

Brighton Ambitious: Some Fragments

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an unpublished play by Maria Edgeworth, edited by Ellen B. Brewster

The following scenes are from an unpublished play by Maria Edgeworth c.1811, found in MS Eng misc. f.897. The fragments have been joined by a title and staging devices which, it is hoped, continue to draw attention to the incomplete and fragmentary nature of the surviving source material.

The editor has added and modernised some punctuation, whilst attempting to retain Edgeworth's characteristic use of dashes. Non-standard and archaic spellings (such as 'ax' for 'ask') are generally retained where they may be taken as indications of pronunciation and accent. Abbreviations have been written out in full and ampersands have been silently replaced with 'and'. The modern conventions for stage directions and displaying dialogue have been used, with further directions added where it might be useful to a reader or performer of the text.

This text was drawn up from the manuscript material and transcription contained in this booklet, and used for a performance on Tuesday 3rd December 2019, at the Centre for Digital Humanities at the Bodleian Library.

The parts were read and performed by Jemima Hubberstey, Olivia Krauze and Eugenie Nevin.

Dramatis Personae (Staged)

Miss Lapell {Maid to Mrs Chamberlayne}?Mrs Wright {Housekeeper of Herbert Hall} Miss Sophie Seymour {Cousin to Lady Flora} Miss Millicent Chamberlayne {Cousin to Lady Flora} Lady Flora {Granddaughter to Lady Herbert}

Dramatis Personae (Unstaged)

Lady Herbert {Grandmother to Lady Flora}?Mrs Chamberlayne {Mother of Millicent, Mistress of Miss Lapell} Miss Shuffleton {Maid to Miss Millicent}?Rob {Manservant of Herbert Hall}

SCENE 1

[Herbert Hall - Housekeeper's Room. Projected on the wall is a full-length portrait of a man in military dress - think Sharpe, or Poldark - alongside images from MS Eng misc. f.897. In the middle of the room is a table with two chairs.]

[Enter Miss Lapell, sola.]

Miss Lapell: Brighton! Ah Brighton! I must and I will go to Brighton for I've bought the sweetest second hand pelisse I o'purpose - and have laid myself out for the season at Brighton. So let me consider - yes, that's the way it shall be - this old Lady Herbert is going there with her grand-daughter little Lady Flora next week - and I'll go with them as sure as my name's Lapell! -- Shuffleton too, would give her two eyes to go - and I'm a little afraid of her outplotting me, for she is as cunning as twenty foxes in one - But cunning as she

bees I hope and trust she's on the wrong scent now - what she goes upon is, that being Miss Millicent's maid she must be taken as part of her baggage and Shuffleton I know reckons that Miss Milly will be the cousin axed to go on account of my Lady Flora's taking such a fancy to her - may be so - But now my plans are on surer ground - My scheme is to get to be my Lady Flora's own maid and then no matter which cousin is axed I must go with my Lady - and luckily my Lady Flora's maid's just gone and here's the place open and a word from Mrs Wright the housekeeper (who rules the roost with young and old above stairs as well as below) will get me the situation - and I can easy win Mrs Wright by a genteel Douceur² of a paper or a bond of my making instead of the dowdy she wears -- [thinking] or maybe I without going to that expense - a few fair words - oh leave that to me - If I don't flatter her up well - and here she comes -
[Enter Mrs Wright, with a tray of desert spoons and bowls.]

Miss Lapell: My dear Mrs Wright, if I enter'd rude I ax pardon but I have been waiting for you here to make my apologies - my dear Ma'am I'm afeared that Rob (who has no more manners than a calf when he's sent on a message) annoyed you about that there evening primrose ribbon and I'm so dismayd -

Mrs Wright: Ma'am it is all over now. You'll excuse Ma'am my going on with my desert laying out.

Miss Lapell: Indubitably, Ma'am. But my dear Mrs Wright I was looking at this here fine picture, [gestures] this full length of an officer that graces your apartment and often I've intended to axe (if it in't an indiscreet question) whose picture it may be.

Mrs Wright: The picture is my property Ma'am - a present from my kind lady - 'Tis a portrait of the young Lord my Lady Flora's father who was an officer -

Miss Lapell: [Interrupting] of the guards? Dear yes, I should have known the regimentals anywhere - 'Tis a prodigious likeness I dare say Ma'am

Mrs Wright: Yes, Ma'am it's such a likeness that it strikes everyone who ever saw my young lord.

Miss Lapell: And a very striking figure it is, an elegant fine presence of a gentleman and a military presence too which I doat upon -- My stars what a match my Lord will be for somebody.

