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The Witlings: A Comedy by Frances Burney

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ERINDALE

THE WITTLINGS

by Frances Burney

Acting Version

adapted by Patrick Young

The Witlings

A Comedy
By

A Sister of the Order
(Frances Burney, 1779)

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Acting Version adapted by Patrick Young
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contact the Playwrights Guild of Canada at 416-703-0201 or info@playwrightsguild.ca
ISBN 978-1-555435-559-4.

“Patrick Young and his cast of effervescent young actors breathe life into Burney’s long-lost text. . . .
Young . . . keeps the spirit, the story, and certainly the wit of Burney’s original text splendidly.”

– Kelcie Jones, *British Society for Eighteenth Century Studies*

“Theatre Erindale made history by presenting the Canadian premiere of *The Witlings*. . . . Demonstrates
clearly that Burney’s play has many positive features of its own, most notably a large cast of
eccentric characters that look forward more to the novels of Charles Dickens than back to
Restoration comedy. . . . We can feel nothing but gratitude to Theatre Erindale for choosing to stage
it. . . . Thoroughly delightful!”

– Christopher Hoile, *Stage Door*

“Wry and witty . . . Consistently remarkable . . . If you're a fan of comedy where people get locked in
cupboards and doors are constantly being slammed, you'll find this production right up your street.”

– David Paterson, *Mississauga News*

“A marvellous, hilarious treat that’s worth rapt attention every minute.”

– Alexandra Balaj, *The Medium*

INTRODUCTION

About the Author ...

FRANCES BURNEY (1752-1840) is still regarded as a pioneer in the development of the comic novel of manners. She laid the groundwork for Jane Austen – who wrote that in Burney’s work “the most thorough knowledge of human nature ... the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language” – and even for Charles Dickens.

‘Fanny’ was the third of six children of Charles Burney, a noted musicologist and composer whose brilliant social circle included Joshua Reynolds, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and Dr. Samuel Johnson. She lost her mother at the age of ten, a misfortune she passed on to many of her characters, and was entirely self-educated. In 1778, with the help of a brother, she published her first and most popular novel anonymously behind her father’s back. *Evelina; or, a Young Lady’s Entrance into the World* was an instant hit, and her identity soon became known. Her subsequent writing was under constant pressure from her parent, who feared that her work – if it strayed beyond the parameters becoming to a female – would threaten both her reputation and his own professional and social standing. Nevertheless, she published *Cecilia* in 1782, *Camilla* in 1796, and *The Wanderer* in 1814, all of which enjoyed multiple printings.



Yet Burney’s fondest ambition was to write for the theatre. With the success of *Evelina*, both Sheridan and Johnson clamoured for a comedy for Drury Lane. The result was *The Witlings*, the first draft of which met with enthusiasm. But Charles Burney would have none of it, and neither would family friend Samuel Crisp, whom Frances considered a second ‘Daddy’. Aside from reputation, they were afraid that the satirical portrait of Lady Smatter would offend Elizabeth Montagu, leader of the Bluestocking group. Frances wrote three more comedies and two tragedies for which there was no such concern, but her ‘Daddies’ were no less adamant. A single tragedy, *Edmy and Elgiva*, made it to the stage unsuccessfully in 1794. The plays were not discovered until her papers were acquired by the New York Public Library in 1945. They were published by McGill University in 1995, and one of them, *A Busy Day*, has seen multiple professional productions including one in 2000 by the Bristol Old Vic.

Burney spent several frustrated years at court as a Keeper of the Queen’s Robes. In her forties she married Alexandre d’Arblay, who had been exiled to England during the French Revolution, and bore him one son. In 1811 she underwent a mastectomy for breast cancer – without anaesthetic – and lived another 29 years, dying in London at the age of 87. A lifetime collection of

brilliant letters and diaries was published soon after her death, and still serves as a major source for the social and political history of the time.

About the Acting Version ...

I first read *The Witlings* in the fine scholarly edition of Peter Sabor and Geoffrey Sills, and I immediately fell in love with it. A brilliant eighteenth-century Comedy of Manners harking back to the sharp-tongued romps of the Restoration, but also looking forward to the comic eccentricities of our favourite Dickens characters, with a cast dominated by a colourful collection of females – not to mention a romantic provenance featuring a true story of male suppression and an accidental rediscovery after more than two centuries of collecting dust? What’s not to like?

Well, for starters, as it was never produced in the author’s lifetime (though twice in recent decades in the USA), the original text exhibits the typical symptoms of a wonderful but not-yet-ready first draft. It is close to four hours long and wildly over-written, with one incomplete subplot and loose ends that cry out to be woven into the otherwise very tightly structured comedy. In other words, it needs the working over that a professional cast and an accomplished dramaturge would have given it – and almost did. Impresario Richard Brinsley Sheridan wanted badly to produce it at the Drury Lane, and veteran playwright Arthur Murphy promised Burney to see it through whatever changes were necessary to guarantee its success. However, all of that was prevented by Burney’s two “Daddies” (see above). Any new production

would therefore be dependent on completing the process they interrupted ‘with prejudice’ two hundred and thirty-odd years ago. And so *The Witlings* went back onto my shelf, where it languished for several more years. Until, that is, the meticulous online transcription of the original text by Ray Davis; when that appeared, I had no further excuse for delay and started in with glee.

While it is true that the storylines of *The Witlings* are complex and that overwriting in the original text frequently obscures the forest for the trees, the elements of several complete and one or more partial plots certainly do exist even in the original. Burney’s main storyline is the power struggle between Censor and Lady Smatter, for which the lovers provide the stakes. My cast was quickly able to identify the Controlling Idea that resolves this conflict: “Justice prevails at last – when the bully is given a dose of her own medicine!”

As Davis points out, however, Burney has built the layers of characterization and satire in this play less around plot than around a single thematic statement: “Self-regard blocks communication. No character can stop broadcasting long enough to receive any other character's signal.” Every one of the characters, whether heroine or villain, suffers from the same all-too-human malady. They refuse to listen to anything that does not correspond with their own agenda, in many cases missing the very thing that could solve their problem. And because of this, Lady Smatter’s injustice against Cecilia and Beaufort comes very close to succeeding.

And, as in any other comedy of the “Long Eighteenth Century,” the asides are far from disposable. It’s to them that the play owes much of its humour.

Had Arthur Murphy and Sheridan’s company at the Drury Lane been permitted to rehearse and revise the play, it would no doubt be known today as one of the outstanding comedies of the eighteenth century. The current version continues the labour of re-punctuating and sometimes re-spelling begun by Davis, while preserving the ubiquitous dashes so characteristic of the period. Most importantly however, it aims to throw into relief the key movements in Burney’s creation by means of a general and rigorous paring, the elimination of red herrings and redundancies, an occasional re-sequencing, and an attempt to ensure that all pay-offs have set-ups and vice versa. In particular, a careful attempt has been made to integrate, justify, and complete the vestigial Sapient storyline which suddenly came to the fore in the last act of the original. Overall, my aim has been to make up (somewhat belatedly!) for the missing workshop and rehearsal process and create a producible script.

This version is shorter than the original text by 18 pages, 10,100 words, or more than 27%. Footnotes are mine.

Acknowledgements:

The Witlings and The Woman-Hater / Frances Burney, edited by Peter Sabor and Geoffrey Sill (Toronto: Broadview Press Ltd., 2002)

The Witlings / HTML version edited by Ray Davis at <http://www.pseudopodium.org/repress/witlings/index.html>

A very helpful reading of the first draft of this Acting Version took place on 15 December 2012 at the University of Toronto Mississauga. The participants were Kaitlyn Alexander, Nancy Copeland, Marcus Haccius, Ben Hayward, Hannah Jack, Megan Janssen, April Leung, Carolyn Nettleton, Megan O’Kelly, Wes Payne, Victor Pokinko, Nicholas Potter, Gevvy Sidhu, Elizabeth Stuart-Morris, Christian Tribuzio, Jonathan Walls, Evan Williams, and Joshua Wiles.

The excitement and intelligence of the cast for the first full production made rehearsals a pleasure and the finishing touches to the script a joy. And without the commitment of the Theatre Erindale Production Staff, none of it would have been possible.

We had a fine time working to bring this sparkling comedy into the limelight it always deserved. We hope you enjoy it.

– Patrick Young
Toronto, 2014

Theatre Erindale presented
 the Canadian Première of *The Wiflings*
 at the Erindale Studio Theatre
 on the campus of the University of Toronto Mississauga
 from February 13th to March 2nd, 2014.

THE WIFLINGS

by Frances Burney
 Adapted and directed by Patrick Young*
 Set by Patrick Young
 Costumes by Barbara Rowe
 Properties by Sarah Scroggie
 Lighting by James W. Smagata
 Stage Management by Jan Munroe*

THE CAST

(in order of first appearance):

MISS JENNY.....Madeleine Brown
 MISS POLLY..... Kate Cattell-Daniels
 MISS SALLY.....April Leung
 MRS. WHEEDLE.....Hannah Vanden Boomen
 FOOTMAN.....Aaron Schaefer
 MRS. VOLUBLE..... Kaitlyn Alexander
 BEAUFORT.....Samuel Turner
 CENSOR.....Christian Tribuzio
 MRS. SAPIENT.....Hannah Ehman
 JACK.....Jovan Kocic
 BOBBY.....Aaron Schaefer
 LADY SMATTER..... Bailey Green
 CECILIA..... Mercedes Morris
 MRS. HOBBS..... Kate Cattell-Daniels
 CODGER..... Mark Snetzko
 DABLER.....Tomas Ketchum
 BETTY.....April Leung

Assistant Stage Managers.....Terilyn Nutt, Kristi Poor
 Music Editor..... Patrick Young
 Speech & Dialect Coach.....Meredith Scott
 Movement Coach.....Sarah Jane Burton

FOR THEATRE ERINDALE

Artistic Director..... Patrick Young
 Executive Producer..... Bruce Barton
 Manager of Theatre Operations..... Peter Urbanek

* With the permission of Canadian Actors Equity Association.

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

MEN

BEAUFORT: In his early twenties, Beaufort is one half of the “hysterically overdramatizing” pair of lovers in the play. Since his mother remarried before she died (ten or more years ago), his only inheritance will be due to his adoption by his aunt, Lady Smatter.

CENSOR: Late twenties to thirty, Beaufort’s closest friend, and a man of independent means. The actual protagonist of the piece, Censor’s caustically witty one-man crusade against the selfish follies of the world conceals a tender heart.

DABLER: Thirty-something. The dandy darling of the Esprit Party, whose pretentious claim to literary skills vastly exceeds his grasp.

JACK: Eighteen to twenty, a good-hearted lad with an eighteenth-century case of ADHD. Son to Codger and half-brother to Beaufort.

CODGER: Seventies. A doddering country gentleman who is always two beats behind, but actually has better sense than his city associates. Father to Jack and step-father to Beaufort.

BOB: Eighteen, the comically lumpish, eternally optimistic, and much-abused son of Mrs. Voluble. (This actor can double as the Footman.)

A FOOTMAN: Supercilious attendant on Lady Whirligig (who never enters herself).

WOMEN

LADY SMATTER: In her fifties (though she would never admit it), the elegant Lady Smatter’s literary pretensions are exceeded only by her social and financial ones. Childless herself, ten years ago she adopted the son of her dead brother and made him her heir. President of the “Esprit Party”.

CECILIA: Just turned twenty-one. An orphan heiress who – though formerly the legal ward of the banker in charge of her fortune, Mr. Stipend – is currently under the reluctant protection of her fiancé’s aunt. She is the other half of the “hysterically over-dramatizing” pair of lovers in the play.

MRS. SAPIENT: Fifty but ‘admitting to thirty-nine’. A very wealthy widow not long on taste, famous both for her opinionated simple-mindedness and for her raging crush on Mr. Dabler.

MRS. VOLUBLE: Forty to fifty; the gossiping busybody owner of a large house with upscale furnished apartments to let – landlady to Dabler and mother to Bob.

MRS. WHEEDLE: Owner of a fashionable dressmaker’s and milliner’s establishment which is threatening to slip out of her grasp. Friend to Mrs. Voluble and roughly the same age.

MISS JENNY: Late twenties, a plain and self-conscious but romantic spinster who is Mrs. Wheedle’s lead hand.

MISS SALLY: Apprentice to Mrs. Wheedle. This actor can double as Betty.

MISS POLLY: Apprentice to Mrs. Wheedle. This actor can double as Mrs. Hobbins.

MRS. HOBBS: Housekeeper to Lady Smatter and friend to Mrs. Voluble. Forty-ish.

BETTY: Mrs. Voluble’s slovenly maid.

Dramatis Personæ

Censor.
 Beaufort.
 Dabler.
 Jack, *half Brother to Beaufort.*
 Codger, *Father to Jack, and Father in Law¹ to Beaufort.*
 Bob, *Son to Mrs. Voluble.*
 [A Footman.]
 Lady Smatter, *Aunt to Beaufort.*²
 Cecilia.
 Mrs. Sapient.
 Mrs. Voluble.
 Mrs. Wheedle, *a Milliner.*
 Miss Jenny,
 [Miss Sally,
 Miss Polly,] *her Apprentice[s].*
 [Mrs. Hobbins, *Housekeeper to Lady Smatter.*]
 Betty, *Maid to Mrs. Voluble.*

Scene

The play takes place in a single day in London about 1780

Running Time

2 hours 55 minutes including two 10-minute intermissions

¹ = Stepfather. Codger is the second husband of Beaufort's late mother. Jack is their son.

² Beaufort's paternal inheritance, if any, seems to have been lost when his mother remarried. When she too died as he was entering his teens, his father's sister – clearly a widow without offspring of her own – adopted him and made him her heir.

Act I.

A milliner's and dressmaker's shop.

A counter spread with caps, ribbons, fans and band boxes; an elaborate wedding dress displayed.

MISS JENNY and several young women at work.

Enter MRS. WHEEDLE.

MRS. WHEEDLE. So, young ladies! Pray, what have you done today? [*She examines their work.*]
Has anybody been in yet?

MISS JENNY. No, ma'am, nobody to signify;— only some people a-foot.

MRS. WHEEDLE. Why, Miss Sally, who is this cap for?

MISS SALLY. Lady Mary Megrim,¹ ma'am.

MRS. WHEEDLE. Lady Mary Megrim, child? Lord, she'll no more wear it than I shall! Why,
how have you done the lappets?² One would think you had never worked in a Christian
land before! Pray, Miss Jenny, set about a cap for Lady Mary yourself.

MISS JENNY. Ma'am, I can't; I'm working for Miss Stanley.

MRS. WHEEDLE. Oh ay, for the wedding.

MISS SALLY. Am I to go on with this cap, ma'am?

MRS. WHEEDLE. Yes, to be sure, and let it be sent with the other things to Mrs. Ape-all in
Mint Street;³ it will do well enough for the City.⁴

Enter a FOOTMAN.

FOOTMAN. Is Lady Whirligig's⁵ cloak ready?

MRS. WHEEDLE. Not quite, sir, but I'll send it in five minutes.

FOOTMAN. My Lady wants it immediately; it was bespoke a week ago, and my lady says you
promised to let her have it last Friday.

MRS. WHEEDLE. Sir, it's just done, and I'll take care to let her Ladyship have it directly.

[Exit FOOTMAN.]

MISS JENNY. I don't think it's cut out yet.

MRS. WHEEDLE. I know it i'n't. Miss Sally, you shall set about it when you've done that cap.
Why, Miss Polly, for goodness' sake, what are you doing?

MISS POLLY. Making a tippet,¹ ma'am, for Miss Lollop.²

¹ = Migraine

² = A decorative hanging fold, loose flap, or streamer

³ Originally "the Minories", a street in the City that intersects with Royal Mint Street near the Tower

⁴ = Financial district of London, once encompassed by city walls, home to merchants and tradespeople

⁵ = Spinning toy, top, or merry-go-round

MRS. WHEEDLE. Miss Lollop would as soon wear a halter! For goodness' sake add some ribbons to it— *last year's!*

Enter MRS. VOLUBLE.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Mrs. Wheedle, how do do? I'm vastly glad to see you. I hope all the young ladies are well. Miss Jenny, my dear, you look pale; I hope you a'n't in love, child? Miss Sally, your servant. I saw your uncle the other day, and he's very well, and so are all the children; except, indeed, poor Tommy, and they're afraid he's going to have the whooping cough. I don't think I know that other young lady? Oh Lord, yes, I do— it's Miss Polly Dyson! I beg your pardon, my dear, but I declare I did not recollect you at first.

MRS. WHEEDLE. Won't you take a chair, Mrs. Voluble?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Why yes, thank you, ma'am; but there are so many pretty things to look at in your shop, that one does not know which way to turn oneself. I declare it's the greatest treat in the world to me to spend an hour or two here in a morning; one sees so many fine things, and so many fine folks— Lord, who are all these sweet things here for?

MRS. WHEEDLE. Miss Stanley, ma'am, a young lady just going to be married.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Miss Stanley? Why, I can tell you all about her. Mr. Dabler, who lives in my house, makes verses upon her.

MISS JENNY. Dear me! Is that gentleman who dresses so smart a poet?

MRS. VOLUBLE. A poet? Yes, my dear, he's one of the first wits of the age. He can make verses as fast as I can talk.

MISS JENNY. Dear me! Why, he's quite a fine gentleman; I thought poets were always as poor as Job.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Why so they are, my dear, in common; your *real* poet is all rags and tatters: but Mr. Dabler is quite another thing; he's what you may call a poet of fashion. Oh he's quite one of the great geniuses, I assure you! I listened at his door, once, when he was at it, but I could make nothing out: only a heap of words all in a chime, as one may say— 'mean, lean, Dean, wean'— Lord, I can't remember half of them!—

MRS. WHEEDLE *motions* MISS JENNY *back to work*.

But, Mrs. Wheedle, I was going to tell you about Miss Stanley; you must know she's a young lady with a fortune all in her own hands, for she's just come of age, and she's got neither papa nor mama, and so—

Re-enter the FOOTMAN.

FOOTMAN. Lady Whirligig desires Mrs. Wheedle will come to the coach door.

[Exit FOOTMAN *and* MRS. WHEEDLE.

MRS. VOLUBLE. *[Turning herself to* MISS JENNY.*]* And so, Miss Jenny, as I was saying, this young lady came to spend the winter in town with Lady Smatter, and so she fell in love with my lady's nephew, Mr. Beaufort, and Mr. Beaufort fell in love with her, and so—

¹ = A stole or covering for the shoulders with long ends that hang in front

² = To lounge about or loll

Re-enter MRS. WHEEDLE.

MRS. WHEEDLE. Miss Jenny, take Lady Whirligig the new trimming.

MRS. VOLUBLE. [*Turning to* MISS SALLY.] And so, Miss Sally, the match is all agreed upon, and they are to be married next week, and so, as soon as the ceremony is over—

MRS. WHEEDLE. Miss Sally, put away those ribbons.

MRS. VOLUBLE. [*Turning to* MISS POLLY.] And so, Miss Polly, as soon as the ceremony's over, the bride and bridegroom—

CENSOR. [*Within.*] No, faith, not I! Do you think I want to study the fashion of a lady's top knot?

BEAUFORT. Nay, prithee, Censor, in compassion to me—

Enter BEAUFORT *and* CENSOR *struggling.*

CENSOR. Why how now, Beaufort? Is not a man's person his own property? Do you conclude that, because you take the liberty to expose your own to a ridiculous and unmanly situation, you may use the same freedom with your friend's?

BEAUFORT. Pho, prithee don't be so churlish. [*Advancing to* MRS. WHEEDLE.] Pray, ma'am, has Miss Stanley been here this morning?

MRS. WHEEDLE. No, sir; but I expect her every moment.

BEAUFORT. Then, if you'll give me leave, I'll wait till she comes.

CENSOR. Do as you list, but, for my part, I am gone.

BEAUFORT. How! Will you not stay with me?

CENSOR. No, sir; I'm a very stupid fellow— I take no manner of delight in tapes and ribbons.

[*Going.*

BEAUFORT. [*Holding him.*] You shan't go, I swear!

CENSOR. With what weapons will you stay me? Will you tie me to your little finger with a piece of ribbon, like a lady's sparrow? Or enthrall me in a net of Brussels lace? Or will you stop my retreat with a fan?

MISS JENNY. Dear, how odd the gentleman talks!

MRS. WHEEDLE. I wonder they don't ask to look at something.

MRS. VOLUBLE. [*Whispers.*] I fancy I know who they are.

BEAUFORT. Are you not as able to bear the place as I am?

CENSOR. My good friend, do you not consider that there is some little difference in our situations? I—for which I bless my stars!—am a *free* man, and therefore may be allowed to be guided by the light of Reason; you—for which I most heartily pity you—are a *lover*, and, consequently, can have no pretensions to sanity.

BEAUFORT. Ought you not, in justice, to acknowledge some obligation to me for introducing you to a place which abounds in such copious materials to gratify your splenetic humour?

CENSOR. Obligation? What, for showing me new scenes of the absurdities of my fellow creatures?

BEAUFORT. Yes, since those new scenes give fresh occasion for the railing which makes the whole happiness of your life.

CENSOR. Do you imagine, then, that I *seek* occasion? Have I not eyes? and can I open them without becoming a spectator of dissipation, idleness, luxury and disorder? Have I not ears? and can I use them without becoming an auditor of malevolence, envy, futility and detraction? Oh Beaufort, take me where I can *avoid* occasion of railing, and then, indeed, I will confess my obligation to you!

MRS. VOLUBLE. [*Whispering* MRS. WHEEDLE.] It's the youngest that's the bridegroom, that is to be—

MRS. WHEEDLE. The bridegroom? [*Aside to the apprentices.*] Polly! Sally! Hide that wedding dress!

