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## The Personation of John Suckling, 1635

*The letters of Anthony Mingay indicate that in early 1635 Sir John Suckling was satirically personated in an unnamed play. This article considers Richard Brome's The Sparagus Garden and James Shirley's The Lady of Pleasure as possible candidates to be this play. It concludes, however, that the cowardly braggart soldier Sucket in Henry Glaphthorne's The Lady Mother is the most likely personation of Suckling, as the humiliating beating of that character most closely aligns with the attack on Suckling by Sir John Digby as described in Mingay's letters.*

Scholars have widely recognized the satiric depiction of Sir John Suckling by other poets and playwrights in the late 1630s and early 1640s. In particular, the representation of Sir Ferdinando in Richard Brome's *The Court Beggar* (1640) is an extended mockery of Suckling as a foppish, cowardly, and impecunious courtier and writer. Part of this depiction reflects his failed attempt to court Anne Willoughby in 1633–34, which ended in a pair of physical confrontations with Sir John Digby, a rival suitor, that seriously damaged Suckling's reputation.<sup>1</sup> While these later literary representations of Suckling have been much discussed,<sup>2</sup> scholarship to date has not recognized that Suckling was also personated on the public stage in early 1635, shortly after the events surrounding the Willoughby courtship. This personation is clear from a series of letters written by Anthony Mingay to his friend Sir Framlingham Gawdy, which are preserved in British Library Egerton MS 2716.<sup>3</sup>

The first letter, dated 29 November 1634, simply records the outcome of the second violent encounter between Suckling and Digby: 'It is said here [Norwich] that mr digby that came along with you at our last Assises hath killed one of Sir John Sucklings men for certaine'.<sup>4</sup> The second, from 24 April 1635, indicates that a play has been written or performed concerning the incident: Mingay writes, 'wee heare that ther is a play made of our Country knight, and your kinsman that

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came with you hether at the last Summer Assises'.<sup>5</sup> Finally, a third letter (undated, but probably from 1 May 1635) confirms that the play concerns Suckling: 'yt is reported here that ther is a play made of Sir J: S: and of his kinsman that came along with you at summer assises with mr deuce [or dence]'.<sup>6</sup> The repeated reference to the kinsman who joined Gawdy at the summer assizes makes clear that the three letters refer to the same incident and that Suckling, in relation to his conflict with Digby, was clearly depicted onstage in the spring of 1635.<sup>7</sup>

While Mingay's letters establish the existence of an early 1635 play that mocks Suckling, they do not identify that play, or even indicate if or where it was performed. To identify the play, we must consider three possible scenarios: first, that the Mingay letters refer to a play for which no text survives; second, that they refer to a surviving play known to have been performed in 1635; or third, that they refer to a surviving play that has not hitherto been dated from that year. If the first scenario is correct, there is little more to say, unless further evidence arises. I thus turn to the second scenario. Of plays datable to this year,<sup>8</sup> a couple — Thomas Nabbes's *Hannibal and Scipio* and William Davenant's *The Temple of Love* — are unlikely because of their genre or subject matter. John Jones's obscure play, *Adrasta*, was never performed and, as far as we know, its text was not widely known. Davenant's *The Platonick Lovers*, Henry Glapthorne's *The Lady Mother*, and James Shirley's *The Lady of Pleasure* were only licensed for performance in the fall of 1635, placing them well after Mingay's letters. However, I will consider the latter two as possible candidates for redating, given their similarities to the Suckling-Digby situation. Of surviving plays datable to early 1635 that plausibly could include a representation of Suckling, we are left with Richard Brome's *The Sparagus Garden*, for which Matthew Steggle has established dates from the first half of 1635.<sup>9</sup> Brome is certainly a playwright one would expect to engage in such personation; as noted above, his representation of Suckling in *The Court Beggar* is indisputable. He attacked Suckling and other amateur courtier playwrights in a number of his prologues and epilogues.

