

Politics of Gender and National Identity in Susanna Centlivre's Iberian Plays: A Defence of Whig Feminism

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Key Words:

Centlivre. Whig. Feminism. Gender politics.

Abstract:

This paper argues that Susanna Centlivre's choice of setting in her Portuguese plays (*Marplot in Lisbon or the Second Part of The BusyBody* (1710), *The Wonder! A Woman Keeps a Secret* (1714) and *A Wife Well Mananag'd* (1715)) not only works as the only logical meeting point where the clash of three cultures (British, Spanish and Portuguese) can take place, but as a liminal space where the author can freely express her views on politics, gender relations and the situation of women in Britain, a liminoid stage where, through *déplacement*, gender ideologies, identities, discourses of truth and national stereotypes can be contested, reformulated and interrogated.

Políticas de género e identidad nacional en las obras 'Ibéricas' de Susanna Centlivre: una defensa del feminismo Whig

Palabras clave:

Centlivre. Feminismo. Whig. Políticas de género.

Resumen:

Este ensayo sostiene que la elección de Lisboa como escenario de las obras 'Portuguesas' (*Marplot in Lisbon or the Second Part of The BusyBody* (1710), *The Wonder! A Woman Keeps a Secret* (1714) y *A Wife Well Mananag'd* (1715)) de Susanna Centlivre, no solo atiende a una necesidad lógica (Portugal sería el terreno neutral en el que Gran Bretaña, España y Portugal dialogarían de forma pacífica), sino que atiende a una razón más profunda: Lisboa (y Portugal) se transforman así en un espacio liminal donde la autora puede expresar sus ideas políticas, sus conceptos de género y denunciar la difícil situación de la mujer en Gran Bretaña, un escenario en el que, a través del *déplacement*, se cuestionan, reformulan e interrogan

las ideologías de género, la identidad, los discursos de verdad que sustentan el sistema y los estereotipos nacionales.

Towards the early 18th century, relations between Spain and Britain had been deteriorating for the last two centuries: the rivalry between the two colonial powers had only worsened since the 1500s due to the history of naval victories and military defeats that both countries accumulated along the centuries. Moreover, all throughout the 1700s the Black Legend, which had originated in the early days of the Spanish colonial expansion in America, continued to be invoked in anti-Hispanic British circles as the true Spanish character. The Portuguese connection however, had enjoyed a more favourable history ever since it was first established in the Early Medieval period. In fact, the Portuguese were considered far less suspicious than their Spanish neighbours were, although many British people still imagined both Iberian nations shared certain common traits, with some authors going as far as using the terms 'Spanish', 'Spaniard' and 'Portuguese' as synonyms.

Although politics and international relations between the three countries had been strained for centuries, British authors, poets and playwrights had been fascinated by the two Iberian nations for decades, seeing them as strange and exotic lands which caught their interest and allowed for some flights of fancy and poetic licenses that would have been seen as ridiculous if they had not had a Spanish or Portuguese flavour and inspiration. As Kagan explains, although the negative views of the Peninsula, founded on the Black Legend, crossed the Atlantic and were incorporated to the school curriculum, there were several authors that still painted Spain as «'picturesque' because it was both exotic and backwards –a quintessential Other, still medieval» [1996: 426]. Thus, and in spite of the complicated diplomatic and political relationship the countries had struck, literary and artistic relations were far more fluid and amicable: from the sixteenth century onwards and specially during the seventeenth century, British authors felt the appeal of these two exotic nations and their drama, so much so, that



Portuguese and Spanish plots and characters soon became part of the British literary canon [Braga Riera, 2010: 108].

Most British texts or artistic artefacts tended to portray the Iberian Peninsula as a captivating yet incomprehensible land, a territory and a people that were nothing like Britain. This ‘Otherness’ of the Peninsula was not just used as a literary device intended to transport audiences to a foreign and enticing territory, but it also worked as a political tool, especially on stage: the characterization of Spanish and Portuguese characters as irrational, impulsive, passionate and sometimes violent, not only explains the cases of mistaken identity and «cloak-and-dagger intrigue» [Loftis, 1987: 70–75] which form the basis of canonical English Spanish plays, but the change of setting also works as a way to build a strong national English/British identity, based on a measured Protestantism diametrically opposed to the excesses of feeling typical of the Peninsular Catholic nations. For, as Lezra explains, «the imaginary processes of national, social, religious, or ethnic consolidation [...] are never autonomous, never acts of sovereign self-fashioning, but always depend upon an imitation of, and distancing from, and hence upon a form of dialectical subjection to, perceived others» [2009: 120]. Thus, the creation of a uniquely English/British identity is entirely dependent on the creation of a (realistic or unrealistic) clashing national character, an Other that can reinforce, by opposition, one’s own national identity outlining not just what one’s nation is, but what it certainly is not.

