

A DEFENCE OF WHIG FEMINISM IN CENTLIVRE'S  
PORTUGUESE PLAYS *THE WONDER! A WOMAN KEEPS  
A SECRET* (1714) AND *MAR-PLOT, OR THE SECOND PART  
OF THE BUSY BODY* (1710)

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### **I. Susannah Centlivre and *déplacement***

Susannah Centlivre was one of the most prolific playwrights of her time (Centlivre, *The Wonder* 10), with 19 plays in 23 years, 17 poems and three books of letters to her name (Staves in Kastan 426) and she certainly is one of the most successful ones, with a number of performances of her plays that make her second only to Shakespeare (Martínez-García 30). The plays that will be the focus of this study, *The Wonder! A Woman Keeps a Secret* (1714) and *Mar-plot; or the Second Part of The Busy Body* (1710) differ greatly as regards audience's reception: while *The Wonder*, extremely popular during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was revived until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Centlivre, *The Wonder* 10), *Mar-plot* was a disappointment from its premiere and has scarcely been revived. Reception data notwithstanding, these two plays stand out in a theatrical corpus heavily influenced by the Spanish comedies of intrigue, "cloak-and-dagger comedies" with "plots [which] feature challenging obstacles for the lovers, ingenious plotters, complex intrigues, and elements of farce" (Staves 427).

In the two plays studied, the playwright not only turns to the Iberian Peninsula and the "Mediterranean countries" as a source of inspiration for her plots and theatrical devices, but she moves the action to these contexts "to heighten the heroines's confinement and to make the idea of confining women and forcing them into marriages as unattractive as possible to

an English audience” (Staves 427). This technique, this *déplacement* (Puga, “A Lisboa Católica” 113; Puga, “Entre O Terreiro Do Paço” 325) works not just as a criticism against these unfair Roman Catholic practices, but “as a means of criticising the British society of the time, for many were the men and women that could identify themselves with what they saw onstage” (Martínez-García 192): the playwright may locate the action in the exotic streets of Lisbon, but the situations resonate with her audiences. Thus, Centlivre manages a veiled criticism of “a suposta liberdade feminina inglesa e, logo, também a crítica social à realidade britânica, que é assim desfamiliarizada através da técnica do *déplacement*” (Puga, “Entre O Terreiro Do Paço” 325).

This paper argues that this *déplacement* works not just as a commentary on a society that prides itself on being a nation “in love with Liberty” (Centlivre, *The Wonder* 48) but as the most plausible scenario for the defence of the author’s Whig politics and mercantilism. Portugal, then, not only works as a distancing device, but as the only logical setting: if all three nations (British, Spanish and Portuguese) were to meet in one place, that would be Lisbon, the trading capital of the Anglo-Portuguese alliance, a neutral battleground where two opposing social systems collide: on one side, what Foucault came to call the “deployment of alliance: a system of kinship ties, of transmission of names and possessions” (Foucault 106) represented by Spain and Portugal and their strict Roman Catholic ideas. On the other side, Britain, representing the “deployment of sexuality” (Foucault 106) advocating for more freedom and equality amongst genders and social classes. This paper will focus on Lisbon’s double role in the play: a mirror in which British audiences can see their best and worst features reflected and the arena in which Centlivre’s Whig sympathies and her defence of the merchants contest and challenge the outdated Roman Catholic notions of kinship, bloodlines and marriage; to that end, the actual relationship between both countries will be first studied, to then proceed with an analysis of Centlivre’s construction of Portuguese and British characters and of the ways in which her passionate Liberal ideals filter through.

## **II. Setting the scene: the Anglo-Portuguese Alliance and the War of Spanish Succession**

Although a primitive commercial pact seems to have been struck some time during the 12<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to the “convenient position of Portugal as a stopping place for ships sailing

to the Holy Land, which made it possible for the English to help the early Portuguese kings in their long struggle with the Moors" (Shillington 109), the Anglo-Portuguese Alliance can be traced back as far as 1386 when "the first formal treaty of all between Great Britain and Portugal was signed" (Caldwell 149). The Treaty of Windsor, signed on May 9<sup>th</sup> 1386, was the starting point of a union between two nations that would last well into our days, with the exception of a time when "it was in abeyance (...) during the reign of Elizabeth and (...) a brief interruption in the time of Cromwell" (Prestage 69). The economic implications of this partnership are quite clear for "the prosperity of Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was in great part due to the commercial expertise and efforts of the merchants in earlier times" (Shaw xi), but the political and social aspects of the longest standing coalition between two countries (Prestage 69) are less easy to grasp.

As regards politics, the Alliance underwent several revisions and it seems that "whenever the alliance is renewed (...) Portugal enters into special temporary agreements related to the particular emergency" (Caldwell 150). In 1654, for instance, "Article I forbade either party from adhering to any war, counsel or treaty to the damage of the other" (Shaw 9) a precaution against attacks from Spain. After some years of uncertainty, came the War of the Spanish Succession (1701) with Portugal first siding with Spain against Britain. Still, after the signing of the Methuen Treaty, ensuring exclusive trading rights for both countries, Portugal joined Britain in a war that "ended with the signing of the Peace of Utrecht in 1714" (Shaw 19), the year *The Wonder* was premiered (Lock 98).

