTE

**MARRING THE PLOT: SUSANNA CENTLIVRE'S
THE BUSYBODY AND THE CRITIQUE
OF HETERONORMATIVITY**

Laura Alexander

SUSANNA Centlivre's sentimental comedy, *The Busybody* (1709), her ninth and most popular play, introduces a typical figure of mirth, the fop Marplot, alongside the typically witty couples, Miranda and Sir George Airy, and the pair, Isabinda and Charles. Like Miranda and Sir George, Isabinda and Charles face difficulties from blocking authority characters, Sir Francis Gripe and Sir Jealous Traffick, but also from Marplot. As his name implies, Marplot unwittingly foils each character's plans several times, producing comedic mayhem. But his character presents a challenge to the typical formula of sentimental comedy and critiques the heteronormative dynamic of marriage that defined them in the early eighteenth century. The play does not point to the importance of marriage but to the idiosyncrasies of Marplot's character and his need for Charles. His homoerotic desire presents a radical alternative to heterosexual love and marriage. As Centlivre concentrates so much attention on Marplot, she shifts the focus from the couples that will inevitably marry to the challenges and desires of a darkly comedic figure attempting to subvert a normative system.

Secrets consume Marplot throughout the play, mostly as they relate to Charles. Centlivre envisions a different kind of desire that she explores in Marplot's character, or homo-erotic love. If Centlivre typically upholds conventional endings in her plays, she departs from convention in certain characters. There is a forced marriage and a trapped woman. And then there is another form of entrapment with Marplot, who obsesses over Charles even though he can never have him. *The Busybody* was not Centlivre's first play to deal with the problems of marriage; however, it is her darkest exploration of the tensions that compromised the heteronormative standards of the day.

Marplot's "chief pleasure lies in knowing everybody's business," (2.3) as he would "know every man's concern" (1.1) and "love[s] discoveries" (3.1), or gossip, a stereotypically "feminine" characteristic. Charles' "secret," or his secret amour, drives Marplot "stark mad" (1.1) to know and unravel. Described as Charles's "instrument," Marplot becomes a willing partner, anxious to do anything for his beloved. Charles tells Sir George that Marplot will "lend his money when he has any,

run of errands and be proud on't; in short, he'll pimp for [him], lie for [him], drink for [him], do anything but fight for [him]" (1.1). And though Marplot, in Charles's words, has "a passionate desire to kiss" Sir George's "hand" (1.1), or to be known by a wit, it is Charles who most fascinates him. Marplot often contrives an "accident" (1.1) to prevent Charles from his love affairs with women, as Charles explains in Act One to George, who becomes frustrated with Marplot's blunderings.

At first obsessed with the town wits, Marplot only wants to know what the men about town do and say about him and each other; by the end of the play, however, Marplot loses interest in others. Marplot fixates on Charles and cares nothing for George's contrivances. He does not want to know George's secrets unless they help him to understand Charles better. In Act Four, when George *does* want Marplot to know his secret with Miranda, or one "of the party" (4.5), Marplot wants "to be let in to nothing" (4.5). Instead, as Sir George reminds the audience, "now has he a mind to be gone to Charles" (4.5). Marplot reiterates that he "never had more mind to be gone in [his] life" (4.5). He loses interest in every intrigue but his own love affair however remote the possibility of a real relationship with Charles outside of friendship.

Centlivre intends for Marplot to appear initially as a foolish fop, and she reinforces his stereotypical effeminacy, including his interest in the monkey, gossiping, and his appearance. But the play focuses on the hidden, deeper meanings to Marplot's love for Charles, whom he wants to "have an opinion of [his] courage" (3.3). Marplot's fixation with Charles's secrets and desires drives the plot in the latter half of the play. After almost ruining Charles's cover from Sir Jealous with his "bawling," Marplot desires to "oblige Sir George," but only that "it may be a means to reconcile [him] again to Charles" (3.3). The play takes a darker turn when Marplot suffers from several literal beatings for his inquiries. In Act 3, scene 5, Marplot pines to "have some comfort in being beat for [him]" (3.5), a desire for Charles to acknowledge how he has suffered for him.

While Marplot never offers a direct speech about his homoerotic desires, his attentiveness to Charles and the thwarting of the play's heteronormative love affairs gesture to an innate wish for a different outcome that includes an amorous relationship with Charles. Other characters and speeches point out his lack of interest in women. In Act Four, scene five, after Marplot mistakenly frustrates Miranda and Sir George's rendezvous, Miranda notes that Marplot "Converse[s] but little with our sex," or with women, since he "can't reconcile contradictions" (4.5). The Prologue to *The Busybody* was written by the playwright of *Tunbridge Walks* – a play that features a homosexual character, Maiden. In the Prologue, Maiden points to Marplot's inclinations for men.

Centlivre leaves Marplot's desires unrealized at the end; he never responds to Charles's marriage. Like Sir Jealous, Marplot claims he is "as happy as any" (5.4) when Sir George promises that he will receive his estate. But his desire for Charles remains unfulfilled and problematic because his character has become the dominant one by the end of the play. Centlivre constructs a social world that ends conventionally even as she critiques its surface marriages; she cannot resolve Marplot's obsession with Charles. Neither can she propose another happy alternative for Marplot's character. He seems to accept Charles's traditional marriage, but as Katherine M. Rogers and Richard C. Frushell have both pointed out, Centlivre defaults to perfunctory marriage plot endings, without intellectual scrutiny or philosophical speculation (Frushell 1986). It is the most unsentimental of sentimental comedies in the era (Rogers 1982, 100). The play's very mundane, routine ending is what allows Centlivre to refocus attention on Marplot's problem.

Centlivre presents a sympathetic and lonely figure in Marplot; she advocates for the tolerance of homosexual characters like him, even if she does not present radical alternatives to traditional marriage for women or gay men. Both, she suggests, are trapped in a system.¹ While Centlivre intended us to laugh at Marplot, she also meant for us to see in his character an outcast, a figure for our sympathy ultimately rather than ridicule. Marplot's beatings particularly cast a dark shadow on the superficial world of sentimental comedy. Perhaps, after all, the play advocates new modes of treatment beneath the comedic layers, including tolerance, and forces us to re-conceptualize the potential for homoerotic love in sentimental eighteenth-century comedy.

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¹ Centlivre also wrote a sequel that focuses mainly on Marplot in 1710: *Mar-plot: or, the second part of The busie-body*.

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