MISS POLLY & MISS SALLY. Whatever for, ma'am?

MRS. WHEEDLE. Miss Stanley's bridegroom!

MISS POLLY *and* MISS SALLY *rush to do as asked.*

MRS. VOLUBLE.—but I'm pretty sure I know the other too, for he comes to see Mr. Dabler; I'll speak to him. [*Advances to* CENSOR.] Sir, your humble servant.

CENSOR. Madam!

MRS. VOLUBLE. I beg your pardon, sir, but I think I've had the pleasure of seeing you at my house, sir, when you've called upon Mr. Dabler.

CENSOR. Mr. Dabler?— Oh, yes, I recollect.— Why, Beaufort, what do you mean? Did you bring me hither to be food to this magpie?

BEAUFORT. Not I, upon my honour; I never saw the woman before. Who is she?

CENSOR. A fool, a prating, intolerable fool. Dabler lodges at her house, and whoever passes through her hall to visit him, she claims for her acquaintance. She will consume more words in an hour than ten men will in a year!

MISS JENNY. [*To* MRS. VOLUBLE.] I think the gentleman's very proud, ma'am, to answer you so short.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Oh, but he won't get off so, I can tell him! I'll speak to him again.

[*To* CENSOR.] Poor Mr. Dabler, sir, has been troubled with a very bad headache lately; I tell him he studies too much, but he says he can't help it; however, I think it's a friend's part to advise him against it, for Mr. Dabler's such a worthy, agreeable gentleman, 'twould be a thousand pities he should come to any ill. Pray, sir, do you think he'll ever make a match of it with Mrs. Sapien? She's ready enough, we all know, and to be sure, she's no chicken. Pray, sir, how old do you reckon she may be?

CENSOR. Really, madam, I have no talent for calculating either the age of a lady or her chances at a match! [*Aside to BEAUFORT.*] What a torrent of impertinence!

[*Going.*

BEAUFORT. [*Holding him back.*] I cannot imagine what detains Cecilia, but I will do anything rather than wait with such gossips by myself. [*To MRS. VOLUBLE.*] I hope, ma'am, we don't keep you standing?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Oh no, sir, I was quite tired of sitting.— What a polite young gentleman, Miss Jenny! I'm sure he *deserves* to marry a fortune.— I think, sir, your name's Mr. Beaufort?

BEAUFORT. At your service, ma'am.

MRS. VOLUBLE. I was pretty sure it was you, sir, for I happened to be at my window one morning when you called in a coach; and Mr. Dabler was out— that is, between friends, he was only at his studies, but he said he was out, and so that's all one. I hope, sir, your good aunt, my Lady Smatter, is well? For though I have not the pleasure of knowing her Ladyship myself, I know them that do. I suppose you two gentlemen are members of the 'Sprit Party, at my Lady's house?

CENSOR. 'Sprit Party? Prithee, Beaufort, what's that?

BEAUFORT. Oh, the most fantastic absurdity under heaven. My good aunt has established a kind of club at her house, professedly for the discussion of literary subjects; and the set who compose it are about as well qualified for the purpose as so many dirty cabin boys would be to find out the longitude. To very little reading, they join less understanding and no judgement, yet they critique books and authors with the most confirmed confidence. And this club they have had the modesty to nominate the "Esprit¹ Party".

CENSOR. Nay, when you have told me Lady Smatter is President, you need add nothing more to convince me of its futility. I hardly know a more insufferable being. Faith, Beaufort, were you my enemy instead of my friend, I should still commiserate your situation in being dependent upon that woman.

MRS. VOLUBLE. I always know, sir, when there's going to be a 'Sprit party, for Mr. Dabler shuts himself up to study. Pray, sir, did you ever see his Monody on the Birth of Miss Dandie's Lap Dog?

CENSOR. A monody on a birth?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Yes, sir; a monody, or elegy,² I don't exactly know which, but I think it's one of the prettiest things he ever wrote; he tells us— Oh dear, is not that Mrs. Sapien's coach? I'm pretty sure I know the monogram.

CENSOR. Mrs. Sapien? Nay, Beaufort, if *she* is coming hither—

BEAUFORT. Patience, man; she is one of the Party, and will divert you.

CENSOR. You are mistaken; such consummate folly only makes me melancholy. She is more weak and superficial even than Lady Smatter, yet, to compensate for that deficiency, she retails all the opinions she hears, and confidently utters them as her own.

¹ = Spirit, vitality, genius, wit

² Both monody and elegy are terms for a poem lamenting the dead

BEAUFORT. She is, indeed, immeasurably wearisome.

CENSOR. Moreover she compounds her stupidity by being hopelessly infatuated with Dabler, and fancies him the greatest poet in the world!

BEAUFORT. Silence! She is here.

Enter MRS. SAPIENT.

MRS. SAPIENT. Oh Mrs. Wheedle, how could you disappoint me so of my short apron? I believe you make it a rule never to keep to your time; and I declare, for *my* part, I know nothing so provoking as people's promising more than they perform.

MRS. WHEEDLE. Indeed, ma'am, I beg ten thousand pardons, really, ma'am, we've been so hurried; but upon my word, ma'am, you shall certainly have it this afternoon. Will you give me leave to show you any caps, ma'am? I have some exceeding pretty ones just finished.

MRS. SAPIENT. [*Looking at the caps.*] Oh, for heaven's sake, don't show me such flaunting things, for, in *my* opinion, nothing can be really elegant that is tawdry.

MRS. WHEEDLE. But here, ma'am, is one I'm sure you'll like; it's in the immediate taste—only look at it, ma'am! What can be prettier?

MRS. SAPIENT. Why yes, this is well enough, only I'm afraid people—gentlemen—er— [*whispering*] Mr. Dabler—will find it too young for me; don't you think it is?

MRS. WHEEDLE. Too young? Dear ma'am, no, I'm sure he'll find it becomes you of all things: only try it. [*Holds it over her head.*] Oh ma'am, you can't think how charmingly you look in it! and it sets so sweetly! I never saw anything so becoming in my life.

MRS. SAPIENT. Is it? Well, I think I'll have it— if you are sure he—it won't be thought too young for me. You must know, I am mightily for people's consulting their time of life in their choice of clothes: and, in *my* opinion, there is a wide difference between fifteen and fifty.

CENSOR. [*To* BEAUFORT.] She'll certainly tell us next that, in *her* opinion, a man who has but one eye, would look rather better if he had another!

MRS. WHEEDLE. Shall I show you some of our new ribbons, ma'am?

MRS. SAPIENT. Oh, I know, now, you want to tempt me. I always say the best way to escape temptation is to run away from it; however, as I *am* here—

MRS. VOLUBLE. Had not you better sit down, ma'am? [*Offering a chair.*]

MRS. SAPIENT. Oh Mrs. Voluble, is it you? How do do? Lord, I don't like any of these ribbons. Pray how does your lodger, Mr. Dabler, do?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Pretty well, thank you, ma'am, considering so much study's very bad for the health; it's a pity he don't take more care of himself, and so I often tell him; but it's all to no purpose, for he says he has a kind of a *Fury*, I think he calls it, upon him—

MRS. SAPIENT. [*A delighted shiver*] Ah—!

MRS. VOLUBLE.—that makes him write whether he will or not. And, to be sure, he does write most charmingly! and he has such a collection of miniscrips! Lord, I question if a pastry cook or a cheesemonger could use them in a year!¹

MRS. WHEEDLE. Do, ma'am, pray let me put this cloak up for you, and I'll make you a hat for it immediately.

MRS. SAPIENT. Well, then, take great care how you put in the ribbon, for you know I won't keep it if it does not please me. Mr. Beaufort!— Lord bless me, how long have you been here? Oh heavens! Is that Mr. Censor? I can scarce believe my eyes! Mr. Censor in a milliner's shop! Well, this does, indeed, justify an observation I have often made, that the greatest geniuses sometimes do the oddest things.

CENSOR. Your surprise, madam, at seeing me here today will bear no comparison to what I must myself experience should you ever see me here again.

MRS. SAPIENT. I assure you, I am equally averse to it myself:— No time, in *my* opinion, turns to so little account as that which we spend in dress.

CENSOR. [*To* BEAUFORT.] Did you ever hear such an impudent falsehood?

MRS. SAPIENT. For *my* part, I always wear just what the milliner and mantua-maker² please to send me; for I have a kind of maxim upon this subject, though I don't know if anybody else has ever suggested it: that the real value of a person springs from the *mind*, not from the outside appearance. [*Turning quick to the milliners.*] Be sure you take care how you trim the hat! I shan't wear it else.

CENSOR. Prithee, Beaufort, how long will you give a man to decide which is greatest, her folly, or her conceit?

MRS. SAPIENT. Gentlemen, good morning; Mrs. Wheedle, pray send the things in time, for, to *me*, nothing is more disagreeable than to be disappointed. Mrs. Voluble, you may give my very best compliments to dear Mr. Dabler.

As she is going out, JACK enters abruptly, and brushes past her.

Oh heavens!

JACK. Lord, ma'am, I beg you a thousand pardons! I did not see you, I declare. I hope I did not hurt you?

MRS. SAPIENT. No, sir, no; but you a little alarmed me.

JACK. Upon my word, ma'am, I'm very sorry— but I was in such monstrous haste, I had no time to look about me.

MRS. SAPIENT. Oh, sir, 'tis of no consequence; yet, allow me to observe that, in *my* opinion, too much haste generally defeats its own purpose. Good morning.

[*Exit.*]

BEAUFORT. For heaven's sake, Jack, what is the occasion of all this furious haste?

¹ The fate of more than one missing masterpiece—even a lost play by Shakespeare—is blamed on illiterate cooks using the loose pages to line their pans or wrap their products.

² Mantua = a loose gown or cloak named after a town in Italy

JACK. Why, Lord, you know I'm always in a hurry; how the deuce is anything to be done without a little spirit?

BEAUFORT. Pho, prithee, Jack, give up this idle humour.

JACK. Idle? Nay, brother, call me what else you please, but you can never charge me with idleness.

BEAUFORT. Why, with all your boasted activity, I question if there is a man in England who would be less able to give any account of his time. Pray, tell us what you have to do this morning.

JACK. Why more things than either of you would do in a month, but I can't stop now to tell you any of them, for I have three friends waiting for me in Hyde Park, and twenty places to call at in my way.

[*Going.*

MRS. WHEEDLE. [*Following him.*] Sir, would you not choose to look at some ruffles?

JACK. Oh, ay— have you anything new? What do you call these?

MRS. WHEEDLE. Oh pray, sir, take care! They are so delicate they'll hardly bear to be touched.

JACK. I don't like them at all! Show me some others.

MRS. WHEEDLE. I'll look some directly, sir— .

CENSOR. And pray, Jack, are all your hurries equally important and equally necessary as those of this morning?

JACK. Lord, you grave fellows, who plod on from day to day without any notion of life and spirit, spend half your lives in asking people questions they don't know how to answer, but I shall give you tit for tat when we meet again.

[*Going.*

MRS. WHEEDLE. Sir, I've got the ruffles— won't you look at them?

JACK. Oh, the ruffles! Well, I'm glad you've found them, but I can't stay to look at them now. Keep them in the way against I call again.

[*Exit.*

MRS. WHEEDLE. Miss Jenny, put these ruffles up again. That gentleman never knows his own mind.

MISS JENNY. I'm sure he's tumbled and tossed the things about like mad.

BEAUFORT. He is young, and I hope this ridiculous humour will wear away.

CENSOR. But how came *you* so wholly to escape its infection?

BEAUFORT. Why we are but *half* brothers, and our educations were as different as our fathers, for my mother's second husband was no more like her first than am I to Hercules— though Jack, indeed, has no resemblance even to his own father.

CENSOR. Resemblance? An hare and a tortoise are not more different; for Jack is always running, without knowing what he pursues, and his father is always pondering, without

knowing what he thinks of!— But pray, sir: what think you by this time of the punctuality of your mistress?

BEAUFORT. Why— to own the truth— I fear I must have made some mistake.

CENSOR. Bravo, Beaufort! Ever doubt your own senses in preference to suspecting your mistress of negligence or caprice.

BEAUFORT. She is much too noble minded, too just in her sentiments, and too uniform in her conduct, to be guilty of either.

CENSOR. Bravissimo, Beaufort! I commend your patience! In the future, however, I shall take the liberty more closely to investigate the accuracy of your appointments.

[*Exit.*

BEAUFORT. [*Aside.*] My situation begins to grow as ridiculous as it is disagreeable. Surely Cecilia cannot have forgotten me!

MRS VOLUBLE. [*Advancing to him.*] To be sure, sir, it's vastly incommodious to be kept waiting so, but, sir, if I might put in a word, I think—

Enter JACK running.

JACK. Lord, brother, I quite forgot to tell you Miss Stanley's message.

BEAUFORT. Message! What message?

JACK. I declare I had got half way to Hyde Park, before I ever thought of it.

BEAUFORT. Upon my honour, Jack, this is too much!

JACK. Why, I ran back the moment I recollected it, and what could I do more? I would not even stop to tell Will Scamper what was the matter, so I'll just step and see if he's in the street.

[*Going.*

BEAUFORT. Jack!! What was the message? Tell me quickly!

JACK. Oh ay, true! Why, she said she could not come.

BEAUFORT. Not come? But *why*? I'm sure she told you *why*?

JACK. Oh yes, she told me a long story about it— but I've forgot what it was.

BEAUFORT. [*Warmly.*] Recollect, then!

JACK. Why, so I will. Oh, it was all your aunt Smatter's fault—somebody came in with the new songs from the Ranelagh Gardens¹, so she stayed at home to study them; and Miss Stanley bid me say she was very sorry, but of course she could not come by herself.

BEAUFORT. And why might I not have been told this sooner?

JACK. Why, she desired me to come and tell you of it an hour or two ago, but I had so many places to stop at by the way I could not possibly get here sooner: and when I came, my

¹ = Chelsea site of vocal and orchestral concerts featuring the latest compositions by the stars of the day

head was so full of my own appointments that I never once thought of her message. However, I must run back to Will—

BEAUFORT. Hear me, Jack! If you do not take pains to correct this absurd rage to attempt everything, while you execute nothing, you will render yourself as contemptible to the world, as you are useless or mischievous to your family.

[*Exit.*

JACK. [*Aside.*] What a passion he's in! I've a good mind to run to Miss Stanley, and beg her to intercede for me.

[*Going.*

MRS. WHEEDLE. Sir, won't you please to look at the ruffles?

JACK. Oh ay, true— where are they?

MRS. WHEEDLE. Miss Jenny, give me those ruffles again.

JACK. Oh if they a'n't ready, I can't stay.

[*Exit.*

MRS. VOLUBLE. Well, Mrs. Wheedle, I'm sure you've a pleasant life of it here in seeing so much of the world. I'd a great mind to have spoke to that young gentleman too, but he was in such a violent hurry I could not get in a word.— But now, Mrs. Wheedle, when will you come and drink a snug dish of tea with me? You, and Miss Jenny, and any of the young ladies that can be spared? I'm sure if you can all come—

Enter BOB.

BOB. I ask pardon, ladies and gentlemen, but pray is my mother here?

MRS. VOLUBLE. What's that to you, sirrah? Who gave you leave to follow me? Get home, directly, you dirty figure you! Go, go, I say!

BOB. Why, Lord, mother, you've been out all the morning, and never told Betty what was for dinner!

MRS. VOLUBLE. Why, you great, tall, greedy, gourmandizing, lubberly cub, you, what signifies whether you have any dinner or no? Go, get away, you idle, good for nothing, dirty, greasy, hulking, tormenting—

She drives him off, and the scene closes.

Act I, Scene 2.

The Library at Lady Smatter's.

LADY SMATTER *and* CECILIA.

LADY SMATTER. Yes, yes, this song is certainly Mr. Dabler's, I am not to be deceived in his style. What say you, my dear Miss Stanley, don't you think I have found him out?

CECILIA. Indeed, I am too little acquainted with his poems to be able to judge.

LADY SMATTER. Your indifference surprises me! For my part, I am never at rest till I have discovered the authors of everything that comes out;¹ and, indeed, I commonly hit upon them in a moment. I declare I sometimes wonder at myself when I think how lucky I am in my guesses.

CECILIA. Your Ladyship devotes so much time to these researches, that it would be strange if they were unsuccessful.

LADY SMATTER. Yes, I do indeed devote my time to them; I own² it without blushing, for how, as a certain author says, can time be better employed than in cultivating intellectual accomplishments? And I am often surprised, my dear Miss Stanley, that a young lady of your good sense should not be more warmly engaged in the same pursuit.— Shall I put up your name for becoming a member of our Esprit Party?

CECILIA. By no means; my ambition aspires not at an honour for which I feel myself so little qualified.

LADY SMATTER. Nay, but you are too modest; you can't suppose how much you may profit by coming among us. The authors always bring us something new of their own, and the critics regale us with manuscript notes upon something old.

CECILIA. And in what class is your Ladyship?

LADY SMATTER. Oh, I am among the critics. I love criticism passionately, though it is really laborious work, for it obliges one to read with a vast deal of attention. I declare I am sometimes so immensely fatigued with the toil of studying for faults and objections that I am ready to fling all my books behind the fire.

CECILIA. And what authors have you chiefly criticized?

LADY SMATTER. Pope and Shakespeare— though I have not, yet, read above half their works, so how they will fare as I go on, I can't determine. Oh, here's Beaufort.

Enter BEAUFORT.

BEAUFORT. Your Ladyship's most obedient.

CECILIA. Mr. Beaufort, I am quite ashamed to see you! Yet the disappointment I occasioned you was as involuntary on my part as it could possibly be disagreeable on yours. Your brother, I hope, prevented your waiting long?

BEAUFORT. That you meant he should is sufficient reparation for my loss of time; but what must be the disappointment that an apology from you would not soften?

LADY SMATTER. [*Reading.*] 'Oh lovely, charming, beauteous maid,'— I wish this song was not so difficult to get by heart— Oh how little does the world suspect the private hardships and secret labours of a *belle esprit*!³

Enter MRS. HOBBS.

MRS. HOBBS. Mr. Codger, my lady.

Enter MR. CODGER.

¹ Many works were published anonymously (including the novels of Frances Burney and Jane Austen).

² = Admit, confess

³ = Lady of wit

LADY SMATTER. Mr. Codger, your servant. I hope I see you well?

CODGER. Your Ladyship's most humble. Not so well, indeed, as I could wish, yet, perhaps, better than I deserve to be.

LADY SMATTER. How is your son Jack?

CODGER. I can't directly say, madam; I have not seen him these two hours, and poor Jack is but a harum-scarum young man; many things may have happened to him in the space of two hours.

LADY SMATTER. Have you heard lately from our friends in the north?

CODGER. Why, madam, yes; my sister Deborah acquainted me with many curious little pieces of history that have happened in her neighbourhood; would it be agreeable to your Ladyship to hear them?

LADY SMATTER. Oh no, I would not take up so much of your time.

CODGER. I cannot, madam, employ my time more agreeably. Let me see— in the first place— no, that was not first— let me recollect!

BEAUFORT. Pray, sir, was any mention made of Tom?

CODGER. Yes; but don't be impatient; I shall speak of him in his turn.

BEAUFORT. I beg your pardon, sir, but I enquired from hearing he was not well.

CODGER. I shall explain whence that report arose in a few minutes; in the mean time, I must beg you not to interrupt me, for I am trying to arrange a chain of anecdotes for the satisfaction of Lady Smatter.

LADY SMATTER. Bless me, Mr. Codger, I did not mean to give you so much trouble.

CODGER. It will be no trouble in the world, if your Ladyship will, for a while, forbear speaking to me, though the loss upon the occasion will be all mine. [*He retires to the side scene.*¹]

LADY SMATTER. [*Aside.*] What a formal old fogy the man grows!— Beaufort, have you seen this song?

BEAUFORT. I believe not, madam.

LADY SMATTER. Oh, it's the prettiest thing! But I don't think you have a true taste for poetry; I never observed you to be enraptured or lost in ecstasy when I have been reading to you. But *my* enthusiasm for poetry may, perhaps, carry me too far; come now, my dear Miss Stanley, be sincere with me, don't you think I indulge this propensity too much?

CECILIA. I should be sorry to have your Ladyship suppose me quite insensible to the elegance of literary pursuits, though I neither claim any title, nor profess any ability to judge of them.

LADY SMATTER. Oh you'll do very well in a few years.

CODGER. [*Coming forward.*] I believe, madam, I can now satisfy your enquiries.

¹ = Up to, but not into, the wings

LADY SMATTER. What enquiries?

CODGER. Those your Ladyship made in relation to my letter from our friends in Yorkshire. In the first place, my sister Deborah writes me word that the new barn which, you may remember, was begun last summer, is pretty nearly finished. And here, in my pocket book, I have gotten the dimensions of it. It is 15 feet by—

LADY SMATTER. Oh, for heaven's sake, Mr. Codger, don't trouble yourself to be so circumstantial.

CODGER. The trouble, madam, is inconsiderable. It is 15 feet by 30. And pray does your Ladyship remember the old dog kennel at the parsonage house?

LADY SMATTER. No, sir; I never look at dog kennels.

CODGER. Well, madam, my sister Deborah writes me word—

Enter MRS. HOBBS.

MRS. HOBBS. Mr. Dabler, my lady.

Enter MR. DABLER.

LADY SMATTER. Mr. Dabler, you are the man in the world I most wished to see.

DABLER. Your Ladyship is beneficence itself!

LADY SMATTER. A visit from you, Mr. Dabler, is the greatest of favours, since your time is not only precious to yourself, but to the world.

DABLER. It is indeed precious to myself, madam, when I devote it to the service of your Ladyship. Miss Stanley, may I hope you are as well as you look? If so, your health must indeed be in a state of perfection; if not, never before did sickness wear so fair a mask.