The social implications of the pact are also quite remarkable; as two cultures that rested upon extremely different value systems, co-existence was sometimes awkward. One of the main differences between both societies was the diverging religions that dominated it, represented in our plays as "os binómios (...) o Português católico e o Inglês protestante" (Puga, "A Lisboa Católica" 116) and the contrasting principles that ruled them. By the 1700s "trade was not considered demeaning and younger sons of gentry and aristocracy were frequently apprenticed to merchants for a fee" (Shaw 3) amongst liberals in Britain. This idea was related not only to Protestant self-improvement and a strong work ethic, but also to Whig politics of equality. Portugal, as a traditionally Roman Catholic nation, looked less favourably on these practices and "aristocrats and *fidalgos* were forbidden to trade" (Shaw 4), since it was deemed to be below them: in Portugal, and by extension Spain, the lines separating the social classes were very clearly drawn and they seemed to

be quite immobile, unlike in Britain, were Protestantism argued that through sheer hard-work and self-discipline, one could rise in the ranks of society. The general belief was that the Roman Catholic nations were stricter in their morals and beliefs, allowing for less freedom, while the British Protestant nation was seen as a place of liberty. The cultural shock that the coexistence of such different systems brought about, caused puzzlement in the population, but it also generated a fascinating exchange of ideas as portrayed in Centlivre's work.

The playwright uses Lisbon as the battle ground where two opposing systems engage with each other in a battle for supremacy: on the one hand, the strict Roman Catholic ideas represented by Spain and Spanish characters, representative of the deployment of alliance, with its insistence on tradition, the maintenance of the purity of bloodlines and the honour of the family using any means necessary.

On the other side we find the Protestant Whig ideas, representative of the deployment of sexuality, defending the unfair treatment worthy Portuguese merchants are receiving and extolling the virtues of British merchant women, thus preaching equality between the sexes and advocating for the improvement of one's social position through honest and hard work. The transplant of the action to Lisbon helps add emphasis to these ideas and allows Centlivre some safe distance to put forward the thesis that, in Britain, not only are intelligent and capable women like Isabinda, unfairly judged by chastity rather than actions, but that worthy men like Frederick are being excluded from positions of power because of Britain's inability to let go of outdated notions of honour. In this sense, Centlivre's main premise is that merchant classes have a superior system of values based on Whig ideologies of freedom, respect and self-improvement, which is, in her eyes, not only fairer, but more rational and inclusive.

### **III. (Dis)honourable manhood: “Bloody-minded Spaniards” and gentleman merchants**

In her Portuguese plays, Centlivre divides her characters in two clearly defined groups, not based on their nationalities, but rather according to their ideas on the nature of honour: on the one hand, those who attempt to perpetuate the notion that “honour was deeply connected to lineage and family inheritance” (Martínez-García 105) arguing it “was not (...) an individual possession, but (...) belonging to the collective of the family (...) [so]

an affront to one member of a family was seen as an insult and challenge to the honour of the whole household" (Foyster 1999: 32). This notion, typical of the deployment of alliance, would justify the intervention of fathers, husbands and brothers if and when affairs of the heart interfere with their claim to honour and manhood or threaten the century-long honourability of the family. The other group portrayed in these plays, and which is the vehicle for Centlivre's liberal ideas, is composed of characters who belong to the mercantilist classes and who claim that honour "to be regarded as a reward for individual virtue" (Foyster 35) rather than an inherited family possession.

Having both groups of characters interacting and confronting each other in a "distant" battlefield (Lisbon), Centlivre deconstructs and contests the antiquated ideas about honour, blood and lineage that still existed in Britain, showing audiences that these outdated notions are not only unfair but completely unfounded: in both plays Centlivre presents audiences with two Grandees of Portugal who use the word 'honour' insistently, misusing and abusing the term. What is more, through their unfair treatment of others and violent stubbornness, they turn the term into an empty word, devoid of all real value. It will be two merchants, Frederick and Isabinda, who will demonstrate the true meaning of honour, coupled with a moral superiority that does not depend on rank or gender.

The first group of characters, typically, "believed that the good name of the family could be preserved though advantageous marriages, thus establishing connections with other "honourable" houses, an insurance that the good name of the family would be carried onto future generations" (Martínez-García 106). Such is the case of Don Lopez in *The Wonder*, who has tried, and failed, to secure such a union for his son Felix and whom we find in the opening scene talking to his son's best friend Frederick, a wealthy merchant who, as it will be discussed later on, should be the real "hero" of this play. With just this conversation we can immediately get a sense of who Don Lopez is and to what extent he adheres to the principles of the deployment of alliance, a fact that seems to make him, according to the ideas of the age, more Spanish than Portuguese. As the figurehead of such system, he "believes honour is the privilege of a small number of families that have managed to maintain their status generation after generation" (Martínez-García 359), rather than acquired through hardwork.

Thus, although he does appreciate Frederick's friendship with his son Don Felix, he does not recognise him as a gentleman, due to his humble origins: "I am not ignorant of the

friendship between my son and you. I have heard him commend your morals, and lament your want of noble birth" (Centlivre, *The Wonder* 47). This idea is so ingrained in Portuguese and Spanish societies that even Frederick himself seems to believe it: "That's nature's fault, my Lord. It is some comfort not to owe one's misfortunes to one's self, yet it is impossible not to want noble birth" (Centlivre, *The Wonder* 47). Still, his polite responses contrast greatly with Don Lopez's rude remarks and cruel insistence on Frederick's lack of rank and of honour, "Tis a pity indeed such excellent parts as you are master of, should be eclipsed by mean extraction" (Centlivre, *The Wonder* 47). Don Lopez's lack of sympathy comes from his belief that he and his son are better men than Frederick by virtue of their title and birth and that they are privy to a unique sense of honour that merchants do not only not share, but are unable to apprehend. For her part, Centlivre will show that this idea of "honour" at the heart of the lives of these aristocrats is not just outdated, but completely unfair and opposed to the notions of honour that both the author and her merchants live by. Don Lopez soon tells Frederick of his plan to marry his daughter to a rich Spanish merchant; he, like many aristocrats, may have the title, but lacks the funds to sustain it, so he decides to arrange a union that will bring him economic advantage. Audiences may wonder at why having such a good specimen of honourable manhood in front of him (Frederick), Don Lopez marries his daughter off to a Spanish merchant, further emphasising his foolishness and the unfair treatment good men like Frederick receive in countries where the deployment of alliance is still present.

