

Amorous Relationships and Marital Contracts

as Staged in Restoration Drama

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ABSTRACT

The present contribution explores amorous relationships in light of the marital contracts represented in selected London comedies staged during Restoration. On these premises, special attention will be devoted to the so-called *proviso* scenes: the most peculiar theatrical feature of that time involving a couple negotiating the terms and conditions of a (pre-)nuptial agreement. The hypothesis underpinning this study is that, while the plots of plays typical of this genre revolve around themes such as the pursuit of inheritance or social climbing, such *topos* tends to deviate from economic factors or status-seeking, emphasising instead behavioural regulation. More importantly, it evolves in tandem with the characterisation of the parties by signalling a transition from the rakish taming of the 1660s and 1670s to the sentimental taming that marks the close of the century, thus becoming a touchstone not only of the prevailing dramatical tendencies and the audience's preferences, but also of the current social *milieu*. By analysing selected excerpts, I intend to demonstrate that, until the 1670s, when debauchery was prevailing in England, the marriage contracts on stage ensure that the lovers share a profound yet non-exclusive bond that permits them to satisfy their sexual appetite, thus exalting lust over love. Nevertheless, from the 1680s onward, both the *proviso* scenes and the characterisation of the couple undergo a transformation following some significant historical events and in accordance with the preferences of a renewed audience: the contracts no longer endorse sexual freedom, conversely aiming to exalt virtues such as fidelity and mutual respect.

Keywords: Marital Contract; Mistress; *Proviso* Scene; Rake; Restoration Theatre