CECILIA. Heavens, Mr. Dabler—!

LADY SMATTER. 'Tis a thousand pities, Mr. Dabler, to throw away such poetical thoughts and imagery in common conversation.

DABLER. Why, ma'am, the truth is, something a little out of the usual path is expected from a man whom the world has been pleased to style a poet;— though I protest I never knew why!

LADY SMATTER. How true is it that modesty, as Pope, or Swift, I forget which, has it, is the constant attendant upon merit!

DABLER. If merit, madam, were but the constant attendant upon modesty, then, indeed, I might hope to attain no little share! Faith, I'll set that down. [*He takes out his tablets*¹.]

CODGER. And so, madam, my sister Deborah writes me word—

LADY SMATTER. Oh dear, Mr. Codger, I merely wanted to know if all our friends were well.

CODGER. Nay, if your Ladyship does not want to hear about the dog kennel—

LADY SMATTER. Not in the least! I hate kennels, and dogs too.

¹ = Notepad

CODGER. As you please, madam! [*Aside.*] She has given me the trouble of ten minutes recollection, and now she won't hear me!

LADY SMATTER. Mr. Dabler, I believe I've had the pleasure of seeing something of yours this morning.

DABLER. Of mine? You alarm me beyond measure!

LADY SMATTER. Nay, nay, 'tis in print, so don't be frightened.

DABLER. Your Ladyship relieves me: but, really, people are so little delicate in taking copies of my foolish manuscripts that I protest I go into no house without the fear of meeting something of my own. But what may it be?

LADY SMATTER. Why I'll repeat it.

'Oh sweetest, softest, gentlest maid'—

DABLER. No, ma'am, no;— you mistake—

'Oh lovely, beauteous, charming maid'—
is it not so?

LADY SMATTER. Yes, yes, that's it. Oh what a vile memory is mine!—I was reading, the other day, that the memory of a poet *should* be short, that his works may be original.

DABLER. Oh curse it, how unlucky!

LADY SMATTER. Why so?

DABLER. Why, madam, 'tis my own thought! I've just finished an epigram upon that very subject!

LADY SMATTER. But, dear sir, pray let's hear it!

DABLER. Why— if your Ladyship insists upon it— [*Reads.*]

Ye gentle Gods, Oh hear me plead,
And kindly grant this little loan;
Make me forget whate'er I read
That what I write may be my own.

LADY SMATTER. Oh charming! Very clever indeed.

BEAUFORT. But pray, sir, if such is your wish, why should you read at all?

DABLER. Why, sir, one *must* read; one's reputation requires it.

BEAUFORT. [*Aside to CECILIA.*] What a shallow coxcomb!

LADY SMATTER. You must positively let me have a copy of that epigram, Mr. Dabler. Don't you think it charming, Mr. Codger?

CODGER. Madam, I never take anything in at first hearing; if Mr. Dabler will let me have it in my own hand, I will give your Ladyship my opinion of it after I have read it over two or three times.

DABLER. [*Giving it to him.*] Sir, it is much at your service; but I must insist upon it that you don't get it by heart.

CODGER. Bless me, sir, I should not do that in half a year! I have no turn for such sort of things.

LADY SMATTER. I know not in what Mr. Dabler most excels, epigrams, sonnets, odes or elegies.

DABLER. Your Ladyship far over-rates my poor abilities;— my writings are mere trifles, and I believe the world would be never the worse if they were all committed to the flames.

BEAUFORT. [*Aside to CECILIA.*] I would I could try the experiment!

DABLER. Everybody, I believe, has some little talent— mine happens to be for poetry, but it's all a chance! Nobody can choose for himself, and really, to be candid, I don't know if some other things are not of equal consequence.

LADY SMARTER. There, Mr. Dabler, I must indeed differ from you! What in the universe can be put in competition with poetry?

DABLER. Your Ladyship's enthusiasm for the fine arts—

Enter MRS. HOBBS.

MRS. HOBBS. Mrs. Sapient, madam.

LADY SMATTER. Lord, how tiresome! She'll talk us to death!

Enter MRS. SAPIENT.

Dear Mrs. Sapient, this is vastly good of you!

DABLER. Your arrival, madam, is particularly critical at this time, for we are engaged in a literary controversy; and to whom can we so properly apply to enlighten our doubts by the sunbeams of her counsel, as to Mrs. Sapient?

MRS. SAPIENT. You do me too much honour, sir!

LADY SMATTER. What a sweet speech! [*Aside.*] I wonder how he could make it to that stupid woman!

MRS. SAPIENT. But what is the subject I have been so unfortunate as to interrupt?

DABLER. The present question is upon poetry. We were considering whether, impartially speaking, some other things are not of equal importance?

MRS. SAPIENT. I am unwilling, sir, to decide upon so delicate a point; yet, were I to offer my humble opinion, it would be that though to *me* nothing is more delightful than poetry, I yet fancy there may be other things of greater utility in common life.

DABLER. Pray, Mr. Codger, what is your opinion?

CODGER. Sir, I am so intently employed in considering this epigram, that I cannot, just now, maturely weigh your question.

DABLER. Sir, you do my foolish epigram much honour. [*Aside.*] That man has twice the sense one would suppose from his look. I'll show him my new sonnet.

MRS. SAPIENT. How much was I surprised, Mr. Beaufort, at seeing Mr. Censor this morning in a milliner's shop!

CECILIA. [*To* BEAUFORT] I rejoice to hear you had such a companion;— if the sting of his raillery did not inflame your disappointment and vexation.

BEAUFORT. The sting of a professed satirist only proves poisonous to *fresh* subjects; those who have *often* felt it are merely tickled by the wound.

DABLER. [*Aside.*] How the deuce shall I introduce the sonnet? [*To the company.*] Pray, ladies and gentlemen, you who so often visit the muses, is there anything new in the poetical way?

LADY SMATTER. Who, Mr. Dabler, can so properly answer that question as you— you, to whom all their haunts are open?

DABLER. Oh dear ma'am, such compositions as mine are the merest baubles in the world! I dare say there are people who would even be ashamed to set their names to them.

BEAUFORT. [*Aside to* CECILIA.] I hope there is but one person who would not!

MRS. SAPIENT. How much more amiable in my eyes is genius when joined with diffidence than with conceit!

DABLER. Too kind, too kind, ma'am.

CODGER. [*Returning the epigram.*] Sir, I give you my thanks: and I think, sir, your wish is somewhat uncommon.

DABLER. I am much pleased, sir, that you approve of it. [*Aside.*] This man does not want understanding, with all his formality. He'll be prodigiously struck with my sonnet. [*Takes it out.*]

MRS. SAPIENT. What, is that something new of Mr. Dabler's? Surely, sir, you must write night and day.

DABLER. Oh dear no, ma'am, for I compose with a facility that is really surprising,

CODGER. With respect, sir, to that point concerning which you consulted me, I am inclined to think—

DABLER. Sir!

CODGER. You were speaking to me, sir, respecting the utility of poetry; I am inclined to think—

DABLER. Oh, apropos, now I think of it, I have a little sonnet here that is quite pat to the subject, and—

CODGER. What subject, good sir?

DABLER. What subject?— why— this subject, you know.

CODGER. As yet, sir, we are talking of no subject; I was going—

DABLER. Well but— ha! ha!— it puts me so in mind of this little sonnet we were speaking of, that—

CODGER. But, sir, you have not heard what I was going to say.—

DABLER. True, sir, true;— I'll put the poem away for the present—unless, indeed, you very much wish to see it?

CODGER. Another time will do as well, sir. I don't rightly comprehend what I read before company.

DABLER. Dear sir, such trifles as these are hardly worth your serious study; however, if you'll promise not to take a copy, I think I'll venture to trust you with the manuscript— but you must be sure not to show it a single soul—and pray take great care of it.

CODGER. Good sir, I don't mean to take it at all.

DABLER. Sir!

CODGER. I have no time for reading; and I hold that these sort of things only turn one's head from matters of more importance.

DABLER. Oh very well, sir— if you don't want to see it— [*Aside.*] What a tasteless old dolt! The fellow's a perfect driveller!

LADY SMATTER. I declare, Mr. Codger, had we known you were so indifferent to the charms of poetry, we should never have admitted you.

Enter JACK.

JACK. [*To LADY SMATTER.*] Ma'am, your servant. Where's Miss Stanley? I'm so out of breath I can hardly speak.— Miss Stanley, I'm come on purpose to tell you some news.

CECILIA. It ought to be of some importance by your haste.

BEAUFORT. His haste indicates nothing, for it accompanies him in everything.

JACK. Nay, if you won't hear me at once, I'm gone!

CODGER. And pray, son Jack, whither may you be going?

JACK. Lord, sir, to an hundred places at least. I shall be all over the town in less than half an hour.

CODGER. I am much afraid, son Jack, you will be a blockhead all your life.

LADY SMATTER. For shame, Mr. Codger! Jack, you were voted into our Esprit Party last meeting; and if you come tonight, you will be admitted.

JACK. I'll come with the greatest pleasure, ma'am, if I can but get away from Will Scamper, but we are upon a frolic tonight, so it's ten to one if I can make off.

MRS. SAPIENT. If I might take the liberty, sir, to offer *my* advice upon this occasion, I should say that useful friends were more improving than frivolous companions, for in *my* opinion, it is pity to waste time.

JACK. Why, ma'am, that's just my way of thinking! I like to be always getting forward, always doing something. Why, I am going now as far as Fleet Street, to a print shop where I left Tom Whiffle. I met him in my way from Cornhill, and promised to be back with him in half an hour.

BEAUFORT. Cornhill? You said you were going to Hyde Park.

JACK. Yes, but I met Kit Filligree, and he hauled me into the City. But now you put me in mind of it, I believe I had best run *there* first, and see who's waiting.

BEAUFORT. But what, in the meantime, is to become of Tom Whiffle?

JACK. Oh, hang him, he can wait.

CODGER. In truth, son Jack, you scandalize me! You appear to me to be *non compos mentis*¹!

BEAUFORT. 'Tis pity you cannot change situations with a running footman.

JACK. Ay, ay, good folks, I know you all love to cut me up, so pray amuse yourselves your own way— only don't expect me to stay and hear you.

[*Going.*

CECILIA. [*Following him.*] Jack! You are destined to be tormented this morning, for I cannot suffer you to escape till we come to an explanation: you said you had news for me?

JACK. Oh ay, true; I'll tell you what it was. While I was upon 'Change² this morning— but hold, I believe I'd best tell Lady Smatter first.

CECILIA. Why so?

JACK. Because perhaps you'll be frightened.

CECILIA. Frightened? At what?

JACK. Why it's very bad news.

CECILIA. Good God, what can this mean?

BEAUFORT. Nothing, I dare be sworn.

JACK. Very well, brother! I wish you may think it nothing when you've heard it.

CECILIA. Don't keep me in suspense, I beseech you.

BEAUFORT. Jack, what is it you mean by alarming Miss Stanley thus?

CECILIA. Why will you not explain yourself?

JACK. Why, ma'am, if you please, I'll call on you in the afternoon.

CECILIA. No, no, you do but increase my apprehensions by this delay.

BEAUFORT. Upon my honour, Jack, this is insufferable!

JACK. Why Lord, brother, don't be so angry.

LADY SMATTER. Nay, now Jack, you are really provoking.

MRS. SAPIENT. Why yes, I must needs own I am, myself, of opinion that it is rather disagreeable to wait long for bad news.

CODGER. In truth, Jack, you are no better than a booby.

JACK. Well, if you will have it, you will! But I tell you beforehand you won't like it. You know Stipend, the banker?

CECILIA. Good heaven, know him? Yes— what of him?

JACK. Why— now, upon my word, I'd rather not speak.

¹ Latin: Not of sound mind (therefore legally incompetent)

² = At the Royal Exchange (the centre of London commerce— a sort of combination stock exchange and trade centre incorporating a boutique shopping mall)

CECILIA. You sicken me with apprehension!

JACK. Well— had you much money in his hands?

CECILIA. Everything I am worth in the world!

JACK. Had you, faith?

CECILIA. You terrify me to death!— what would you say?

BEAUFORT. Jack, I could murder you!

JACK. There, now, I said how it would be! Now would not anybody suppose the man went broke through my fault?

CECILIA. Broke?— Oh heaven, I am ruined!

BEAUFORT. No, my dearest Cecilia, your safety is wrapped in mine, and, to my heart's last sigh, they shall be inseparable.

LADY SMATTER. Broke?— what can this mean?

MRS. SAPIENT. Broke? Who is broke? I am quite alarmed.

CODGER. In truth, this has the appearance of a serious business.

CECILIA. Mr. Beaufort, let me pass— I can stand this no longer.

BEAUFORT. Allow me to conduct you to your own room.— Jack, wait till I return!

He leads CECILIA out.

JACK. No, no, brother, you'll excuse me there!— I've stayed too long already.

[Going.

LADY SMATTER. Hold, Jack. I have ten thousand questions to ask you. Explain to me what all this means. It is of the utmost consequence I should know immediately.

MRS. SAPIENT. I, too, am greatly terrified: I know not but I may be myself concerned in this transaction; and the thought of losing one's money is extremely serious, for, as far as *I* have seen of the world, there's no living without it.

CODGER. In truth, son Jack, you have put us all into tribulation.

MRS. SAPIENT. What, sir, did you say was the banker's name?

JACK. Stipend, ma'am.

MRS. SAPIENT. Stipend? I protest he has concerns with half my acquaintance! Lady Smatter, half the people I know are ruined! I wish your Ladyship good morning. Upon my word, in my opinion, a bankruptcy is no pleasant thing!

[Exit.

LADY SMATTER. Pray, Jack, satisfy me more clearly how this affair stands; tell me all you know of it?

JACK. [*Aside.*] Lord, I shan't get away till midnight!— Why, ma'am, the man's broke, that's all.

LADY SMATTER. Is there no prospect his affairs may be made up?

JACK. None; they say upon 'Change there won't be a shilling in the pound.

LADY SMATTER. What an unexpected blow! Poor Miss Stanley!

DABLER. 'Tis a shocking circumstance indeed. [*Aside.*] I think it will make a pretty good elegy, though!

LADY SMATTER. I can't think what the poor girl will do! For here is an end of our marrying her! I have the greatest regard in the world for Miss Stanley— nobody can esteem her more— but I can't think of letting Beaufort marry without money.

CODGER. Pray, madam, how came Miss Stanley to have such very large concerns with Mr. Stipend?

LADY SMATTER. Why he was not only her banker, but her guardian, and her whole fortune was in his hands. She is a pretty sort of girl— I am really grieved for her.

DABLER. 'Tis very hard upon her indeed. [*Aside.*] 'Twill be the most pathetic thing I ever wrote! [*To* LADY SMATTER.] Ma'am, your Ladyship's most obedient. [*Aside.*] I'll to work while the subject is warm— nobody will read it with dry eyes!

[*Exit.*

JACK. Lord, here's my brother! [*Aside.*] I wish I could make off.

Re-enter BEAUFORT.

BEAUFORT. Stay, sir! One word, and you will be most welcome to go. Whence had you the intelligence you so humanely communicated to Miss Stanley?

JACK. I had it from the Royal Exchange: everybody was talking of it. Perhaps you think I am not sorry for Miss Stanley, but I made a point of running all the way for fear she should hear it from a stranger.

BEAUFORT. Enough. I have no desire to detain you any longer.

JACK. Very well, brother. [*Aside.*] Plague take it, I wish I had gone to Hyde Park at once!

[*Exit.*

CODGER. Madam, as your house seems in some little perturbation, I hope you will excuse the shortness of my visit if I take leave now. Your Ladyship's most humble servant.— Jack is a good lad at the bottom, although he be somewhat wanting in solidity.

[*Exit.*

BEAUFORT. At length, thank heaven, the house is cleared. Oh madam, will you not go to Miss Stanley? I have left her in an agony of mind which I had no ability to mitigate.

LADY SMATTER. Poor thing! I am really in great pain for her.

BEAUFORT. Your Ladyship alone has power to soothe her— a power which, I hope, you will instantly exert.

LADY SMATTER. I will go to her presently— or send for her here.

BEAUFORT. Surely your Ladyship will go to *her*?— at such a time as this—

LADY SMATTER. I am thinking what the poor girl had best do; I really don't know what to advise.

BEAUFORT. I hope to prevail with her to be mine immediately.

LADY SMATTER. Pho, pho, don't talk so idly.

BEAUFORT. Madam!

LADY SMATTER. Be quiet a few minutes, and let me consider what can be done. Nothing is so difficult as disposing of a poor girl of fashion.

BEAUFORT. Madam!

LADY SMATTER. She has been trained in nothing— if she can make a cap, 'tis as much as she can do— and, in such a case, when a girl is reduced to a penny, what is to be done?

BEAUFORT. Good heaven, madam, will Miss Stanley ever be reduced to a penny while I live in affluence?

LADY SMATTER. Beaufort— to cut the matter short, you must give her up.

BEAUFORT. Give her up?

LADY SMATTER. Certainly; you can never suppose I shall consent to your marrying a girl who has lost all her fortune. While the match seemed suitable to your expectations and to my intentions towards you, I readily countenanced it, but now it is quite a different thing— all is changed, and—

BEAUFORT. No, madam, no, all is *not* changed, for the heart of Beaufort is unalterable! I loved Miss Stanley in prosperity— in adversity, I adore her! I solicited her favour when she was surrounded by my rivals, and I will still supplicate it, though she should be deserted by all the world besides. Her distress shall increase my tenderness, her poverty shall redouble my respect, and her misfortunes shall render her more dear to me than ever!

LADY SMATTER. Beaufort, you offend me extremely. I have as high notions of sentiment and delicacy as you can have, for the study of the fine arts, as Pope justly says, greatly enlarges the mind; but, for all that, if you would still have me regard you as a son, you must pay me the obedience due to a mother. Never suppose I adopted you to marry you to a beggar!

BEAUFORT. A beggar?— Indignation chokes me!— I must leave you, madam— the submission I pay you as a nephew, and the obedience I owe you as an adopted son, will else both give way to feelings I know not how to stifle!

[*Exit.*

LADY SMATTER. This is really an unfortunate affair.—Hobbins!

Enter MRS. HOBBS.

Tell Miss Stanley I beg to speak to her.

[*Exit* MRS. HOBBS.

I protest I wish she was fairly out of the house! I never cordially liked her— she has not a grain of taste, and her compliments are so cold, one has no pleasure in receiving them— a most insipid thing! I shan't be sorry to have done with her.

Enter CECILIA.

Miss Stanley, my dear, your servant.

CECILIA. Oh madam!

LADY SMATTER. Take courage; don't be so downcast— a noble mind, as I was reading the other day, is always superior to misfortune. Do you think Jack may have been misinformed?

CECILIA. Alas no! I have just received from Mr. Stipend this melancholy confirmation of his intelligence. [*Gives LADY SMATTER a letter.*]

LADY SMATTER. Upon my word 'tis a sad thing! A sad stroke upon my word! However, you have good friends, and such as, I dare say, will take care of you.

CECILIA. Take care of me, madam?

LADY SMATTER. Yes, my dear, *I* will for one. I assure you of my continued regard; and if you can think of anything in which I can serve you, I am quite at your command; nobody can wish you better. My house, too, shall always be open to you. I should scorn to desert you because you are in distress. A mind, indeed, cultivated and informed, as Shakespeare has it, will ever be above a mean action.

CECILIA. I am quite confounded!

LADY SMATTER. In short, my dear, you will find *me* quite at your disposal, and as much your friend as in the sunshine of your prosperity.— But ... as to Beaufort—

CECILIA. Hold, madam! I now begin to understand your Ladyship perfectly.

LADY SMATTER. Don't be hasty, my dear. I say as to Beaufort, he is but a young man, and young men, you know, are mighty apt to be rash; but when they have no independence, and are of no profession, they should be very cautious how they disoblige their friends. Besides, it always happens that, when they are drawn in to their own ruin, they involve—

CECILIA. No more, I beseech you, madam! I know not how to brook such terms, or to endure such indignity. I shall leave your Ladyship's house instantly, nor, while any other will receive me, shall I re-enter it! Pardon me, madam, but I am yet young in the school of adversity, and my spirit is not yet tamed down to that abject submission to unmerited mortifications which time and long suffering can alone render supportable.

LADY SMATTER. You quite surprise me, my dear! I can't imagine what you mean. However, when your mind is more composed, I beg you will follow me to my room. Till then, I will leave you to your meditations, for, as Swift has well said, 'tis vain to reason with a person in a passion.

[*Exit.*]

MRS. HOBBS, *who has been listening, appears at the other door.*

CECILIA. [*Aside.*] Follow you? No, no, I will converse with you no more, cruel, unfeeling woman! I will quit your inhospitable roof, I will seek shelter— alas where?— where can the poor Cecilia seek shelter, peace or protection? Oh Beaufort! 'tis thine alone to console me; thy sympathy shall soften my calamities, and thy fidelity shall instruct me to support them. Yet fly I must!— Insult ought not to be borne, and those who twice risk, the third time deserve it.— [*Seeing and running to her.*] Oh Mrs. Hobbs!—

[*Exeunt.*

Act I, Scene 3.

The Library at Lady Smatter's an hour or so later.

Enter LADY SMATTER, *followed by* BEAUFORT.

BEAUFORT. Madam, you distract me! 'Tis impossible her intentions should be unknown to you— tell me, I beseech you, whither she is gone? what are her designs? and why she deigned not to acquaint *me* with her resolution?

LADY SMATTER. Why will you, Beaufort, eternally forget that it is the duty of every wise man, as Swift has admirably said, to keep his passions to himself? Do you remember what Pope has said upon this subject?

