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HUMOUR AS AFFECT IN SUSANNA CENTLIVRE'S PLAY *A BOLD STROKE FOR A WIFE*

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ABSTRACT. ***Humour as Affect in Susanna Centlivre's Play* A Bold Stroke for a Wife.** Susanna Centlivre's plays are conceived in a cultural climate of moral debate and ideological reconsideration of values such as virtue, goodness and liberty. Centlivre's use of humour becomes an ethical instrument and shows eighteenth-century audiences how liberty and freedom triumph over the excesses and follies of opposing figures such as parents and guardians. On the one hand, Centlivre's comic playwriting creates an empathetic drama in which the female heroines are virtuous and elicit edifying responses from the audience and, on the other, the comic experience, following Bakhtin's notion of laughter and the comic, enables freedom from the socially conventional notion of selfhood, thus making space for a re-orientation of values and norms.

Keywords: *eighteenth-century drama, comedy, affect theory, empathy, ethics.*

REZUMAT. *Umorul ca afect în piesa* A Bold Stroke for a Wife *de Susanna Centlivre.* Piesele Susannei Centlivre sunt concepute într-un climat cultural al dezbaterilor morale și al reevaluării ideologice a valorilor precum virtutea, bunătatea și libertatea. Umorul lui Centlivre devine un instrument etic, arătându-i publicului de secol XVIII cum triumfă libertatea și eliberarea asupra exceselor și viciilor unor figuri antitetice, precum părinții și protectorii. Pe de o parte, piesele comice ale lui Centlivre creează un tip de teatru empatic, în care eroinele sunt virtuoase și primesc răspunsuri edificatoare din partea publicului. Pe de altă parte, folosind teoria lui Bahtin despre râs și comic, experiența comică permite

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eliberarea de noțiunea convențională, din punct de vedere social, de individualitate, făcând astfel loc unei reorientări a valorilor și normelor.

Cuvinte-cheie: *teatrul secolului al XVIII-lea, comedie, teoria afectelor, empatie, etică.*

Introduction

Susanna Centlivre's plays are conceived in a cultural climate of moral debate and ideological reconsideration of values such as virtue, goodness, and liberty. Centlivre's use of humour becomes an ethical instrument and shows eighteenth-century audiences how liberty and freedom triumph over the excesses and follies of opposing figures such as parents and guardians. Instead of merely providing classical comedy which is, according to Philip Sidney, "an imitation of the common errors of our life" (1595, 53), Centlivre creates an empathetic drama in which the female heroines are virtuous and elicit edifying responses from the audience. The playwright induces empathy for the protagonists of her plays and thus encourages the audience to identify with the characters. From this identification, ethical sensitivity to the characters' problems and dilemmas seems only natural. In contemporary discourses on sensibility, such sensitivity to characters is hailed as a moral and ethical tool. As Konigsberg and Combe, amongst others, have argued, empathetic and moral responses to the literature of sentimentalism necessarily coincide.[2] Yet, Centlivre does not overuse tropes and figures of sentimental drama but modifies her comic writing to utilize empathy and comic pleasure for her own political purpose. Theatrical writing and performance thus offer a more nuanced insight into the eighteenth-century world of affect and its ethical reverberations, as audience members experience comic pleasure as a transformative and very powerful impact on cultural norms and concepts.

In her play *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* (1718), Centlivre employs comic pleasure very effectively in the scenic representation of character. She neatly juxtaposes her morally virtuous characters who embody the values of liberty and moderation with characters who personify not only conformity but also excess and eccentricity. Her conceptualisation of character diverges from previous types and "humours" characters and gives them a realistic quality that activates empathetic as well as ethical considerations. Despite the many comic events and contrived plotting, the characters gain more complexity and multi-

[2] Csengei (2012), of course, views the discourse on sensibility as one that has drawn critical responses, too.

dimensionality, providing the possibility for the audience to identify with them. Comic pleasure has, however, a variety of effects and implications which need to be explored in depth in order to grasp the complex interactions between the audience and the characters on stage, involving an ethical dimension as well as emotional responses. One effect of comic pleasure, as Bakhtin's theory on laughter suggests, frees the audience from their conventional ideas of who they are. They see themselves as "freed from themselves": "Maybe the Rabelaisian and Bakhtinian notion of full laughter stems, among other things, from the fact that by retrieving and having recourse to the corporeal human beings are 'freed from themselves,' since they do not have to uphold the construction of a single and unified self" (Horlacher 2009, 27). In this sense, laughter, humour and comedy contribute to a briefly felt freedom from social convention, from prescribed roles and identity as well as from the self that is assumed to be stable and unified. Along with their freedom from a unified self, social selves based on gender, class or race are also called into question. This might in fact free a space for a re-orientation or re-formation of social normativity and conventionality.

