

The Busybody

A Comedy

SUSANNA CENTLIVRE



RENARD PRESS

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PREFATORY REMARKS

The Busy Body is a comedy that has now held possession of the stage above a hundred years (the best test of excellence), and the merit that has enabled it to do so consists in the ingenuity of the contrivance, the liveliness of the plot and the striking effect of the situations. Mrs Centlivre, in this and her other plays, could do nothing without a stratagem; but she could do everything with one. She delights in putting her dramatis personae continually at their wit's end, and in helping them off with a new evasion; and the subtlety of her resources is in proportion to the criticalness of the situation and the shortness of the notice for resorting to an expedient. Twenty times in seeing or reading one of her plays your pulse beats quick, and you become restless and apprehensive for the event; but with a fine theatrical sleight of hand, she lets you off, undoes the knot of the difficulty, and you breathe freely again, and have a hearty laugh into the bargain. In short, with her knowledge of chambermaids' tricks, and insight into the intricate foldings of lovers' hearts, she plays with the events of comedy, as a juggler shuffles about a pack of cards, to serve his own purposes, and to the surprise of the spectator. This is one of the most delightful employments of the dramatic art.

TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE
JOHN LORD SOMERS,

*Lord-President of Her Majesty's Most
Honourable Privy Council.**

May it please your lordship,

As it's an established custom in these latter ages for all writers, particularly the poetical, to shelter their productions under the protection of the most distinguished, 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,¹ are justly allowed to be the best judge of all kinds of writing.

I was indeed at first deterred 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, overrules the fate of all Europe. But then I was encouraged

¹ *consent*: Agreement.

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 pleased to be diverted by the following scenes, will excuse and overlook such faults as your nicer judgement might discern.

And here, my lord, the occasion seems fair for me to engage in a panegyric¹ 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 myself,

My lord,

Your lordship's

Most humble and

Most obedient servant,

SUSANNA CENTLIVRE

¹ *panegyric*: A public speech in praise of someone.

PROLOGUE

By the author of

TUNBRIDGE WALKS *

Though modern prophets were exposed of late,*
The author could not prophesy his fate;
If with such scenes an audience had been fired,
The poet must have really been inspired.

But these, alas! are melancholy days
For modern prophets, and for modern plays.
Yet since prophetic lies please fools o' fashion,
And women are so fond of agitation,
To men of sense, I'll prophesy anew,
And tell you wondrous things that will prove true:

Undaunted colonels will to camps repair,
Assured there'll be no skirmishes this year.

On our own terms will flow the wished-for peace;
All wars, except 'twixt man and wife, will cease.*

The grand monarch may wish his son a throne,
But hardly will advance to lose his own.*

This season most things bear a smiling face;
But players in summer have a dismal case,*
Since your appearance only is our act of grace.*

Court ladies will to country seats be gone –
My lord can't all the year live great in town –

Where, wanting operas, basset¹ and a play,
 They'll sigh and stitch a gown to pass the time away.
 Gay city wives* at Tunbridge* will appear,
 Whose husbands long have laboured for an heir;
 Where many a courtier may their wants relieve,
 But by the waters only they conceive.*
 The Fleet Street sempstress,² toast of Temple sparks,
 That runs spruce³ neckcloths for attorneys' clerks,
 At Cupid's Gardens* will her hours regale,
 Sing 'Fair Dorinda'* and drink bottled ale.
 At all assemblies, rakes⁴ are up and down,
 And gamesters, where they think they are not known.
 Should I denounce our author's fate today,
 To cry down prophecies, you'd damn the play.
 Yet whims like these have sometimes made you laugh;
 'Tis tattling all, like Isaac Bickerstaff.*
 Since war and places claim the bards that write,*
 Be kind, and bear a woman's treat tonight;
 Let your indulgence all her fears allay,
 And none but woman-haters damn this play.

¹ *basset*: A high-risk card game played only by the nobility and very wealthy.

² *sempstress*: Seamstress.