Mrs Wright: Dear heart Ma'am he's dead - my young Lord died soon after he came to us after that wound and fever he had abroad -

Miss Lapell: What a thousand pities Ma'am! [Abruptly changing subject] But your Lady, I mean the old, the Dowager Lady about stairs is looking quite charming for her age - and I'm quite in love do you know Mrs Wright with hers and your stile of dress - as my Lady says, 'tis so [in a French accent] vieille comme.

Mrs Wright: So what, Ma'am? I have no French -

?Miss Lapell: So Ma'am it wasn't the fashion in your time - But the foreign tongue is of late greatly come up -

?Mrs Wright: [aside] Greatly come down, I think -

Miss Lapell: But now if you'll believe me Mrs Wright I see a vast likeness Ma'am not only in dress and externities but in your air and speech and total manner. In every thing you're the very model of your own reverend Lady -

Mrs Wright: [turning suddenly with a pleased manner] Dear heart! Ma'am but do you really think so? Miss Lapell: 'Pon honour so I do - for I was saying so in my bed no later than this morning to

Miss Shuffleton - says I, Mrs Wright is the very model of her lady -

Mrs Wright: [sets a chair for Miss Lapell] While you are in my room won't you make yourself comfortable

Ma'am?

Miss Lapell: Pray, Ma'am - I beg -

[Miss Lapell seats herself and Mrs Wright seats herself, crossing her hands formally]

Miss Lapell: So Mrs Wright the young people is all going this night to Huntingdon's brother's dancing master's ball and I'll engage ma'am in that ballroom there won't be the nonpareil of your own lovely Lady Flora -

Mrs Wright: What Ma'am when your own young lady is there Ma'am?

Miss Lapell: Yes indeed Ma'am - I speak with my eyes open, for to be candid with you Mrs Wright, though my own Lady has had the advantage - I grant you - in hint of polish and fashion masters and all that, yet I can't be blind Ma'am, and O must knock under in regard of natural beauty and grace and the je ne sais quoi for though my Lady Flora may'nt have all the connections I say a conspicuously regular bread feature in her face, if you accept her eyes - yet she's what the gentlemen call fascinating -

Mrs Wright: My lady Flora was but twelve years old last birthday Ma'am - Miss Lapell: Indeed Ma'am? then she's very tall of her age -

Mrs Wright: We think Ma'am very little, for her age -

Miss Lapell: Dear Ma'am do you! ? But I like little ladies best. They are so compact and Lady Flora's quite a pocket Venus?. How she'll be admired at Brighton! [Angling] Where you're going next week I understand Ma'am?

Mrs Wright: So I understand Ma'am -

Miss Lapell: Take her all in all, there's not a young lady in England I'd so wish to be attached to as Lady Flora -

Mrs Wright: But you be attached already be'nt you Ma'am to your own Lady?

Miss Lapell: Indeed Ma'am ? if possible but confidentially speaking and trust to your discretion my dear

Mrs. Wright I've made up my mind, directly to quit Mrs Chamberlayne for I'd sooner give up the month's salary ? salary was nothing of the kind being no object with me, sooner than stay another month as Mrs Chamberlayne Ma'am is so difficult and since she's grown so nervous and Miss Millicent has such a temper and such a tongue and is so hard to fit in her dress and please her humours that I'd not live longer with them two, even if I could live with Miss Shuffleton Ma'am, whom you yourself must see there's no human possibility of putting up with - no - not for a globe of gold and this season. Now Ma'am I would not mention this to anyone but you, whom I took a fancy to from the first minute ever I set eyes upon you Mrs Wright.

Mrs Wright: [aside] I wish I could return the compliment - [aloud] I am oblig'd to you Ma'am -

Miss Lapell: And Mrs Wright I have a secret to tell you too -

Mrs Wright: [rising] Oh dear Ma'am don't tell me any of your secrets, I am the worst person in the world for secrets -

Miss Lapell: Oh dear Ma'am don't disparage yourself so ? I'm sure I'd trust you as soon as my own mother with my secrets -

Mrs Wright: [moving away] But indeed Miss Lapell I have no time for secrets -

Miss Lapell: But my dear Mrs Wright [holding her] this won't keep you a minute - it's a family secret which your domestic nature can't but be interested to hear of a near connection of your Lady's -

Mrs Wright: [resisting Miss Lapell's grip] My Lady will inform me I'm sure Ma'am in proper course -

Miss Lapell: Of course, Ma'am, if she knowed it ? But Ma'am the thing is - I smell a rat!

?Mrs Wright: [starting] Do you Ma'am? - then I hate a rat.

Miss Lapell: Oh Ma'am 'tis only in the nose of my fancy, but indeed it was Miss Shuffleton smelt it first to do her justice, and she put me upon the scent which in plain English is this Ma'am, that the Chamberlaynes is believed --

SCRAP 1

[Offstage, a sound of a tearing manuscript page is heard. Mrs Wright retrieves six dishes piled with assorted fruit and jelly and places them on the table. Miss Lapell and Mrs Wright resume their seats.]