If Mingay's letter refers to a performed play, such possibly took place in Norwich whence he writes his letter, and this would actually increase the likelihood that either *The Sparagus Garden* or *The Lady Mother* is the play in question. The players of the King's Revels were in Norwich for at least part of the spring of 1635. Gerald Eades Bentley suggested they were the company who visited the town in March 1635,<sup>10</sup> and a record captured in *REED: Norwich* has confirmed (and extended) that identification: 'a Bill signed with his Majesties hand and privie signett Dated the last day of Aprill in the nynth yeare of his Majesties Reigne, and a lycence under the seale of his Majesties Revelles dated the second of March last

& contynuinge till the Second of September next, They have leave to play here till the xviii<sup>th</sup> of this moneth'.<sup>11</sup> The March reference recorded by Bentley was an order for them to leave the city, but the later record shows that if they did leave in March they returned later in the spring and, clearly, the king had pulled rank on the Norwich authorities.<sup>12</sup> Two weeks later, however, they had once again outstayed their welcome: 'This day mr Maior sent for the Players who have exceeded their tyme, And Comanded them to forbear playinge from this day forward'.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the acting company was in Norwich for significant parts of the spring of 1635 and so the play referred to by Mingay was possibly performed there. Brome wrote *The Sparagus Garden* for the King's Revels, and *The Lady Mother* was likely performed by them, based upon the name Thomas Sands, a player of the company, appearing in the surviving manuscript.<sup>14</sup>

There are certainly characters and situations in *The Sparagus Garden* that recall Suckling and his situation in 1635. A prominent character with marked similarities to Suckling is Sir Hugh Moneylacks, described in the character list as 'a needy knight that lives by shifts'. Striker, his father-in-law, recalls the circumstances of his dead daughter's marriage to Moneylacks: Moneylacks's 'riotousness abroad' quickly consumed her dowry of 5000 pounds and his own inheritance, and his neglect led to her death (1.3.25–6). Donald S. McClure argues that as 'an impoverished gentleman who lives by his wits' Moneylacks is 'a figure familiar to the seventeenth-century playgoer', but 'his knighthood places him in a special category, like Falstaff before him'.<sup>15</sup> All this sounds much like Suckling, who by the mid-1630s was notorious for having wasted his inheritance and seeking dubious means to sustain himself. The depiction is also consistent with Brome's later representations of him, which point to Suckling's 'prodigality' as his defining vice: 'Sutlin's Play cost three or four hundred Pounds setting out, eight or ten Suits of new Cloaths he gave the Players; an unheard of Prodigality'.<sup>16</sup> Moneylacks also shares with Sir Ferdinando in *The Court Beggar* an obsession with 'projects' to resolve his financial concerns (*Garden*, 2.1.142).<sup>17</sup> In particular, Striker identifies Moneylacks as one who has a 'projective' wit (1.3.62): he plans to introduce sedan chairs into the city.<sup>18</sup>

Admittedly, the portrait and situation are far from a complete match with Suckling: Moneylacks is a widower and the father of Annabel, the courtship of whom stands at the centre of the play. Her name connects her with Anne Willoughby, and like Anne she is married off with a large dowry. Nothing in the play, however, alludes to the violent confrontations between suitors in the real-life contest between Digby and Suckling. Moneylacks certainly embodies Suckling's impecunious avarice, but there is no suggestion of the cowardice for which

Suckling was most derided in the months following the Willoughby incidents. We must conclude that if *Sparagus Garden* is the play alluded to in Mingay's letters, it involves a general personation of Suckling's character rather than any direct reflection upon the notorious events of late 1634.