³ *runs spruce*: Spruces up, fixes quickly.

⁴ *rakes*: Libertines.

THE BUSYBODY

A COMEDY

As it is acted at the

THEATRE ROYAL

IN DRURY LANE

by Her Majesty's servants

WRITTEN BY

MRS SUSANNA CENTLIVRE

*Quem tulit ad scenam ventoso gloria curru,
Exanimat lentus spectator, sedulus inflat.
Sic leve, sic parvum est, animum quod laudis avarum
Subruit aut reficit—*

HORAT. EPIST. LIB. II. EP. I *

CHARACTERS

SIR GEORGE AIRY, *a gentleman of four thousand a year,
in love with MIRANDA*

SIR FRANCIS GRIPE, *guardian to MIRANDA and
MARPLOT, father to CHARLES, in love with MIRANDA*

CHARLES, *friend to SIR GEORGE,
in love with ISABINDA*

SIR JEALOUS TRAFFICK, *a merchant that had lived
some time in Spain, a great admirer of the
Spanish customs, father to ISABINDA*

MARPLOT, *a sort of a silly fellow, cowardly, but very
inquisitive to know everybody's business, generally
spoils all he undertakes, yet without design*

WHISPER, *servant to CHARLES*

MIRANDA, *an heiress, worth thirty thousand pounds,
really in love with SIR GEORGE, but pretends
to be so with her guardian SIR FRANCIS*

ISABINDA, *daughter to SIR JEALOUS, in love with
CHARLES, but designed for a Spanish merchant by her
father, and kept up from the sight of all men*

PATCH, *her woman*

SCENTWELL, *woman to MIRANDA*

SERVANTS

BUTLER

DRAWER*

ACT I

SCENE I

*The park.** SIR GEORGE AIRY *meeting* CHARLES.

CHARLES: Ha! Sir George Airy! A-birding* thus early?
What forbidden game roused you so soon? For no
lawful occasion could invite a person of your figure
abroad at such unfashionable hours.*

SIR GEORGE: There are some men, Charles, whom
Fortune has left free from inquietudes, who are dili-
gently studious to find out ways and means to make
themselves uneasy.

CHARLES: Is it possible that anything in nature can ruffle
the temper of a man whom the four seasons of the
year compliment with as many thousand pounds?
Nay, and a father at rest with his ancestors?

SIR GEORGE: Why, there 'tis now! A man that wants
money thinks none can be unhappy that has it; but
my affairs are in such a whimsical posture that it will
require a calculation of my nativity* to find if my gold
will relieve me or not.

CHARLES: Ha, ha, ha! Never consult the stars about that; gold has a power beyond them; gold unlocks the midnight councils;¹ gold outdoes the wind, becalms the ship or fills her sails; gold is omnipotent below;* it makes whole armies fight or fly; it buys even souls, and bribes the wretches to betray their country! Then what can thy business be that gold won't serve thee in?

SIR GEORGE: Why, I'm in love.

CHARLES: In love! Ha, ha, ha, ha! In love! Ha, ha, ha! With what, prithee?² A cherubim?

SIR GEORGE: No, with a woman.

CHARLES: A woman? Good! Ha, ha, ha! And gold not help thee?

SIR GEORGE: But suppose I'm in love with two—

CHARLES: Aye, if thou'rt in love with two hundred, gold will fetch 'em, I warrant thee, boy. But who are they? Who are they? Come.

SIR GEORGE: One is a lady whose face I never saw, but witty as an angel; the other beautiful as Venus—

CHARLES: And a fool—

SIR GEORGE: For ought I know, for I never spoke to her, but you can inform me. I am charmed by the wit of one, and die for the beauty of the other.

CHARLES: And pray, which are you in quest of now?

SIR GEORGE: I prefer the sensual pleasure. I'm for her I've seen, who is thy father's ward Miranda.

CHARLES: Nay, then, I pity you; for the Jew my father* will no more part with her, and thirty thousand

¹ *midnight councils*: Covert or illicit meetings.

