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Citation

Sweeney, Carole. 2018. "Why This Rather Than That?": The Delightful Perversity of Brigid Brophy. *Contemporary Womens Writing*, 12(2), pp. 233-247. ISSN 1754-1476 [Article]

Persistent URL

<https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/19917/>

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‘Why this rather than that?’: The Delightful Perversity of Brigid Brophy

**“The novel doesn’t stop short at taking you out of yourself:
it puts the author in your place.”** (Brigid Brophy, *Don’t Never Forget*)

The brainiest woman in Britain?

After her untimely death in 1995, Brigid Brophy’s literary agent, Giles Gordon, wrote a touching obituary capturing the richness of her literary, cultural and political interests that spanned three decades from the 1950s into the late 1980s when she wrote a clear-eyed account of life confined to a wheelchair. She was, he said, an

[a]theist, vegetarian, socialist; novelist and short-story writer; humanist; biographer; playwright; Freudian promoter of animal rights; children’s author; tennis fanatic and, on television, football fancier; most loyal of friends; reverer of Jane Austen; lover of Italy; Mozart adorer; disliker of “Shakespeare in performance”; smoker of cigarettes in a chic holder and painter of her fingernails purple; mother, grandmother, wife; feminist; lover of men and women (Gordon 1995).

But “above all”, Gordon concluded, Brophy was “an intellectual”. At a time when to be considered intellectual, or even just clever, was not much of a compliment for a woman, Brophy was regarded, says Christine Brooke Rose, as the “brainiest woman in Britain” (*In Transit*, Introduction, 1). Indeed, contemporary reviewers of her work insisted on pointing up its ‘braininess’, its tendency, as they saw it, to cerebral showing off. As D. J. Enright quipped, “Brigid Brophy’s novels have often been described as ‘brilliantly written’ a judgment which can have done her sales little good” (“A Writer’s Fancy”). One of the last devotees of the Shavian ‘shew’ and fond of wordplay of all sorts, Brophy possessed a grammatical virtuosity bordering on pedantry and was not shy of showing her extensive cultural knowledge from Mozart to Wimbledon in her work. The assured intellectualism characterising much of Brophy’s writing was often negatively received; indeed, some reviewers and critics went out of their way to characterise her work as simply too clever, too insistently stylised, and far too mulishly opinionated, Ian Hamilton purportedly going so far as to tag her with the disgracefully misogynist sobriquet of “Britain’s foremost literary shrew” (Hodgson 269). Even the dust jacket blurb on one of her own books seemed to disapprove of her intelligence: “Miss Brophy [...] is so clever and so assured that she has no trouble holding the reader’s attention” (*The New Yorker*). It appears, then, as if Brophy’s intelligence was something of a hindrance to her literary success as Enright points up: “Brigid Brophy is probably too versatile for her own good, as good goes, and possibly a little too clever, and certainly too

much of a writer” (15-16). Elsewhere, her work was described in *The Washington Post* as a “vegetarian *jeux d’esprit*”, a description that manages to be somehow simultaneously apposite and impertinent.

Brophy’s overly ‘clever’ fiction was often met with a disapprobation that seemed to suggest her eccentric aesthetic agenda and wilfully ‘cultured’ prose was a kind of insubordinate affectation. Mary (later Lady) Warnock notes her tendency to insubordination: “The arguments are often clever. But the air of the schoolboy boldly undermining what he takes to be the schoolmaster’s presuppositions detracts from our admiration of their ingenuity” (785-6). *People* magazine, an influential US weekly, declared her to be “the best prose writer of her generation” and, according to S. J. Newman, she was “One of the oddest, most brilliant and most enduring of [...] 1960s symptoms” (138). Brophy’s work is, to be sure, brilliant and odd, but has not been, it turns out, enduring.¹ Despite the inventiveness that she brought to a sometimes lacklustre British literary scene in the 1950s and 60s, Brophy’s writing has been critically ignored; much of her work, both fiction and non-fiction, has sunk into unwarranted obscurity and, for the most part, has long been out of print. However, the recent reissue of *In Transit* and *The King of a Rainy Country* by Coelacanth Press as well as the Faber Finds re-issues of other work promises a timely resurgence of interest in this consummately ‘brainy’ writer whose writing and activism was, as Ali Smith notes on the back notes on *The King of a Rainy Country*, “[e]ntirely ahead of its own time”. Concurring with Smith’s assessment of Brophy’s neglected significance, Richard Kelley states, “In hindsight Brophy still cuts a singular figure as novelist, critic, feminist, pacifist, campaigner for the rights of authors and of animals and connoisseur of art and opera.”²