In this freedom from the self, cultural change can take place. If one is momentarily freed from cultural norms and social conventions, new ideas can have an effect on the self. Performances on stage that induce comic pleasure undoubtedly transmit ideas, concepts and notions of culture and conduct that the audience absorbs. While laughter creates a space for freedom from the self, empathy with the characters might re-connect the audience with the ideas and ideologies presented on stage. Thus, comedy, which employs emotional connection and identification, has transformative power on the members of the audience in the liminal space of the performance where laughter stimulates emancipation from conventional notions of selfhood.

A closer look at the affective side of this experience reveals that comic pleasure as well as empathy enable points of connection between the audience and the social world constructed on stage. Ahmed reflects on this interaction in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* and claims that emotions in general establish a relation between the self and the world. According to Ahmed, emotions are "neither with the I nor the social but it is through the emotions that humans relate to others and to their environment" (Ahmed 2014, 10). In a similar vein, Scheer, Johansen and Fadil declare that emotions are shared, collective and cultural rather than private and interior. Their approach is to investigate the "collective, shared, atmospheric qualities of affect, [and to] question[s] the interiority of emotion and thus the private/public, personal/political divide on which secularism is based." (Scheer, Johansen, and Fadil 2019, 11). What these critics might in fact share is a view of emotions as embedded in the social world – relating to the self, instead of emerging from the self.

In this regard, affects are trans-personal and provide an interesting view on the nature of society in a particular historical period. Reckwitz (2012) draws on this idea when he suggests that emotions are a kind of practice. He therefore takes a "praxeological perspective" on emotions when he examines emotions and their "embedded and embodied" nature:

> But of course, 'affect' must not be understood in a one-sided, deterministic fashion as a bodily response to an external stimulus. Quite on the contrary, the *praxeological perspective* offers the advantage of closely tying perceptive/affective processes to actions and activities which always involve limitless amounts of implicit knowledge. There is no such thing as a pre-cultural affect. Affects are always embedded in practices which are, in turn, embedded in tacit schemes of interpretation. (Reckwitz 2012, 250-51; my emphasis,)

Such a "praxeological perspective" entails a detailed analysis of emotional processes and how they are embedded in knowledge and interpretation. The world of the theatre and the characteristics of drama as well as performance are ideal texts and contexts in which to explore such emotional processes as affects. They are implicit in (dramatic) texts, and rather explicit in the performance and in the response from the audience. In my article, I will analyze comic pleasure and empathy as such emotional processes and I will show how they are aroused by the comedic text and its performance.

In early eighteenth-century theatre, the changes and shifts towards different conceptualizations of character have far-reaching effects on the affective experience of performance. The "praxeological perspective" central to my analysis needs to consider theatre culture that emerged from the Restoration in early eighteenth-century Britain and witnessed a shift in theatrical and cultural notions of character. As comic pleasure and empathy circle around the conceptualization of character, Centlivre's play will be placed within the context of altered notions of character in comedy as well as the changes in the theatrical tradition more generally.

From Restoration to Eighteenth-Century Comedy: Changes and Transformations

Beginning in the first half of the twentieth century, critics have grappled with the changes in theatre at the turn of the eighteenth century.[3] As Heard

[3] In *English Dramatic Form*, Laura Brown proposes a reading of Restoration drama that is much more complex than the shift from libertine to social reform suggested by other critics. In her examination of Restoration drama, she reveals a multi-layered and multi-faceted form that manifests "the evolution from intrigue to intrigue-like and 'all in fun' social satire [and] entails an increasing formal discrimination of individual characters and fates" (Brown 1981, 40). For

documents in her work on experimentation in English drama, there are two strands of criticism, one that assumes that there was a change from Restoration to Sentimentalist drama (cf. Heard 2014, 3) and the other which claims that there is continuity as well as diversity and complexity in the theatre culture of that time. Perhaps it is an oversimplification to chart a development from Restoration to Sentimental drama, but there are shifts in comic playwriting that undeniably altered the nature of Restoration drama.

Bevis examines the cultural aspects of change that impacted the writing of comedy in the transitory period from the late seventeenth to the early eighteenth century: "Encouraged by sovereigns who sporadically issued proclamations against immorality and whose low chamberlains were trying to regulate drama, moralists founded society to suppress vice and reform manners, and attacked the stage as a sink of wit, Hobbism, and Restoration excess" (Bevis 1988, 117). In his view, change is not merely located in a demographic shift that saw the growing middle-class as the most dominant segment of the audience in the theatre of the early eighteenth century. While there is undeniably the playwrights' need to cater to their audience's taste, they still have the opportunity to create characters and plots within a conventional comic genre that adequately takes up discourses on morality and satisfies their audiences' expectations.