Don Lopez soon explains his choice, "he has two things which render him very agreeable to me for a Son-in-Law, he is Rich and well Born" (Centlivre, *The Wonder* 48). Although marriage to a merchant might diminish his family honour, Don Lopez takes care to choose not just a rich man, but one who has, according to his Roman Catholic ideas, a claim to honour. He admits to having arranged this marriage to try and regain some of the family money lost during the Spanish War of Succession, "(...) you are not insensible what I have suffered by these Wars, (...) this is acting the Politick part, Frederick, without which, it is impossible to keep up the Port of this Life [social position or standing]" (Centlivre, *The Wonder* 48), a survival tactic common in places like Portugal where "arranged marriages for interest (...) arose as a major mechanism for the circulation of wealth among the propertied and moneyed classes" (Velissariou 117). The displacement of the action to Lisbon allows audiences to believe Britain different, a country where the wishes of children

are respected, where such a practice would be condemned, an attitude mirrored by Frederick's outrage, "You will not surely sacrifice the lovely Isabella to age, avarice, and a fool. Pardon the expression, my lord, but my concern for your beauteous daughter transports me beyond that good manners which I ought to pay your Lordship's presence" (Centlivre, *The Wonder* 47). Still, Don Lopez remains firm in the face of these very just and fair arguments: as the *pater familias* of the deployment of alliance his main concern is not for the happiness of the children, but for the maintenance or improvement of the good name of the family. Consequently, "since family honour and the purity of both their bloodlines and names were at the centre of this deployment of alliance" his aim is to arrange marriages "as a means of implementing, improving relationships that already existed between powerful families, or to create new and profitable connections" (Martínez-García 64).

As customary, Don Lopez strives to maintain the good name of the family intact, an even bigger worry in his case since it has suffered a major blow after the unruly behaviour of both his children: his son has refused to marry the woman chosen for him, injured the lady's brother in a duel and has fled. His daughter, desperate at the thought of an unwanted union, jumps out a window and disappears. All of Don Lopez's efforts to repair the damage done to his name are in vain and he is finally tricked into accepting his children's choice of spouse. Although a triumph for his children, it is also a partial triumph for the man himself and his ideas about kinship: Isabella, married beneath her station, will be carried off to Britain and the affront to the family name will be forgotten in the distance. Don Felix, for his part, is more fortunate in his choice of spouse, for Violante not only contributes to the marriage with considerable wealth, but with a social position not too dissimilar to Don Lopez's.

The displacement of the action to Lisbon then, not only allows for the "normalization" of the precepts of the deployment of alliance, but it also serves as a way to oppose these unfair notions to the more rational system that rules Britain; it could even be argued that Centlivre uses this opening scene not just to outline Don Lopez's ideas on honour, but to lay bare Frederick's own system of values and worthiness: when confronted with the insulting remarks Don Lopez makes on his "unfortunate" lack of social standing, Frederick not only remains polite and unfazed, but even joins in the Grandee's laments, wishing for a title that would allow him to be considered worthy of marrying Isabella "he is Rich, and well born, powerful Arguments indeed! Could I but add them to the Friendship of Don Felix, what might I not

hope? But a Merchant and a Grandee of Spain, are inconsistent Names" (Centlivre, *The Wonder* 49). In fact, "his frustration with Don Lopez's insistence on social status is clear and audiences feel sympathy for a man who is more worthy of admiration and honour than any grandee" (Centlivre, *The Wonder* 361), a sympathy that only grows stronger with each of his appearances on stage: all throughout the play, Frederick will not just be the only advocate for women's honour and rights, expressing his horror at the thought of a mercenary union ruling out love and happiness,<sup>1</sup> but emerging as the only man to hear their explanations before he censures their actions, always trusting these women and their innate sense of honour, a most extraordinary action in a city which does allow women a claim to honourable behaviour. Many are the instances in which Frederick confronts not just his friend Don Felix, but even his social superior Don Lopez, being the most dramatic Act 3 scene 2, when the Grandee accuses him of having dishonoured his house and daughter, an unfounded charge to which the merchant promptly responds, outraged at such dishonourable behaviour,

LOPEZ (...) Frederick, an Affair brings me here—which—requires Privacy. — (...) Sir, I must tell you, that you had better have pitch'd upon any Man in Portugal to have injur'd, than myself (...).

FREDERICK I understand you not, my Lord! (...) Explain yourself my Lord! I am not conscious of any dishonourable Action, to any Man much less to your Lordship.

LOPEZ 'Tis false! You have debauch'd my Daughter (...).

FREDERICK My Lord, I scorn so foul a Charge.

LOPEZ You have debauch'd her Duty at least, therefore instantly restore her to me, or by St. Anthony I'll make you.

FREDERICK Restore her, My Lord! Where shall I find her?

LOPEZ I have those that will swear she is here in your House (...).

FREDERICK You are misinformed my Lord, upon my Reputation I have not seen Donna Isabella, since the Absence of Don Felix.

LOPEZ Then pray Sir—if I am not too inquisitive, What Motive had you for those Objections you made against her Marriage with Don Guzman Yesterday?

