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Nathalie Bernard

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# I heard that you said you had not laughed above twice in your life

Nathalie BERNARD

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- 1 Dear Dr. Swift,
- 2 I am taking the liberty of sending this letter to you; I know that you dislike praise and therefore hope that you will not think me a fool for owning that I regard you as a man of true genius and the greatest master of humour who ever wrote. A severe censor of religious superstition and universal immoralities, you are also prompt to ridicule the mediocrity and corruption of contemporary literature; so that any young man with literary ambitions and a keen desire to make a name for himself on the London stage, as I am, must be very pleased to receive your compliment, or mortified to arouse your contempt. There is a rumour that the Dean of St Patrick's' wit is matched only by his severity, and I must therefore be forgiven for not being totally surprised when I heard that you said you had not laughed above twice in your life (though I suspect that this statement is slightly exaggerated). I also heard that one of these two occasions was the performance of my two-act burlesque tragedy *Tom Thumb*, the precise circumstance being the killing of the hero's ghost in the final scene of the play: as no man can judge humour and wit better than you, Sir, I am very honoured and more than willing to believe that I was told the truth.
- 3 Since its first performance in April 1730, more than a year ago, *Tom Thumb* has provoked the mirth and laughter of spectators far less expert than you: the play debuted as an afterpiece to *The Author's Farce*, but it met with no little success, running to full houses for forty-one nights, so that I started to revise it during its initial run. I have since then expanded it into *The Tragedy of Tragedies, or, The Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great*, a three-act play which, I am proud to say, also enjoys some popularity on the stage. In both plays, it has been my intention to satirise modern tragedy as the dramatic genre most likely to make audiences laugh. As indicated in the preface to *Tom Thumb*, modern tragedies, particularly those of the heroic type, should more appropriately be referred to as "laughing Tragedies": they can indeed be credited with *enlarging* the sphere of a genre which, in ancient times, could only provoke two feelings

amongst the audience, either awakening fear and pity, or putting the spectators to sleep. The empty pomp of contemporary tragedies is my main target, and the killing of the ghost in *Tom Thumb*, to which you responded so favourably, ridicules the extravagant rhetorical phrases often found in plays written in the heroic vein, such as “kill my soul,” “stab my very soul,” “bleeding soul,” “dying soul,” and other such fantastical expressions which, while they aim to arouse *pathos*, will more likely cause perplexity and laughter. With the same satirical purpose, I have chosen to tell the story of a little hero with a great soul, a worthy knight of an inch in height, taking the rough outline of my plays and several of their episodes from the old folktale of Tom Thumb. I need not tell you that this tale has been circulating widely in chap-books and ballad form for more than a century, together with other noble stories that will undoubtedly garner the praise of future ages, such as *Whittington and his Cat*, *Valentine and Orson*, or *Tom Tram* and *Hickathrift*, etc. I very well remember the passage from *A Tale of a Tub* in which your *Grubæen Sage* mentions the History of Tom Thumb as one of the “several Dozens of works” he has handled and annotated, praising it as “a dark treatise” which “contains the whole scheme of the *Metempsychosis*, deducing the progress of the soul thro’ all her stages.” I am therefore confident that you share my admiration for the sublime beauties of these immortal works of imagination, whose subtle plots so eminently contribute to our people’s instruction and moral improvement.

- 4 In order to reveal the essentially comic nature of modern tragedy, the play on characters’ sizes in *Tom Thumb* and *The Tragedy of Tragedies* is paralleled by the shortness of scenes and their accelerated pace, culminating in the bloody catastrophe which concludes both plays. Problems of size and proportion are also emphasised in a different manner when Princess Huncamunca’s “amorous disposition” tempts her to become both Tom and Lord Grizzle’s wife, or when Queen Glumdalca, who reigns over one hundred thousand giants (and also happens to be in love with Tom Thumb in spite of his diminutive stature), reveals that she already has no fewer than twenty husbands among her subjects.
- 5 I willingly acknowledge that *Tom Thumb* and *The Tragedy of Tragedies* are deeply indebted to the first two parts of *Gulliver’s Travels*: Queen Glumdalca, of the giants, obviously borrows her name from Glumdalclitch, the young girl who looks after Gulliver in Brobdingnag. You may also have heard that the dramatic climax of *The Tragedy of Tragedies*, which differs from that of *Tom Thumb*, is reached when the mighty hero is “devoured/ By the expanded jaws of a red cow” of larger than the usual size. This sad end is partly inspired by the original folktale, in which Tom is several times swallowed and regurgitated, yet it also borrows from one of Gulliver’s misadventures in Brobdingnag, when after failing to leap over a cowpat, Gulliver unfortunately jumps short and finds himself “in the middle up to his knees.” After all, Sir, were you not inspired by several popular chap-books, like *The History of Jack and the Giants*, *The World Turned Upside Down*, and particularly, the Tale of Tom Thumb? The small but warlike Lilliputians, who are six inches high, are sure to remind your reader of the valiant but minute knight praised in Thumbian adventures. Are not similarities between Tom Thumb and *Gulliver’s Travels* even more obvious in Part II, when your English captain becomes a dwarf hero in a land of giants? While Tom Thumb is dropped into his mother’s pudding, Gulliver falls into a bowl of cream, and both are attacked by small creatures bigger than themselves, such as rats, birds, fish, or even insects. However, when Gulliver is finally transported away from the land of the giants in the claws of a giant eagle, the classical reader is left to determine whether the incident comes from

the original tale, in which Tom is borne away by a raven, or whether it borrows from the story of Ganymede and the eagle related in Homer's *Iliad* or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*...