² *prithee*: Please.

pound,* than he would with a guinea to keep me from starving.

SIR GEORGE: Now you see gold can't do everything, Charles.

CHARLES: Yes, for 'tis her gold that bars my father's gate against you.

SIR GEORGE: Why, if he is this avaricious wretch, how camest thou by such a liberal education?

CHARLES: Not a souse¹ out of his pocket, I assure you; I had an uncle who defrayed² that charge, but for some little wildnesses of youth, though he made me his heir, left Dad my guardian till I came to years of discretion, which I presume the old gentleman will never think I am; and now he has got the estate into his clutches, it does me no more good than if it lay in Prester John's dominions.*

SIR GEORGE: What, canst thou find no stratagem to redeem it?

CHARLES: I have made many essays³ to no purpose; though want, the mistress of invention, still tempts me on, yet still the old fox is too cunning for me. I am upon my last project, which, if it fails, then for my last refuge: a brown musket.*

SIR GEORGE: What is't? Can I assist thee?

CHARLES: Not yet — when you can, I have confidence enough in you to ask it.

SIR GEORGE: I am always ready; but what does he intend to do with Miranda? Is she to be sold in private?

¹ *souse*: A small coin (i.e. 'not a penny').

² *defrayed*: Paid for.

³ *essays*: Attempts.

Or will he put her up by way of auction, at who bids most? If so, egad,¹ I'm for him: my gold, as you say, shall be subservient to my pleasure.

CHARLES: To deal ingenuously² with you, Sir George, I know very little of her, or home; for since my uncle's death, and my return from travel, I have never been well with my father: he thinks my expenses too great, and I his allowance too little; he never sees me, but he quarrels; and to avoid that, I shun his house as much as possible. The report is, he intends to marry her himself.

SIR GEORGE: Can she consent to it?

CHARLES: Yes, faith, so they say; but I tell you, I am wholly ignorant of the matter. Miranda and I are like two violent members of a contrary party: I can scarce allow her beauty, though all the world does; nor she me civility, for that contempt.* I fancy she plays the mother-in-law already, and sets the old gentleman on to do mischief.

SIR GEORGE: Then I've your free consent to get her?

CHARLES: Aye, and my helping hand, if occasion be.

SIR GEORGE: Pugh, yonder's a fool coming this way; let's avoid him.

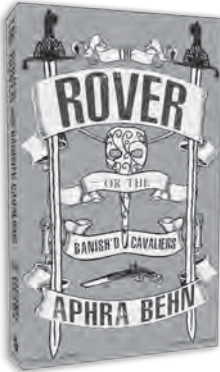
CHARLES: What, Marplot? No, no, he's my instrument; there's a thousand conveniences in him. He'll lend me his money when he has any, run of my errands and be proud on't; in short, he'll pimp for me, lie for me, drink for me, do anything but fight for me, and that I trust to my own arm for.

¹ *egad*: An exclamation of surprise or devotion (from 'A God').

² *ingenuously*: Straightforwardly.



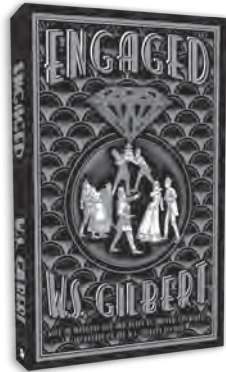
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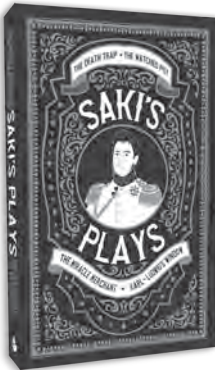
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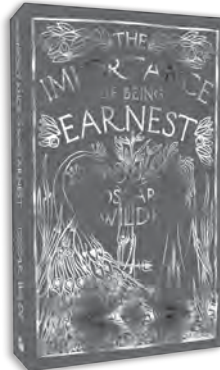
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