



A Vindication of Contractual Equality in Susanna Centlivre's "The Busy Body" and "A Bold Stroke for a Wife"

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Under the aspect of portraying eighteenth-century contracts, this paper is to examine connections and interrelations of Susanna Centlivre's comedies *The Busy Body* (1709) and *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* (1718). Centlivre (1669-1723), author of nineteen plays, several poems, and love letters (*Lock 13*), was "the only playwright, male or female, with four plays among the most popular repertoire offerings of the eighteenth century" (Anderson 25) and with that one of the most successful female playwrights ever after. Her comedies mentioned above, have enjoyed long-termed continuance in theatre and reflect her attitude towards the institution of marriage and the connoted contractual opportunities and restrictions for the persons concerned. The intention of this paper is to engender historical marriage laws and widespread ideas, to take a reference to the social critic William Hogarth's etching and engraving *The Marriage Contract* (1745), and to point out how and to what extent Centlivre's comedies mirror her personal but also prevalent opinions in that period of time. It is striking all through reading *The Busy Body* that, with the help of rhetorical skills, masquerade, and contracts, her protagonist Miranda converts her ambiguous legal status into a much better legal economic security, whereas in *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*, Centlivre chiefly mirrors her actual frustration, when it comes to common-law marriage reforms.

The thesis of this paper is that the playwright consistently had a negative view on the institution of marriage but temporarily a rather positive view on British liberalism and contractual developments, which she eventually lost though towards the end of her life. As an "ardent Whig and a supporter of the House of Hanover" (Finberg xix), her optimism to loosen the boundaries of male dominance becomes obvious in the presentation of her active character Miranda, who is not introduced as victim but as vicious heroine, driving successfully towards her own goal of victory. It seems though that nine years later, Centlivre's future prospect had changed. Though both plays still reflect her opinion that women definitely deserve to control their own destinies, her last big stage success, *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*, indicates a rather disappointed tone, more precisely, it reveals her resignation on women's contract possibilities, manifested by the play's passive and ineffectual protagonist Anne, who can do little to free herself from...

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