Brophy’s *oeuvre* is extraordinary in its diversity, both in its range of influences, tone and styles, and in its variety of genres. The work she left behind includes novels, essays, journalism and her memorably penetrating, some might say acerbic, (she called herself a “controversialist”) criticism in the *London Review of Books*, *New York Times*, and *The New Statesman*. The author of nine works of fiction, her first novel, *Hackenfeller's Ape* (1953), won the Cheltenham Literary Festival prize for the best first novel (Iris Murdoch took the second prize), depicting the increasingly poignant relationship between a scientist and a laboratory ape, This was followed by *The King of a Rainy Country* (1956). With its gently detached air of bohemian disaffection and nonchalant queer-ish proclivities, the novel stood out in age of angry young men and kitchen sink realism but in its own way as much involved in its own times depicting educated, bohemian young women. Then came *Flesh: A Novel of Indolent Passion* (1962), *The Finishing Touch* (1963), and *The Snow Ball* (1964), ending the sixties with her most experimental work, *In Transit* (1969). Brophy’s non-fiction works include a lengthy Freudian study *Black Ship to Hell* (1962); *Mozart the Dramatist* (1964); two books about Aubrey Beardsley, *Black and White* (1968), *Beardsley and His World* (1976) and

a long work on literary aesthetics, *Prancing Novelist: A Defence of Fiction in the Form of a Critical Biography of Ronald Firbank* (1973) and finally a comic novel, *Palace Without Chairs: A Baroque Novel* (1978), that revisited some of the themes of her earlier works including lesbianism and women's sexual autonomy. Diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis in 1979, Brophy spent the rest of her life stricken with this debilitating disease until her death in 1995 at only 66. Ever the writer, she chronicled the onset and progression of her illness in a clear-eyed work *Baroque 'n' Roll* (1987) that described the experience of being confined to a wheelchair as the disease took hold.

The daughter of the Irish writer, John Brophy (1899-1965) and a school teacher mother Charis Weare (1895-1975), who herself published a novel written in her twenties, the young Brigid Antonia Brophy was a passionate and precocious reader, apparently reading *Finnegans Wake* at just nine years of age and already writing many plays and stories in her early childhood. Although she attended several different schools because of the War, she was academically successful, attending St. Paul's Girls' School in London, before going up to St. Hugh's College, Oxford, on a scholarship in 1947. However, in the second year of her Classics degree, she was sent down for 'unspecified offences,' the precise nature of which remains unclear to this day.

Brophy returned from Oxford to London where she took a series of secretarial jobs as was customary for educated young women at the time, one of which was working for a pornographic bookseller, possibly 'somewhere off Tottenham Court Road' like the heroine Susan in *The King of A Rainy Country*. This was the early 1950s, a time in which women writers tended to fall on one side or the other of an unspoken boundary that divided women writers into either 'serious' women writers like Iris Murdoch, Doris Lessing and Muriel Spark or popular 'middlebrow' writers like Agatha Christie, Barbara Pym, Nancy Mitford, Elizabeth Taylor, and Vera Brittain. In 1953, Brophy published her first two novels *The Crown Princess and Other Stories* and *Hackenfeller's Ape*, neither of which can be easily accommodated in these two camps. Brophy began writing at a time when the plain-speaking Angry Young Men were in ascendance both in the theatre and the novel. The representation of women in their work was, for the most part, deeply misogynist and depicted women as manipulative harpies who lay sexual traps in order to ensnare men into domestic life. In the absence of "any good, brave causes", the much fêted antihero of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, Jimmy Porter, resigns himself to the abhorrent feminine cauldron of domesticity and to being "butchered by the women" (84-85). The counterpoint to these young male writers was a number of, if not quite angry, then disenchanted, young women novelists who described the crippling effects of domesticity and motherhood on the creative and intellectual ambitions of 'brainy' women, the first post-war generation of girls to be university educated. While Brophy's writing did not fit in with the demotic vernacular of the so-called 'angries',