BEAUFORT. This is past endurance!— no, madam, no!— at such a time as this, his very name is disgusting to me.

LADY SMATTER. How!— did I hear right?— the name of Pope disgusting?—

BEAUFORT. Yes, madam— Pope, Swift, Shakespeare himself, and every other name you can mention but that of Cecilia Stanley, is hateful to my ear, and detestable to my remembrance.

LADY SMATTER. I am thunderstruck!— this is downright blasphemy.

BEAUFORT. Good heaven, madam, is this a time to talk of books and authors?— If your Ladyship will give me no satisfaction, I must endeavour to procure intelligence elsewhere.

LADY SMATTER. I protest to you she went away without speaking to me; she sent for a chair,¹ and did not even let the servants hear whither she ordered it.

BEAUFORT. Perhaps, then, she left a letter for you?—

LADY SMATTER. Well, well, whether she writ or not is nothing to the purpose; she has acted a very prudent part in going away, and, once again I repeat, you must give her up.

BEAUFORT. No, madam, never!— never while life is lent me will I give up the tie that renders it most dear to me.

LADY SMATTER. Well, sir, I have only this to say— one must be given up, she or me— the decision is in your own hands.

Enter MRS. HOBBS.

MRS. HOBBS. Mr. Censor, my lady.

LADY SMATTER. Beg him to walk up stairs. [*Aside.*] He is a sour, morose, ill-tempered wretch, and will give Beaufort no quarter.

Enter CENSOR.

Mr. Censor, I am vastly glad you came, for I want to have a little rational consultation with you.

¹ A covered sedan chair carried by two sturdy chairmen was a principle means of hired transportation.

CENSOR. I thank your Ladyship. I have heard the whole affair. Where is Miss Stanley?

LADY SMATTER. Why, not at home. Alas, Mr. Censor, what an unexpected stroke! You can't imagine how unhappy it makes me.

CENSOR. Possibly not.— When does your Ladyship expect Miss Stanley's return?

LADY SMATTER. Why, really, I can't exactly say, for she left the house in a sort of a hurry. I would fain have dissuaded her, but all my rhetoric was ineffectual;— however, poor thing, great allowance ought to be made, for, as the poet has it, misfortune renders everybody unamiable.

CENSOR. What poet?

LADY SMATTER. Bless me, don't you know? Well, I shall now grow proud indeed if I can boast of making a quotation that is new to the learned Mr. Censor. My present author, sir, is Swift.

CENSOR. Swift?— you have, then, some private edition of his works?

LADY SMATTER. Well, well, I won't be positive as to Swift— perhaps it was Pope. 'Tis impracticable for anybody that reads so much as I do to be always exact as to an author. Let us, for the present, quit these abstruse points, and, as Parnell says, "e'en talk a little like folks of this world."

CENSOR. Parnell?— you have, then, made a discovery with which you should oblige the public, for that line passes for Prior's.¹

LADY SMATTER. Prior?— Oh, very true, so it is. Bless me, into what errors does extensive reading lead us! But to business— this poor girl must, some way or other, be provided for, and my opinion is she had best return to her friends in the country. London is a dangerous place for girls who have no fortune. Suppose you go to her, and reason with her upon the subject?

BEAUFORT. You *do* know her address, then?

LADY SMATTER. No matter; I will not have *you* go to her, whoever does. Would you believe it, Mr. Censor, this unthinking young man would actually marry the girl without a penny? However, it behoves me to prevent him, if only for example's sake.

CENSOR. I hope, madam, the gratitude of the world will be adequate to the obligations it owes you.

LADY SMATTER. Well, Mr. Censor, I will commit the affair to your management. This paper will tell you where Miss Stanley is to be met with, and pray tell the poor thing she may always depend upon my protection, and that I feel for her most extremely; but she must think no more of Beaufort, for why should the poor girl be fed with false hopes? It would be barbarous to trifle with her expectations! Tell her —

BEAUFORT. Oh madam, forbear!— Heavens, what a message for Miss Stanley! Is she not the same Miss Stanley who was so lately respected, caressed, and admired? Can a few

¹ Sabor & Sill: "The line is from Prior's poem 'A Better Answer' (1718): 'Let Us e'en talk a little like Folks of this World.' Prior himself is alluding to Falstaff's words to Pistol in Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part 2*: 'I pray thee now, deliver them like a man of this world' (V.iii.95)."

moments have obliterated all remembrance of her merit? Shall *we* be treacherous because *she* is unfortunate?

LADY SMATTER. Beaufort, you offend me extremely. Do you suppose I have laboured so long at the fine arts to be taught, at last, the right rule of conduct by my *nepben*? Oh Mr. Censor, how well has Shakespeare said rash and inconsiderate is youth!— But I must waive a further discussion as I have some notes to prepare for our Esprit Party tonight. Remember, Beaufort, that if you make any attempt to see or write to Miss Stanley, I will disown and disinherit you. Mr. Censor, you will enforce this doctrine, and pray tell him, it was a maxim with Pope— or Swift, I am not sure which— that resolution, in a cultivated mind, is unchangeable.

[*Exit.*

BEAUFORT. By heaven, Censor, with all your misanthropy, I had believed you incapable of listening to such inhumanity without concern.

CENSOR. No man is much moved by events that merely answer his expectations.

BEAUFORT. I must hasten to the lovely, injured innocent, and endeavour to make her forget my connections. Show me the paper at once, I beseech you.

CENSOR. Not so fast, Beaufort.

BEAUFORT. Surely you do not mean to refuse me her direction?

CENSOR. Indeed I do.

BEAUFORT. Why will you trifle with me thus? The paper! The direction! If you are determined to refuse it, say so; I have other resources and will use them.

CENSOR. It is no news to me that a man may find more ways than one to ruin himself.

BEAUFORT. I will trouble you no longer— your servant.

[*Going.*

CENSOR. Hold, Beaufort! Forget, for a few moments, the lover, and listen to me, not with passion but understanding. Miss Stanley, you find, has now no dependence but upon you;— you have none but upon Lady Smatter— what follows?

BEAUFORT. Distraction, I believe— I have nothing else before me!

CENSOR. If, instantly and wildly, you oppose her in the first heat of her determination, you will have served a ten years' apprenticeship to her caprices without any other payment than the pleasure of having endured them. She will regard your disobedience as rebellion to her judgement, and resent it with acrimony.

BEAUFORT. Oh misery of dependence!

CENSOR. There is but one thing in the world can excuse your seeking Miss Stanley.

BEAUFORT. Whatever it may be, I shall agree to it with transport. Name it.

CENSOR. Insanity.

BEAUFORT. Censor, at such a time as this, raillery is unpardonable.

CENSOR. Attend to me, then, in sober sadness. You must give up all thoughts of quitting this house, till the ferocity of your learned aunt is abated.

BEAUFORT. Impossible!

CENSOR. I will go to Miss Stanley myself, and bring you an account of her situation.

BEAUFORT. Would you have me, then, *submit* to this tyrant?

CENSOR. Would I have a farmer, after sowing a field, not wait to reap the harvest?

BEAUFORT. I will endeavour, then, to yield to your counsel; but remember, Censor, if I do not speedily find the good effects of my self-denial, I will boldly and firmly give up forever all hopes of advantage, for the greater blessing of claiming my lovely Cecilia!

CENSOR. And do you, Beaufort, remember in turn, that had I believed you capable of a different conduct, I had never ranked you as my friend.

BEAUFORT. Oh Censor, how soothing to my anxiety is your approbation! Hasten, then, to the sweet sufferer— tell her my heart bleeds at her unmerited distresses— tell her that, with her fugitive self, peace and happiness both flew this mansion— tell her that when we meet—

CENSOR. Do you suppose I can find no better topic for conversation, than making soft speeches by proxy?

BEAUFORT. Tell her, at least, how much—

CENSOR. My good friend, I am not ignorant that lovers, fops, fine ladies and chambermaids have all charters for talking nonsense; it is a part of their business; but I never yet heard of any order of men so unfortunate as to be under a necessity of listening to them.

[*Exit.*

BEAUFORT. Dear, injured Cecilia! Why cannot I be myself the bearer of the faith I have plighted thee?— prostrate myself at thy feet, mitigate thy sorrows, and share or redress thy wrongs! Even while I submit to captivity, I disdain the chains that bind me— but alas, I rattle them in vain! Oh happy those who to their own industry owe their subsistence, and to their own fatigue and hardships their rest and their affluence!

End of Act the First.

— *Interval* —

Act II.

An apartment at Mrs. Voluble's.

DABLER *is discovered writing.*

DABLER. *The pensive maid, with saddest sorrow sad*— no, hang it, that won't do!—*saddest sad* will never do. With— with— with *mildest*— ay that's it!—*The pensive maid with mildest sorrow sad*— I should like, now, to hear a man mend that line!— I shall never get another equal to it.— Let's see— sad, bad, lad, dad— curse it, there's never a rhyme will do!— Where's *The Art of Poetry*?¹—Oh, here— now we shall have it; [*Reads.*] Add— hold, that will do at once— *with mildest sorrow sad, Shed crystal tears, and sigh to sigh did add.* Admirable! Admirable by all that's good! Now let's try the first stanza. [*Reads.*]

'Ye gentle nymphs, whose hearts are prone to love,
Ah, hear my song, and ah! my song approve;
And ye, ye glorious, mighty sons of fame,
Ye mighty warriors'—

How's this, two *mightys*?— hang it, that won't do!— let's see— ye *glorious* warriors— no, there's *glorious* before— Oh curse it, now I've got it all to do over again!— just as I thought I had finished it!— ye *fighting*— no— ye *towering*, no;— ye— ye— ye— I have it, by Apollo!

Enter BETTY.

BETTY. Sir, here's a person below who—

DABLER. [*Starting up in a rage.*] Now curse me if this is not too much! What do you mean by interrupting me at my studies? How often have I given orders not to be disturbed?

BETTY. I'm sure, sir, I thought there was no harm in just telling you—

DABLER. Tell me nothing!— get out of the room directly!—and take care you never break in upon me again— no, not if the house be on fire!— Go, I say!

BETTY. Yes, sir. [*Aside.*] Lord, how masters and missuses do love scolding!

[*Exit.*]

DABLER. What a provoking intrusion! Just as I had worked myself into the true spirit of poetry!— I shan't recover my ideas this half hour. 'Tis a most barbarous thing that a man's retirement cannot be sacred. [*Sits down to write.*] Ye *fighting*— no, that was not it— ye— ye— ye— Oh curse it, [*Stamping.*] if I have not forgot all I was going to say! I protest, I was upon the point of making as good a poem as any in the language— my numbers flowed— my thoughts were ready— my words glided— but now, all is gone!— all gone and evaporated! [*Claps his hand on his forehead.*] Here's nothing left! Nothing in the world!— What shall I do to compose myself? Suppose I read?— Why, where the deuce are all the things gone? [*Looking over his papers.*] Oh, here— I wonder how my epigram

¹ Sabor & Sill: "Edward Bysshe's *The Art of English Poetry* ... contained a rhyming dictionary, as well as 'Rules for making English Verse' ... It went through nine editions between 1702 and 1762."

will read today— I think I'll show it to Censor— he has seen nothing like it of late. I'll pass it off for— let's see— suppose Pope?— no, it's too smart for Pope— Pope never wrote anything like it!— well then, suppose—

Enter MRS. VOLUBLE.

Oh curse it, another interruption!

MRS. VOLUBLE. I hope, sir, I don't disturb you?— I'm sure I would not disturb you for the world, for I know nothing's so troublesome; and I know you gentlemen writers dislike it of all things; but I only just wanted to know if the windows were shut, for fear of the rain, for I asked Betty if she had been in to see about them, but she said—

DABLER. They'll do very well— pray leave them alone— I am extremely busy;— [*Aside.*] I must leave these lodgings, I see!

MRS. VOLUBLE. Oh sir, I would not stay upon any account, but only sometimes there are such sudden showers, that if the windows are left open, half one's things may be spoilt. And if so much as a paper of yours was to be damaged, [*Shuts it.*] I should never forgive myself, for I'd rather all the poets in the world should be burnt in one great bonfire, than lose so much as the most minikin bit of your writing, though no bigger than my nail.

DABLER. My dear Mrs. Voluble, you are very obliging. [*Aside.*] She's a mighty good sort of woman— I've a great mind to read her that song;— no, this will be better. [*To* MRS. VOLUBLE.] Mrs. Voluble, do you think you can keep a secret?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Oh dear sir, I'll defy anybody to excel me in that! I am more particular scrupulous about secrets than anybody.

DABLER. Well, then, I'll read you a little thing I've just been composing, and you shall tell me your opinion of it. [*Reads.*] *On a Young Lady Blinded by Lightning.*

Fair Cloris, now depriv'd of sight,
To error ow'd her fate uneven;
Her eyes were so refulgent bright
The blundering lightning thought them heaven.

What do you think of it, Mrs. Voluble?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Oh, I think it the prettiest, most moving thing I ever heard in my life.

DABLER. Do you indeed?— pray sit down, Mrs. Voluble, I protest I never observed you were standing.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Dear sir, you're vastly polite.

[Seats herself.]

DABLER. So you really think it's pretty good, do you?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Oh dear yes, sir; I never heard anything I liked so well in my life. It's prodigious fine, indeed!

DABLER. Pray don't sit so near the door, Mrs. Voluble; I'm afraid you will take cold. [*Aside.*] 'Tis amazing to me where this woman picked up so much taste!

MRS. VOLUBLE. But I hope, sir, my being here is of no hindrance to you, because, if it is, I'm sure—

DABLER. [*Looking at his watch.*] No, Mrs. Voluble, I am obliged to go out myself now. I leave my room in your charge; let care be taken that no human being enters it in my absence, and don't let one of my papers be touched or moved upon any account.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Sir, I shall lock the door, and put the key in my pocket. Nobody shall so much as know there's a paper in the house.

[*Exit* DABLER.

MRS. VOLUBLE. I believe it's almost a week since I've had a good rummage of them myself. Let's see, is not this 'Sprit Night? Yes; and he won't come home till very late, so I think I may as well give them a fair look over at once. [*Sits herself at the table.*] Well, now, how nice and snug this is! What's here? [*Takes up a paper.*] "To Cleora"—

Enter BOB.

BOB. Mother, here's Miss Jenny, the milliner maker.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Is there? Ask her to come up.

BOB. Lord, mother, why you would not have her come into Mr. Dabler's room? Why, if he—

MRS. VOLUBLE. What's that to you? Do you suppose I don't know what I'm about? You're never easy but when you're a-talking—always prate, prate, prate about something or other. Go and ask her to come up, I say.

BOB. Lord, one can't speak a word!

[*Exit.*

MRS. VOLUBLE. Have done, will you? Mutter, mutter, mutter;— It will be a prodigious treat to Miss Jenny to come into this room.

Enter MISS JENNY.

Miss Jenny, how do do, my dear? This is very obliging of you. Do you know whose room you are in?

MISS JENNY. No, ma'am.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Mr. Dabler's own room, I assure you! And here's all his papers; these are what he calls his *miniscrips*.

MISS JENNY. Well, what a heap of them!

MRS. VOLUBLE. And he's got five or six boxes brimful besides.

MISS JENNY. Dear me! Five or six boxes?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Now if you'll promise not to tell a living soul a word of the matter, I'll read you some of them: but be sure, now, you don't tell.

MISS JENNY. Dear no, I would not for ever so much.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Well, then, let's see— what's this? [*Takes up a paper.*] *Elegy on the Slaughter of a Lamb.*

MISS JENNY. Oh, pray let's have that.

MRS. VOLUBLE. I'll put it aside, and look out some more. *A Dialogue between a Tear and a Sigh—Verses on a Young Lady's Fainting Away—*

MISS JENNY. That must be pretty indeed! I dare say it will make us cry.

MRS. VOLUBLE. *An Epitaph on a Fly killed by a Spider; an—*

Enter BOB.

BOB. Mother, here's a young gentlewoman wants you.

MRS. VOLUBLE. A young gentlewoman?— who can it be?

BOB. I never see her before. She's a deal smarter than Miss Jenny.

MISS JENNY. I'm sure I'd have come more dressed, if I'd known of seeing anybody.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Well, I can't imagine who it is. I'm sure I'm in a sad pickle. Ask her into the parlour.

MISS JENNY. Dear ma'am, you'd better by half see her here; all the fine folks have their company up stairs, for I see a deal of the quality by carrying things to their homes.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Well then, ask her to come up.

BOB. But suppose Mr. Dabler—

MRS. VOLUBLE. Mind your own business, sir, and don't think to teach me. Go and ask her up this minute.

BOB. I'm going, a'n't I?

[*Exit.*

MRS. VOLUBLE. I do verily believe that boy has no equal for prating; I never saw the like of him— his tongue's always a-running.

Re-enter BOB, *followed by* CECILIA *with a small bag.*

BOB. Mother, here's the young gentlewoman.

CECILIA. I presume, ma'am, you are Mrs. Voluble?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Yes, ma'am.

CECILIA. I hope you will excuse this intrusion; and I must beg the favour of a few minutes private conversation with you.

MRS. VOLUBLE. To be sure, ma'am. Bobby, get the lady a chair. I hope, ma'am, you'll excuse Bobby's coming in before you; he's a sad rude boy for manners.

BOB. Why the young gentlewoman bid me herself; 'twas no fault of mine.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Be quiet, will you? Jabber, jabber, jabber!— Pray, ma'am, do sit down.

CECILIA. I thank you, I had rather stand. I have but a few words to say to you, and will not detain you five minutes.

MISS JENNY. [*Apart to* MRS. VOLUBLE.] Why Lord, Mrs. Voluble, I know who that lady is as well as I know you! Why, it's Miss Stanley, that we've been making such a heap of things for.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Why you don't say so! What, the bride?

MISS JENNY. Yes.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Well, I protest I thought I'd seen her somewhere before. [*To CECILIA.*]
Ma'am, I'm quite ashamed of not recollecting you sooner, but I hope your goodness will excuse it. I hope, ma'am, the good lady your aunt is well?— that is, your aunt that is to be?

CECILIA. If you mean Lady Smatter— I believe she is well.—

MRS. VOLUBLE. I'm sure, ma'am, I've the greatest respect in the world for her Ladyship, though I have not the pleasure to know her; but I hear all about her from Mrs. Hobbins— to be sure, ma'am, you know Mrs. Hobbins, my lady's housekeeper?

CECILIA. Certainly: it was by her direction I came hither.

MRS. VOLUBLE. That was very obliging of her, I'm sure, and I take your coming as a very particular favour. I hope, ma'am, all the rest of the family's well? But I beg pardon for my ill manners, ma'am, for to be sure, I ought first to have asked for Mr. Beaufort. I hope he's well, ma'am?

CECILIA. I— I don't know— I believe— I fancy he is.—

MRS. VOLUBLE. Well, he's a most agreeable gentleman indeed, ma'am, and I think—

CECILIA. If it is inconvenient for me to speak to you now—

MRS. VOLUBLE. Not at all, ma'am; Miss Jenny and Bobby can as well divert themselves in the parlour.

MISS JENNY. Dear me, yes, we'll go directly.

CECILIA. No, it is not necessary.

MISS JENNY. Then we'll keep at this side, and we shan't hear what you say. Come, then, Master Bobby. [*Aside to BOB.*] She's very melancholic, I think, for a young lady just going to be married.

[MISS JENNY and BOB *walk aside.*]

CECILIA. The motive which has induced me to give you this trouble, Mrs. Voluble—

MRS. VOLUBLE. Dear ma'am, pray don't talk of trouble, for I'm sure I think it none. I take it quite as a favour to receive a visit from such a young lady as you. But pray, ma'am, sit down; I'm quite ashamed to see you standing— it's enough to tire you to death.

CECILIA. It is not of the least consequence. A very unexpected and unhappy event has obliged me, most abruptly, to quit the house of Lady Smatter, and if—

MRS. VOLUBLE. Dear ma'am, you surprise me! But I hope you have not parted upon account of any disagreement?

CECILIA. I am not now at liberty to say. I have, at present, insuperable objections to visiting any of my friends; and Mrs. Hobbins said she believed you would be able to recommend me to some place where I can be properly accommodated till my affairs are settled.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Oh dear yes, ma'am, I know many. Let's see—there's one in King Street— and there's one in Charles Street—and there's another in— Lord, I dare say I know an

hundred! Only it is not every place will do for such a lady as you. But pray, ma'am, where may Mr. Beaufort be? I hope he has no hand in this affair?

CECILIA. Pray ask me no questions!

MRS. VOLUBLE. I'm sure, ma'am, I don't mean to be troublesome; and as to asking questions, I make a point not to do it, for I think that curiosity is the most impertinent thing in the world. I suppose, ma'am, he knows of your being here?

CECILIA. No, no— he knows nothing about me.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Well, that's quite surprising, upon my word!

CECILIA. Can you name no place to me, Mrs. Voluble, that you think will be eligible?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Yes sure, I can, ma'am. I know a lady in the very next street, who has very genteel apartments that will come to about five or six guineas a week,¹ for to be sure, a young lady of your fortune would not choose to give less.

CECILIA. Alas!

MRS. VOLUBLE. Dear ma'am, don't vex so.

CECILIA. I must entreat you, Mrs. Voluble, not to speak of my affairs at present; my mind is greatly disordered, and I cannot bear the subject.

MRS. VOLUBLE. I won't say another word. To be sure, nothing's so improper as talking of private affairs— But what think you, ma'am, of that place I mentioned?

CECILIA. I mean to be quite private, and should wish for a situation less expensive.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Why sure, ma'am, you would not think of giving less than five guineas a week? That's just nothing out of such a fortune as yours! Forty thousand pounds—!