FREDERICK The Disagreeableness of such a Match, I fear'd, wou'd give your Daughter cause to curse her Duty, if she comply'd

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<sup>1</sup> "Fred. Monstrous! These are the Resolutions which destroy the comforts of Matrimony" (Centlivre, *The Wonder* 49).

with your Demands, that was all my Lord!

LOPEZ And so you help'd her thro' the Window to make her disobey (...)

FREDERICK This is insulting me my Lord, when I assure you I have neither seen, nor know anything of your Daughter—if she is gone, the Contrivance was her own, and you may thank your Rigour for it.

(Centlivre, *The Wonder* 75–6)

The raging Don Lopez does not seem to register how earnest the young man is when he swears upon his reputation, for the Grandee is unable to allow a merchant to have any sense of honour; but Frederick soon proves the contrary and thinks nothing of starting a fight to defend, not just his innocence, but his friend Felix from a mercenary Alguazil who represents the corruption of the deployment of alliance. When the Alguazil is called inside the house to search it, Frederick tries to stand in his way and declares he will be revenged for this trespassing on his property. Don Lopez seems to believe that his higher rank makes him privy to enter any house in Lisbon and so he tries to force his way into the room where Felix is hiding, proving how unfair and dangerous the notion of rank superiority might be,

LOPEZ Very well, Sir, however my Rigour shall make bold to search your House, here call in the Alguzile— (...).

FREDERICK The Alguzile! My Lord you'll repent this.

[Enter Alguzile and Attendants.]

LOPEZ No Sir, 'tis you that will repent it, I charge you in the King's Name to assist me in finding of my Daughter—Be sure you leave no Part of the House unsearch'd; come, follow me.

[Goes towards the Door where Felix is; Frederick draws, and plants himself before the Door.]

FREDERICK Sir, I must first know by what Authority you pretend to Search my House, before you enter here.

ALGUAZIL How! Sir, dare you presume to draw your Sword, upon the Representative of Majesty! I am Sir, I am his Majesty's Alguzile, and the very Quintessence of Authority—therefore put up your Sword, or I shall order you to be knock'd down—for know Sir, the Breath of an Alguzile, is as dangerous, as the Breath of a Demy-Culverin.

LOPEZ She is certainly in that Room, by his Guarding the Door—if he Disputes your Authority, knock him down I say.

FREDERICK I shall show you some Sport first; the Woman you look for is not here, but there is something in this Room, which I'll preserve from your sight at the Hazard of my Life.

LOPEZ Enter I say, nothing but my Daughter can be there—  
force his Sword from him.

[*Felix comes out and joins Frederick.*]

(Centlivre, *The Wonder* 76–7)

The ensuing sword battle is “an occasion for Frederick to demonstrate a merchant can have honour by drawing to bar the door to the room where Felix is” (Copeland, *Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre* 13–6), an action that makes him, by the standards of the deployment of sexuality, worthy of the highest respect and honour. Swords are ubiquitous in Lisbon, where men are quick to draw at the minimal provocation, proving that “Latin” countries are more prone to irrational violence: Felix, for example, continuously reaches for his sword when angered or when he becomes suspicious and jealous (Centlivre, *The Wonder* 96), two things that happen uncannily often, as his exile from Lisbon for duelling proves. Frederick, for his part, remains calm in the face of these accusations and affronts to his honour, as it befits a true man of honour under the deployment of sexuality, and only offers to fight when he is accused of lying, a grievous offence for a man who prides himself in his honesty. As Copeland argues, “in this case, swordplay is the honourable defence of a gentleman, including a gentleman-merchant” (*Staging Gender* 136).

Frederick’s worthiness is further emphasised by his exchange with the Alguazil, the supposed representative of the Government in this play, and as Puga points out, a “autoridade corrupta (...) cuja moral se pauta sobretudo pelo lucro imediato” (Puga, “Entre O Terreiro Do Paço” 322). In their exchange the Alguazil discovers Felix hiding and tries to bribe Don Lopez out of £500, to which Frederick responds by expressing his disdain for a representative on an unfair system that allows itself to be corrupted by money,

ALGUAZIL Ha, his Son! Here's five hundred Pounds good, my Brethren, if Antonio dies, and that's in the Surgeons Power, and he's in love with my Daughter you know—Don Felix! I command you to surrender yourself into the Hands of Justice, in order, to raise me and my Posterity, and in Consideration you lose your Head to gain me five hundred Pounds, I'll have your Generosity recorded on your Tomb-Stone—at my own proper Cost, and Charge—I hate to be ungrate-ful.

FREDERICK Here's a generous Dog now—

LOPEZ Oh that ever I was born—Hold, hold, hold.

FREDERICK Did I not tell you, you wou'd repent my Lord,

What ho! Within there [Enter Servants] arm your selves, and let not a Man in, or out, but Felix—Look ye Alguzile when you wou'd betray my Friend for filthy Lucre, I shall no more regard you as an Officer of Justice, but as a Thief and Robber thus resist you.

FELIX Gen'rous Frederick! Come on Sir, we'll how you Play for the five hundred Pounds.

ALGUAZIL Fall on, seize the Money right or wrong ye Rogues.

[*They fight.*]

(Centlivre, *The Wonder* 77)

Frederick, as the epitome of honourable manhood, is not just “honest in his dealings” but “does not allow others to be otherwise” (Martínez-García 363) and he soon emerges as the chosen representative of Centlivre’s Whig ideals on liberty and feminism. In fact, “his constant defence of both Violante and Isabella’s innocence and honour is certainly highly subversive in a male” (Martínez-García 363), even more so in a Portuguese, men who, like Felix, are traditionally portrayed as the misogynistic, jealous and violent types. Frederick, whose ideas about honour seem to come from the intelligence gathered during his visits to Britain (Centlivre, *The Wonder* 48), takes an extremely different approach to the mysteries that surround him, preventing irrational violence and absurd duels when he “persuades Felix to verify his suspicions before acting on them” (Copeland, *Staging Gender* 136).