Such is the case of the Iberian characters and plays written by Susanna Centlivre, an ardent Whig, a passionate feminist and one of the most prolific and successful female playwrights of her time, a woman whose work has been overlooked for centuries but which modern scholarship is striving to recover. Centlivre was one of the best-known playwrights of the late 1690s and the early 1700 although she had to contend with the prejudice of many of her contemporaries due to her gender: she was accused of plagiarism by Colley Cibber who had actually plagiarised her work [Lynch, 2016: 232; Rosenthal, 1996: 206], actors would refuse to put her plays on stage arguing they were



silly pieces written by a silly woman [Caldwell, 2011: 16] and, more famously, a certain man of the town, having expressed a great admiration for one of Centlivre's plays, threw a fit of anger¹ once he learned the author was a woman [Peters, 2003: 215].

Despite a defamation campaign launched against her and against female playwrights at large, «in which the culture gave its angriest and most hostile members permission to speak their minds» [Donkin, 1995: 20] some of her works survived the passage of time to become stock pieces of 19th-century theatrical companies both in Britain and the USA. In fact, her play, *The Wonder!* was chosen to be played in front of a Native American delegation in 1769, some fifty years after its first staging, as «a representative performance of Anglo-American society» [Centlivre and O'Brien, 2003: 9; Willis, 1968: 446–447]. Furthermore, «in terms of stage success, before the 20th century, Centlivre is second only to Shakespeare» [Bratton, 2000: 7] as far as number of performances of plays is concerned, with Collins pointing out that in a span of 100 years (1700-1800) her plays were «performed 1,227 times in London theatres» [1999: 179], while Frusheel declares that there were 232 performances of *The Wonder!* in London alone between 1714 and 1800 [1982: xlvii].

Centlivre specialised in theatre and poetry although she is best remembered as a superb writer of comedies: her best-known play is *The Busy Body* (1709) performed over 450 times before 1800 [Case, 2014: 36] and featuring one of the most beloved comic characters of the British stage: Marplot, a clumsy gossip who excels at involuntary marring all the plots and plans of the rest of the characters. He was a recurrent role for such well-known actors as David Garrick or Henry Woodward, who, according to the critics of the age, surpassed the former in his portrayal of the comical meddler [Gorton, 1828: 1215].

¹ A spark had seen [*The*] *Gamester* three or four times, and liked it extremely. Having bought one of the books [he] asked who the author was, and being told a woman, threw down the book and put up his money, saying he had spent too much after it already, and was sure, if the town had known that, it would never have run ten days. [Morgan, 1981: 53]



Although most of her plays are set in fashionable London, Spanish and Portuguese motifs, plots and characters feature in a fair amount of her works; in three of them she not only makes use of them as theatrical devices, but she actually moves the action to Portugal itself, an intertextuality that not only pertains plots and characters, but also setting [Puga, 2011a: 113, 2011b: 311]: Lisbon, the capital of the kingdom, is the chosen backdrop for two of her comedies (*Mar-plot in Lisbon or the Second Part of The BusyBody* (1710) and *The Wonder! A Woman Keeps a Secret* (1714)) and one of her short farcical episodes (*A Wife Well Mananag'd* (1715)), a relocation of the action which obeys a plot need for, as Lock points out,

Lisbon is first a more plausible locale for the comedy of intrigue. Tempers are hotter, honour more sacred, jealousy more rife than in London. Fathers and brothers exercise despotical control over their wives, daughters, and sisters. Disguise and secret assignation are accepted as everyday occurrences [1979: 96].

Furthermore, the change of setting also responds to the rule of plausibility since Lisbon and Portugal are the logical neutral ground where century-old enemies like Spain and Britain would meet; more importantly, this displacement of the setting results in the reformulation of the city (and by extension the stage) as a liminal space, where the author can openly express her radical political opinions and where national stereotypes and gender identities can be contested and reformulated in an attempt at proposing new ways forward.