Centlivre, aware of these traditions as well as her audience's interest in novelty, aptly draws on existent models to craft a new brand of comedy. The comedy of wit and the comedy of "humours" are certainly the most dominant genres at the time. However, the immense diversity and vast variety of subgenres speak of the impressive creativity of playwrights, theatre managers and a great curiosity of audiences. In this culture of creativity and novelty, playwrights and audiences alike welcomed heterogeneity in comedy. Various traditions blended and merged: Jonsonian "humours characters, those suffering from an imbalance of the four humours that ancient medicine identified as the determinants of personality and behaviour" (Corman 2021, 29) and Fletcherian comedy as a precursor to the comedy of wit and the comedy of manners, with an interest in intrigue and marriage plots. Centlivre, I argue, combines "humours" characters with wit comedy, but provides a more empathetic connection for the audiences to identify with her central heroes and heroines.[4] Departing from the

Brown, the dominant genre at the time comprises contradictions and conflicts that point out the problematic relationship between morality and social context. For her, Restoration comedy is a social satire that includes a critique of moral and ethical principles rather than merely providing entertainment for the elite classes. While this is certainly a valid and appealing view of Restoration drama, research on the development of the genre needs to identify certain typical characteristics and distinguish specific marks in dramatic form.

[4] A prominent example of a new type of humours character can be found in Congreve's oeuvre in the character of Sir Willful Witwoud in *The Way of the World*. According to Corman, he exemplifies a new type of character that is "three-dimensional and increasingly seen as embodying British values that valorized native eccentricities, prototypical John Bulls" (Corman 2021, 37).

witty characters of the Restoration era, her characters, despite not being openly moral or virtuous, promote positive values and elicit more empathy from the audience than the prototypical figures of the Restoration stage. In an artfully structured comedy, Centlivre places her new characters alongside "humour" figures so as to guide her audience towards a more empathetic attachment to heroes and heroines.

Scenic Representation of Character and Plot in *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*

As the above changes in the tradition of comedy suggest, the central alteration took place in the conceptualization of character. Centlivre constructs her characters in *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* around the notion of liberty. Both male and female protagonists' desire for liberty guides their motivation and propels the action in the play. Still, the characters are placed within the normative narratives of marriage which, according to Anderson, is the gendered script of comedy (cf. Anderson, 2002).[5]

Susanna Centlivre produces a theatrical world that needs to protect the individual's liberty against the threat of extreme ideologies and the chaos of absolutist rule. The hero of her play, the handsome soldier Colonel Fainwell, shines as a paragon of English liberty against the backdrop of four fanatical guardians who stand in his way because he wants to marry the beautiful young heiress Anne Lovely. Despite the fact that liberty, for the female heroine Anne, lies in the conclusion of the plot in marriage, it is a choice that she consciously makes and for which she also considers the right circumstances: she wants to marry Fainwell but, at the same time, she wishes to claim her inheritance and financial security. While the plot is formed according to the traditional marriage narrative and, as such, is aligned with a gendered script (cf. Anderson, 2002), the characters within this conservative script gain more agency. The shift of the genre towards an interest in character and character-building (cf. Heard, 2014) inadvertently challenges the easy plot resolutions and comedic plot twists of Restoration drama.

For her hero and heroine, Susanna Centlivre sets up a world of chaos generated by the disparate and extravagant worldviews of four guardians. Thus, the scenic world is dominated by both characters and plot. The characters and their ascribed values generate tension on the level of the plot. And the plot

[5] Anderson proposes that "[t]hese playwrights and their heroines measure the disparity between idealized marriage narratives and the real circumstances of characters in history throughout the gendered scripts of comedy. Behn, Centlivre, Cowley, and Inchbald found in comedy a narrative where the economic future, erotic possibility, and public visibility of women merge, and they were able to engage generations of theatergoers in their version of that story" (Anderson 2002, 1).

expresses the chaotic regime of disparate values and ideas. In the four guardians, Centlivre envisions a stark opposition to the harmony of post-1688 England that saw the consequences of the Glorious Revolution epitomised as the Age of Reason which stood in the light of "ideal of providential harmony, of co-operation, and of a political order reflecting that of nature [which] seemed to many to be realized in the triumph of practical reason, liberal religion, and impartial law. Temperate kings would reign over a united nation in which individual liberty would be constitutionally guaranteed" (Sanders 2000, 278). It is particularly the notion of individual liberty that Centlivre represents and places at the centre of her comedic writing.