Frederick’s entreaties to Felix to try and curb his jealous and suspicious nature and his belief that jealousy is typical of the uneducated lower classes,<sup>2</sup> not only serve to buttress the ridiculous nature of Felix’s outdated system of values, but they also serve to highlight Frederick’s worthiness and the unfairness of the Roman Catholic nation that does not grant him the honour he is more than worthy of. He is “a *raisonneur* in the play” (DeRitter 385) who reveals the absurdity of the deployment of alliance at work in Portugal, while defending a more rational approach to life and relationships. In what many critics have believed to be an expression of Centlivre’s patriotism, Frederick claims to be an admirer of Britain and her principles, especially freedom and liberty, the two pillars that sustain the Whig political agenda, “My Lord, the English are by Nature, what the ancient Romans were by Discipline, courageous, bold,

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<sup>2</sup> “This from a Person of mean Education were excusable, such low Suspicions have their source from vulgar Conversation; Men of your politer Taste never rashly Censure” (Centlivre, *The Wonder* 75).

hardy, and in love with Liberty. Liberty is the Idol of the English, under whose Banner all the Nation Lists, give but the Word for Liberty, and straight more armed Legions wou'd appear, than France, and Philip keep in constant Pay" (Centlivre, *The Wonder* 48). This equating of Britain with the great Roman Empire would most definitely appeal to the national pride of British audiences, delighted to see their country portrayed as "a nation of such openness, inclusiveness and freedom that Catholic Lisbon comes off as practically medieval in its readiness (...) to enforce discipline within the family" (Centlivre, *The Wonder* 16–7). Patriotic appeals notwithstanding, the fact still remains that none of the British men present in the play possess the good qualities that Frederick displays, a realisation that turns this seemingly patriotic play into a reflection not on the superiority of one nation over the other, but on the prevalence of outdated notions of honour and rank in both countries.

Indeed, and in spite of all his good qualities and being the perfect embodiment of the Whig gentleman merchant, Frederick remains single and "is denied the 'prize' all heroes in comedies get: the lady" (Martínez-García 364), in a twist of the Spanish plot that comes to buttress Centlivre's critique of not just Portuguese society, but of the British one: although it is true that in Britain "merchants who succeeded in business could buy states and become country gentlemen" (Shaw 3), this practice was still frowned upon, especially by Tories. Thus, the unfair treatment Frederick is dealt and the realization that he "is not the hero of the play and (...) is denied a happy ending" (Martínez-García 365) are intended as 'food for thought' for Centlivre's audiences to reflect on the fairness of their own political inclinations.

In the second part of *The Busybody* Copeland argues Lisbon is a "stereotypical hyper-masculine environment of sexual intrigue and macho honour" (*Staging Gender* 109) where husbands and brothers vie with the British gentlemen for the attention of wives and sisters. One of the most zealous guardians of 'family honour' is Don Lopez, a Grandee of Portugal and referred to as a "bloody-minded Spaniard" (Centlivre, *Marplot in Lisbon* 74, 98) whose title seems to be inextricably linked to his ideas of honour and worth. This 'Latin' character is in possession of very specific traits: he is "irascível, vingativo destemido ao querer assassinar Marplot e ao ofender a irmã" (Puga, "A Lisboa Católica" 119), hot-headed and quick to draw his sword<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "Don Lop. Name your Spado again, and I'll shake thee into Dust, thou feeble Dotard" (Centlivre, *Marplot in Lisbon* 8)

to demonstrate a courage he believes all base-born men lack. This brutal and violent man whose impulsive behaviour audiences would read typically ‘Spanish,’ stands in clear opposition to Centlivre’s defence of a more rational manhood and a concept of honour based on personal good deeds, rather than rank. The Grandee, who resembles both Don Lopez and his son Felix in many respects, feels a crippling apprehension about his sister cuckolding her husband, an anxiety which not only stems from the fact that “cuckoldry made nonsense of the gender order” (Fletcher 101), but from a skewed sense of responsibility for his sister’s behaviour since “in the absence of a father, the brother became the guardian and patriarch of the family and sisters” (Martínez-García 184). Although Don Perriera is present in the play, Don Lopez feels it is his place to intervene and prevent his sister from becoming “the Strumpet of a damn’d Heretick” (Centlivre, *Marplot in Lisbon* 8), convinced as he is that his brother-in-law is incapable of acting as a true *pater familias* should, “Your Spado! Employ it against the Man that robs you of your Honour, and not against him that wou’d preserve it” (Centlivre, *Marplot in Lisbon* 8–9).

Don Lopez, as the head of one of the highest ranking families in Lisbon, is extremely concerned with the possible damage his sister’s actions may cause to the name of his family and, consequently, his own honour; thus, he is more than willing to step into action if his brother-in-law will not: “this I know, if you won’t punish her as a Wife, I will as a Sister; she shall not stain the Honour of my House this Way (...) I shall pursue my own Method” (Centlivre, *Marplot in Lisbon* 9). His distrust comes from his own heightened sense of worth, a trait he shares with his namesake in *The Wonder* and which rests firmly on his birth and title: as Grandee the honour of the family name must come before all things. As a proud Portuguese aristocrat, and continuing with the topical representation of ‘Latin’ characters, he soon emerges as the representative of the deployment of alliance “which took blood (its spilling and bloodties) as its central motif” and “bestowed on the King and the father, the divine power to rule over their dependants and (...) to control and take the lives of their subjects or kin” (Martínez-García 399). This is precisely his intention: to set the wrongs done to his honour right, through the spilling of blood if necessary. The Grandee’s zeal to repair his family name is fuelled by his sister’s previous offence to the family: “the greatest fear in a society so acutely conscious of status and hierarchy was of social derogation in marriage, of alliance with a family of lower state or degree than one’s own” (Stone 87), a fear that became

a reality in Don Lopez's case when his sister "injur'd it [the Honour of his House] too much in marrying you [a merchant]" (*Centlivre, Marplot in Lisbon* 9), a union which was considered a dishonour for the nobility.