Mar-plot in Lisbon was one of Centlivre's least successful plays: intended to be a second part to her major blockbuster, *The BusyBody*, this comedy «was a disappointment from its premiere and has scarcely been revived» [Martínez-García, 2015: 85]. Critics have argued that Centlivre composed the work in response to the public's desire to see more of Marplot, one of the great comic characters created by the author, but they were



disappointed with the result, since it lacked the brilliancy of its prequel². *Marplot in Lisbon* picks up where *The BusyBody* left off: once Isabinda and Charles are married, he is sent to Spain to negotiate some of the properties that Isabinda's father (Sir Jealous Traffick, «a great admirer of the Spanish customs» [Finberg, 2014: 77]) had in the Peninsula. There, the former libertine gets distracted by the possibilities that Lisbon offers and «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» [Martínez-García, 2015: 100] when he initiates an affair with Dona Perriera, married to the pusillanimous Don Perriera and sister to the violent and irrational Don Lopez. Meanwhile, Marplot, who has traveled to the continent following his friend, will threaten the safety of Charles's plot. It is not until Charles's own wife Isabinda arrives in Lisbon and disguises herself as a priest that the intrigue will be happily resolved.

Whereas this 'Spanish' play was a total disaster, Centlivre's next attempt at transposing the action to Portugal proved to be her biggest success story: *The Wonder! A Woman Keeps A Secret* was premiered in Drury Lane in 1714. Although it was a difficult time to stage a new play, the piece counted on the support of two of the most beloved actors of the time (Robert Wilks and Anne Oldfield) who took on the roles of the two protagonists, Felix and Violante. The play follows the adventures of the nobleman Felix, who returns to his native Lisbon in secret after seriously injuring a man in a duel. There he resumes his courtship of the rich heiress Violante who is hiding Felix's own sister (Isabella) from their father (Don Lopez) so as to prevent her unwanted marriage to a wealthy Spanish merchant. Since Isabella has literally fallen into the arms of a charming British soldier (Colonel Britton) he visits her in Violante's house, arising Felix's suspicions of Violante's duplicity. Because Violante has sworn to keep Isabella's whereabouts secret and because she refuses to disclose the plot for Felix, he continuously explodes in

² «This play, like most second parts, falls greatly out of the merit of the first» [Baker, 1812: 12]



bursts of jealousy which Frederick, Felix's merchant friend, not only finds irrational, but dangerous. After five acts of intrigue, masks, misunderstandings and arguments, both couples find a happy resolution to their situations.

A Wife Well Manag'd is a short one-act farce which was deemed inadequate for the stage lest it would cause offense to the British Catholics and was thus, refused a license on first application [Lock, 1979: 99]; it was not until ten years later that it was staged. It narrates the story of Lady Pisalto, a wealthy Portuguese woman in love with her Catholic confessor, Father Bernardo, who is, in turn, infatuated with her. When Don Pisalto intercepts his wife's letter to Bernardo confessing her love for him, he dresses up as the priest, meets her, brutally hits her and then leaves her crying. Thus, she starts to hate Bernardo thinking he is a violent beast and returns to her husband, who congratulates himself in having taught his wife a lesson.

Anglo-Iberian Relations and The Black Legend

By the time Centlivre's three Iberian-inspired works were premiered, relations between the three countries present in the plays were far from easy. In the early 18th century, Britain had just taken part in the War of Spanish succession siding with Austria, some Protestant European powers (the Dutch Republic, Prussia, Savoy and Hannover) and sundry Catholic allies (part of the Spanish territories, the Crown of Aragon and Portugal) against Catholic France, the Crown of Castile, the Kingdoms of Naples and Sicily, as well as Bavaria and Mantua [Falkner, 2015]. Although Britain counted with a part of Spain amongst its allies, both «England and the Netherlands, Spain's imperial rivals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, imagined Spain as cruel and degenerate barbarians of La Leyenda Negra (the Black Legend), in league with the powers of "blackest darkness" and driven by "dark motives"» [DeGuzman, 2005: 1]. These anti-Spanish feeling of mistrust was well-



known to all inhabitants of the British Isles since its origin could be traced back to the 15th century and the beginning of Spain's colonial expansion; this Leyenda Negra «predicated on a simplistic and faulty analysis of historical information [...] spread the falsehood that historically Hispanics were *uniquely* cruel, bigoted, tyrannical, lazy, violent, treacherous and depraved» [Sanchez, 1990: 7]. Almost 200 years later, during Centlivre's own time, the prejudice against Spain was very much revived, for, as Sanchez points out, «in the next four centuries, the Black Legend was kept alive especially whenever conflict arose between the English- and Spanish-speaking territories arose» [1990: 8] and the War of Spanish succession had certainly renewed the Hispanophobia of yore.