Demonstrating Centlivre's skill of plotting and intrigue,[6] the play revolves around the strategy of Colonial Fainwell to gain his beloved's hand in marriage. But instead of representing the courtship and growing love between Fainwell and Anne, the plot is driven by the need to obtain the agreement of Anne's four guardians. As a rule set by her late father, in case the marriage was not in agreement with the four guardians, the money of Anne's inheritance would be lost. Each individual guardian incorporates a different characteristic that needs to be emulated by the protagonist in order to gain their assent to marry Anne.

The humour is used as a clear corrective here and Centlivre shifts her comedic efforts away from the courtship to the acts that are necessary in order to assure the happy outcome for the young lover's desires. The comic is thus re-positioned in the play and centres on the protagonists in their struggle with the conservatism and eccentricity of the guardian figures. This positioning in the play enables a focus on the interactions of the young protagonist and their illiberal antagonists, as opposed to the classical comedy of manners where there might be an initial antagonism between the lovers. In *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*, Centlivre rewrites the conventional comic script to create a new type of comic hero and heroine who represent a challenge to conservative ideas as well as to the raucous figures of Restoration drama.

As mentioned above, the shift from the aristocratic witticism and sexual comedy of the Restoration to a more virtuous and decorous type of comic entertainment is foremost detectable in the representation of the central couple or couples. In *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*, the lovers Anne and Captain Fainwell are hardly ever portrayed in the act of wooing or flirting. They are rather engaged in, and committed to, attaining Anne's freedom. There are parallel scenes in which the audience can identify with the young lovers versus the obstructing characters and their follies. Fainwell is portrayed in a scene with the fop Modelove and Anne is paired with Mrs. Prim in a similar scene. Both scenes revolve

[6] According to O'Brian, critics have always noted Centlivre's skill for the construction of plot (cf. O'Brian, 2001).

around fashion and manners. Mrs. Prim, the wife of Mr. Prim, one of Anne's guardians, lectures Anne on the appropriateness of dress. And, in both scenes, the extremes of exaggerated attitudes become clear: while the fop Modelove indulges in fashion, Mrs. Prim restricts fashion and dress according to her religious ideology. Thus, Centlivre places her protagonists as ideal and moderate figures in a world of extremes.

While Fainwell deliberately chooses to perform in order to achieve his goals and demands Anne to play along, Anne has already uncovered the hypocrisy of her guardians, even before she meets Fainwell. In dialogic speech, Anne exposes the pretence of her Quaker guardians. In an ongoing dispute about her fashionable mode of dress, Anne defends her position by demonstrating that her antagonist Mrs. Prim's modest dress code is mere facade:

> Mrs. Lovely
> […] Are the pinched cap and formal hood the emblems of sanctity? Does your virtue consist in your dress, Mrs. Prim?
>
> Mrs. Prim
> It doth not consist in cut hair, spotted face, and bare necks. Oh, the wickedness of this generation! The primitive women knew not the abomination of hooped petticoats. (Act II.ii, 70)
>
> Enter Mrs. Prim and Mrs. Lovely in Quaker's dress, meeting.
>
> Mrs. Prim
> So now I like thee, Anne. Art thou not better without thy monstrous hoop coat and patches? If Heaven should make thee so many black spots upon thy face, would it not fright thee, Anne?
>
> Mrs. Lovely
> If it should turn your inside outward and show all the spots of your hypocrisy, 'twould fright me worse. (V.i, 117)

Anne Lovely's observations point out the difference between values and appearances. While Mrs. Prim's objections to Anne's desire for a fashionable appearance name the items of fashion such as, for example, hoop coat, patches and black spots on the face, Anne's repartee employs the same term of black spots and assigns a new meaning: spots of hypocrisy. Thus, she makes it clear that the importance lies in values and virtue, rather than in the outward appearance as a sign of decorum and manners. The signification of appearance is of course particularly relevant to the theatrical performance. In this scene, Centlivre dramatizes different concepts in characterization. In contrast to Anne's common

sense and liberal attitude to dress and fashion, her antagonist Mrs. Prim's dishonesty is demonstrated in a visual staging of her character in costume.