One final reference in *The Sparagus Garden* offers an enigmatic connection to Suckling: in act 3, scene 10, a Gentleman who quarrels over the bill at the Sparagus Garden dismissively charges the servant to 'tell [Martha, the gardener's Dutch wife,] the Countess of Copt Hall is coming to be her neighbor again, and she may decline her trade very dangerously'. The footnote in McClure's edition of the play only suggests that the 'Countess' is 'apparently a notorious prostitute'; the edition at *Richard Brome Online* offers this similar, but extended, explanation:

Certainly Copt Hall is in Barnet, a then suburb of North London that had been the setting for Ben Jonson's 1629 play *The New Inn*. It featured a tailor's wife, Pinnacia Stuff, who performed the role of a countess in order to enjoy fetishistic sexual intercourse with her husband, a London tailor, at the Barnet inn which forms the centre of the play.<sup>19</sup>

Neither of these comments considers that by far the most famous Copt Hall in the mid-1630s was a real place in Essex with a real countess.<sup>20</sup> It was the main seat of Lionel Cranfield, the earl of Middlesex, and his second wife, Anne Brett; Middlesex was Suckling's uncle (his mother was Martha Cranfield, the earl's sister). Hence, a connection to Suckling's extended family exists here, but how this link functions in the play, and even the general sense of the Gentleman's comment, is unclear. While the reference may involve sexual innuendo, as assumed by McClure and Sanders, it might instead be a reference to Middlesex's consideration of selling Copt Hall because of his financial problems. The joke then would be about the earl and countess coming down in the world, to something closer at least to his original situation as an apprentice and then merchant in the city, based in Wood Street, and then at Chelsea House. Prestwich describes how 'The Copt Hall garden was his great pride and he once noted that Suckling could put him in touch with a Dutch gardener'.<sup>21</sup> In the early to the mid-1630s Middlesex was forced by financial distress to sell off property, and in 1636 he left Copt Hall to live largely at Milcote.<sup>22</sup>

Brome's *Sparagus Garden* thus offers intriguing connections to Suckling and his extended family, but it lacks the complete reflection of the Digby-Suckling confrontations that Mingay's letters suggest. Overall, the play seems like a shattered mirror, in which various aspects of Suckling's situation and reputation are

reflected.<sup>23</sup> There are three possible explanations for this: Mingay's information on the play was somewhat inaccurate (i.e. the play offered a general personation of Suckling rather than a reflection of the Suckling-Digby affair), the play in performance had elements not preserved in the published text, or *Sparagus Garden* is not the play mentioned by Mingay.

I now turn to the possibility that Mingay is referring to a surviving play that has not hitherto been dated from the spring of 1635. Because Shirley's *The Lady of Pleasure* was only licensed on 15 October 1635, it seems that Mingay could not be referring to a performance of this play in the spring of 1635. However, his language in both references is ambiguous: he writes that there is "a play made" of the Suckling-Digby matter. By "made" he could mean either performed or written, and it is possible that Shirley had already written *The Lady of Pleasure* in the spring of 1635, even though it was not licensed and performed until the autumn. The play includes a character (John Littleworth) with significant similarities to Suckling, many of which overlap with Moneylacks. Littleworth, marked by failure and frustration, is even more ridiculous than Moneylacks. One of his hallmarks is the offering of 'sugar-plums' to the women he encounters; likewise, Suckling was known for his lavish and financially ruinous attempts at gastronomical hosting: 'he made a magnificent entertainment ... for a great number of Ladies of Quality, all beauties, and young, which cost him hundreds of poundes, where were ... all the rarities that this part of the world could afford'.<sup>24</sup> Littleworth's attire reflects a similar ridiculous extravagance; as Ronald Huebert puts it, his 'code of dress is flamboyance at any price'.<sup>25</sup> Specifically, Aretina's steward describes him as

The gallant that still danceth in the street,  
And wears a gross of ribbon in his hat,  
That carries oringado in his pocket,  
And sugar-plums to sweeten his discourse,  
That studies compliment, defies all wit  
On black, and censures plays that are not bawdy—  
Mr John Littleworth. (1.1.192–8)

John Aubrey offers a similar portrait of Suckling: he was the 'great gallant of his time', and 'when he was at his lowest ebbe in gameing, I meane when unfortunate, then would make himselfe most glorious in apparell'.<sup>26</sup> Littleworth plays a similar role to Moneylacks in educating a young man into the corrupt fashionable life of a gentleman in London. Where Moneylacks had reshaped (and cheated) the Somerset farmer, Tim Hoyden, Littleworth (with Kickshaw) is appointed by Aretina to transform her nephew Frederick, into the semblance of a drunken city wit.