CECILIA. Talk to me no more of my fortune, I beseech you— I have none!— I have lost it all!—

MRS. VOLUBLE. Dear ma'am, why, you put me quite in a cold sweat! Lost all your fortune?

CECILIA. I know not what I say!— I can talk no longer;— pray excuse my incoherence.
[*Walks away. Aside.*] Oh Beaufort, my only hope and refuge! Hasten to my support!

MRS. VOLUBLE. Well, this is quite what I call a *nigma*! Miss Jenny, my dear, come here.

MISS JENNY. Lost all her fortune? Lack a daisy! Why, then who's to pay for all our things? Why, we've got such a heap as will come to a matter of I don't know how much.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Well, to be sure it's a sad thing; but my notion is she has been falling out with her sweetheart, and if so may be her head's a little touched. Them things often happens in the quarrels of lovers.

Enter BETTY.

BETTY. Ma'am, here's a gentleman wants the young lady.

¹ An exorbitant rent, as a pound a week would provide a comfortable average lodging (*cf* Liza Picard: *Dr. Johnson's London*, pp. 230-231). One guinea = 21 shillings = one pound, one shilling. While there are multiple King Streets and Charles Streets in London, they were closely paired at Covent Garden (by this time low-brow) and at St. James Square (a prestige address).

CECILIA. [*Starting.*] 'Tis surely Beaufort!— Beg him to walk upstairs.— Mrs. Voluble, will you excuse this liberty?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Yes, sure, ma'am.

[*Exit* BETTY.

CECILIA. [*Aside.*] Dear, constant Beaufort!— how grateful to my heart is this generous alacrity!

MRS. VOLUBLE. [*Aside to* MISS JENNY.] I dare say this is her sweetheart.

MISS JENNY. Dear me, how nice! We shall hear all they say!

Enter CENSOR.

CECILIA. Mr. Censor!— good heaven!

CENSOR. Miss Stanley, I will not say I rejoice— for, in truth, in this place I grieve to see you.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Pray, sir, won't you sit down?

CENSOR. I thank you, madam, I had rather stand. Miss Stanley, I must beg the honour of speaking to you alone.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Oh sir, if you like it, I'm sure we'll go.

CENSOR. Ay, pray do.

MRS. VOLUBLE. [*Aside to* MISS JENNY.] This gentleman is by no means what I call a polite person. [*To* CENSOR.] Sir, I hope you'll put the young lady in better spirits; she has been very low indeed since she came; and, sir, if you should want for anything, I beg—

CENSOR. Do, good madam, be quick. I am in haste.

MRS. VOLUBLE. We're going directly, sir. Come, Miss Jenny. Bobby, you great oaf, what do you stand gaping there for? Why don't you go?

BOB. Why, you would not have me go faster than I can, would you?

MRS. VOLUBLE. I would have you hold your tongue, Mr. prate-apace! Always wrangling and wrangling. Come, Miss Jenny!

MISS JENNY. I don't see why we might not as well have stayed here.

[*Exeunt.*

CECILIA. By what means, sir, have you discovered me?

CENSOR. First let me ask you what possible allurements could draw you under this roof? Did you mean, by the volubility of folly here, to overpower the sadness of recollection?

CECILIA. No, no! I came hither by the dire guidance of necessity. I am sending a porter to Mr. Stipend, from whom I expect further intelligence speedily. But tell me, I beseech you, whence you had your information of the calamity that has befallen me? and who directed you hither? and whether my letter has been shown or concealed?—and what I am to infer from *your* being the first to seek me?

CENSOR. Pray go on!

CECILIA. Sir?

CENSOR. Nay, if you ask forty more questions without waiting for an answer, I have messages that will more than keep pace with your enquiries; therefore ask on, and spare not!

CECILIA. [*Disconcerted.*] No, sir, I have done.

CENSOR. How? Have I, then, discovered the art of silencing a lover? Hasten to me, ye wearied guardians of pining youth, I will tell ye a secret precious to ye as repose!

CECILIA. Spare this raillery, I beseech you;—and keep me not in suspense as to the motive of your visit.

CENSOR. My first motive is the desire of seeing, my second of serving, you; if indeed, the ill-usage you have experienced from one banker will not intimidate you from trusting in another.

CECILIA. How am I to understand you?

CENSOR. As an honest man! Or, in other words, as a man to whose friendship distressed innocence has a claim indisputable.

CECILIA. You amaze me!

CENSOR. It must be some time ere your affairs can be settled, and your present situation will teach you many lessons you are ill prepared to learn. Consider *me*, therefore, as your banker, and draw upon me without reserve.

CECILIA. Stay, stay Mr. Censor!—amazement has, indeed, silenced me, but it must not make me forget myself. I—

CENSOR. Probably you suspect my motives? and if you do, I am the last man whom your doubts will offend; in fact, suspicion in worldly transactions is but another word for common sense.

CECILIA. Is it, then, possible you can think so ill of all others and yet be so generous yourself?

CENSOR. Will any man follow an example he abhors?

CECILIA. Oh how little are you known, and how unjustly are you judged!

CENSOR. In truth, madam, you will, indeed, find me an odd fellow: a fellow who can wish you well without loving you, and be active in your service without any sinister view; a fellow unmoved by beauty, yet zealous in the cause of distress. If you accept my good offices, *I* shall ever after be *your* debtor for the esteem your acceptance will manifest.

CECILIA. I am charmed with your generous offer, and shall henceforward know better how to value you; but I must not, *cannot*, accept it. I hope that someday, some woman ... [*She realizes she is overstepping her bounds.*]—But tell me, for uncertainty is torture, have you or have you not been at Lady Smatter's?

CENSOR. I have; and I come hither loaded with as many messages as ever abigail¹ was charged with for the milliner of a fantastic bride. Lady Smatter offers you her

¹ The name of the handmaid of King David in the biblical Book of Samuel, proverbial for a lady's maid and frequently used in plays

protection— which is commonly the first step towards the insolence of avowed superiority; and Beaufort—

CECILIA. Beaufort?— Good Heaven!— did Mr. Beaufort know whither you were coming?

CENSOR. He did; and charged me with as many vows, supplications, promises, and tender nonsenses, as if he took my memory for some empty habitation that his fancy might furnish at its pleasure. He commissioned me—

CECILIA. Oh heaven! [*Weeps.*]

CENSOR. Why how now? He commissioned me, I say—

CECILIA. Oh faithless Beaufort! Lost, lost Cecilia!

CENSOR. — to sue for him— kneel for him—

CECILIA. Leave me, leave me, Mr. Censor!— I can hear no more.

CENSOR. Nay, prithee, madam, listen to his message.

CECILIA. No, sir, never! At such a time as this, a message is an insult! He must know I was easily to be found, or he would not have sent it, and, knowing that, whose duty was it to have sought me?— Go, go, hasten to your friend— tell him I heard all that it became me to hear, and that I understood him too well to hear more: tell him that I will save both him and myself the disgrace of a further explanation— tell him, in short, that I renounce him for ever!

CENSOR. Faith, madam, this is all beyond my comprehension.

CECILIA. To desert me at such a time as this! To know my abode, yet fail to seek it! To allow my wounded heart, bleeding in all the anguish of recent calamity, to doubt his faith, and suspect his tenderness!

CENSOR. I am so totally unacquainted with the logic employed by fine ladies, that—

CECILIA. Once more, Mr. Censor, I must beg you to leave me. Pardon my impatience, but I cannot converse at present. Ere long, perhaps, time and reason may restore my tranquility.

CENSOR. Time, indeed, may possibly stand your friend, but I know not what right you have to expect succour from Reason if you are determined not to hear it. Beaufort, I say—

CECILIA. Why will you thus persecute me? Nothing can extenuate the coldness, the neglect, the insensibility of his conduct. Tell him that it admits no palliation, and that henceforth— no, tell him nothing— I will send him no message— I will receive none from him— I will tear his image from my heart— I will forget, if possible, that there I cherished it!—

Enter MRS. VOLUBLE.

MRS. VOLUBLE. I hope I don't disturb you, sir? Pray, ma'am, don't let me be any hindrance to you; I only just come to ask if you would not have a bit of fire, for I think it's grown quite cold. What say you, sir?

CENSOR. Intolerable! Will you, Miss Stanley, allow me five minutes conversation to explain—

MRS. VOLUBLE. I beg that my being here may not be any stop to you, for I'll go directly if I'm in the way. I've no notion of prying into other people's affairs— indeed, I quite make it a rule not to do it, for I'm sure I've business enough of my own, without minding other peoples. Why, I've got to—

CENSOR. Oh pray, good madam, don't make your complaints to me— I am hard of heart, and shall be apt to hear them without the least compassion. Miss Stanley—

MRS. VOLUBLE. Nay, sir, I was only going—

CENSOR. Do pritheee, good woman, give me leave to speak. Miss Stanley, I say—

MRS. VOLUBLE. Good woman! I assure you, sir, I'm not used to be spoke to in such a way as that.

CENSOR. If I have called you by an appellation opposite to your character, I beg your pardon; but—

MRS. VOLUBLE. I can tell you, sir, whatever you may think of it, I was never called so before; besides—

CENSOR. Miss Stanley, some other time—

MRS. VOLUBLE. Besides, sir, I say, I think in one's own house it's very hard if—

CENSOR. Intolerable! Surely this woman was sent to satirize the use of speech! Once more—

MRS. VOLUBLE. I say, sir, I think it's very hard if—

CENSOR. Miss Stanley, your most obedient!

[Exit abruptly.]

MRS. VOLUBLE. Well, I must needs say, I think this is the rudest fine gentleman among all my acquaintance. 'Good woman', indeed! I won't so much as go downstairs to open the street door for him.

CECILIA. [*Aside*] Hast thou not, Fortune, exhausted now thy utmost severity?— Reduced to poverty— abandoned by the world— and now betrayed by Beaufort— what more can I fear?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Lord, ma'am, sure you a'n't a-crying?

CECILIA. Loss of fortune I could have borne with patience— change of situation I could have suffered with fortitude— but such a stroke as this!—

MRS. VOLUBLE. [*Aside*] Poor young lady!— I declare I don't know what to think of to entertain her.

CECILIA. Oh Beaufort! Had our situations been reversed, would such have been *my* conduct?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Come, dear ma'am, what signifies all this fretting? I'm sure I have my misfortunes as well as other people: only think, ma'am, what a plague my son Bobby is to me! If—

CECILIA. Oh for a little repose!— leave me to myself, I beseech you! I can neither speak nor listen to you;— Go!— pray go!— Alas, I know not what I say! I forget that this house is yours, and that I have no right even to the shelter its roof affords me.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Dear ma'am, pray take a little comfort—

CECILIA. Have you, madam, any room which for a few hours you can allow me to call my own?— where, unmolested and alone, I may endeavour to calm my mind, and settle some plan for my future conduct?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Why, ma'am, the room overhead is just such another as this, and if it's agreeable—

CECILIA. Pray show it me— I'm sure it will do.

MRS. VOLUBLE. I only wish, ma'am, it was better for your sake; however, I'll make it as comfortable as ever I can, and as soon—

[*Exit, talking, with CECILIA.*]

The scene changes to ...

Act II, Scene 2.

The library at Lady Smatter's that evening.

LADY SMATTER, MRS. SAPIENT, DABLER *and* CODGER,
seated at a round table covered with books.

LADY SMATTER. Now before we begin our literary subjects, allow me to remind you of the rule established at our last meeting, that everyone is to speak his real sentiments, and no flattery is to taint our discussions.

ALL. Agreed.

LADY SMATTER. This is the smallest assembly we have had yet; some or other of our members fail us every time.

DABLER. But where such luminaries are seen as Lady Smatter and Mrs. Sapient, all other could only appear to be eclipsed.

MRS. SAPIENT. Oh fie, Mr. Dabler!

LADY SMATTER. What have you brought to regale us with tonight, Mr. Dabler?

DABLER. Me? Dear ma'am, nothing!

LADY SMATTER. Oh barbarous!

MRS. SAPIENT. Surely you cannot have been so cruel? For, in my opinion, to give pain causelessly is rather disobliging.

DABLER. Dear ladies, you know you may command me; but, I protest, I don't think I have anything worth your hearing.

LADY SMATTER. Let us judge for ourselves. Bless me, Mr. Codger, how insensible you are! Why do you not join in our entreaties?

CODGER. For what, madam?

LADY SMATTER. For a poem, to be sure.

CODGER. Madam, I understood Mr. Dabler he had nothing worth your hearing.

LADY SMATTER. But surely you did not believe him?

CODGER. I knew no reason, madam, to doubt him.

LADY SMATTER. Oh you Goth!¹ Come, dear Mr. Dabler, produce something at once, if only to shame him.

DABLER. Your Ladyship has but to speak. [*Takes a paper from his pocket book, and reads.*]

On a Certain Party of Beaux Esprits

Learning, here, doth pitch her tent,
Science, here, her seeds doth scatter;
Learning, in form of Sapiënt,
Science, in guise of heav'nly Smatter.

LADY SMATTER. Oh charming! Beautiful lines indeed.

MRS. SAPIENT. Elegant and poignant to the last degree!

LADY SMATTER. What do *you* think, Mr. Codger, of this poem? [*Whispering him.*] To be sure, the compliment to Mrs. Sapiënt is posterously overstrained.

MRS. SAPIENT. Why, Mr. Codger, you don't speak a word! [*Whispering him.*] Between friends, don't you think the choice of Lady Smatter for Science to be rather unskillful?

CODGER. Why, madam, you give me no time to think at all.

LADY SMATTER. Well, now to other matters. I have a little observation to offer upon a line of Pope; he says,

“Most Women have no character at all.”²

Now I should be glad to know, if this was true in the time of Pope, why people should complain so much of the depravity of the present age?

DABLER. Your Ladyship has asked a question that might perplex a Solomon.

MRS. SAPIENT. It is, indeed, surprisingly ingenious.

DABLER. Yes, and it reminds me of a little foolish thing which I composed some time ago.

LADY SMATTER. Oh pray let us hear it.

DABLER. Your Ladyship's commands—

The lovely Iris, young and fair,
Possess'd each charm of Face and air
That with the Cyprian³ might compare;
So sweet her Face, so soft her mind,
So mild she speaks— she looks so kind—
To hear— might melt!— to see— might blind!

¹ = Member of a Germanic tribe that contributed to the fall of Rome. In this context, a barbarian or Philistine.

² Sabor & Sill: “Misquoting line two of Pope's *Moral Essays* (1731-5), Epistle II, ‘To a Lady: Of the Characters of Women.’ ” Note that ‘character’ in this period is a synonym for reputation; Pope means simply that few women are known outside the home.

³ = Aphrodite, goddess of love, who was born in the sea near Cyprus

LADY SMATTER AND MRS. SAPIENT. [*Together.*]

Oh elegant! Enchanting! Delicious!

Oh delightful! Pathetic! Delicate!

LADY SMATTER. Why Mr. Codger, have you no soul? Is it possible you can be unmoved by such poetry as this?

CODGER. I was considering, madam, what might be the allusion to which Mr. Dabler referred, when he said he was *reminded* of this little foolish thing, as he was pleased to call it himself.

DABLER. [*Aside.*] I should like to toss that old fellow in a blanket!

CODGER. Now, sir, be so good as to gratify me by relating what may be the connection between your song, and the foregoing conversation?

DABLER. [*Pettishly.*] Sir, I only meant to read it to the ladies.

LADY SMATTER. I'm sure you did us great honour.

DABLER. [*Aside.*] What an old curmudgeon!

CODGER. Madam, to the best of my apprehension, I conceive your Ladyship has totally mistaken that line of Pope which says 'Most women have no character at all'.

LADY SMATTER. Mistaken? How so, sir? [*Aside to DABLER.*] I begin to think the poor creature is superannuated.

DABLER. So do I, ma'am; I have observed it for some time.

CODGER. By 'no character', madam, he only means—

LADY SMATTER. A bad character, to be sure!

CODGER. There, madam, lies your Ladyship's mistake; he means, I say—

LADY SMATTER. Oh dear sir, don't trouble yourself to tell me his meaning;— I dare say I shall be able to make it out.

MRS. SAPIENT. [*Aside to DABLER.*] How irritable is her temper!

DABLER. Oh, intolerably!

CODGER. Your Ladyship, madam, will not hear me. I was going—

LADY SMATTER. If you please, sir, we'll drop the subject, for I rather fancy you will give me no new information— do you think he will, Mr. Dabler?

CODGER. Mr. Dabler, Madam, is not a competent judge of the case, as—

DABLER. [*Rising.*] Not a judge, sir? Not a judge of poetry?

CODGER. Not in the present circumstance, sir, because, as I was going to say—

DABLER. Nay then, sir, I'm sure I'm a judge of nothing!

CODGER. That may be, sir, but is not to the present purpose; I was going—

DABLER. Suppose, sir, we refer to the ladies? Pray, now, ladies, which do *you* think the most adequate judge of poetry, Mr. Codger, or your humble servant? Speak sincerely, for I hate flattery.

MRS. SAPIENT. I would by no means be so ill bred as to determine for Mr. Dabler in the presence of Mr. Codger, because *I* have always thought that a preference of one person implies less approbation of another; yet—

CODGER. Pray, madam, let me speak; the reason, I say—

MRS. SAPIENT. Yet the well-known skill of Mr. Dabler in this delightful art—

CODGER. Madam, this interruption is somewhat injudicious, since it prevents my explaining—

MRS. SAPIENT. [*Rising.*] Injudicious, sir? I am sorry, indeed, if I have merited such an accusation: there is nothing I have more scrupulously endeavoured to avoid, for, in *my* opinion, to be injudicious is no mark of an extraordinary understanding.

LADY SMATTER. [*Aside to DABLER.*] How soon she's hurt!

DABLER. Oh most unreasonably!

CODGER. Madam, you will never hear me out; you prevent my explaining the reason, I say, why Mr. Dabler cannot decide upon Lady Smatter's error in judgement—

LADY SMATTER. [*Rising.*] Error in judgement? Really this is very diverting!

CODGER. I say, madam—

LADY SMATTER. It's rather a hard case if, after so many years of intense study and most laborious reading, I am not allowed to criticize a silly line of Pope!

DABLER. —And if I, who, from infancy have devoted all my time to the practice of poetry, am now thought to know nothing of the matter!

MRS. SAPIENT. —And if I, who, during my whole life, have made propriety my peculiar study, am now found to be deficient in it!

LADY SMATTER. And as to this line of Pope—

Enter MRS. HOBBS.

MRS. HOBBS. Mr. Censor, my lady, begs to speak to your Ladyship for only two minutes upon business of consequence.

DABLER. Censor? Suppose we admit him?— [*Aside.*] 'Twill be an admirable opportunity to show him my epigram.

LADY SMATTER. Admit him? What, to ask his opinion of Mr. Codger's critical annotations?

CODGER. My doubt, madam, is, if you will give him time to speak it.

LADY SMATTER. Well, is it agreeable to ye all that Mr. Censor should have admittance? I know it is contrary to rule, yet, as he is one of the wits, and therefore ought to be among us, suppose we indulge him?

CODGER. Madam, I vote against it.

LADY SMATTER. Pray, Mr. Codger, why?

CODGER. Because, madam, there are already so many talkers that I cannot be heard myself.

DABLER. [*Aside to LADY SMATTER.*] You see how it is.

LADY SMATTER. Yes.— Desire Mr. Censor to walk upstairs.

[*Exit* MRS. HOBBSINS.]

CODGER. I am thinking, madam—

Enter CENSOR.

LADY SMATTER. Mr. Censor, your entrance is most critically fortunate; give me leave to present you to our society.

CENSOR. I expected to have seen your Ladyship alone.

LADY SMATTER. Yes, but I have obtained a dispensation for your admittance to our Esprit Party. You must know we are at present discussing a very knotty point, and I should be glad of your opinion upon the merits of the cause.

DABLER. And as soon as that is decided, I have a little choice piece of literature to communicate to you which I think you will allow to be tolerable.

MRS. SAPIENT. And I, too, sir, must take the liberty to appeal to your judgement concerning—

CENSOR. Ay, ay, speak all at a time, and then one hearing may do.— Madam, the business which brings me hither—

DABLER. Business? Oh name not the word in this region of fancy and felicity.

MRS. SAPIENT. That's finely said, Mr. Dabler, and corroborates with an opinion of mine which I have long formed— that business and fancy should be regarded as two things.

CENSOR. Ay, madam, and with one of mine which I hold to be equally singular.

MRS. SAPIENT. What is it, sir?

CENSOR. That London and Paris should be regarded as two places.

MRS. SAPIENT. Pshaw!

CODGER. [*To* LADY SMATTER.] I say, madam, I am thinking—

CENSOR. Then, sir, you are most worthily employed.

DABLER. Suppose, therefore, we change the subject. Oh, apropos, have you seen the new verses that run about?

CENSOR. No. [*Turning to* LADY SMATTER.] Give me leave, madam, to acquaint you with the motive of my present visit.—

LADY SMATTER. You would not be such a Goth as to interrupt our literary discussions?— besides, I must positively have your sentiments upon an argument I have just had with Mr. Codger upon this line of Pope: 'Most women'—

CENSOR. Hold, madam; I am no Don Quixote,¹ and therefore encounter not danger where there is no prospect of reward; nor shall I, till I emulate the fate of Orpheus,¹ ever argue about women ... in their presence.

¹ = I do not tilt at windmills (a reference to Cervantes' mad knight)

DABLER. Ha, Ha! Mighty well said. [*Aside*] A good thought that! I'll turn it into a lampoon, and drop it at the printer's. [*Walks aside and writes in his tablets.*]

CENSOR. [*To* LADY SMATTER.] I have seen Miss Stanley, madam, and—

LADY SMATTER. Did you find her at Mrs. Voluble's?