Pairing the value systems of her protagonists with the comic pleasure that lies in the audience's attention to the various strategies and tricks, Centlivre's play balances the focus on character and plot. The characters' goal is as much Anne's freedom from the wilfulness of her four guardians as Captain Fainwell's gaining her hand in marriage and her fortune for their safe and comfortable marital future. In this initial scene, the difficulty of achieving this is explained as follows:

> Colonel.
> She visited a lady who boarded in the same house with me. I liked her person and found an opportunity to tell her so. She replied she had no objection to mine, but if I could not reconcile contradictions, I must not think of her, for that she was condemned to the caprice of four persons who never yet agreed in any one thing, and she was obliged to please them all. (I.i, 55)

Anne is introduced as being "condemned to the caprice of four persons" and by such an introduction the playwright emphasizes two aspects simultaneously. Her heroine's position is entirely determined by her environment in the guise of her guardians. She is "condemned," which carries associations of the inescapable nature of fate or a higher power, but at the same time, it is stated that Anne is victim to the "caprice of four persons," which conjoins the notion of fate to a very "real" personality problem. In her work, Centlivre plays with the different concepts of personality versus character. The eccentricities of the drama's "villains" is balanced by the virtuous and morally superior character of her protagonists. While caprice is clearly employed by the playwright to entertain in a humorous manner, it is also the reason for the heroine's suffering and thus, by implication, a motivation for the audience's empathy towards her.

> Betty
> Bless me, madam! Why do you fret and tease yourself so? This is giving them the advantage with a witness.
>
> Mrs. Lovely
> Must I be confounded all my life to the preposterous humours of other people; and pointed at by every boy in town? –
> O! I could tear my flesh, and curse the hour I was born. Is it not monstrously ridiculous that they should desire to impose their Quaking dress upon me at these years? When I was a child, no matter what they made me wear; but now – (I.ii, 59)

Anne makes it clear that it is "the preposterous humors of other people" that is at the root of her plight. Her suffering is made tangible by referring to the Quaker dress that she is forced to wear. For the audience, it is a visible semiotic sign of her submission to a way of life that she does not agree with. Her liberty is thus severely limited by the religious custom of her guardian. But, in the course of the play, the statement that "preposterous humors" rather than sincere religious belief force her to submit to Quaker manners becomes very clear.

What is at stake here is not merely a young woman's choice of fashion and dress, but the loss of personal liberty and individualism. In the course of the play, Anne's loss of liberty is emphasized and beyond the comedic situations the protagonist finds herself in, the audience's empathy is occasioned. The following soliloquy illustrates the loss of liberty and the abuse of power by her guardians:

> Mrs. Lovely.
> Let me be quiet, I say. Must I be tormented thus forever? Sure no woman's condition ever equalled mine: foppery, folly, avarice, and hypocrisy are by turns my constant companions, and I must vary shapes as often as a player. I cannot think my father meant this tyranny. No, you use an authority which he ever intended you should take (II.ii, 72)

In this short monologue, Anne, directly appeals to the feelings of the audience by asking, "Must I be tormented thus forever?" With such hopelessness, the heroine's situation elicits empathy in the audience. She cannot be free as her late father has condemned her to the willful and eccentric judgments of her guardians. But, as she states here, she thinks that her father never intended them to exert as much authority and in the manner they do. Thus, Anne appeals to their reason and exposes the impossibility of her situation. She explicitly calls tyranny the authority under which she suffers. But, for the comic pleasure of the audience, tyranny is different from mere patriarchal authority. It actually derives from the incongruity of her guardians' ideological/religious or personal convictions. The characters of the guardians, who represent such divergent ideologies, are in their combination the source of her plight and also the cause of much comic delight on the part of the audience.

It is interesting that Anne calls the guardians' command "tyranny," thus making her ideological position clearly liberal and moderate. The whole play seems to be structured along the lines of liberty versus tyranny. Both Anne and Fainwell's actions are motivated by the desire for liberty that will ensure their personal and marital happiness. Within the gendered script of comedy (cf. Anderson, 2002), this liberty can be attained, and the empathy clearly lies with the protagonists who confidently claim their right to liberty and freedom of choice. I would argue, differently form Anderson's claim, that the gendered

script predictably leads to marriage and that women are free only insofar as they are safely delivered into marital life and do not express their liberty in alternative choices and that Centlivre's play, by employing empathy and humour to strategically position her assertive protagonists versus the absurdity of the guardians; and their tyrannical behaviour, points to a more confident statement on gender roles. Even though the gendered script might still be in place, the empathy of the audience is unquestionably directed at the leading figures of Anne and Fainwell. Susanna Centlivre thus achieves to turn the question of marriage into an ethical question and to implement ethics into the comedic domain, as Anne can gain her liberty through the marital contract and through her joined efforts together with Fainwell to secure it.