The play may also point to a crucial element of Suckling's tarnished reputation in 1634–5: his cowardice. Alexander explains why Littleworth is so well-placed to defame Celestina: 'My friend shall call her whore, or anything, / And never be endangered to a duel' (3.2.79–80). After Aretina asks 'How's that?', he continues, 'He can endure a cudgelling, and no man will fight after so fair a satisfaction' (82–3). This certainly sounds like Suckling's humiliating beating at the hands of Digby in their first encounter. Overall, Littleworth would seem a fuller reflection of Suckling than *Moneylacks*, especially in relationship to the encounters with Digby. Shirley certainly 'had form' when it came to such personation: Henry Herbert, the master of the revels, had required major changes to his play *The Ball* because it touched too clearly upon well-known contemporaries.

The closest parallel to Suckling's situation is found in Glapthorne's *The Lady Mother*, which features another impoverished, braggart, cowardly soldier, Sucket, whose very name echoes 'Suckling'. Sucket is the companion of the citizen Crackby; both have come to the country seeking a means of redeeming their financial situation, either through Crackby's uncle, Sir Geffery, or an advantageous marriage. The plot revolves around rival suitors to three women: the widow, Lady Marlove (the lady mother of the title), and her daughters, Clariana and Belizea (also Belisia). Both Crackby and Sucket unsuccessfully pursue Belizea, and she is won instead by Bonville. In the climactic scene of this plot line, Crackby violently takes the ring that Bonville has given to Belisia. Bonville, upon entering the scene, assaults Crackby and Sucket. Sucket challenges Bonville to a duel, but, out of cowardice and false bravado, he retracts the offer, because he conveniently forgot his sword that very morning.<sup>27</sup> Crackby offers his own sword to Sucket, who refuses it and reveals the real reason he wishes to avoid a fight: 'Hold yo<sup>r</sup> peace be wise that fellow in the blew garm<sup>t</sup> has a countenance presages losse of limne if we incounter, Ile meet you presently' (1592–4).<sup>28</sup> Disdaining such a pathetic challenger, Bonville orders Grimes the servant to beat them. Sucket's words while he is being beaten conclude the scene: 'Take me without a weapon, this Cudgell sure is Crabtree it tasts soe Sowrely' (1599–1600). Thus, the scene directly recalls Digby's reputed beating and humiliation of Suckling, and the effect is to highlight the cowardice and empty bravado of Sucket within the context of a failed courtship.

Throughout the play, Glapthorne emphasizes Sucket's martial boastfulness; for example, he is ridiculed as 'Captain Huff' by Clariana. The history of his military career at least partly aligns with Suckling's own: Crackby says of him, 'Creditt me my Captaine carries fortitude enough for a whole legion, twas his advice, tooke in y<sup>e</sup> Busse, & at Mاسترخت his courage did conclude *Papenhams*

over throw' (622). Suckling had fought at the prince of Orange's famous siege of the Bosch (also known as s'Hertogenbosch or the Busse) in July 1629. There is no record of Suckling participating in the capture of Maastricht by the same prince in August 1632.

The high level of correspondence between the Suckling-Digby conflict and the events of the play, the name 'Sucket', and the likelihood that it was a King's Revels play (possibly performed in Norwich), make *The Lady Mother* the most likely candidate of the three plays. The licensing date of 15 October 1635 remains as the one barrier to this identification. However, the surviving manuscript of the play (BL Egerton 1994) is a heavily revised working text to which William Blagrave (deputy to Henry Herbert, master of the revels) then added his licensing approval (along with some changes).<sup>29</sup> As it seems this manuscript passed back and forth between the author and the censor a number of times, final licensing may have been considerably after its original composition. Internal evidence for dating the play is limited, and Arthur Brown suggests that it could have been written anytime between 1633 and 1635.<sup>30</sup> Brown, Greg, and Bentley all note that the play was likely acted by the King's Revels company,<sup>31</sup> and hence, as with *The Sparagus Garden*, a Norwich performance in the spring of 1635 is plausible, but such would have been done without a license.