Osborne, Alan Sillitoe, and John Braine, neither did her recondite and artful prose with its often densely allusive texture and love of eighteenth century literature and opera share much in the way of aesthetic company with Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962), Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone* (1965), or Penelope Mortimer's *The Pumpkin Eater* (1962). However, while not a straightforwardly realist writer, Brophy did not, despite her keen interest in the aesthetic possibilities of novelistic form, count herself as one of the tiny number of British experimenters, despite her inclusion in B.S. Johnson's list of writers who recognized the "revolution that was *Ulysses*" and who spurned the "crutch of storytelling" (15). Not fitting in, then, might be said to be a defining feature of Brigid Brophy's *oeuvre*.

In Transit might be regarded as a forerunner of British postmodernism. Indeed, Brophy warranted inclusion in Brain McHale's (very short) list of contemporary postmodernist women writers alongside Angela Carter, Maggie Gee, Muriel Spark and Christine Brooke-Rose in the influential *Postmodernist Fiction*. However, it is also true that Brophy's work cannot easily be accommodated in a literary historical continuum that posits neat breaks between realism/modernism/postmodernism. In such a model, literary movements neatly follow one and other, before settling into a tidy taxonomy organised around the temporal markers of 'before' and 'after'. In this way, artists that come 'after' must find a new language, or mode in which to write, one that is not only different to what has gone before but is often compelled to rail against its immediate antecedents, to wit, Virginia Woolf's essay 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' in which she rebukes H.G. Wells and Arnold Bennett for their naïve Edwardian realism. But for Brophy, the novelist need not be always intent upon looking forward for innovation; looking back, reassessing and reusing past languages and cadences could be, she thought, just as inventive: "To submit yourself to an idiom unfamiliar through disuse is as pioneering an act as to submit yourself to one unfamiliar because it has never been used before" (*The Prancing Novelist*, 66).

Neither was Brophy an obviously feminist writer. Although she wrote with a subversive wit about women, sex and sexuality, she consistently eschewed any involvement in the feminist movement, so much so in fact, that Janet Todd claims, rather unfairly, that Brophy was well-known "for her acerbic anti-feminism" (9). What was clearer though was Brophy's also famously (even notoriously) outspoken views on sexual liberation and the essential "unreasonableness" of marriage in a society that felt it necessary to impose "monogamy on the ones who have not chosen it" (*Don't Never Forget*, 29). In a BBC interview in 1965 examining women's views on marriage, contraception and childbearing, Brophy remarks in her characteristic low-spoken, clipped RP that monogamous marriage was just one of an "infinitely flexible" ways of arranging intimate human relations. She added that she welcomed new methods of contraception, recently introduced for married women in Britain in 1961, as a momentous opportunity to set women free both "economically and

morally". On the surface, the permissiveness of the 1960s appeared to offer liberation for women but this frequently came down to choosing between two equally restrictive roles of dolly-bird or housewife. For women, the so-called 'permissive society' was still fraught with all kinds of sexism that positioned them as objectified sexual playthings with men doing most of the 'permitting'.³ Although momentous legal changes for women were just around the corner; 1968 Abortion Act, the 1970 Equal Pay Act, and in 1975, the Sex Discrimination Act, marriage was still seen as the sole destiny for women and very few women worked outside of the home once married. Far from being unsympathetic to feminism, both in her fiction and journalism, Brophy's writing very clearly recognised some of the most important deep-rooted psychological effects of patriarchal thinking that would become central to second wave feminism in the 1970s and 80s.

Women are free. At least they look free. They even feel free. But in reality women in the western, industrialised world today are like the caged animals in a modern zoo. There are no bars. It appears that cages have been abolished. Yet in practice women are still kept in their place just as firmly as the animals are kept in their enclosures. The barriers which keep them in now are invisible (*Don't Never Forget* 38).

Here, she notes that women's oppression is perpetuated by invisible means such as language and the ways in which it covertly operates to keep women in their subordinate place.