Anne must be viewed as a new comic heroine whose fate evokes ethical considerations. The dramatic denouement as well as the conceptualization of her character point to the fact that she is a comic heroine who achieves her goals and claims her right to freedom. Although her liberty is gained by the strategy of her male lover, the denouement in the form of a happy ending can only be achieved by their collaboration, their wit and their talent in acting and disguise. In the final act, Anne and Fainwell playfully convince Prim of Anne's conversion to Quakerism. Prim is eavesdropping on the couple to find out how the disguised Fainwell, who pretends to be a Quaker, convinces Anne of the rightness of his religious doctrine and, by implication, of the rightfulness of a match between Anne and the Quaker:

> Prim. (aside)
> I would gladly hear what argument the good man useth to bend her.
>
> Mrs. Lovely [unaware of Prim].
> Thy words give me new life, methinks.
>
> Prim. (aside)
> What do I hear?
>
> Mrs Lovely [still unaware of Prim]
> Thou best of men! Heaven meant to bless me sure, when first I saw thee.
>
> Prim (aside)
> He hath mollified her. O wonderful conversion!
>
> Colonel (sees Prim; aside to Mrs. Lovely)
> Ha! Prim listening - no more, my love; we are observed; seem to be edified, and give 'em hope that thou wilt turn Quaker, and leave the rest to me. – (Aloud.) I am glad to find that thou art touched with what art I said unto thee, Anne; another time I will explain another article to thee. In the meanwhile be thou dutiful to our friend Prim.

Mrs.Lovely
I shall obey thee in everything. (V.i, 126)

This scene exemplifies that humour is both pleasurable and corrective. The comic pleasure is derived from the audience's awareness of the male lover's true identity and Anne's impossible conversion. Once they notice that they are observed, their pretence and acting enhance the comic impression of their role-playing as religious purists. It is the humour of the scene that enlightens the audience and guides their empathy towards the lover's desire for each other and also the desire for their liberty of choice and agency. Their aptness at play-acting provides comic pleasure as it concurrently directs a critique towards the roles that they are performing. Centlivre's particular humour enables the audience to focus on the ethical aspects of the play: Piety and religious zeal are unmasked as artificial acts in the performance by the two lovers. Religion is thus revealed to be a performance for a particular audience willing to believe in the truthfulness of the performers.

Centlivre's employment of empathy with the protagonist might be more subtle and directed towards a particular audience. Young female theatre-goers will be caught in an empathetic response, once they become aware of Anne's unfair subjection to the whims of the guardians who are all attempting to impose their ideological opinion on her. In one instance, Anne has to wear a Quaker's dress and thus her submission becomes symbolically visible in her physical appearance. The younger audience members will certainly empathize with her having to dress according to strict religious doctrine, instead of taking pleasure in dressing according to fashion. The audience members, themselves being on display in the eighteenth-century theatre auditorium in their fashionable dresses, are undoubtedly affected by the young heroine's fate. The emotion of empathy thus binds the character on stage in her performance to the audience that responds to the ideological restrictions and impositions on the young woman's liberty. In this performative act within the context of the theatre space — the nature of the auditorium as being integrated and in close proximity to the action on stage — the boundary between dramatic action and the audience is blurred through the affective power of empathy.

Affective Power of Empathy: Humour, Comedy and Ethics

Regarding Centlivre's play from a wider perspective, the values of liberty, freedom, and individualism are integrated into the creation of both plot and characters. The apparent changes to the comedic plot, away from the marriage plot to the plot centred on the protagonist's freedom enhance, on the one hand,

more realist elements of the play and complexity in the characters. Centlivre's realism lies in the couple's attempt to attain their goals together and in this they elicit the empathy of the audience who will identify with the young lovers versus the tyrannical imposition of rules by the guardians. The constraints imposed by eccentricity and extremism stand out against the empathetic figures of the young couple, whose desire to be in control of their own fate becomes the driving force of the plot.

Similarly, the play works with different types of humour to evoke a variety of responses from the audience. The tyranny of the guardians lies in the sphere of satire and "humours" comedy while the protagonists are placed in the realm of humane comedy which provokes benevolent laughter and empathy. Therefore, the audiences might laugh *at* the guardians but laugh *with* Anne and Fainwell. Thus comic pleasure consists of a complex response to the blurring and mixing of comedic elements and effects. But, overall, comic pleasure is more liberating than pedagogical, as the humorous treatment of eccentricity is simultaneously shown. The same applies to the desire for freedom and the witty actions of the protagonists to achieve it. The different types of humour thus produce a particular effect and contribute to the liberating experience of comic pleasure.