CENSOR. Yes. [*They whisper.*]

MRS. SAPIENT. [*Listening. Aside.*] So, so, Cecilia is at Mrs. Voluble's? And her engagement to Beaufort ended?— This can only mean some design upon Dabler!

CENSOR. But hear me, madam. I have something to communicate to you which—

LADY SMATTER. Not now, I can attend to nothing now. These evenings, sir, which I devote to the fine arts, must not be contaminated with common affairs.

MRS. SAPIENT. [*Aside.*] I shan't rest till I have dived into this matter! Leave genius exposed to the blandishments of any pretty young hoyden who loses her fortune? Never! [*To* LADY SMATTER.] I am much chagrined, madam, at the disagreeable necessity I am under of breaking abruptly from this learned assembly, but I am called hence by an appointment which I cannot give up without extreme rudeness; and I have long been of opinion that a breach of good manners— is no great sign of politeness.

LADY SMATTER. I am quite sorry to lose you so soon.

[*Exit* MRS. SAPIENT.]

[*Aside.*] What a tiresome creature! How glad I am she's gone!

CODGER. Notwithstanding the rebuff I have just met with, madam, I must say I cannot help thinking that—

LADY SMATTER. Mr. Dabler, what are you writing?

DABLER. Only a little memorandum, ma'am, about business; nothing more.

CODGER. [*Aside.*] I find I can never get in two words at a time.

Enter JACK.

JACK. Ma'am, your Ladyship's most obedient.

LADY SMATTER. Why did not you come sooner, Jack?— we are just broke up.

JACK. I could not help it, upon my word. I came away now just as my tea was poured out at the coffee house, because I would not stay to drink it. I believe I have been to sixteen places since dinner!

CODGER. [*Aside.*] I'm glad Jack's come; I think, at least, I shall make *him* listen to me.

JACK. So this is your Club Room, where you all meet to talk?

CENSOR. Yes; and the principal maxim of the learned members is that no one shall listen to what is said by his neighbour.

¹ Some time after Orpheus' failed attempt to rescue his beloved Eurydice from the underworld, he was torn apart by Maenads in a jealous Dionysian frenzy.

LADY SMATTER. Fie, Mr. Censor! Mr. Dabler, suppose, in compliment to our new member Jack, you were to indulge us with a few lines?

DABLER. Does your Ladyship mean an *extempore*?¹

LADY SMATTER. The thing in the world I should like best.

DABLER. Really, ma'am, I wish for nothing upon earth so much as the honour of your Ladyship's commands— but as to an *extempore*— the amazing difficulty— the genius requisite— the masterly freedom— the— the— the things of that sort it requires make me half afraid of so bold an undertaking.

CENSOR. Sir, your exordium² is of sufficient length.

DABLER. I shall but collect my thoughts, and be ready in a moment.

[*Walks apart.*]

LADY SMATTER. Never mind what Mr. Censor says, Jack, for you know he is a professed Stoic.

CENSOR. Stoic? Pray what does your Ladyship mean?

LADY SMATTER. Well, well, Cynic, then, if you like it better.

CENSOR. You hold, then, that their signification is the same?

LADY SMATTER. Mercy, Mr. Censor, do you expect me to define the exact meaning of every word I make use of?

CENSOR. No, madam, I do not.

While they are speaking, DABLER privately looks at a paper, which he accidentally drops instead of putting in his pocket.

DABLER. [*Advancing.*] I hope I have not detained you long?

LADY SMATTER. Is it possible you can be ready so soon?

DABLER. Oh dear yes, ma'am; these little things are done in a moment; they cost *us* nothing.

In one sole point agree we all,
Both rich and poor, and saint and sinner,
Proud or humble, short or tall—
And that's— a taste for a good dinner.

LADY SMATTER. Oh charming! I never heard anything so satirical in my life.

CENSOR. And so, sir, you composed these lines just now?

DABLER. This very moment.

CENSOR. It seems, then, you can favour your friends whenever they call upon you?

DABLER. Oh yes, sir, with the utmost pleasure.

CENSOR. I should be obliged to you, then, sir, for something more.

¹ = Impromptu or improvisation; a poem improvised on the spot

² = Introduction

DABLER. Sir, you do me honour. I will but take an instant for consideration, and endeavour to obey you. [*Aside.*] So, so!— I thought I should bring him round at last!

[*Walks away, groping for another paper.*]

CENSOR. You can have no objection, I presume, to my choosing you a subject?

DABLER. Sir!

CENSOR. And then with firmer courage your friends may counteract the skepticism of the envious, and boldly affirm that the verses are your own, and unstudied.

DABLER. Really, sir, as to that, I can't say I very much mind what those sort of people say; we authors, sir, are so much inured to illiberal attacks that we regard them as mere marks of celebrity.

CENSOR. You are averse, then, to my proposal?

DABLER. Oh dear no, sir!— not at all— not in the least, I assure you, sir! [*Aside.*] I wish he was in the deserts of Libya with all my Heart!

CENSOR. The readiness of your compliance, sir, proves the promptness of your wit. I will not affront you by naming so hackneyed a theme as Love, but give us, if you please, a spirited couplet upon War.

DABLER. Upon War?— hum— let's see— upon War— ay— but hold! Don't you think, sir, that War is rather a disagreeable subject where there are ladies? For *myself* I can certainly have no objection, but, I must confess, I am rather in doubt whether it will be quite polite to Lady Smatter.

JACK. Why Lord, Mr. Dabler, a man might ride ten times round Hyde Park before you are ready to begin.

DABLER. Sir, things of this importance are not to be settled rashly.

CENSOR. Then, Mr. Dabler, let your verses be upon the use and abuse of time, and address them, if you please, to *that* gentleman. [*Indicating JACK.*]

JACK. Ay, with all my heart— so as he will not keep me long to hear him.

DABLER. Time, did you say?— the use and the abuse of time?— ay, very good, a very good subject— Time?— [*Pauses.*] But pray, sir, pray, Mr. Censor, let me speak a word to you; are you not of opinion— now don't imagine this is any objection of *mine*, no, I like the subject of all things— it is just what I wished— but don't you think that poor Mr. Codger, here, may think it is meant as a sneer at him?

CENSOR. How so, sir?

DABLER. Why, sir, on account of his being so slow, poor man, for he means no harm. Besides, sir, his age!— consider that; we ought all to make allowances for the infirmities of age. I'm sure *I* do— poor old soul!

CENSOR. Well, sir, I shall name but one subject more, and to that if you object, you must give me leave to draw my own inference and to report it accordingly.

DABLER. Sir, I shall be very— I — that is, sir, I shall be quite at your service. [*Aside.*] What a malignant fellow!

CENSOR. Slander.

DABLER. Slander—?!

CENSOR. Yes, sir; what objection can you devise to that?

DABLER. Sir, I should be extremely happy to obey you— nothing could give me greater pleasure, only that just now I am so particularly pressed for time, that— Lady Smatter, I have the honour to wish your Ladyship good night.

[*Going.*

JACK. [*Stopping him.*] Fair play, fair play! You shan't go till you have made the verses.

DABLER. Upon my word, sir—

LADY SMATTER. Come, Mr. Dabler!— I see you relent.

DABLER. Why— hem!— if— if your Ladyship insists— Slander, I think it was?— [*Aside. Holding his hand before his eyes, and walking about.*] Not one thought— not one thought to save me from ruin!

CENSOR. Why, Mr. Codger, what are you about? Is it not rather melancholy to sit by yourself at the table, and not join at all in the conversation?

CODGER. [*Raising his head.*] Perhaps, sir, I may conceive myself to be somewhat slighted.

DABLER. [*Pettishly.*] Upon my word, if you all keep talking so incessantly, it is not possible for a man to know what he is about.

CODGER. I have not spoken before for this half hour, and yet I am as good as bid to hold my tongue! [*Leans again on the table.*]

LADY SMATTER. My good friend, we should all be extremely happy to hear you, if you were not so long in coming to the point; is it not so, Jack?

JACK. To be sure, ma'am: I have made a journey to Bath and back again, while he has been considering whether his next wig should be a bob or a full-bottom!

CODGER. Son Jack, this is very unseemly discourse—

LADY SMATTER. Nay, pray don't scold him.

CODGER. [*Aside, and reclining as before.*] I verily believe they'd rather hear Jack than me!

JACK. Lord, Mr. Dabler, I believe you are dreaming. Will you never be ready?

DABLER. Sir, this is really unconscionable! I was just upon the point of finishing—and now you have put it all out of my head!

CENSOR. Well, Mr. Dabler, you have now sufficiently satisfied us of your skill at an *extempore*. We release you from all further trouble.

DABLER. Sir, making verses is no sort of trouble to me, I assure you— however, if you don't choose to hear these which I have been composing—

LADY SMATTER. Oh but *I* do, so pray—

JACK. Pho, pho, he has not got them ready.

DABLER. You are mistaken, sir, these are quite ready— entirely finished—and lodged here!
[*Pointing to his head*]

CENSOR. If they are ready, you may as well repeat them.

DABLER. No, sir, no, since you declined at first, I am above compelling you to hear them at all. Lady Smatter, the next time I have the honour of seeing your Ladyship, I shall be proud to have your opinion of them.

[*Exit hastily.*]

CENSOR. Poor wretch!— what's this? [*Picks up the paper dropped by DABLER.*] So! So! So—!

Enter BEAUFORT.

BEAUFORT. [*To* LADY SMATTER.] Pardon me, madam, if I interrupt you, I am come but for a moment. [*Apart to* CENSOR.] Censor, have you no heart? Are you totally divested of humanity?

CENSOR. Why, what's the matter?

BEAUFORT. The matter? You have kept me on the rack— you have wantonly tortured me with the most intolerable suspense that the mind of man is capable of enduring. Where is Cecilia?—have you given her my message?— have you brought me any answer?— why am I kept in ignorance of everything I wish or desire to know?

CENSOR. Is your harangue finished?

BEAUFORT. No, sir, it is hardly begun!

CENSOR. At least, my good friend, object not to raillery in me, till you learn to check railing in yourself.

LADY SMATTER. Beaufort, after an education such as I have bestowed upon you, this weak anxiety about mere private affairs is unpardonable;— especially in the presence of people of learning.

BEAUFORT. I waited, madam, till Mrs. Sapient and Mr. Dabler were gone.

JACK. [*Aside.*] Not a word of me! I'll e'en sneak away before he finds me out.

[*Going.*]

CODGER. Son Jack, please to stop.

JACK. Sir, I can't; my time's expired.

CODGER. Jack, come hither and sit by me; you may hear me, I think, if nobody else will. Sit down, I say.

JACK. Lord, sir—

CODGER. Sit down when I bid you, and listen to what I am going to tell you.

[*Makes* JACK *seat himself at the table, and talks to him.*]

LADY SMATTER. Beaufort, let me speak to Mr. Censor. What have you done, sir, about this poor girl? Did you give her my message?

CENSOR. She had too much sense, too much spirit, too much dignity to hear it.

LADY SMATTER. Indeed?

CENSOR. Yes; and therefore I should propose—

LADY SMATTER. Sir, I must beg you not to interfere in this transaction; it is not that I mean to doubt either your knowledge or your learning, far from it;— but I have reason to believe that I have read as many books as you have.

BEAUFORT. Oh those eternal books! Would to heaven there were not one in the world!

LADY SMATTER. Oh monstrous!

BEAUFORT. Once again, madam, I entreat, I conjure—

LADY SMATTER. I will not hear a word more. Wish there was not a book in the world? Monstrous, shocking, and horrible! Beaufort, you are a lost wretch! I tremble for your intellects; and if you do not speedily conquer this degenerate passion, I shall abandon you without remorse to that ignorance and depravity to which I see you are plunging.

[*Exit.*

BEAUFORT. Hard-hearted, vain, ostentatious woman! Go, then! I will fly to Cecilia, and I will tear myself from her no more. If *without* her I can receive no happiness, why *with* her should I be apprehensive of misery?

CENSOR. Beaufort, is not security from want the basis of all happiness? Will the presence of Cecilia soften the hardships of penury? Will her smiles teach you to forget the pangs of famine?

BEAUFORT. Well, well, tell me where I can find her, and she shall direct my future conduct herself.

CENSOR. I have a scheme upon Lady Smatter for you, which I think has some chance of succeeding.

BEAUFORT. Till I have seen Cecilia, I can attend to nothing else.

CENSOR. Then she has more wisdom than her lover, for she charged me to command your absence.

BEAUFORT. My absence? I don't understand you.— Is Cecilia offended?

CENSOR. Yes, and most marvelously, for neither herself nor her neighbours know why.

BEAUFORT. Then I will not stay another minute!— I will find other methods to discover her abode.

[*Going.*

CENSOR. Prithee, Beaufort: my scheme upon Lady Smatter— !

BEAUFORT. I will not hear it! I disdain Lady Smatter! It is time to shake off the yoke and dare to be poor, that I may learn to be happy!

[*Exit.*

CENSOR. Shall this noble fellow be suffered to ruin himself? No! The world has too few like him. Jack, a word with you— Jack, I say!— are you asleep, man?

CODGER. Asleep? Surely not.

CENSOR. If you're awake, answer!

JACK. [*Yawning.*] Why, what's the matter?

CENSOR. Wake, man, wake and I'll tell you.

CODGER. How, asleep? Pray, Son Jack, what's the reason of your going to sleep when I'm talking to you?

JACK. Why, sir, I have so little time for sleep, that I thought I might as well take the opportunity.

CODGER. Son Jack, son Jack, you are verily an ignoramus!

CENSOR. Come hither, Jack. I have something to propose to you—

CODGER. Sir, I have not yet done with him myself. Whereabouts was I, son, when you fell asleep?

JACK. Why there, sir, where you are now.

CODGER. Son, you are always answering like a blockhead; I mean whereabouts was I in my story?

JACK. What story, sir?

CODGER. How? Did not you hear my story about your aunt Deborah's poultry?

JACK. Lord, no, sir!

CODGER. Not hear it? Why what were you thinking of?

JACK. How many places I've got to go tonight.

CODGER. This is the most indecorous behaviour I ever saw! You don't deserve ever to hear me tell a story again! In fact, I never intend to utter a word more in this room, and I shall quit the place directly!

[*Exit.*

JACK. Is he gone? Huzzah! I was never so tired in my life.

[*Going.*

CENSOR. Hold! I yet have something to say to you.

JACK. Can't possibly stay to hear you.

CENSOR. On this occasion I believe you can. And you will!— Jack, are you willing to serve your brother?

JACK. That I am! I would ride to York to see what's o'clock for him.

CENSOR. I will put you in a way to assist him with less trouble, though upon a matter of at least equal importance.—

CENSOR *begins to whisper to* JACK; JACK *begins to laugh.*

End of Act the Second.

— *Interval* —

Act III.

A parlour at Mrs. Voluble's.

MRS. VOLUBLE, MRS. WHEEDLE, MISS JENNY and BOB are seated at a round table at supper; BETTY is waiting.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Betty, give me some beer. Come, Miss Jenny, here's to your love and mine.

[*They drink.*

Well, this is a sad thing indeed!

MRS. WHEEDLE. I do believe there's more misfortunes in our way of business than in any in the world; the fine ladies have no more conscience than a Tartar— they keep ordering and ordering, and think no more of paying than they do of working for a living.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Ah, the times are very bad! Very bad, indeed!— all the gentlefolks going broke— poor Mr. Mite, the rich cheesemonger at the corner is quite knocked up.¹

MRS. WHEEDLE. You don't say so?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Very true, indeed.

MISS JENNY. Why, it is but a week ago that I met him a-driving his own trap².

MRS. WHEEDLE. Well, who'd have thought of that? Pray, Mrs. Betty, give me some bread.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Ah, this is a sad world! A very sad world, indeed! Nothing but ruination going forward from one end of the town to the other. My dear Mrs. Wheedle, you don't eat; pray let me help you to a little slice more.

MRS. WHEEDLE. Oh, I shall do very well; I only wish you'd take care of yourself.

MRS. VOLUBLE. There, that little bit can't hurt you, I'm sure. As to Miss Jenny, she's quite like a crocodile, for she lives upon air.³

MRS. WHEEDLE. No, ma'am, the thing is she laces so tight that she can't eat half her natural victuals.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Ay, ay, that's the way with all the young ladies; they pinch for fine shapes.

BOB. Mother, I wish you'd help *me*— I'm just starved.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Would you have me help you before I've helped the company, you greedy fellow, you? Stay till we've done, can't you?

MISS JENNY. I'll give Master Bobby a piece of mine, if you please, ma'am.

MRS. VOLUBLE. No, no, he can't be very hungry, I'm sure, for he ate a dinner¹ to frighten a horse. There— take that, and be quiet. So, as I was saying—

¹ = Ruined

² = A light two-wheeled carriage with springs

³ Herodotus, in *Inquiries*, Book 2, declared that crocodiles ate nothing in the four winter months. The Renaissance revival of classical learning made this myth proverbial.

BOB. Lord, Mother, you've given me nothing but fat!

MRS. VOLUBLE. Ay, and too good for you, too.

MRS. WHEEDLE. Ah, Master Bobby, these are no times to be dainty! One ought to be glad to get bread to eat.

MRS. VOLUBLE. If you'll take my advice, Mrs. Wheedle, you'll send in your account directly, and then, if the young lady has any money left, you'll get it at once.

MRS. WHEEDLE. Why that's just what I thought myself, so I made out the bill, and brought it in my pocket.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Quite right! But, good lack, Mrs. Wheedle, who'd have thought of such a young lady's being brought to such a pass?— I shall begin soon to think there's no trusting in anybody.

Enter CECILIA.

Oh Law!— I hope she did not hear me!

CECILIA. I beg your pardon, Mrs. Voluble, for this intrusion, but I rang my bell three times, and I believe nobody heard it.

MRS. VOLUBLE. I'm sure, ma'am, I'm quite sorry you've had such a trouble; but I dare say it was all my son Bobby's fault, for he keeps such a continual jabbering, that there's no hearing anything in the world for him.

BOB. Lord, mother, I'll take my oath I ha'n't spoke three words the whole time!

MRS. VOLUBLE. What, you are beginning again, are you?—

CECILIA. I beg I may occasion no disturbance; I merely wished to know if my messenger were returned from Mr. Stipend.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Dear no, ma'am, not yet.

CECILIA. Then he has certainly met with some accident. If you will be so good as to lend me your pen and ink once more, I will send another man after him.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Why, ma'am, he could not have got back so soon, let him go never so fast.

CECILIA. So soon?! [*Walking apart.*] Oh, how unequally are we affected by the progress of time! Winged with the gay plumage of hope, how rapid seems its flight; oppressed with the burden of misery, how tedious its motion!—

MISS JENNY. I believe she's talking to herself.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Yes, she has a mighty way of musing. Ma'am, will it be agreeable to you to eat a bit of supper with us?

MRS. WHEEDLE. The young lady does not hear you; I'll go to her myself. [*Rises and follows* CECILIA.] I hope, Miss Stanley, you're very well? I believe, ma'am, you don't recollect me?

CECILIA. Mrs. Wheedle?— yes, I do.

¹ Dinner was the mid-day or early-afternoon meal; the evening meal was supper.

MRS. WHEEDLE. I'm very sorry, I'm sure, ma'am, to hear of your misfortunes.

CECILIA. I thank you. Mrs. Voluble, is your pen and ink here?

MRS. VOLUBLE. You shall have it directly; but pray, ma'am, let me persuade you to eat a morsel first.

CECILIA. I am obliged to you, but I cannot.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Why now here's the nicest little minikin bit you ever saw;— it's enough to tempt you to look at it.

BOB. Mother, if the lady don't like it, can't you give it me?

MRS. VOLUBLE. I was just this minute going to help you, but now you're so greedy, you shan't have a bit.

CECILIA. Mrs. Voluble, I'll step upstairs, and when you are at leisure, you will be so good as to send me the pen and ink.

[*Going.*

MRS. WHEEDLE. [*Stopping her.*] Ma'am, as I did not know when I might have the pleasure of seeing you again, I took the liberty just to make out my little account and bring it with me; and I hope, ma'am, that when you make up your affairs, you'll be so good as to let me be the first person that's considered, for I'm a deal out of pocket, and should be very glad to have some of the money as soon as possible.

CECILIA. Dunned already! Good heaven, what will become of me! [*Bursts into tears.*]

MRS. VOLUBLE. Dear ma'am, what signifies fretting?— better eat a bit of supper, and get up your spirits. Betty, go for a clean plate.

[*Exit BETTY.*

MRS. WHEEDLE. Won't you please, ma'am, to look at the bill?

CECILIA. Why should I look at it?— I cannot pay it— I am a destitute creature— without friend or resource!

MRS. WHEEDLE. But, ma'am, I only mean—

CECILIA. No matter what you mean!— all application to me is fruitless— I possess nothing— The beggar who sues to you for a penny is not more powerless and wretched!

MRS. WHEEDLE. But sure, ma'am, when there comes to be a division among your creditors, your debts won't amount to more than—

CECILIA. Forbear, forbear!— I am not yet inured to disgrace, and this manner of stating my affairs is insupportable. Your debt, assure yourself, is secure, for sooner will I famish with want, or perish with cold, than appropriate to my own use the smallest part of my shattered fortune till your and every other claim upon it is answered.

MRS. WHEEDLE. Well, ma'am, that's as much as one can expect.

Re-enter BETTY, with a plate and a letter.

BETTY. Ma'am, is your name Miss Stanley?

CECILIA. Yes; is that letter for me? [*Takes it.*]

MRS. VOLUBLE. Come, Mrs. Wheedle, come and finish your supper.

MRS. WHEEDLE *returns to the table.*

CECILIA. I dread to open it! Does anybody wait?