Miss Lapell: ... and so would you Ma'am I'm morally certain, - so that with your friendly admonition and advice I don't doubt but we might - is she wa'n't so old and inveterate - cure poor Miss Shuffleton of that habit of scandal as disparages her, so that as her friend I can't help but feel for her.

Mrs Wright: Ma'am I do not pretend to be Miss Shuffleton's friend -

Miss Lapell: [aside] That's well, that's settled -

Mrs Wright: [gestures] My six long dishes - prunes and melons and the four brandy forests which is apricots, cherries, plums and peaches - you'll excuse my going on with my desert Ma'am [Reaching for one]

Miss Lapell: Induitably Ma'am -

SCRAP 2

[Offstage, the sound of shearing scissor blades. Mrs Wright, pudding in hand, raises her spoon to her mouth. Before she can eat, Miss Lapell reaches for her arm to speak. Mrs Wright puts down the spoon, resigned.]

Miss Lapell: And another thing, Mrs Wright, I was quite ashamed about the exceptions as Miss Shuffleton made today to the luncheon when I'm sure everything is on such a genteel scale in the establishment at Herbert Hall.

Mrs Wright: I'm glad you find it so - my Lady wishes every thing to be handsome and I do my endeavour. And the house I believe has a good name.

Miss Lapell: Indeed ma'am it has every where ? and it is quite scandalous of Miss Shuffleton to be so over nice and as to request syllabubs!

[At the mention of pudding, Mrs Wright raises her spoon once again to her mouth. Again she is thwarted.]

Miss Lapell: And Ma'am another thing, she is so addicted to scandal - at tea yesterday Ma'am you was quite oppressed with it. I remarked and laughed Ma'am at the stories she was putting in circulation - circulation it was purely to laugh scandal out of countenance.

SCENE 2

[Exit Miss Lapell and Mrs Wright, with the uneaten pudding. A bell is placed on the table.]

[Enter Miss Millicent Chamberlayne and Miss Sophy Seymour.]

Miss Millicent: Do Sophy ring the bell - I must know why the boy is not come back with the letter from the port - I'm dying to hear what is decided about Brighton - are not you?

Miss Sophy: No, indeed [ringing the bell] - I'd rather be here than at Brighton - I'm so happy here with you walking and talking and such beautiful walks! And such entertaining books we have to read together. I only hope you will not be taken away from me to Brighton.

[Enter Lady Flora, with a letter.] Miss Millicent: [joking] But you'd give a great deal that you shall go.

Lady Flora: [hearing] Oh more than that.

Miss Sophy: More! - then you are to go Flora! [sighing]

Miss Millicent: [simultaneously] More! - then I am to go Flora?

Lady Flora: That's as hereafter may be Millicent - but it is more still Sophy - you'll think -

Miss Sophy: - Well if you mean - if I am to go with you too - [blandly] I am very glad, I dare say I shall be very happy with you - anywhere.

Lady Flora: That's as hereafter may be, but I must tell you all at once for I cannot keep the pleasure any longer in. Grandmamma intends to ask one of you my dear cousins, to live with us always.

Miss Sophy: [apparently joyfully] To live with you always? Oh how I should - but I'm afraid it won't be me.

Miss Millicent: [aside, to Miss Sophy] And I'm afraid it will be me, and that's a hard price even for a trip to Brighton. [affecting eagerness] And which is it to be my dearest Flora?

Lady Flora: That's as hereafter may be - but I must tell you I am to have the choice.

Miss Millicent: The choice? Then -

Miss Sophy: Then I hope - [stifling laughter] I hope I shall not be envious or jealous of you Millicent - I'll do my best - [moves to leave]

Lady Flora: [playfully] Stay till you have the reason my dear.

?Miss Sophy: That is true - but I know you'll always esteem me and love me too - though I'm not so entertaining as Millicent.

Lady Flora: Well that is just the very truth and just what I was saying to Grandmamma and now I have said it to your face. Dear Sophy I am better pleased with myself.

Miss Millicent: [fawning] Oh how happy Flora, my dearest Flora, we two should be laughing together at Brighton - do you remember the night we went to the play together? [puts her arm within Lady Flora's]

Lady Flora: Oh yes I do and I never laughed so much in my life - you certainly Millicent are the most entertaining person.

Miss Millicent: [Taking Lady Flora, or perhaps being taken] Come then, I've something to tell you - it's too satirical to tell you here. Come, in the mean time let us walk.

[Exeunt Lady Flora and Miss Millicent, arm in arm.]

Miss Sophy: [knowingly] But I hope I shall never be jealous!

[Exit Miss Sophy.]

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