She was, then, something of an aesthetic *refusenik*, preferring, just like her beloved Aubrey Beardsley, to keep 'a foot in either camp—a foot wearing, moreover, a kinky boot' (*Black and White*, 32). Brophy's 'kinkiness' was regarded as somehow 'catching' by the conservative British press. In the *Daily Telegraph's* obituary of Brophy's husband, Sir Michael Levey, director of the National Gallery 1973-86, there is the implication that Brophy's political views on "humanism, animal rights, feminism, pornography, homosexual rights, the Vietnam War and religious education in schools (she disapproved of only the last two)" were not only subversive but actually contagiously so-- they "rubbed off on her husband", transmitting themselves sartorially in his adoption of "loud roll-neck sweaters, black shirts with gingham collars and cuffs, and black velour caps." He seemed, then, to have 'caught' his wife's perversity when he declared in 1966 "I'd really rather be dissolute and sexy than respectable".⁴

A politically active writer who engaged in the minutiae of everyday politics: assiduous letter writing to Parliament in support of prison reform, religious freedom and humanism, writers and animal rights, Brophy's writing was not, however, overtly political. In fact, she actively shunned didactic writing, rejecting the idea that literature has a directly

improving quality. The arts, Brophy said, cannot “get away with pretending that it can render society a direct quid pro quo by serving as a short cut to the production of better-informed [...] citizens or even better citizens” (quoted in Hodgson, Afterword, 272). Her *littérature* is *engagé* only in the most oblique way; approaching politics with a decorous stealth, she beguiles her reader by suggestion rather than diktat, a process employed by Miss Antonia Mount, the teacher in *The Finishing Touch*, who fosters subversive reading practices in her young charges. Brophy’s political and ethical beliefs were expressed in her literary writing only very indirectly in a prose style blending a detached all-purpose realist surface with a baroque, even rococo, plotting and timbre, thus drawing attention to the play of aesthetic surface but avoiding the ‘deep’ psychology of conventional realism.

A “critically awkward phase”

By 1945 Woolf, Joyce, and Eliot were all dead and only the influence of Beckett, now writing in French, kept alive the modernist project. In terms of English fiction, the two post-war decades have been described as a ‘critically awkward phase’ (MacKay and Stonebridge, 1) between a dying modernism and a not quite yet born postmodernism, what has been called, in the British context, a “weak postmodernism” (Waugh, 190). It seemed that the dominant mode in the novel was once again realism (or what has been called subsequently, neo-realism). The return of realism was welcomed by many critics, who saw it as a return of English literature to its empirical sense--a rejection of what was regarded as the frothy European prattle of an evermore obfuscating linguistic disorderliness that had culminated in *Finnegans Wake*. In 1958, Kingsley Amis issued a scathing indictment of experimental literature in the Woolfian and Joycean model, denouncing it as pointless, even irresponsible wordplay privileging formal and linguistic innovation over meaningful content.

“Experiment,” in this context, boils down pretty regularly to “obtruded oddity,” whether in construction—multiple viewpoints and such—or in style; it is not felt that adventurousness in subject matter or attitude or tone really counts. Shift from one scene to the next in midsentence, cut down on verbs or definite articles, and you are putting yourself right up in the forefront, at any rate in the eyes of those who were reared on Joyce and Virginia Woolf and take a jaundiced view of more recent developments (quoted in Rabinowitz 40-41).

In contrast, Malcolm Bradbury rebukes British novelists at this time for “refusing experiment, the strains and pains of form and perception” and falling back on “an anciently liberal and humane universe” that behaved as if the formal and ontological innovations of modernism had never happened (176). Turning their collective backs on Woolf, Joyce and Beckett, such

writers, Bradbury said, were “celebrating their own provincialism”. There appeared, the now familiar, lamentation over the death of the English novel, which seemed to be “pottering”, Giles Gordon noted, “into near-extinction as a serious art form” (21). In 1954 *The Observer* ran a series entitled “Is the Novel Dead?” a question that has been periodically raised ever since. In a piece entitled “The Novel as a Takeover Bid”, first broadcast for the BBC Third programme in 1963, Brophy discusses this anxiety about the novel: “To worry about the state of the novel—with its morals or intelligence or both—is as time-honoured as to worry about the state of the younger generation [...] Soon after the last war an extraordinary fashion broke out amongst literary public figures for pronouncing that the novel is dead” (*Don't Never Forget* 93).