BETTY. Yes, ma'am, a man in a fine lace livery.

CECILIA. [*Reading.*]

“Since you would not hear my message from Mr. Censor, I must try if you will read it from myself. I do most earnestly exhort you to go instantly and privately into the country, and you may then depend upon my support and protection. Beaufort now begins to listen to reason—”

Oh Heaven!

“and, therefore, if you do not seduce him to follow you—”

Insolent, injurious woman!

“— I have no doubt but he will be guided by one whose experience and studies entitle her to direct him. I shall call upon you very soon to know your decision, and to supply you with cash for your journey, being, with the utmost sorrow for your misfortunes, dear Miss Stanley,
Yours etc.—Judith Smatter.”

What a letter!

BETTY. Ma'am, if you please, is there any answer?

CECILIA. No, none.

BETTY. Then, ma'am, what am I to say to the footman?

CECILIA. Nothing.— Yes— tell him I have read this letter, but if he brings me another, it will be returned unopened.

BETTY. Yes, ma'am. [*Aside.*] Laws! What a queer answer!

[*Exit.*]

MRS. VOLUBLE. [*Rising and approaching CECILIA.*] Ma'am, I'm sure I wish I could serve you with all my heart, and if you're distressed about a lodging, I've just thought of one in Queen Street, that, in a week's time—

CECILIA. In a week's time I hope to be far away from Queen Street— far away from this hated city— far away, if possible, from all to whom I am known!

MRS. VOLUBLE. Dear ma'am, sure you don't think of going beyond seas?

MRS. WHEEDLE. If you should like, ma'am, to go abroad, I believe I can help you to a thing of that sort myself.

CECILIA. How?

MRS. WHEEDLE. Why, ma'am, I know a lady who's upon the very point of going, and the young lady who was to have been her companion all of a sudden married a young gentleman of fortune and left her without any notice.

CECILIA. Who is the lady?

MRS. WHEEDLE. Mrs. Hollis, ma'am; she's a lady of very good fortunes.

CECILIA. I have heard of her.

MRS. WHEEDLE. And she wants a young lady very much. She sets off the beginning of next week. If it's agreeable to you to go to her, I shall be proud to show you the way.

CECILIA. I know not what to do!— Yes, I had indeed better quit the kingdom— No— stay!— Am I not too rash?— I cannot well accompany you to this lady myself, Mrs. Wheedle, but if you will go to her in my name, you will much oblige me. When did you say she leaves England?

MRS. WHEEDLE. Next week, ma'am.

CECILIA. I shall have time, then, to arrange my affairs. Tell her it is my first wish to quit this country.

MRS. WHEEDLE. Yes, ma'am. I'll get my hat and cloak, and go directly.— I suppose, ma'am, I may tell Mrs. Hollis you will have no objection to doing a little work for the children, and things of that sort, as the last young lady did?

CECILIA. Oh heavy hour!— down, down, proud heart!— Tell her what you will! I have no more directions to give, and I can answer no more questions.— Oh Beaufort! Faithless, unfeeling Beaufort! To have rescued *you* from distress and mortification such as this would have been *my* heart's first joy— my life's only pride!

[*Exit.*

MRS. VOLUBLE. She's quite in a sad taking, that's the truth of it.

MISS JENNY. Poor young lady! I'm so sorry for her you can't think.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Come, Mrs. Wheedle, you shan't go till you've drunk a glass of wine, so let's sit down a little while and be comfortable.

They seat themselves at the table; MRS. VOLUBLE serves the wine.

You need not be afraid of the dark, for Bobby shall go with you.

BOB. I'd rather behalf¹ not.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Who wants to know whether you'd rather or not? I suppose there's no need to consult all your rather-nesses. Well, ma'am, so, as I was going to tell you—

A violent knocking at the door.

Lord bless me, who's at the door? Why, they'll knock the house down! Somebody to Mr. Dabler, I suppose; but he won't be home this two hours.

Enter BETTY.

BETTY. Laws, ma'am, here's a fine lady all in her coach, and she asks for nobody but you.

MRS. VOLUBLE. For me? Well, was ever the like! Bob, why don't you stir? One would think you were nailed to your seat.

¹ = For my part

BOB. Why, I'm making all the haste I can, a'n't I?

They all rise, and BOB jars the table, tipping dishes and wineglasses onto the floor.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Well, if this is not enough to drive one mad! I declare I could flay the boy alive! Here's a room to see company! You great, nasty, stupid dolt, you, get out of my sight this minute.

BOB. Why, mother, I did not do it for the purpose.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Get out of my sight this minute, I say! [*Drives him off the stage.*] Well, what's to be done now?— Did ever anybody see such a room?— Mrs. Wheedle, do help to put some of the things into the closet. Betty, why don't you get a broom?— you're as helpless as a child.— No, a mop— get a mop, and clean it all away at once.— Why, you a'n't going empty handed, are you? I declare you have not half the head you was born with.

BETTY. I'm sure I don't know what to do no more than the dog. [*Gets mop and broom.*]

The knocking is repeated

MRS. VOLUBLE. There, they're knocking like mad!— Miss Jenny, what signifies your staring? Can't you make yourself a little useful?— Why, Betty, why don't you make haste?— Bobby! As soon as ever you've done the mischief you think of nothing but running away!

Re-enter BOBBY and they clear the stage.

Come, poke everything into the closet.— There, now we shall do pretty well. Betty, go and ask the lady in.

[*Exeunt BETTY and BOBBY.*]

I declare I'm in such a flustration!

MISS JENNY. So am I, I'm sure, for I'm all of a tremble.

MRS. WHEEDLE. Well, goodbye, then—we'll go to Mrs. Hollis's directly. [*Aside.*] I shall see who the lady is as I go along.

[*Exit.*]

MRS. VOLUBLE. It's prodigious odd what can bring any company at this time of night.

Enter MRS. SAPIENT.

Mrs. Sapient! Dear ma'am, I can hardly believe my eyes!

MRS. SAPIENT. I am afraid my visit is unseasonable, but I beg I may not incommode you.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Incommode me? Dear ma'am no, not the least in the world; I was doing nothing but just sitting here talking with Miss Jenny, about one thing or another.

MRS. SAPIENT. I have a question to ask you, Mrs. Voluble, which—

MRS. VOLUBLE. I'm sure, ma'am, I shall be very proud to answer it; if I had but known of the pleasure of seeing you, I should not have been in such a pickle, but you know, ma'am, in all families there will be some busy days— and I've the misfortune of a son who's so unmanageable, ma'am, that really—

MRS. SAPIENT. Well, well, I only want to ask if you know anything of Miss Stanley?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Miss Stanley? To be sure I do, ma'am; why she's now in my own house here.

MRS. SAPIENT. Indeed?— And pray— what, I suppose, she is chiefly with— Mr. Dabler?

MRS. VOLUBLE. No, ma'am, no, she keeps prodigiously snug; she bid me not tell anybody she was here, so I make it a rule to keep it secret— unless, indeed, ma'am, to such a lady as you.

MRS. SAPIENT. Oh, it's very safe with me. But, pray, don't you think Mr. Dabler— rather admires her?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Oh no, ma'am, not half so much as he admires another lady of your acquaintance. Ha! Ha!

MRS. SAPIENT. Fie, Mrs. Voluble!— but pray, does not he write a great deal?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Dear ma'am yes; he's in one continual scribbling from morning to night.

MRS. SAPIENT. Well, and— do you know if he writes about any particular person?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Oh yes, ma'am, he writes about Celia, and Daphne, and—

MRS. SAPIENT. You never see his poems, do you?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Oh dear yes, ma'am, I see them all. Why only this morning I picked up the prettiest song about Cleora, who—

MRS. SAPIENT. Cleora? Not Cecilia?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Cleora, I believe I remember.

MRS. SAPIENT. Cleora— [*Aside.*] Why, that's half way to Clara, my own name!— I wonder—

MRS. VOLUBLE. Should you like to see it, ma'am?—

MRS. SAPIENT. Why— if you have it at hand—

MRS. VOLUBLE. Oh dear ma'am, indeed no,— *I* carry off one of Mr. Dabler's miniscraps? I would not do such a thing upon any account, because I should scorn to do such a baseness to Mr. Dabler, but to such a lady as you it's quite another thing. I shall be quite proud to oblige you. Perhaps, ma'am, you'd like to see Mr. Dabler's study?

MRS. SAPIENT. Oh no, not upon any account.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Because, upon his table, there's a matter of an hundred of his miniscraps.

MRS. SAPIENT. Indeed?— But when do you expect him home?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Oh not this good while.

MRS. SAPIENT. Well then— if you are certain we shall not be surprised—

MRS. VOLUBLE. Oh, I'm quite certain of that.

MRS. SAPIENT. But, then, for fear of accidents, let your maid order my coach to wait in the next street.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Yes, ma'am. Here, Betty!

[*Exit.*

MRS. SAPIENT. This is not quite right, but this woman would show them to somebody else if not to me. She will not, for her own sake, dare betray me. And now perhaps I may discover at last whether any of his private papers contain my name!

Re-enter MRS. VOLUBLE.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Now, ma'am, I'll wait upon you. I assure you, ma'am, I would not do this for everybody, only a lady of your honour I'm sure would be above—

[*Exit talking, with* MRS. SAPIENT.

MISS JENNY. [*Runs to a looking glass.*] Dear me, what a figure I've made of myself! It's very unlucky I did not put on my Irish muslin!— She's said never a word to *me* all this time, and I dare say she knew me as well as could be; but fine ladies seem to think their words are made of gold, they are so afraid of bestowing them.

Re-enter MRS. VOLUBLE.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Well, Miss Jenny, I never saw a lady so tickled as Mrs. Sapient when she first set foot in Mr. Dabler's study! And here's you and I and even Betty can go there every day and think nothing of it. She right away set to reading all his miniscraps, and— Lord, I hope she don't disarrange them, for then he would know—

A knocking at the door.

[*Screams.*] Oh! that's Mr. Dabler's knock! What shall we all do?— run upstairs and tell the lady this minute—

[*Exit* MISS JENNY.

Betty! Betty! Don't go to the door yet— I can't think what brings him home so soon!— here's nothing but ill luck upon ill luck!

Enter carrying a paper MRS. SAPIENT *with* MISS JENNY.

Come, ma'am, come in! Betty!— you may go to the door now.

MRS. SAPIENT. But are you sure he will not come in here?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Oh quite, ma'am; he always goes to his own room. Hush!— ay, he's gone up— I heard him pass.

MRS. SAPIENT. I am quite surprised, Mrs. Voluble, you should have deceived me thus; did not you assure me he would not return this hour?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Indeed, ma'am, I knew no more of his return than you did, for he makes it a sort of a rule of a 'Sprit night— Lord, ma'am, what have you there?

MRS. SAPIENT. Oh no! The ode to Cleora! I was reading it when Miss Jenny surprised me. I declare I'm quite beside myself! How shall I—

MISS JENNY. Ma'am, ma'am, I hear him on the stairs!

MRS. SAPIENT. Oh hide me— hide me this instant anywhere, I shall be ruined!— And don't say I am here for the universe!

[*She runs into the closet.*

MRS. VOLUBLE. No, ma'am, that I won't if it costs me my life!— you may always depend upon me. [*Shuts her in.*]

MISS JENNY. Laws, what a pickle she'll be in in there!

Enter DABLER.

DABLER. Mrs. Voluble, you'll please to make out my account, for I shall leave your house directly.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Leave my house? Lord, sir, you quite frighten me!

DABLER. You have used me very ill, Mrs. Voluble, and curse me if I shall put up with it!

MRS. VOLUBLE. Me, sir? I'm sure, sir, I don't so much as know what you mean.

DABLER. You have been rummaging all my papers.

MRS. VOLUBLE. I?— no, sir— I'm sorry, sir, you suspect me of such a mean proceeding.

DABLER. 'Tis in vain to deny it; I have often had reason to think it, but now my doubts are confirmed, for my last new song, which I called Cleora, is nowhere to be found.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Nowhere to be found?— you surprise me!— [*Aside.*] Good Lack, how shall we get it back?

DABLER. I'm certain I left it at the top of my papers.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Did you indeed, sir? Well, I'm sure it's the oddest thing in the world what can be come of it!

DABLER. There is something so gross, so scandalous in this usage, that I am determined not to be duped by it. I shall quit my lodgings directly;— take your measures accordingly.

[*Going.*]

MRS. VOLUBLE. Oh pray, sir, stay—and if you won't be so angry, I'll tell you the whole truth of the matter.

DABLER. Be quick, then.

MRS. VOLUBLE. [*In a low voice.*] I'm sorry, sir, to betray a lady, but when one's own reputation is at stake—

DABLER. What lady? I don't understand you.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Hush, hush, sir!— she'll hear you.

DABLER. She?— Who?

MRS. VOLUBLE. [*Whispering.*] Why, Mrs. Sapient, sir, she's in that closet.

DABLER. What do you mean?

MRS. VOLUBLE. I'll tell you all, sir, by and by— but you must know she came to me, and— and— and begged just to look at your study, sir.— So, sir, never supposing such a lady as that would think of looking at your papers, I was persuaded to agree to it;— but, sir, as soon as ever we got into the room, she fell to reading them without so much as saying a word!— while I, all the time, stood in this manner!— staring with stupification. So, sir, when you knocked at the door, she ran down to the closet.

DABLER. And what has induced her to do all this?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Ah, sir, you know well enough! Mrs. Sapien is a lady of prodigious good taste; everybody knows how she admires Mr. Dabler.

DABLER. Why yes, I don't think she wants taste.

MRS. VOLUBLE. And seeing, perhaps, that the song about Cleora she particularly admired ...

DABLER. Ah!

MRS. VOLUBLE. Well but, sir, pray don't stay, for she is quite close crammed in the closet.

DABLER. I think I'll speak to her.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Not for the world, sir! If she knows I've betrayed her, she'll go beside herself! As soon as she's gone, I'll come and return the miniscip— but pray, dear sir, make haste!

DABLER. Yes, She's a good agreeable woman, and really has a pretty knowledge of poetry. Poor soul!— I begin to be half sorry for her.

[*Exit.*

MRS. VOLUBLE. I thought he'd never have gone. How do do now, ma'am? [*Opens the closet door.*]

Enter MRS. SAPIENT.

MRS. SAPIENT. Cramped to death! What a strange place have you put me in! Let me be gone this instant— but are you sure, Mrs. Voluble, you have not betrayed me?

MRS. VOLUBLE. I'm surprised, ma'am, you should suspect me! I would not do such a false thing for never so much, for I always—

A knocking at the door.

Why now who can that be?

MRS. SAPIENT. How infinitely provoking!— let me go back to this frightful closet till the coast is clear.

[*Returns to the closet.*

MRS. VOLUBLE. Well, I think I've managed matters like a Match-a-vell.¹

Enter MRS. WHEEDLE.

MRS. WHEEDLE. Oh, I'm quite out of breath— I never walked so fast in my life.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Where have you left Bobby?

MRS. WHEEDLE. He's gone into the kitchen. I must see Miss Stanley directly.

MRS. VOLUBLE. We've been in perilous danger since you went. [*In a low voice.*] Do you know, Mrs. Sapien is now in the closet? Be sure you don't tell anybody.

¹ Voluble mispronounces 'Machiavel' (a person who emulates Machiavelli, author of *The Prince*, a rationale for ruthless scheming inspired by the Borgias): cf Sabor & Sill after Rogers.

MRS. WHEEDLE. No, not for the world. Miss Jenny, pray step and tell Miss Stanley I'm come back.

[*Exit* MISS JENNY.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Well, and while you speak to Miss Stanley, I'll go and talk over Mr. Dabler. But first I'll get that nasty song from the poor lady in the closet! [*Opens the door.*] Ma'am! if you've a mind to keep still, you'll hear all what Miss Stanley says presently, for she's coming down. And—

MRS. SAPIENT. Are you mad, Mrs. Voluble?— what do you hold the door open for?— Would you have that woman see me?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Ma'am, I beg your pardon! [*Shuts the door.*] I won't help her out this half hour for that crossness.

[*Exit.*

MRS. WHEEDLE. These fine ladies go through anything for the sake of curiosity.

Enter CECILIA.

CECILIA. Well, Mrs. Wheedle, have you seen Mrs. Hollis?

MRS. WHEEDLE. Yes, ma'am, and she's quite agreeable to your proposal: but as she's going very soon, and will be glad to be fixed, she says she shall take it as a particular favour if you will go to her house tonight.

CECILIA. Tonight— !

MRS. WHEEDLE. She says she's heard of your misfortunes, and shall be glad to give you her advice what to do.

CECILIA. Then I *will* go to her!— for never yet did poor creature more want advice and assistance!

MRS. WHEEDLE. [*Calls at the door.*] Betty! go and get a coach. I'll just go get your things for you, ma'am, and come again.

[*Exit.*

CECILIA. My thanks.— Perhaps I may repent this enterprise— my heart fails me already;— and yet, how few are those human actions that repentance may not pursue! Error precedes almost every step, and sorrow follows every error. I who to happiness have bid a long, a last farewell, must content myself with seeking peace in retirement and solitude.

Enter BETTY.

BETTY. Ma'am, the coach is at the door.

[*Exit.*

CECILIA. Oh cease, fond, suffering, feeble heart, to struggle thus with misery inevitable. Beaufort is no longer the Beaufort he appeared, and since he has lost even the semblance of his worth, why should this sharp regret pursue his image? But, alas, that semblance which he has lost, *I* must ever retain! Fresh, fair and perfect it is still before me!— I will think of him no more— I will reason no longer— I will offer myself to servitude.— Where is this woman?—

[*Going.*

Enter BEAUFORT, *who stops her.*

BEAUFORT. My Cecilia!—

CECILIA. Oh— good Heaven!

BEAUFORT. My loved, lost, injured— my adored Cecilia!

CECILIA. Am I awake?

BEAUFORT. Whence this surprise?— my love, my heart's sweet partner—

CECILIA. Oh forbear!— these terms are no longer— Mr. Beaufort, let me pass!

BEAUFORT. What do I hear?

CECILIA. Leave me, sir— I cannot talk with you— leave me, I say!

BEAUFORT. Leave you?— [*Offering to take her hand.*]

CECILIA. Yes— [*Turning from him.*] for I cannot bear to look at you!

BEAUFORT. Not look at me? What have I done? How have I offended you? Why are you thus dreadfully changed?

CECILIA. *I* changed? Comes this well from *you*?— but I will not recriminate, neither will I converse with you any longer. You see me now perhaps for the last time— I am preparing to quit the kingdom.

BEAUFORT. To quit the kingdom?

CECILIA. Yes; it is a step which your own conduct has compelled me to take.

BEAUFORT. *My* conduct?— who has belied me to you?— what villain—

CECILIA. No one, sir; you have done your work yourself.

BEAUFORT. Cecilia, do you mean to distract me?— if not, explain your dark, your cruel meaning.

CECILIA. Can it want explanation to *you*? Have you shocked me in ignorance, and irritated me without knowing it?

BEAUFORT. *I* shocked?— *I* irritated you?—

CECILIA. Did you not, in the very first anguish of a calamity which you alone had the power to alleviate, neglect and avoid me? Send me a cold message by a friend? Suffer me to endure indignities without support, and sorrows without participation? Leave me, defenseless, to be crushed by impending ruin? and abandon my aching heart to all the torture of new-born fears, unprotected, unassured, and uncomforted?

BEAUFORT. Can *I* have done all this?

CECILIA. I am sure it has *seemed* so.

BEAUFORT. Oh wretched policy of cold, unfeeling prudence, had I listened to no dictates but those of my heart, I had never been wounded with suspicions and reproaches so cruel.

CECILIA. Rather say, had your heart sooner known its own docility, you might have permitted Lady Smatter to dispose of it ere the deluded Cecilia was known to you.

BEAUFORT. Barbarous Cecilia! Take not such a time as this to depreciate my heart in your opinion, for now— 'tis all I have to offer you.

CECILIA. You know too well— 'tis all I ever valued.

BEAUFORT. Oh take it then— receive it once more, and with that confidence in its faith which it never deserved to forfeit! Painfully I submitted to advice I abhorred, but though my judgement has been overpowered, my truth has been inviolate. Turn not from me, Cecilia!— I have disobeyed Lady Smatter— I have defied all consequences, and flown in the very face of ruin— and now, will you, Cecilia, [*Kneeling.*] reject, disdain and spurn me?

CECILIA. Oh Beaufort— is it possible *I* can have wronged *you*?

BEAUFORT. Never, my sweetest Cecilia, if now you pardon me.

CECILIA. Pardon you?— too generous Beaufort— ah! Rise.

Enter LADY SMATTER and MR. CODGER.

BEAUFORT. [*Rising.*] Lady Smatter!

LADY SMATTER. How, Beaufort here?—and kneeling, too!

CODGER. Son Beaufort, I cannot deny but I think it is rather an extraordinary thing that you should choose to be seen kneeling to that young lady, knowing, I presume, that your Aunt Smatter disaffects your so doing.

LADY SMATTER. Beaufort, I see you are resolved to keep no terms with me. As to Miss Stanley, I came hither with the most generous views of assisting her, and prevailed with Mr. Codger to conduct her to her friends in the country; but since I find her capable of so much baseness, since I see that all her little arts have been at work, I renounce her with contempt—

CECILIA. Forbear, madam, these unmerited reproaches; believe me, I will neither become a burden to you, nor a scorn to myself;— though I owe you no defence or explanation.

[*Exit.*]

BEAUFORT. Stay, my Cecilia— hear me—

[*Follows her.*]

LADY SMATTER. How? Pursue her in defiance of my presence? Had I a pen and ink I should disinherit him immediately.

Enter MISS JENNY, MRS. VOLUBLE, and MRS. WHEEDLE with Cecilia's things.