This strict division between classes is so deeply implanted in the Portuguese psyche that even Don Perriera, the foolish merchant, seems convinced of his own inferiority: "So, there's the Blessing of matching into an honourable Family: now must I bear all Affronts patiently, because I am but a Merchant, forsooth" (*Centlivre, Marplot in Lisbon* 9). Don Lopez not only considers Perriera his inferior because of his birth, but also for his inability to show the proper manly quality of courage, intrinsically linked to his base origins; as the representative of the deployment of alliance, he believes Perriera, a merchant, is not a man of honour, and thus lacks "the necessary authority over his wife [which] also meant a loss of credibility, status and honour" (Martínez-García 196) and that all other men are weaklings "Cowardly Dog, [beats him.] dare to lie with a Man's Wife, and not dare to fight for her?" (*Centlivre, Marplot in Lisbon* 62). When his anxiety about the damaged honour of his family by an alliance with his social inferiors threatens to turn into something even more grotesque in the face of his sister's betrayal, his behaviour turns even more radical and violent and his thirst for blood (*Centlivre, Marplot in Lisbon* 67, 74), becomes ever more absorbing.

The further the play develops without any clear resolution to the affront to his blood, the more violent he becomes: his suspicions have him drawing his sword at any person he feels has insulted him and flying into fits of ever more violent rage. His irritation is exacerbated by the realisation that, as much as he wishes to avenge his sister's treachery, he must give precedence to his social inferior Perriera. And so sets about provoking the foolish merchant into action, delighting in his threats and promises of violent action, appealing to the Portuguese "manly" qualities of bravery and strength,

DON LOPEZ Certain Demonstration! Must you have ocular Proof? Must your Coward Heart be animated with the Sight? A Curse of your Equivocations.—

DON PERRIERA No, any other Sense will serve; let me hear 'em, feel 'em, nay smell 'em, and sure Cuckoldom is so rank a Scent, that tho' I lived in England, where they scarce breathe any other Air, I cou'd distinguish it.

DON LOPEZ Now you talk like a Portuguese; keep up this Passion, and secure the Honour of your House and mine, and

deserve the Alliance of my Blood; it shall be my Care to fix them.  
(Centlivre, *Marplot in Lisbon* 10)

His pride in his bloodlines and his ‘Latin’ nationality are inextricably linked to this violent and passionate behaviour and are seen by British characters as typical traits of a Spaniard (the least likeable of all Latin nations), willing to defend his antiquated ideas of honour and family through violence. Still, his irrational behaviour and cruel treatment of others ultimately lead to his defeat and public shaming, as customary in this type of comedies. In the case of *Mar-plot*, Centlivre’s delivery of the chastisement proves to be the ultimate coup against Don Lopez’s antiquated Roman Catholic system of values, as it is delivered not just by a woman, but by the daughter of a British merchant, Isabinda, who, like Frederick, seems to carry the author’s own voice and ideas. In fact, Isabinda’s character seems to work as the embodiment of what O’Brien sees as the core of the playwright’s Whig and feminist ideology: in his annotated edition to *The Wonder!* (2003), he argues that “Centlivre believes that the same Whig ideology that could bridge ethnic and political differences offers hope for bridging the difference between men and women as well, and thus might lead to women’s full citizenship in their society” (Centlivre, *The Wonder* 17).

#### **IV. Angels in and out the House: Centlivre’s Whig feminism**

When Isabinda, the serious heroine to Miranda’s madcap (Copeland, *Staging Gender* 111), intervenes to stop Don Lopez from punishing his repentant and misguided sister, she appeals to Don Lopez’s regard for blood ties, turning his own arguments against him and arguing that brothers should not encourage violence upon their sisters, but rather defend them against any threat, if only because the same blood runs through their veins.

Thus, with this appropriation of the most powerful symbol of the deployment of alliance, blood, Centlivre not only exposes this system as cruel and sustained by mistaken principles, but strengthens her Whig message,

[Enter Don Lopez with his Sword drawn]

DON LOPEZ What! Hangman like, are you asking Pardon ere you dispatch her? I’ll lend you a helping Hand, since you are not Master of your Resolution.

DON PERRIERA [rises hastily, and catches down a Blunderbuss, and cocks it at Lopez] Zounds, put up your Sword,

or by St. Anthony, I'll shoot you thro' the Head

(...)

ISABINDA A Brother shou'd rather reconcile, than blow the Coals of Strife; 'tis barbarous in Strangers, but much more so, in those ally'd to us by Blood: Revenge, tho' just, excludes Religion, and he that pursues it, poisons all his Morals, and impudently affronts that Power which gave him Breath to threaten.

DON LOPEZ Hey Day! What Philosophy have we here?

DON PERRIERA Out of my Lodgings, I say, without one Question more, and never set Foot into them again, as you hope to keep your Guts in. I'll be plagu'd with no more of your Jealousies, I warrant you.