In the decades after the War, two paths opened up for the novel. For Bernard Bergonzi in *The Situation of the Novel* (1970), and the earlier *The Reaction Against Experiment* (1967), English literature was in thrall to its own sense of nineteenth century Englishness as evident in the backward looking ‘liberal’ novels of realism that showed little interest in the idea of the human condition that was under examination in European, especially French, literature. Less pessimistic than Bergonzi, Bradbury, saw post war British fiction as made up not of a single aesthetic movement backwards, in effect a rejection of modernist experimentation, but rather compose “of a great many contradictory strands” (*No, Not Bloomsbury*, 101). He describes the postwar novel as being in state of “oscillation between two parts of its nature [...] its referential and discursive and its aesthetic function” (187). This opposition can be also seen in poetry with the Movement poets (labelled as such in 1954 by *The Spectator*) who were “dismissive of modernist obfuscation” preferring a “progressive robustness” (Head 50). A contrast is drawn, then, between the anti-modernists and the experimenters; between those writers who approached their subject in an “art of familiarity”, using language as a vehicle for “sharing the world with others through the medium of fiction’s local powers of attention” (Bradbury, 188) and those experimented with the limits of linguistic expressiveness even with the fantastic, what Robert Scholes, then later David Lodge, would call fabulation.

Brophy’s writing cannot be easily accommodated in either aesthetic camp. She notes in *Black Ship to Hell* (1962) that “Instead of reflecting the external world “a writer should project “ into it some of his own inner world, giving it the solid existence of a work of art” but this is, according to her, only validated by the “validity of his [sic] inner world (459). Brophy’s aesthetic sympathies both overlap with and extend beyond a certain kind of realism. Her varied *oeuvre* ranges from the deceptively simple *Flesh*, to the more obviously experimental *In Transit*, a whimsical erotic reworking of Mozart’s Don Giovanni in *The Snow Ball* and the boarding school quirkiness of *The Finishing Touch* that has more than touch of Collette about it. Fascinated in the evolving form of the novel, Brophy produced her own

theory of the novel via a study of the archly ‘camp’ writer Ronald Firbank in *The Prancing Novelist* in which she argued that readers suddenly became self-conscious at the end of the nineteenth century when they discovered they were all “doing something remarkably like sharing a daydream” (8). This ‘embarrassment’ led to a shift in “narrative responsibility she argues and the “inventions of a narration within a narration and of a narrator-I within the narrator-I, the elaboration of a frame inside the frame almost to the point of blocking out the picture, in the fictions of Joseph Conrad” (8). This functions as a useful description of Brophy’s own layered writing style in *King of a Rainy Country* and *The Snow Ball* both of which are structured around levels of swerving viewpoints and interlaced micro-stories and faintly ludicrous but still plausible plots featuring a series of stylised erotic entanglements.

Slightly heretically, Brophy claimed that Joyce’s linguistic revolution was not such a stretch for attentive readers of her beloved Ronald Firbank and Laurence Sterne. *Ulysses* is less of a stretch, she said, for those familiar with Chapter 11, Volume 2 of *Tristram Shandy*: “The truest respect which you can pay to the reader’s understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself” (*Prancing* 68). Accordingly, Brophy’s own writing leaves some imaginative work for her reader in its insistence on the mutuality of narrative and design:

If fiction is to cast off not just the unfair reproaches that are brought against daydreams but also the genuine disability that goes with the daydream form, then it must rid itself of the Victorian novel’s subservience to narrative [...] That need not mean it must rid itself of narrative. But the narrative, if there is to be one, together with its demands on continuity and naturalistic plausibility, must be subordinated to the design—in which narrative is welcome to be one of the elements.
(66)