MISS JENNY. [*As she enters.*] Law, only look! Here's Lady Smatter and an old gentleman!

MRS. VOLUBLE. What, in my parlour? Well, I declare, and so there is! Why how could they get in?

MRS. WHEEDLE. I suppose the door's open because of the hackney coach.

LADY SMATTER. Who are all these people?

MRS. VOLUBLE. [*Advancing to* LADY SMATTER.] My Lady, I hope your Ladyship's well; I am very glad, my lady, to pay my humble duty to your Ladyship in my poor house, and I hope—

LADY SMATTER. Pray is Mr. Dabler at home?

MRS. VOLUBLE. Yes, my lady, and indeed—

LADY SMATTER. Tell him, then, I shall be glad to see him.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Yes, my lady. [*Aside to* MISS JENNY.] I suppose, Miss Jenny, you little thought of my having such a genteel acquaintance among the quality!

[*Exit.*

LADY SMATTER. [*To* CODGER.] Yes, I'll just consult with Mr. Dabler, and then—

A sound from the closet; ALL look.

MISS JENNY. [*Whispering* MRS. WHEEDLE.] I'm afraid that poor lady in the closet will spoil all her things.

Enter CENSOR.

LADY SMATTER. Mr. Censor!

CENSOR. I have, with some difficulty, traced your Ladyship hither.

LADY SMATTER. Then, sir, you have traced me to a most delightful spot; and you will find your friend Beaufort as self-willed, refractory and opinionated as your amplest instructions can have rendered him.

CENSOR. I would advise your Ladyship to think a little less for him, and a little more for yourself, lest in your solicitude for his fortune, you lose all care for your own fame.

LADY SMATTER. My fame? I don't understand you.

CENSOR. Nay, if you think such lampoons may spread without doing you injury—

LADY SMATTER. Lampoons? What lampoons?— sure nobody has dared—

Enter DABLER *and* MRS. VOLUBLE.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Why here's Mr. Censor too! I believe there'll be company coming in all night.

LADY SMATTER. Mr. Censor, I say, if there is any lampoon that concerns me, I insist upon hearing it directly.

CENSOR. I picked this one up just now at a coffee house. [*Reads.*]

Yes, Smatter is the Muse's Friend,
She knows to censure or commend;
And has of faith and truth such store
She'll ne'er desert you— till you're poor.

LADY SMATTER. What insolent impertinence!

DABLER. Poor stuff! Poor stuff indeed! Your Ladyship should regard these little squibs as *I* do, mere impotent efforts of envy.

LADY SMATTER. Oh I do; I'd rather hear them than not.

DABLER. And ill done, too; most contemptibly ill done. I think I'll answer it for your Ladyship.

CENSOR. [*Takes him aside and shows a second paper.*] Hark ye, Mr. Dabler, do you know this paper?

DABLER. That paper?

CENSOR. Yes, sir, this paper— torn from a new collection by 'a Sister of the Order'— on which are printed the lines which you passed off at Lady Smatter's as your own *extempore*.

DABLER. Why, sir, that was merely— it happened—

CENSOR. It is too late for equivocation, sir; your reputation is now wholly in my power, and I can instantly blast it, alike with respect to poetry and to veracity.

DABLER. Surely, sir—

CENSOR. If, therefore, you do not, with your utmost skill, assist me to reconcile Lady Smatter to her nephew and his choice, I will show this example of your *true* abilities at an *extempore* to everybody who will take the trouble to read it.

DABLER. To be sure, sir— as to Mr. Beaufort's choice— it's the thing in the world I most approve— and so— [*Reaches for the paper.*]

CENSOR. [*Keeps it away.*] Well, sir, you know the alternative, and must act as you please.

DABLER. [*Aside.*] What cursed ill luck!

CENSOR. Hold, madam— here's something on the other side which I did not see. [*Reads from the first paper.*]

If madness kept to Bedlam's fields,
The world elsewhere would be much thinner;
To time now Smatter's beauty yields—

LADY SMATTER. How!

CENSOR. [*Reading.*]

She fain in wit would be a winner.
At thirty she began to read—

LADY SMATTER. That's false!

CENSOR. [*Reads.*]

At forty, it is said, could spell—

LADY SMATTER. How's that? —

CENSOR. [*Reads.*] At fifty—

LADY SMATTER. At fifty?— ha! ha! ha!

CENSOR. [*Reads.*]

At fifty, 'twas by all agreed
A common school girl she'd excel.

LADY SMATTER. Impertinent nonsense!

CENSOR. [*Reads.*]

Such wonders did the world presage—

LADY SMATTER. Mr. Censor, no more!—’tis such rubbish it makes me quite sick.

CENSOR. [*Reads.*]

Such wonders did the world presage
From blossoms which such fruit invited—
When Avarice— the vice of age—
Stepped in— and all expectance blighted.

LADY SMATTER. Of age!— I protest this is the most impudent thing I ever heard in my life!

CENSOR. Depend upon it, madam, this will never rest here; your Ladyship is so well known that one satire will but be the prelude to another.

LADY SMATTER. Alas, how dangerous is popularity! Oh, Mr. Dabler, that I could but despise these libels as you do!

DABLER. So I do, madam, only—

CENSOR. You do, sir?

DABLER. No, sir, no! I don’t mean to absolutely say that! That is, only— we men do not suffer in the world by lampoons as the poor ladies do; they, indeed, may be quite— quite ruined by them.

CENSOR. You have certainly some secret enemy, ma’am, who avails himself of your disagreement with Miss Stanley to prejudice the entire world against you.

LADY SMATTER. Oh, I’m certain I can tell who it is.

CENSOR. Who?

LADY SMATTER. Mrs. Sapiant!!

A clatter from inside the closet; ALL look.

MISS JENNY. [*Aside.*] Law, I’m afraid she’ll hear them.

LADY SMATTER. Not that I suspect her of the writing, for miserable stuff as it is, I know her capacity is yet below it; but she was the first to leave my house when the affair was discovered, and I suppose she has been retailing it about the town ever since.

A crash from inside the closet; ALL look.

MRS. VOLUBLE. [*Aside.*] Ah, poor lady, it’s all to fall upon her!

Enter BOB, running.

BOB. Mother, mother, I believe there’s a cat in the closet!

MRS. VOLUBLE. Hold your tongue, you great oaf!

BOB. Why, mother, as I was in the back parlour, you can’t think what a rustling it made.

MISS JENNY. [*Aside to MRS. WHEEDLE.*] Dear me!— it’s the poor lady!—

MRS. WHEEDLE. Well, what a thing is this!

MRS. VOLUBLE. Bob, I could beat your brains out!

BOB. Why, Lord, mother, where's the great harm of saying there's a cat in the closet? The best way is to look. [*Goes toward the closet.*]

DABLER. [*Blocking him.*] Not for the world! I won't suffer it!

BOB. But I dare say she's eating up all the victuals!

Brushes past DABLER, and opens the door. Enter MRS. SAPIENT with a tumble of pots, foodstuffs, and soiled linens.

ALL. Mrs. Sapient!

MRS. SAPIENT. [*Coming forward.*] Sir, this impertinent curiosity—

BOB. Lord, ma'am, I beg your pardon! I'm sure I would not have opened the door for the world, only we took you for the cat. If you please, ma'am, I'll shut you in again.

MRS. VOLUBLE. Bob, you great booby!

LADY SMATTER. That's a pretty snug retreat you have chosen, Mrs. Sapient.

CENSOR. To which of the Muses, madam, may that temple be dedicated?

CODGER. Madam, I should be much obliged if you would take the trouble to make plain to my comprehension the reason of your choosing to be shut up in that dark closet?

MRS. SAPIENT. Why I— I—

DABLER. Perhaps, madam, you were about to return a certain paper to me?

MRS. SAPIENT. I was indeed, sir; and here it is— though, with my apologies, somewhat the worse for its exposure to the strawberry preserves.

DABLER. [*Taking it.*] Ew—!

LADY SMATTER. Give me leave, madam, to recommend to your perusal this passage of Addison: 'Those who conceal themselves to hear the counsels of others, commonly have little reason to be satisfied with what they hear of themselves.'

MRS. SAPIENT. And give *me* leave, ma'am, to observe that, in *my* opinion, those who speak ill of people in their absence give no great proof of a sincere friendship.

CENSOR. [*Aside.*] I begin to hope these Wiltings will demolish their Club.

Enter JACK, with several copies of a handwritten score.

JACK. [*Sings.*] ... And gulped such a dose of incongruous matter
That Bedlam must soon hold th' carcass of Smatter.—

LADY SMATTER. How?— what?— the carcass of who?—

JACK. Ha! Ha! Ha! Faith, madam, I beg your pardon, but who'd have thought of meeting your Ladyship here? [*Laughs.*]

LADY SMATTER. I shall go mad!— What were you singing, Jack—what is it you laugh at?— why won't you speak?

JACK. I'm so much hurried I can't stay to answer your Ladyship now. Ha! Ha! Ha— I must go and sing it to Billy Skip and Will Scamper, or I shan't sleep a wink all night.

[*Going.*]

LADY SMATTER. This is intolerable! Stay, Jack, I charge you! Mr. Codger, how unmoved you stand! Why don't you make him stay?

CODGER. Madam I will. Son Jack, stay.

JACK. Lord, sir—!

LADY SMATTER. I am half choked!— Mr. Codger, you would provoke a saint! Why don't you make him tell you what he was singing?

CODGER. Madam, he is so giddy-pated he attends to nothing! Son Jack, don't you perceive that her Ladyship seems curious to know what song you were humming?

JACK. Why, sir, it was only a new ballad.

LADY SMATTER. A ballad with my name in it? Explain yourself instantly!

JACK. Here it is— shall I sing it or say it?

LADY SMATTER. You shall do neither— give it me!

CENSOR. No, no, sing it first for the good of the company.

JACK. Your Ladyship won't take it ill?

LADY SMATTER. Ask me no questions— I don't know what I shall do.

JACK. [*Sings, handing copies to the Company.*]

I call not to swains t'attend to my song;
Nor to all damsels, tender and young;
To critics and fops and pedants I chatter;
Who else will care what comes of poor Smatter?

LADY SMATTER. How? Is my name at full length?

JACK. [*Sings.*]

The lady's study's muddled her head;
Sans meaning she talked, and sans knowledge she read,
And gulped such a dose of incongruous matter
That Bedlam must soon hold th'carcase of Smatter.
With a down, down, derry down.

LADY SMATTER. The carcase of Smatter?— it can't be— no one would dare—

JACK. [*Sings.*]

She thought wealth esteem'd by foolish alone,
Shunning offence, ne'er offered her own;
So when her young friend misfortune did batter,
Too wise to help was kind Lady Smatter.

LADY SMATTER. I'll hear no more! [*Tries to stop JACK.*]

CENSOR. Sing on, however, Jack; we'll hear it out.

MRS. SAPIENT. [*Blocks* LADY SMATTER.] Yes, Jack! Sing on!

JACK. [*Escaping, sings.*]

Her heir she ne'er corrupted with pelf,
Held starving a virtue for all but herself.
Of gold was her goblet, of silver her platter,
But all of such ore was tarnished by Smatter.
With a down, down, derry down.

ALL EXCEPT SMATTER. [*Sing, as* JACK *conducts.*]

A club she led of witlings and fools,
Who, but for her dinners, had scoffed at her rules—
And reason, if any she had, they did shatter
Of poor empty-headed, and little-soul'd Smatter.
With a down, down, derry down!
With a down, down, derry down!

LADY SMATTER. 'Empty-headed'?— 'little-souled'?—

MRS. SAPIENT. 'Witlings'?!

LADY SMATTER. Who has dared write this?— Where did you get it?

JACK. From a man who was carrying it to the printers.

LADY SMATTER. To the printers?— Oh insupportable!— Mr. Dabler, why don't you assist me?— how can I have it suppressed?— Speak quick, or I shall die.

DABLER. Really, ma'am, I— I— I—

LADY SMATTER. Nay, Mr. Dabler, now *you* begin to distress me.

CENSOR. There is but one way to have it suppressed:— make a friend of the writer.

LADY SMATTER. Whom I detest from my soul! But if it is not Sapiient, and it is not Dabler, then— I believe 'tis yourself!

CENSOR. [*Bowing.*] Your Ladyship is not deceived;— I have the honour to be the identical person.

LADY SMATTER. So, then, I see. But I shall not stay here to be mocked by you.

[*Going.*]

CENSOR. Hold! [*Blocks the door.*] You have but one moment for reflection, either to establish your fame upon the firmest foundation, or to consign yourself for life to irony and contempt.

LADY SMATTER. I will have you prosecuted with the utmost severity of the law.

CENSOR. You will have the thanks of my printer for your reward.

LADY SMATTER. You will not dare—

CENSOR. I dare do anything to repel the injuries of innocence! If you any longer oppose the union of your nephew with Miss Stanley, I will destroy the whole peace of your life.

LADY SMATTER. You cannot!— I defy you!

[*Walks from him.*]

CENSOR. [*Following her.*] I will drop lampoons in every coffee-house—

LADY SMATTER. You are welcome, sir.—

CENSOR. Compose daily epigrams for all the papers—

LADY SMATTER. With all my heart—

CENSOR. Send libels to every corner of the town—

LADY SMATTER. I care not!—

CENSOR. Make all the ballad singers resound your deeds—

LADY SMATTER. You cannot!—*shall* not!

CENSOR. And present the Punch and Judy Show¹ with a poppet to represent you.

LADY SMATTER. [*Bursting into tears.*] This is too much to be borne! Mr. Censor, you are a daemon!

CENSOR. But, if you relent— I will burn all I have written, and forget all I have planned; lampoons shall give place to panegyric,² and libels to songs of triumph; the liberality of your soul and the depth of your knowledge shall be recorded by the Muses, and echoed by the whole nation!

LADY SMATTER. I am half distracted!— Mr. Dabler, why don't you counsel me?— how cruel is your silence!

DABLER. Why, certainly, ma'am, what— what Mr Censor says— er—

CENSOR. Speak out, man. And boldly!

DABLER. Hem!— you— Mr. Censor has said, Madam— just what I think.

LADY SMATTER. *Et tu*, Dabler?

CENSOR. Everybody must be against you; even Mr. Codger, as I can discern by his looks. Are you not, sir?

CODGER. I . . . may I have some time to consider?

CENSOR. Come, madam, think what is expected from the celebrity of your character— consider the applause that awaits you in the world;— you will be another Sacharissa, a second Sappho,³ a tenth Muse.

LADY SMATTER. Allow me, at least, a few days—

¹ Traditional and violent English hand-puppet show, still popular with children. (Replaces the original reference to the satirical Patagonian Puppet Theatre, which is now unknown to audiences.)

² = Hymns of praise

³ Sabor & Sill: “Sacharissa was Edmund Waller’s poetic name for Lady Dorothea Sidney. Sappho (born c. 600 BC), a Greek lyric poet, was much admired and regarded as the tenth Muse.”

CENSOR. No, madam, not an hour!— Forego the path of meanness for that of generosity! You may now not only gain the esteem of the living, but consign your name with honour to posterity!

LADY SMATTER. To posterity? I see you have left me no choice. [*Pauses.*]— Well, where is this girl gone?— what has Beaufort done with himself?—

CENSOR. Now, madam, you have bound me yours forever! [*Draws a letter from his bosom.*]— Here, Beaufort!— Miss Stanley!—

[*Goes out.*

JACK. Huzzah!—

CODGER. Madam, to confess the verity, I must acknowledge that I do not rightly comprehend what it is your Ladyship has determined upon doing?

LADY SMATTER. No; nor would you, were I to take an hour to tell you.

Re-enter CENSOR, with BEAUFORT and CECILIA.

BEAUFORT. Oh madam, is it indeed true that—

LADY SMATTER. Beaufort, I am so much flurried, I hardly know what is true;— save, indeed, that pity, as a certain author says, will ever, in noble minds, conquer prudence. Miss Stanley—

CENSOR. Come, come, no speeches; this whole company bears witness to your consent to their marriage.

MRS. SAPIENT. Indeed! *I* have always been of the opinion, that—

She is silenced by a look from the Company.

CECILIA. Lady Smatter's returning favour will once more devote me to her service.

CENSOR. [*In a low voice.*] And your Ladyship may depend upon not losing sight of *me* till the ceremony is over.

CECILIA. But this letter you gave me, Mr. Censor, I do not quite understand: it contains an order for £5000, and is signed with your name?

CENSOR. Pho, pho, we will talk of that another time.

CECILIA. Impossible! Liberality so undeserved—

CENSOR. Not a word more, I entreat you!

CECILIA. Indeed I can never accept it.

CENSOR. Part with it if you wish, but *I* have got rid of it. I merit no thanks, for I mean it not in service to you, but in spite to Lady Smatter, that she may not have the pleasure of boasting to her wondering Wiltings that she received a niece wholly unportioned.¹

CECILIA. Dwells benevolence in so rugged a garb?— Oh Mr. Censor—!

BEAUFORT. Noble, generous Censor! You penetrate my heart— yet I cannot consent—

¹ = Without a dowry

CENSOR. Pho, pho, never praise a man for only gratifying his own humour.

CODGER. Am I to conclude, then, that my stepson is after all to be wed to this young lady?

ALL. Yes!

CODGER. Ah.

BEAUFORT. [*To SMATTER and SAPIENT.*] You must allow me then, Ladies, with all humility, to entreat that the calm of an evening succeeding a day so agitated with storms, may be enjoyed without allay.

The Ladies acquiesce. BEAUFORT turns to CECILIA.

Terror, my Cecilia, now ceases to alarm, and sorrow to oppress us. Let us reflect on the lesson that generosity is the first of earthly blessings, gratefully receive returning happiness from our friend, endeavour to create a life together that is more dependent on ourselves than on others, and celebrate our escape—ephemeral though it may be—from the common vicissitudes of human existence, and the caprices and infirmities of human nature.

The Company congratulates the couple.

— *Finis.* —

The Smatter Song

from Lilibullero (trad: Beggar's Opera)

a tempo

Tenor 

JACK: I call not to swains t'att - end to my song, Nor to all dam - sels,

T 

ten - der and young; To cri - tics and fops and ped - ants I chat - ter: Who else will care what

T 

comes of poor Smat - ter? The la - dy's stu - dy's mud - dled her head; Sans mea - ning she

T 

talked and sans know - ledge she read, And gulped such a dose of in - con - gru - ous mat - ter that

T 

Bed - lam must soon hold th' car - case of Smat - ter. With a down, down, der - ry down -

T 

(DI - A - LOGUE = = =) - She thought wealth es - teemed by fool - ish a -

T 

lone; Shun - ning of - fence, ne'er of - fered her own. So when her young friend mis -

T 

for - tune did bat - ter, Too wise to help was kind La - dy Smat - ter! (DIALOGUE =

T 

= = = = = = = = = = = SAPIENT: Yes Jack! Sing on!) Her

T 

heir she ne'er cor - rup - ted with pelf, Held star - ving a vir - tue for all but her - self. Of


The Smatter Song

T  gold was her gob-let, of sil-ver her plat-ter, But all of such ore was tar-nished by

T  Smat-ter! With a down, down, der-ry down - . ALL:A club she led of

T  wit-lings and fools, Who but for her din-ners had scoffed at her rules. And rea-son, if

T  a - ny she had, they did shat-ter Of poor emp-ty head-ed and lit-tle souled Smat-ter! With a

T  down, down, der-ry down - ! With a down, down, der-ry down - !

APPENDIX 2: Introduction to the Complete Original Text in the HTML Edition by Ray Davis

Fanny Burney wrote four full-length comedies, none performed or published in her lifetime.

Her first play, *The Witlings*, was drafted in 1779, a year after her first novel, *Evelina*. It had every hope of production— among her most enthusiastic admirers was Drury Lane's manager, Richard Brinsley Sheridan— until Burney's father lovingly lowered the boom:

“Not only the Whole Piece, but the *plot* had best be kept secret, from everybody.”

Her second comedy made it onto the Covent Garden schedule before, again, Burney's father forced its withdrawal. Thereafter, Burney drafted solely for herself.

If *The Witlings* had been delivered to Sheridan's company, the play would have undergone revision. Virtually all its asides are disposable, conveying no more than a facial expression or tone of voice would, and its curtain speech against the evils of dependency, although undoubtedly sincere, isn't exactly a rouser.

But who's to say that those would've been the cuts? In its rough form, *The Witlings* feels uniquely contemporary; it might well have been normalized back to the 18th century. The first act, for example, is unusual both in locale (a milliner's shop) and in its leisurely approach to exposition— and that latter objection might be extended to most of the play.

In lieu of a rigorously constructed storyline, Burney builds her play on a rigorously distributed social premise: Self-regard blocks communication.

No character can stop broadcasting long enough to receive any other character's signal. This discursive flaw impedes the play's hysterically overdramatizing young lovers as much as the play's vain and greedy fools. Even the admirable Censor repeatedly sabotages resolution by indulging his impatience and sharp tongue; insofar as resolution's finally won, he wins it by the promise of silence.

Most of Burney's targets are familiar to us: self-congratulatory book clubs, mutually sycophantic workshops, fraudulent freestyles, slow-leaking airbags, pretentious note-jotting moldy-joking obsequious thin-skinned self-styled writers, and culturally-encouraged A.D.D. (Jack would be an enthusiastic toter of cell phone, PDA, text messenger, wireless laptop, and iPod.)

For once, I'm not inclined to defamiliarize. This is not a finished printed work, but an unpolished manuscript made to be spoken aloud. And so I've taken the liberty of regularizing spelling, capitalization, and the formatting of stage directions. Burney used commas to indicate prosody rather than sentence structure; when that seemed too distracting, I also lightly revised punctuation.

– Ray Davis