DON LOPEZ Fine! your Lodgings!—but hear me, Don, dare not, for your Soul, say you match'd into my Family, or you Mistress, —boast of any Blood of mine, as you value those Eyes—for from this Day I hold you as a Bastard, and may Perdition seize you both. [Exit.]

(Centlivre, *Marplot in Lisbon* 92–93)

Although her discourse does nothing to change Don Lopez's resolve, for he is swift to sever all ties with his sister and his brother-in-law, threatening them with violence if they dare mention him as a blood-relation, her character comes to reinforce "the concept of liberty, fundamental to Whig ideology [which] connects Cenlivre's political views to her feminism" (Copeland, "A Bold Stroke for A Wife By Susannah Centlivre" 721).

Isabinda comes to Lisbon in pursuit of her husband Charles, in Portugal, to finalise his father-in-law's business. The gentleman, who seemed to have abandoned his libertine ways, soon finds that exotic Lisbon is perfect for a romantic intrigue, for not only does it secure the absence of his wife (or so he thinks) but it is also an inviting place, where women are more compliant and inclined to engage in extra-marital relations as his friend Colonel Ravelin explains "the Women, I'll say that for 'em, are kind enough, and won't put you to the Expense of swearing and lying to gain them" (Centlivre, *Marplot in Lisbon* 11). The gentleman soon finds himself out of his depth in Lisbon, embroiled in an intrigue which is far more dangerous and complicated than he could have anticipated; it is not until the last act that his wife Isabinda intervenes to rescue her unfaithful husband from an affair that could very well have lethal consequences.

In a plot borrowed from marriage plays, "Charles is one of the period's relapsed libertines and she is the idealized faithful wife who reclaims him" (Copeland, *Staging Gender* 111), becoming the epitome of honourable femininity that the deployment of

sexuality preaches and in accordance to “the growing sense of women as a moral force in society” (Williamson 207). The scientific revolution of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries meant the arrival of the deployment of sexuality, with its insistence on gender difference, rather than inferiority or superiority. “Woman, in this reading, is no longer a lesser form of man” (Fletcher 396), but a different creature, with her own biological tendencies that make her better suited for a private and domestic life: “misogynist pamphlets were replaced by more positive depictions of the goodness of the female sex” (Martínez-García 121) and “strict didacticism steadily gave way to sweetly worded and persuasive phrases about women’s goodness, softness and tenderness as the domestic cult of womanhood based on complementary spheres gathered strength” (Fletcher 396).

Thus, Isabinda “becomes in *Mar-plot* a romance version of the ‘nurturing’ spouse of the era’s conduct books” (Copeland, *Staging Gender* 111). Such traits can be clearly seen in her attitude to her unfaithful husband, which contrasts greatly with the jealousy and violence of Charles’s Portuguese mistress, “descrita como ciumenta, cruel e de sangue quente” (Puga, “A Lisboa Católica” 119) who threatens him with a dagger (Centlivre, *Marplot in Lisbon* 31) and has her Bravoes always ready to attack (Centlivre, *Marplot in Lisbon* 18). When Isabinda, dressed as a Catholic priest, learns from her own husband about his affair and, although he was planning to be unfaithful, Marplot’s continuous interruptions and the extreme vigilance that Don Lopez and Don Perriera exert on Donna Perriera “have postponed sex until the severe consequences of transgression become clear” (Copeland, *Staging Gender* 112), so she can forgive both and resolves to help and restore domestic order.

ISABINDA A weak Defence, alas, shou’d I desert him—Put up your Sword, in pity to your Ignorance, and in Hopes of converting you to the true Faith, I’ll deliver you from this Hazard.

CHARLES But can you save her too?

ISABINDA How, Son! is this a Time to dream of future Pleasures?

CHARLES I’ll give you mine Honour, Father, never to see her more; but as I am Partner of the Guilt, I wou’d not have the Punishment be only her’s.

ISABINDA Well, I’ll endeavour to preserve her too; observe my Orders well, turn your Face, here put on this Garment, my Brother there will conduct you to a Place of Safety, where I desire you’ll wait till I come; look not behind you, nor speak as you pass to the Husband of that Lady.

(Centlivre, *Marplot in Lisbon* 89).

As Copeland points out, Isabinda is invested with “a feminine identity that includes a pronounced moral component” (*Staging Gender* 112), emphasised by her “priest” disguise, which gives her supreme authority in the eyes of the Portuguese characters, but which British audiences will understand as a comment on “os excessos da Igreja Católica” (Puga, “A Lisboa Católica” 116), especially the scene in which the curtain is drawn to reveal Donna Perriera on her knees, confessing her guilt to Isabinda, who still wears the priest costume. Such a scene, and its reversal of gender and religious roles, contributes to the characterization of Isabinda as the understanding wife, for “she emerges from this intrigue as a moral instructor” (*Staging Gender* 112), who not only saves Donna Perrerira from the ire of her brother, but also teaches her the way of honourable womanhood,

DONNA PERRIERA Oh, Madam, you have set Vice and Virtue in their proper Light, from whence I see the Deformity of one, and the Beauty of the other; your generous Forgiveness is all I want, to raise my Soul above a second Fall. I have injur'd you, but—

ISABINDA No more of that; the good Inclination which you shew wipes out all Faults with me, and your Perseverance will give you as large a Share in my Breast, as if you never had offended. Rise, Madam, I hear the Door unlock, prepare your Husband according to my Direction, and leave the rest to me.