Trouser roles

Brophy’s refusal to privilege mimetic realism, (reminiscent, in part, of Woolf in “Modern Fiction”) and the insistence on the “design” of the novel does not, she suggests, inhibit the novel’s ability to allow the reader to inhabit an otherness: “The whole purpose of fiction is that the writer (and thereby the reader) is transported into some form of life which is absolutely different from his own: and to be transported” (Dock 159). For Brophy, this transportation is produced not through the accumulation of realistic detail and dialogue but by a technique of narrative layering, what she calls the “baroque contraposition” of her novels, one often that allows an exchange of gender roles (*The Burglar*, preface 29). An example of this is *The King of a Rainy Country*,⁵ recently reissued with praise from Ali Smith on the back cover who calls it a “pitch-perfect novel” that is “witty, unexpectedly moving and a

revelation again of Brophy's originality." *In Transit* remains, Smith says, "years ahead of itself even now [...] in its emotional range and its intellectual and formal blend of stoicism and sophistication." The novel offers a bracing take on gender in contrast with John Osborne or John Wain's glum recapitulations of the 'war of the sexes'. The novel tells the story, via the queering of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, of a young woman graduate, Susan, who drifts from university into a job temping for a pornographic bookseller, a gentile posing as a Jew called Finkelstein. Susan enters into a desultory affair, with the diffident Neale, although it is never clearly a sexual one. There are no 'thick' social contexts, or familial or personal histories given beyond the self-consciously and semi-farcical events of the plot that revolves around Susan's chance discovery of a picture of a female nude who turns out to be the object of her teenage desire, and which leads to an erotic odyssey across Europe chasing Cynthia Beaulieu (*née* Bewley), now a famous film star, to the Venice Film Festival. While the plot is something of a whimsical erotic fable, the depiction of unlovely 1950s London is recognisably 'real' as is the sweaty bus full of tourists on which Susan and Neale work in Italy. The design of the novel brings together the farcical, pantomime-like action of the operatic plot, complete with the gender switching of the *Hosenrolle*, the traditional breeches or trousers role. As in opera, the sense of individual psychology of characters in the novel is secondary to a set of elaborately orchestrated roles; thus, we get little sense of Susan Neale and Cynthia and Helen from the outside, that is to say, in terms of external description. Brophy once wrote: "I could no more devote a whole paragraph to describing a person's nature than I could to describing Nature. Only artifacts, structures and personalities (psychological structures) exist for me" (Introduction, *King* xv). An intricate comedy of sexual etiquette, *King* is full of highly mannered, often elliptical, in disjointed exchanges in which the speakers' words often sail by each other: 'Our relationship was verbal: allusive and entangled. Deviating further and further into obliquity we often lost track. "I don't think I think I know what you mean." "We'd better say it openly." "Much better. But I'm not going to be the first to say it." "Neither am I." (*King*, 9) The whole of the novel is permeated with this sense of detached irony held together by a series of serendipitous events, culminating in a reworking of the heterosexual marriage plot. Although Neale marries Cynthia, he enters into a convoluted sexual dance in which he "opts for simulation of lesbianism" with his new, possibly lesbian wife (Smith 29). The novel closes with Susan, who has fallen for the diva Helena, found dead in the mountains in suitably operatic tragic style, opening a box containing Helena's soiled wedding dress.

Read today, these novels seem innovative in their narrative ambition; oscillating between realism and self-consciousness, between a self-conscious artfulness and the wider social world. But Brophy was opposed to the term experimental, insisting rather that all of her work followed a baroque design: "The baroque method of designing consists of deploying

contrasting masses in such a way that each, as well as performing its own function, constitutes a funnel down which one gets a sharply unexpected view—ironic, tragic or comic—of the others” (*The Burglar*, 29-30). This technique creates narrative by the use of self-conscious narrative techniques that function within referential, even highly ethical, contexts, treading delicately between the two paths of modernism and antimodernism and between form and content. In this way, Brophy’s work is similar to that of Muriel Spark whose writing is synthesis of artful technique and the projection of an external “complex social world” (Herman 474). While this world is conceived in slightly more artificial form in Brophy’s fiction, both writers share an interest in the technique of narrative patterning set against a largely recognisable world.

Gender In Transit

Many of Brophy’s novels are concerned with the eccentricities and complications of romantic and sexual relationships, the quirks of gender identity and the possibilities of same-sex love which one might have assumed to be uncontroversial in the ‘swinging’ 1960s. But in fact this was not at all the case. Brophy’s views, in fiction as well as in journalism, on love, marriage and sex vexed many of her readers, earning her the reputation of being “pugnacious” and “combative” (*The Burglar* 9). In 1965, she wrote an article called “The Immorality of Marriage” for *The Sunday Times* in which she methodically picked apart the essentialist logic of “the natural” division of roles between the sexes that imprisoned women as mothers and housewives: “Only on the subject of the relation between the sexes do reactionaries start citing ‘nature’ as an ideal” (23). Men and women, Brophy argued, need no longer adhere to such a primitive logic as the “one thing which is consistently natural for humans by intelligence and imagination is to improve upon nature” (23). She argues that it is indefensible to treat “half the human population [...] as sub-persons” but insists that women must take advantage of even the smallest glimpses of liberation on offer (39).