- 6 Some of my enemies suggest that, although my farcical plays and *Gulliver's Travels* may draw from the same source, works of such different natures and merits should not be measured against one another, lest my little pieces should be dwarfed by comparison with your superior talents. Now you must have heard, dear Sir, that the prefaces to my plays are written in the guise of "Scriblerus Secundus," by which I imply a kinship with Martinus Scriblerus, the persona through whose writings prominent literary figures like yourself, Mr. Pope and Mr. Gay have so powerfully satirised dullness and false tastes in learning. It must be noted that my detractors have blamed me for arrogating the Scriblerus name to myself with the sole purpose of benefiting from the fame justly bestowed on the authors of *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Dunciad*, or *The Beggar's Opera*; yet I am bold enough to believe that this false accusation was spread by malicious critics out of sheer envy and jealousy, and that slander is the price I have to pay for my success on the stage. Besides, he must be a very dull fellow, who does not want his works to be associated with the above-mentioned masterpieces. And I can assure you, Sir, that despite my young age, I have long been among your most faithful readers, which is why my first published work, a poem satirising the pleasures of the town, called *The Masquerade*, was written in Hudibrastic verse, your favourite metre, under the name of "Lemuel Gulliver, Poet Laureat to the King of Lilliput." I have thus far had no reason to believe that my Scriblerian pretensions have been resented by any member of your Club; I therefore hope that you will not frown upon the printed text of *The Tragedy of Tragedies*, in which H. Scriblerus Secundus, a grave and solemn scholar, offers valuable comments on the play in countless annotations, exalting its sublimity and sparing no effort to analyse it in the most skilful way possible. His erudite notes employ a technique which I have borrowed from Mr. Pope's *Dunciad* in order to blur the distinction between "low" and "high" culture, the accumulation of pedantic analogies and sources magnifying the play in a manner which suits the effect accomplished by plot, diction and characters.
- 7 I now recall that, if I was told the truth, the other time you laughed was at some trick a mountebank's merry-andrew played and perhaps the two objects which occasioned your merriment are not entirely unrelated. In this corrupt age, when all human relationships amount to commercial transactions, when art and literature have become commodities, plays and books, mere merchandise, the playwright is tempted to imitate the quack doctor: as the ignorant charlatan stupefies the gullible crowd with grandiose but meaningless words in order to sell snake-oil, cordial balms and other wonder-working drugs, so the dramatist must write nonsense to receive applause from the duped but delighted audience. Nevertheless, many commentators of *Tom Thumb* and *The Tragedy of Tragedies* have failed to see that these plays are not to be considered as symptoms of cultural decline, but as satires, and that far from condescending to the low taste of the town, they only seemingly praise the foolishness which they expose, and therefore should not be mistaken for it. Critics of a more saturnine disposition have suggested that the medicine I have used in order to cure the crowds' distemper only adds fury to the disease, yet I am of a different opinion, and trust the cathartic properties of laughter: 'tis an excellent medicine, which purifies and strengthens both body and mind more effectively than a solemn lecture or a serious tragedy. You will perhaps agree with this assertion, and approve the addition, in the revised play, of a new character extending and enriching the episode of the ghost in *Tom Thumb* ☺ I

mean Gaffer Thumb, who is none other than Tom's defunct father. He is a whimsical and garrulous sort of ghost, which, if I believe the spectators of *The Tragedy*, is alone worth the whole performance.

8 I am so far from having exhausted the comic muse that I can see no end to my career as a dramatist: the printed *Tragedy*, however, with its remarks on the play in progress, has given me an opportunity to experiment with the device of the play-within-a-play, which I employed a few months ago in *The Author's Farce*, in the manner of Buckingham's *Rehearsal*. *The Tragedy* may be called an "acting play" as well as a "reading play," displacing as it does my characters and plot from the stage to the page. I may some day write (nay, if I am lucky enough, put forth into the world) a full-length book, but as I do not wish to add to the long list of romances and novels that are every day published in our country, I shall perhaps endeavour to produce a prose text of a new character, defying the reader's expectations in the way Mr Gay's "Tragi-Comi-Pastoral Farce," *The What D'Ye Call It?*, as well as my own plays, break with dramatic conventions. The itinerant doctor and his faithful companion are excellent comic figures indeed, reminding me of the errant Knight of the Woeful Figure and his servant Sancho Panza in Cervantes' masterpiece; I could be tempted to relate the story of two men travelling together across the country in search of the true meaning of knowledge... If ever I write such a text, I shall perhaps not do it in the guise of Scriblerus Secundus, or draw my inspiration from your works as closely as I have in my little *Tragedy*; however, dear Sir, let me assure you that whatever will become of me in future years, I shall remain to my very last breath

9 Your most fervent admirer,

10 Henry Fielding.

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## AUTHOR

### NATHALIE BERNARD

Aix Marseille Univ, LERMA, Aix-en-Provence, France

Nathalie.Bernard@univ-amu.fr

Dr. Nathalie Bernard is Senior Lecturer at Aix-Marseille Université, where she teaches British literature and translation. She is the author of several articles on 18th-century travel literature and has published three translations and co-translations: Henry Fielding, *Le Journal d'un voyage de Londres à Lisbonne* (PUP, 2009), Mary Wollstonecraft, *Lettres de Scandinavie de Mary Wollstonecraft* (PUP, 2013, co-translator: Stéphanie Gourdon) and Daniel Defoe, *La Grande Tempête*. (Éditions Classiques Garnier, 2018, co-translator: Emmanuelle Peraldo).