To conclude, Anthony Mingay's letters undoubtedly establish that Suckling was recognizably personated in at least one English play in the spring of 1635. While for both Brome's *The Sparagus Garden* and Shirley's *The Lady of Pleasure* there is strong textual support for an identification of Suckling with a satirized central character, the strongest parallel to the Digby-Suckling conflict is found in Glapthorne's *The Lady Mother*. A conclusive argument cannot at this point be established, largely because of the uncertainty surrounding that play's date. That discrepancy might be put aside, however, if we assume that by 'made' Mingay means written, or that a performance in Norwich preceded an October 1635 licensing for performance in London. A final intriguing possibility is that all three plays considered here engaged to some degree in personation of Suckling, who by 1635 had become the embodiment of the spendthrift, braggart soldier of the dramatic tradition.

## Notes

- 1 A contemporary of Brome thought ‘twas strange to see the envie, and ill nature of people to trample, and scoffe at, and deject one in disgrace; see Kate Bennet, ed., *Brief Lives with An Apparatus for the Lives of our English Mathematical Writer*, 2 vols (Oxford, 2015), 1.372.
- 2 Matthew Steggle, *Richard Brome: Place and Politics on the Caroline Stage* (Manchester, 2004), 158–61; Matthew Steggle, *Wars of the Theatres: The Poetics of Personation in the Age of Jonson* (Victoria, 1998), 117–24; Ralph J. Kaufmann, *Richard Brome: Caroline Playwright* (New York, 1961), 164.
- 3 The recipient of the letters, Sir Framlingham Gawdy, was a cousin of Anthony Mingay’s wife, Mary Gawdy, and a well-connected member of the Norfolk and Suffolk elite. I have not been able to identify any kinship of Gawdy with Digby. Beyond any such kinship he would have been interested in the Willoughby courtship because of another family connection: his wife, Lettice Knollys, and Anne Willoughby’s mother, Elizabeth Knollys, were first cousins. Lettice was the daughter of Sir Robert Knollys, and Elizabeth the daughter of Henry Knollys; Robert and Henry were sons of Sir Francis Knollys. Note that Mingay himself in the one letter suggests that Digby is the kinsman of Suckling.
- 4 BL MS Egerton 2716, fol. 178r. I quote from the original manuscript; the letters have also been published in *HMC: Report on the Manuscripts of the Family of Gawdy* (London, 1885).
- 5 BL MS Egerton 2716, fol. 193r.
- 6 BL MS Egerton 2716, fol. 194r. If ‘Deuce’ is the correct reading of the name mentioned, it may be Sir Simonds D’Ewes, the well-known parliamentarian, antiquarian, and diarist, who moved in the same East Anglian puritan circles as Gawdy.
- 7 The reference to him as ‘our country knight’ calls for some explanation: Suckling had deep roots in the county of Norfolk, and in Norwich in particular. His great-grandfather and grandfather had been mayor and his uncle (Edward) dean from 1614 to 28. His father, Sir John Suckling, continued the family role there through being elected to represent the city in 1626.
- 8 The list of plays to be considered was based on a combined gleaning of Alfred Harbage, *Annals of English Drama, 975–1700: An Analytical Record of All Plays, Extant or Lost, Chronologically Arranged and Indexed by Authors, Titles, Dramatic Companies & C.*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London, 1989), Yoshiko Kawachi, *Calendar of English Renaissance Drama, 1558–1642* (New York, 1986), Gerard Eades Bentley, *Jacobean and Caroline*