(Centlivre, *Marplot in Lisbon* 91)

In spite of this portrayal of Isabinda as the model “Angel in the House”(Patmore), the fact still remains that she, unlike the quasi-mythical figure poem, leaves her house and country in search for her husband, taking action into her own hands: with her trip to Lisbon, she displays an agency forbidden to British “women without property of their own” (Centlivre, *The Wonder* 17), an independence stemming from her status as merchant’s daughter which ensures she retains some economic independence from her husband, granting her the liberty to move freely between the two countries, proving that “a Grã-Bretanha é considerada uma nação onde reina a liberdade individual” (Puga, “A Lisboa Católica” 121) irrespective of rank or gender. Isabinda’s “easy” passage from one context to the other, “permite a Centlivre criticar indirectamente e elogiar de forma directa os seus conterrâneos, bem como satirizar a opressão e a repressão patriarcal da liberdade individual na Península Ibérica católica”(Puga, “A Lisboa Católica” 121), a criticism she

manages by turning Lisbon into a mirror where British audiences can see the risks of not allowing women any freedom: had Isabinda not left Britain to save her husband, the consequences would have been disastrous for all with an international conflict arising from the deaths of both Charles and Donna Perriera.

## V. Conclusion

Although Centlivre's Portuguese plays have never been considered overtly political, the truth is that she "was unequivocally Whig in her politics" (Copeland, "A Bold Stroke for A Wife By Susannah Centlivre" 903), a tendency that can be clearly seen in the two works studied: *The Wonder* and *Mar-plot* revolve around the ideas of liberty and freedom, notions inextricably linked to a Whig feminism which filters through the text in the author's defence of merchants and their *novel* ideas of honour (a personal quality completely independent from rank or gender) and her derogation of antiquated Roman Catholic and Tory aristocratic notions of kinship and honour as completely dependent on social status and the purity of bloodlines.

To create her defence of such ideas, Centlivre moves the action to Lisbon, not only as the most plausible scenario where the two social systems would coexist, but to create a displacement that "serves to soften some of the force of Centlivre's critique to patriarchy, making these problems seem more typical of Catholic countries in warm climates than it is of Protestant Britain" (Centlivre, *The Wonder* 15–16), in an attempt at warning audiences (especially those with Tory sympathies) of the dangers of sharing in the ideas of these Roman Catholic countries.

Thus, the playwright creates two groups of characters whose opposing views of the world ensure that Lisbon will soon become a battlefield where the ideas of the deployment of alliance will engage in a war with Centlivre's own Whig ideals. In *Mar-plot*, "Don Lopez emerges as the embodiment of stereotypically Latin short-temperedness, propensity to violence, and obsessions with familiar honour" (Copeland, *Staging Gender* 111), traits he shares with Don Lopez in *The Wonder*: the two men are, undoubtedly, equated with the deployment of alliance and with the most conservative part of Portuguese society, an aristocracy that does not want to let go of the Spanish influence even if it proves to be a most pernicious one. Centlivre portrays them as unreasonable characters whose tendency to rash judgements and violent action and whose blindness to the honourability of the mercantile classes not only jeopardize the

stability of Portugal but the continuity of the bloodlines they have strived to maintain. *The Wonder* and *Mar-plot* present us, not with a group of courageous and honourable aristocrats, but with a group of men whose irrational set of ideas not only render their zealousness ridiculous, but whose violence ultimately leads to their defeat.

It is the merchant classes, in the figure of Frederick and Isabinda, where the true worth and honour lay: it is Frederick, the Portuguese merchant, who displays all the hero qualities in *The Wonder* and it is a woman merchant, Isabinda, who ultimately ensures that the plots in *Mar-plot* come to a happy resolution. Although Frederick has a clear moral superiority, and although “the merchant comes out victorious” of his battle against the deployment of alliance, he is “incomplete,” since he remains unmarried and unable to claim the title of ‘hero’ (Martínez-García 360), an outcome which seems intended to comment on the unfairness of a political and social systems that, unlike Whig ideas, equate honour and rank. Centlivre’s unwillingness to crown Frederick as the “hero” of *The Wonder* serves to point out that, under the deployment of alliance, women are not the only individuals excluded from actively participating in society and that the notions of honour and family that buttress this system prevent worthy principles from claiming their rightful place.

Her Whig message is underscored in the figure of Isabinda, whose moral superiority is seen in her magnanimity towards Charles and Donna Perriera and in her chastisement of Don Lopez. Charles’ wife is not just a laudable representative of honourable merchant classes and their admirable values but an example of Centlivre’s feminism and her heroines: self-assured and independent women from the mercantile classes, whose righteous system of values ensure they will make the most of their liberty when they allowed such a privilege. Isabinda’s freedom of movement and action is what ultimately brings about order and peace to the riotous and impassioned Portuguese capital; Centlivre, as an acute social commentator, is aware of the fact that, even in Britain, a nation that has freedom as its idol, most women were not given the privilege of Isabinda’s economic independence and the liberty it entails.

Centlivre’s defence of the mercantile classes should not be viewed as a straightforward patriotic celebration of Britain, for many are the elements that undermine her praise of Great Britain and her morals: most notably, her honourable merchant is not British, but Portuguese, a detail which is intended to caution her English audiences against believing themselves to be

the superior nation. Additionally, Isabinda's independence, exceptional in both Portugal and Britain, reinforces her caution against excessive national pride. Using Portugal as a battlefield where the two powers and visions of the world fight for permanence, Centlivre does not try to faithfully represent England, but rather creates an idealised vision of her nation: Britain would be the perfect nation if it were "united, not by blood but rather by shared commitments to freedom and liberty" (Centlivre, *The Wonder* 16), by a Whig ideology that would ensure not just the felicity of its inhabitants, but the welfare of the nation, which would them live up to the praise Frederick showers on her in Act I.

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