

Headnote for Susanna Centlivre

By John O'Brien

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Susanna Centlivre (c.1669-1723) was the most popular playwright in England in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, and her plays continued to be performed throughout the English speaking world for more than 150 years. Over the course of a playwriting career that began in 1700, Centlivre wrote more or less one play each year, almost all of them comedies, and most of them hits: plays that had long initial runs and frequent revivals. The plays currently in our collection, *The Busie Body* , first staged in 1709, and *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* , first staged in 1718, are two of her best and most popular plays.

We do not know a lot about Centlivre's life with any certainty; much of the biographical information that has come down to us from eighteenth-century accounts is not documented and for that reason not particularly reliable. She was probably born Susanna Freeman in 1669 in Whaplode, a village in Lincolnshire in the north of England. She may have been married very young and very briefly to a "Mr. Fox," whose first name is completely unknown. She does seem to have married a man named Carrol or Carroll (also without a first name that has been recorded), since she published some poetry under that name when she was young. There are stories from the period that Mr. Carroll was killed in a duel, but there is no record of that. We do know that Susanna married Joseph Centlivre (probably pronounced something like "St. Liver," which is how his name is documented in tax records, very likely by someone who was recording phonetically) in 1707, who was a "Yeoman of the Mouth" (that is, a cook), to Queen Anne. Susanna Centlivre continued to publish drama and also some poetry until her death in 1723.

These few facts, and the dates of her printed publications, are about all that we know for certain about Centlivre's life. But there are a number of stories that contemporary biographers told about Centlivre that might tell us some things about her but, more importantly, tell us some things about people thought about a woman who was trying to make a career and a living in the theater, which was extremely rare in this period. Many of these stories describe her as performing, either on the stage or in real life, as a man. John Mottley wrote that she disguised herself as Anthony Hammond's "Cousin Jack" to go to lectures at Cambridge, acting as a man in order to gain access to places where women were usually not permitted to go. William Chetwood wrote that Centlivre started her career in London as an actor, and "had a greater inclination to wear the Britches, than the Petticoat" so she took on men's parts. This was not all that unusual in the period, and there was a whole category of roles, called "breeches parts" where women cross-dressed as male characters in plays. She was said to be playing just this kind of role, that of Alexander the Great in the court performance of play called *The Rival Queens* when she first caught the eye of her future husband Joseph Centlivre. And another biographer, Abel Bowyer, observed that she had a "small Wen on her left Eye lid, which gave her a Masculine Air." We should take such accounts with a grain of salt. But it is notable that the men who wrote about Centlivre's career and life in her own time and shortly thereafter consistently described her as appearing and acting like another man. One possibility is that these authors are trying to account for the rare success of a woman writer in an institution--the London theater--that was dominated by men, who were the majority of owners, managers, playwrights and performers. Only a woman who was able to act like a man, that is, could make it in this environment.

That is probably part of what is going on. But it also seems plausible to suggest that the various myths around Centlivre tell us something interesting about how people in this era thought about gender. It seems clear that these writers found something interesting, and, in Joseph Centlivre's case, desirable about the way that Centlivre may have crossed over into performing as a man on stage and (if we believe John Mottley) in real life. This at-least-partly-mythological Centlivre reminds us that eighteenth-century people thought of gender differently than we do. All of these writers seem to have found something fascinating in the way that Centlivre convincingly cross-dressed; Joseph Centlivre seems to have found it positively appealing. But none of the writers seem to have identify this with any kind of essential quality of Centlivre's sexuality

or personality. It seems rather that her alleged ability to “play” or have the “air of” a man was evidence of theatrical ability that stood her in good stead as the author of comedies about romance.

And that leads us to look at her plays differently as well. Like almost all comedies in the history of the theater, Centlivre’s plays tell a familiar story: young lovers have to overcome obstacles put in their way by members of the older generation, but they ultimately succeed in the end and will live happily ever after. *The Busie Body* and *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* follow this familiar pattern, but Centlivre innovates in two ways. First, both plays have wonderfully clever and intricate plots and counter-plots, and we leave it to the reader to enjoy seeing how the plots develop and are resolved. Second, both plays put modern gender roles up for some review. *A Bold Stroke* makes it clear how much the state of being a woman means having to perform for men. This is made explicit, for example, by *Bold Stroke*’s heroine Ann Lovely, who tells her lover Colonel Fainwell that she must “vary Shapes as often as a Player” (that is, an actor), changing her behavior to meet the demands of the four eccentric guardians who must agree on a potential husband. And Marplot, the title character of *The Busie-Body* is able to mess up the plans of the two young couples precisely because he seems to have no interest at all in conventional heterosexual romance. Marplot is in many ways a conventional “fop” character. This was a character type that developed in the late seventeenth-century English theater, and was typically a man whose sexuality was somewhat ambiguous; fops often seemed to pursue women, but in comparison with the male protagonists of comedies in that period, fops typically seemed more interested in fashion, wit, style, and the theater, and rarely ended up actually marrying a woman by the end of the play. In most plays of the seventeenth century, fops are minor characters and the butt of jokes. With Marplot, however, Centlivre puts that character type at the center of the play as another kind of impediment to the heterosexual couple whose relationship should be the main focus. The character turned out to be so popular that he was brought back in a sequel, *Marplot*, staged in 1710. Centlivre, that is, plays around with the conventions of the comedies that came before her, holding them up for the audience’s attention, and making us aware of the artifice involved both in the plays and the social roles performed by men, women, and people who do not quite fit those categories. Susanna Centlivre’s plays still work very well on stage; if you get an opportunity to see one performed, take it and enjoy the work of one of the best English playwrights of the period.