- Stage, 7 vols (Oxford, 1966–68), and Martin Wiggins, *British Drama 1533–1642: A Catalogue*, 9 vols (Oxford, 2019), vol. 9.
- 9 Steggle, *Richard Brome*, 69.
  - 10 Bentley, *Jacobean and Caroline Stage*, 1.286–8.
  - 11 David Galloway, ed., *REED: Norwich* (Toronto, 1984), 219.
  - 12 On tensions between the playing companies, their patrons, and Norwich authorities, see D.F. Rowan, ‘The Players and Playing Places of Norwich’, in *The Development of Shakespeare’s Theater*, ed. John H. Astington (New York, 1992), 77–80.
  - 13 ‘This day’ is 20 June 1635; Galloway, *REED: Norwich*, 219–20.
  - 14 Arthur Brown, ed. *The Lady Mother*, Malone Society Reprints 109 (Oxford, 1958), xiii; Wiggins, ed., *British Drama*, 9.398.
  - 15 Richard Brome, *A Critical Edition of Richard Brome’s The Weeding of Covent Garden and The Sparagus Garden*, ed. Donald S. McClure (New York, 1980), 13.
  - 16 Kaufman, *Richard Brome*, 152. Prodigality and gluttony are also key notes in the satiric broadsheet *The Sucklington Faction or (Sucklings) Roaring Boyes*, (London, 1641; Wing S6133).
  - 17 See *The Court Beggar*, 1.1.130, on Sir Ferdinando’s ‘hopeful projects’. On projects and projectors in the period, see Mordechai Feingold, ‘Projectors and learned projects in early modern England’, *Seventeenth Century* 32.1 (2016), 63–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0268117X.2016.1249935>.
  - 18 See *The Court Beggar*, 1.1.100ff on the introduction of sedan chairs. *OED*, c.v. ‘sedan’, n. notes ‘In 1634 the exclusive right of supplying “covered chairs” was granted to Sir Sanders Duncombe; the word sedan does not occur in the grant, but the index to the patents of the year has ‘covered chairs (called sedans)’, a connection that may point away from Suckling.
  - 19 Julie Sanders, ed., *The Sparagus Garden*, *Richard Brome Online* last updated 2010, <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/brome/viewTranscripts.jsp?type=MOD&play=SG&act=3>. Sanders provides no basis for the suggestion that Copt Hall is in Burnet; while there were a number of buildings at different times called ‘Copt Hall’ (the name may derive from ‘Coppice Hall’), certainly the famous one in the 1620s and 1630s was the Essex home of the earl and countess of Middlesex.
  - 20 On the building details of Copt Hall, see John Newman, ‘Cophthall: Essex’ in *The Country Seat: Studies in the History of the British Country House*, ed. Howard Colvin and John Harris (London, 1970), 18–29.
  - 21 Menna Prestwich, *Cranfield: Politics and Profits Under the Early Stuarts: The Career of Lionel Cranfield, Earl of Middlesex* (Oxford, 1966), 538. Prestwich notes on the same page that Middlesex grew asparagus there.
  - 22 *Ibid.*, 538–40.

- 23 The character who courts and wins Annabel, Samuel Touchwood, is described as a 'poetical soldier' (5.12.54), but in no other respects is he like Suckling, and the relatively sympathetic portrayal of him makes it unlikely that he is in any way a personation of Suckling.
- 24 Bennet, ed., *Brief Lives*, 1.369.
- 25 James Shirley, *The Lady of Pleasure*, ed. Ronald Huebert (Manchester, 1986), 7.
- 26 Bennet, ed., *Brief Lives*, 1.367–8.
- 27 A later passage in the play mocking laws against duelling may have been cut because of the censor's objections. See Brown, ed., *The Lady Mother*, xii.
- 28 Citations reference Henry Glapthorne, *The Lady Mother*, ed. Arthur Brown, (London, 1959).
- 29 Brown, ed., *The Lady Mother*, viii–xii. N.W. Bawcutt, ed., *The Control and Censorship of Caroline Drama: The Records of Sir Henry Herbert, Master of the Revels 1623–73*, (Oxford, 1996), 60.
- 30 Brown, ed., *The Lady Mother*, xiii.
- 31 *Ibid*, xiii–iv.