According to Bakhtin, laughter is emancipatory, not just from social constraints but also from one's own self. But, if empathy binds the audience to the chief characters and provides identification, how can laughter be supportive if it frees one from the restrictions of the self? Following Bakhtin, the construction of a single unified self is dismantled by the immediacy of the bodily response to humour. Laughter thus reveals a rather tenuous relationship between the body and the self. The self might see itself reflected in some of the dramatic characters represented on stage and feel empathy towards them. Furthermore, in the concept of the "carnivalesque," Bakhtin comments on the "positive, life-embracing, and elevating concept of the comic, which does not laugh with someone at something but supposedly functions without comparison, exclusion, or denigration" (Horlacher 2009, 21). In such a carnivalesque comic universe, there is a connection between "the spectator/reader and the actor/protagonist, whereby both are in a full agreement about the setting free of sensuality, bodily needs, and the pleasure principle" (Horlacher 2009, 22). What Horlacher identifies in Bakhtin's work illuminates Centlivre's effective use of comedy and its liberating power. When Anne Lovely points out the black spots that should appear on Mrs. Prim's face, thus betraying her hypocritical nature and provoking laughter from the audience, the distance between the spectators and the actors is overcome. In this context, laughter does not have a condescending quality but establishes equality in the hope of liberty for the young heroine, of a world for Anne to

thrive in and for the Prims to be revealed as the hypocrites that they are. The restriction on the body of the young Anne by the imposition of Quaker dress and manners is doubly eliminated through Bakhtinian laughter. She is thus freed from the hypocrisy that lies behind it, as well as from bodily restrictions and inhibitions in general.[7]

In Defence of Liberty - Centlivre's New Comedy and The Politics of Self-Determination

Susanna Cenlivre's play *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* exemplifies the ethical dimension of humour but the playwright, through the empathy for the protagonists, engages her audience to such an extent that they respond to, and judge, the characters, and their place in the action of the play from an ethical perspective. Thus, the ethical implications arise from an empathetic move along with the character's negotiation of values and morality. By neatly juxtaposing the play's morally virtuous characters who embody the values of liberty and moderation with characters who personify conformity as well as excess and eccentricity, Centlivre engages her audience in a reflection on these values. Despite the many comic events and contrived plotting, the characters gain more complexity and multi-dimensionality, thus providing the possibility for the audience to identify with them and, implicitly, with their embodied values.

It is certainly interesting to note that in Douglas Canfield's view, the new types of comedies are not revolutionary in their political subtexts but they are a testimony to the new dominant ideological stance of the middle-classes: "It becomes obvious that, despite their democratic, meritocratic political rhetoric, the plays are exclusionary: they portray the consolidation of power in the hands of a new (male) elite – power based ostensibly on law but really on the sword and the gun" (Canfield 1995, 196). Hence, the new comedies provide a discursive opportunity for the upcoming elite to formulate and disseminate their values and thus support and expand their powerful position in British society.[8] It is through

[7] In his insightful work on laughter, Horlacher states that "Bakhtin's laughter abolishes frontiers, is immune to death, spreads everywhere and covers all aspects of life. It is seen as a dynamic link between our body in the sense of its animal and biological aspects, and our culture in the sense of intellect. Moreover, for Bakhtin, laughter entails plurality and ignores interdictions. It is the enemy of censorship and allows mankind to temporarily enter the utopian realm of universality, liberty, equality, and abundance" (Horlacher 2009, 9).

[8] Canfield traces the discursive changes and delineates the socio-cultural alteration as well as the political repercussions around the time of the Glorious Revolution: "It is as if, right up to the Glorious Revolution, an aristocratic force field holds the elements of official discourse together; afterward, we can detect a new bourgeois configuration of discursive elements" (Canfield 1995, 194).

moral reform that the middle-class ranks more highly in the public sphere. For Canfield, this position is not only a class hierarchy but also a racial and gendered one:

> [...] their neostoic exemplary morality masks upper middle-class male dominance over gender, class, and even race. Lockeian social contract theory, which underlay the bourgeois revolution in England and later in America, actually meant in practice, as these plays despite their inculcation of the new ideology unwittingly reveal, that only a few (good) men are created equal. (Canfield 1995, 196)