With its sensual Bill Brandt cover from *The Perspective of Nudes* (1961), *Flesh*, Brophy’s third novel published in 1962, artfully works over this “sexual apartheid” that has refused to acknowledge women’s desire ideas by rigidly policing gender roles for men and women where women are passively gazed upon, desired and pursued by men and never the other way round. *Flesh* describes the ways in which a woman transforms a man’s body, indeed his whole life, for her own delectation; it is a “novel about complex gender investments in cultural formations of the ideal body” (Waugh, *Sixties*, 189). A reversal of the Pygmalion-Galatea myth, the story concerns Marcus and Nancy, a young Jewish couple from North London. A shy virgin, Marcus is gradually moulded by Nancy into her sexual plaything. The novel shows a strong female sexual appetite but with none of the drama or punitive *dénouement* that often accompanies such things. In a reversal of the ubiquitous male

gaze on the female nude, Nancy appraises Marcus with discerning eyes; he has become a “disgustingly fat” Rubens figure with “pendulous breasts, like a woman” nevertheless she still finds him attractive (122). *Flesh* presents women as intensely sexual without any monstrosity accruing to their bodies or lives: “Nancy did have talent. It was for sexual intercourse” (41). In the 2013 re-issue of the novel by Faber, Richard Kelly notes the subtle ways in which Brophy “turns the tables, without fuss or contrivance, but with great style and acute perception” (1). Anticipating Hélène Cixous’ suggestions that in literature and culture women have always been demonised for “being frigid” or “being ‘too hot’,” of “not being both at once” (880). *Flesh* is a parable of transformative passion that refuses conventional modes of eroticism and permits a woman to be “hot” in her desires and to possess, with impunity, the power to transform male beauty to her own taste.

Also recently republished, *In Transit: An Heroi-Cyclic Novel* is another variation on the ‘trouser role’; this time Brophy takes it literally and comically, using trousers to illustrate some absurdities about sexual difference. As her bi-gendered, sufferer of “linguistic leprosy” and “sexual amnesia”, narrator Pat/Evelyn Hillary O’Rooley says, it is time to catch up with the “ambiguity of trousers”. The action occurs in an airport terminal transit lounge ; an “airpocket” and representative “droplet of the twentieth century” (22). The protagonist spills coffee onto the ‘eye slit’ in the ‘mask of a passport’ in which the name of the passport holder is inscribed. This name in a bevelled-edged window, punningly called the “eyedentity of the soul”, a cast-iron guarantee of one’s gendered presence in the world (and, for women, matrimonial status) as Miss, Mr or Mrs. This initiates a *mise-en-abîme* narrative that decomposes and recomposes while mislaying all Pat/Patricia’s gender markers, in particular the phallus much to his/her puzzlement: “But how could such a thing, *such* a thing, be mislaid?” (135). Pat/Patricia’s predicaments are both linguistic and bodily; the lost member cannot be fashioned out of any available material – not from corduroy, nor from a woollen travel rug nor any of the multiple languages on offer in the airport space. While it seems “impossible for an adult human to forget what sex he/she belonged to” despite many efforts of the intellect and of inspection of both clothes and body, “no such knowledge arrived” (71). Thus, begins what Karen Lawrence calls a “wild ride of the signifier”, a self-consciously “fantastic, punning linguistic journey’ in which Brophy “parodies the myth of the phallus as transcendental signifier, the myth that props up all the paradigms of the journey underwriting Western culture” (233). Generically and linguistically unhinged, the novel generically collapses into a series of multiple narratives in which Mr, Mrs or Miss Pat/Patricia O’Rooley ponders the possibilities of gender subversion, not just in English but in all those languages that insist on marking gender:

They’re sly, though, these romance languages, in this matter of sex [...] Sometimes

the adjectives don't change. Vous êtes triste? Tick:— masc.□ fem.□. Strik(e) out whichever does not apply. J'en suis content(e). And o that so demurely flirtatious mute *e* that may be appended to *ami*, where, dimpling, it can be seen but not heard. That's why my French is literary. I am so sex-obsessive *I must know*. They're sex-obsessive, too, the languages: but unsophisticatedly. I shed them in sheer impatience at the infantility of their sexual curiosity. *I do not want to be told the sex of inanimate objects.* (41)

Pat's panic about her/his gendered identity is greatly exacerbated by the fortuitous discovery of a missing page in a book, *L'histoire de la Langue d'Oc* (a play on *Histoire d'O*), a page that might have solved the mystery of the missing member.⁶ In an interview with Leslie Dock, Brophy described *In Transit* as “a series of disintegrations of rulebooks, including the sexual stereotypes, ending with the question of whether Aristotelian logic might disintegrate [...] I mean that what is being questioned is, do [the rules of the logic] reflect any necessary truths, or are they entirely arbitrary?” (6). With more than a little Joycean portmanteau, polyglot badinage in its veins, language in *In Transit* is conceptual, abstract and unruly, only just able to sustain our fictions of mastery and identity.

Conclusion

A gender fantasia, *In Transit* was ahead of its time. In its inquisition of the ‘natural’ relationship of the body to biological sex and the cultural construction of gender, this mischievous airport caper anticipates many of the central concepts of third wave feminism initiated by Judith Butler's Foucauldian interrogation in *Gender Trouble* (1999). Brophy's anti-novel observes how discourse powerfully shapes and regulates the gendering of the corporeal self, and as Foucault says, is ‘directly connected to the body - to bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures’ (Foucault, 1978 151-2). Pat/Patricia's body becomes ‘sexed’ by the discursive trappings of convention—language, clothes, gesture, and above all the romance narratives of both high and low culture compel the subject to reiterate a series of performances that interpellate the body as male or female. Let loose in Brophy's fiction the human imagination is androgynous and playful. Men can sing soprano and women bass, girls can fashion boys into objects of desire Pygmalion-style and all the old myths about mad, unruly women are revealed to be nothing more than the debris of fossilized convention.

In his review of *In Transit* in *Life* magazine in 1970, Robert Phelps recognises Brophy's insistence on the fluidity of identity: “At his innermost center,’ Brophy suggests that ‘...[a person] is many things, many appetites, all genders [...] In his soul, he is as polymorphous as the angels” (10). This polymorphosity is also evident in the disturbance of

language in the unconventional form of the (anti-)novel-- as Brophy points out, 'one of the hero(in)es immolated throughout these pages' (*IT*, 214). Recounting the madcap antics of Pat/Patricia across genres and genders, the form of the novel is as free from the conventions of narrative realism as Pat/Patricia's body is from the 'direct physiological disclosure' of his/her gender (*IT*, 77). In this way then, the novel might be regarded as an example of early British postmodernism, a claim that surely requires further exploration. Funny, clever, and more than little perverse, Brophy's work now merits extensive critical reappraisal as a writer whose work allows us to think again about the mid-century British novel, avoiding the traps of rigid periodisation of literary movements that can often inhibit local understanding of individual writers.

¹ More enduring was her tireless work for author's royalty rights. With fellow writer and close friend, Maureen Duffy, Brophy set up the Writers Action Group that eventually established the Public Lending Right. In this, she was following in her father's footsteps and his suggestion that a penny should go to authors each time their book was borrowed from a library. The term the 'Brophy Penny' was common parlance in 1951.

² Richard Kelly, <http://www.faber.co.uk/blog/out-now-the-exquisite-sentences-of-flesh-and-the-finishing-touch-by-brigid-brophy/>

³ 1969-1970 was a momentous year for pioneering feminist texts with the publication of Sheila Rowbotham's *Women's Liberation and the New Politics*; Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*; Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* and Eva Figes' *Patriarchal Attitudes*.

⁴ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/4015722/Sir-Michael-Levey.html>

⁵ Henceforth *King*.

⁶ It is worth noting that this is ten years before Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* deploys the same misplaced page device to similar metafictional effect.

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