The middle-classes' growing importance in British society in terms of politics, moral and cultural norms as well as economic power, according to Canfield, results in an increasing inequality that places white middle-class men at the centre. But, in the work by Susanna Centlivre, while middle-class ideology begins to take a firmer grip on notions of character, the liberty of the female protagonist is undeniably the central aspect of *A Bold Stroke for a* Wife. Centlivre captures the values of her characters in a plot that centers on the personal. Yet, it points to the political, in and around notions of liberty. Liberty, as represented by Anne and Fainwell, has been taken as evidence for Centlivre's Whig politics: "Although the Whigs do not believe in democracy (that would be chaos), they believe that the individual has the right to resist tyranny, to resist any government official or function that would deprive him or her of any of these rights. Individuals must have the power to create their own destinies, to make their existence in society less than miserable" (Butler 1991, 362-63). "Individuals who have the power to create their own destinies" could be seen as a motivation in a large part of the action of *A Bold Stroke for a Wife.* Fainwell and Anne, in a joint effort, outwit Anne's guardians and "free" her from tyranny. Such a resistance to tyranny resonates with the bourgeois members of the audience. Butler suggests that "in one sense, Centlivre's plays are a dramatic fulfilment of Whig philosophy. Sturdy, self-reliant characters win their fortunes and future mates by virtue of their own cleverness – and some good luck. It is the middle-class ethic in operation – work hard, be smart, and success in matters of love and money cannot be too far away […]" (Butler 1991, 363). There are several aspects of self-reliance and cleverness that the play propagates: Anne's strategies to first survive in a setting that limits and constricts her liberty and her subsequent endeavour to escape from the eccentricities and extremist ideologies of her four guardians shows her as an independent and freedom-loving figure. Her attempt to emulate some of the characteristics only to expose her guardians' hypocrisy demonstrates her wit and smart character. Fainwell, too, displays characteristics that are both intelligent as well as confident, trusting in his ability to liberate Anne and outsmart the guardians.

Both on the level of plot and character, liberal ideas are combined with acts of self-reliance and sharpness. What is highlighted in the play is that the character's goal of liberty must be achieved through actions governed by confidence in one's abilities as well as intelligent decision-making. Anne's conviction that her choice of a husband is right because it will lead to her liberty drives most of the action forward. It is especially her character that incorporates Locke's notion of liberty as the freedom "to choose, to act, to consent" (Edwards 2002, 296).[9] But for Fainwell, the motivation of liberty is obvious in his ambition to liberate Anne. His position is alluding to contemporary notions of liberty not only as a right but also as an obligation. In some instances, citizens are asked to fight for their freedom.[10]

While Anne Lovely defends liberty and self-determination against tyranny, Fainwell uncovers vanity, eccentricity, greed and religious fundamentalism in his encounters with the guardians. The final scene, in which Anne stands up to all her guardians and, in particular, tells Sir Philip to dress according to his age shows the hero's and heroine's common goal of moderation and liberty:

> Mrs. Lovely
> Don't call me miss, Friend Philip; my name is Anne, thou knowest.
>
> Sir Philip
> What, is the girl metamorphosed?
>
> Mrs. Lovely.
> I wish thou wert so metamorphosed. Ah, Philip, throw off that gaudy attire and wear the clothes becoming of thy age. (V.i. 136)

In this scene, moderation and liberty are presented as ideal values and vocally defended by the protagonist. It is mainly through the contrast of the young outspoken heroine and the foppish character who belongs to a theatrical tradition slowly fading from the stage that new values are asserted. Anne's liberty starts with her proper name that she claims defiantly and confidently:

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[9] According to Edwards, "[d]escribing metaphorical an original tale of nature ordered by certain natural general laws, Locke conceived of man as born possessed of certain concomitant and inalienable natural rights. There are life, liberty and property" (Edwards 2002, 296).

[10] Edwards discusses this aspect of liberty in eighteenth-century liberal thinkers and, by providing an exemplary text, highlights its implications for a new civil society: "Algernon Sidney's *Discourses Concerning Government* suggested that the rights of a free people rested on the liberty secured by war. Rebellion, in Sidney's account, was a powerful and improving scourge. The citizen not only had an individual right of rebellion, to be claimed *in extremis*, he also had a positive obligation, as a citizen of the republic, to resist tyranny and to restore liberty" (Edwards 2002, 295; emphasis in the original).

"My name is Anne, thou knowest" expresses her unbeaten desire to be recognised for who she is and, furthermore, to be "known," which means to be acknowledged as her authentic and true self. While Anne asks Philip to refrain from his freakish love for French fashion and his exaggerated vanity, she defends the values of liberty and honesty. This scene also epitomizes a very significant rejection of the theatrical tradition of "humours" characters in favour of realist and sympathetic figures. Anne's request to "[t]hrow off that gaudy attire" can be viewed as the playwright's own comment on a previous theatrical tradition that has been succeeded by Centlivre's ingenious comedic creation of Anne Lovely as a prime example of liberty on the English stage.[11]

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[11] One could certainly argue that Centlivre's *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* propagates liberty as a value that is associated with Englishness. Pincus, for example, argues that "*[c]ontinental* Europeans vacillated between the wild extremes of republican and popular government on the one hand and tyrannical royal absolutism on the other. The English, by contrast, were committed to limited monarchy, allowing just the right amount of tempered popular liberty" (Pincus 2009, 5; emphasis in the original).

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