Thus, while in the 1700s «the days of the Armada were long gone, [...] Spain remained a traditional old enemy and great imperial and commercial rival of Britain, whilst Portugal was an important trading partner and old ally» [Daly, 2013: 12]; furthermore, authors and audiences like Centlivre, saw countries like Spain and Portugal as their cultural inferiors, «consigned to the very margins of what was considered “civilized Europe”» [Daly, 2013: 12] in their inability (or unwillingness) to accept the Enlightened ideas that were sweeping over Europe. Still, and as Daly explains, visions of the Spanish Peninsula and its inhabitants, were not as straightforward as the Black Legend may suggest, for alongside this seemingly negative view of the Peninsula, there was a general interest on the chivalric and picturesque history and quality of both countries and their peoples, a precedent of the Romantic period's vision of the Mediterranean countries [Daly, 2016].

Thus, British portrayals of Spain and Portugal were multi-faceted rather than either positive or negative: there was, among certain circles, a tendency towards portraying the Peninsula as less culturally evolved than Britain, although there was still an attempt at making these two countries appealing territories, sensuous kingdoms where certain passions and feelings were heightened. This comparison had, more often than not, less than flattering results for the Mediterranean nations, which usually came up losers



in the comparison between them and Britain, whom many authors portrayed as the most advanced nation in Europe.

Centlivre's political convictions are present in all her plays and her open Whig sympathies meant that her vision of Spain and Portugal was certainly coloured by her ideas on rank, female agency and notions of honour and class. While Centlivre and the Whigs advocated for a social order based on merit rather than bloodlines (a notion that many Protestant nations shared), lineage was still the ruling principle of social politics both in Spain and in Portugal. Furthermore, Centlivre clearly advocated for a social system that allowed women more agency and independence, two rights she felt females did not have in the Iberian countries and in a British nation governed by the Conservative party, as evidenced by her farcical piece *A Gotham Election* and a multitude of her poems, dedications epilogues and prologues [Smith, 2014: 150–155]. Religion was also one of the major concerns of Whigs like Centlivre, who felt that the Catholic Church was corrupt and had extended its vice to all layers of society and could certainly affect politics.

The present paper will study these three concerns (class, gender and religion) as portrayed by Centlivre, studying the juxtaposition of Iberian characters and traits and of British individuals and their virtues and the resulting creation of complementary national identities, namely the 'Catholic Other' and of the 'British ideal', to show how the author transports the action to a foreign land so as to represent the struggle between the two main political factions in Britain from a safe distance.

Constructing the Catholic Other: Class and Gender in *Marplot in Lisbon* and *The Wonder!*

In the second part of *The BusyBody*, Lisbon is portrayed as a «stereotypical hyper-masculine environment of sexual intrigue and macho honour» [Copeland, 2004: 109] where husbands and brothers try to exert absolute



control over wives and sisters. This suffocating backdrop allows Centlivre the opportunity to comment on the politics of gender and social class from a safe distance: the situation and characters portrayed take on a different meaning when transported to the Peninsula and the change in setting helps buttress British national identity in opposition to the 'Catholic Other' that is ridiculed and satirised in the plays.

The most obvious contrast between British and Iberian characters is their politics of place, that is, their ideas about rank and social class; the author presents us with an array of Iberian male characters whose sole purpose in life is to zealously guard their family honour and titles, a trait she paints as typical of countries where the reigning social system would be a quasi-medieval «deployment of alliance» [Foucault, 1990: 106] in which social order depends on lineage and bloodlines. According to the author, in countries such as Spain and Portugal, unlike Britain, it was still «believed that the good name of the family could be preserved through advantageous marriages, thus establishing connections with other “honourable” houses, an insurance that the good name of the family would be carried onto future generations» [Martinez-Garcia, 2014: 106] and the heads of households (whether it be fathers, brothers, uncles or husbands) would go to any lengths to ensure that the good name of the family is not tainted.

Such is the case of two homonymous characters in *Marplot in Lisbon* and *The Wonder!*; while in the first play Don Lopez, a Grandee of Spain and Portugal described as a «bloody-minded Spaniard» [Centlivre, 2014: 74, 98] intent on preventing his sister from tainting the family name, in *The Wonder!* Don Lopez is a zealous father who not only intends to marry his daughter off to a rich noble, but a snobbish man who disregards all those characters who, unlike him, have no title to speak of.

Marplot's Don Lopez is Centlivre's attempt at a comic portrayal of the Spaniard of the Black Legend: he is «irascível, vingativo destemido ao querer assassinar Marplot e ao ofender a irmã» [Puga, 2011a: 119], has a quick temper and is more than eager to draw his sword. In his case, he is



worried about his sister's behaviour and his brother-in-law's passivity³ in the face of what he feels is a serious threat to his family name: «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, 2014: 9]. His brutality, his violent outbursts and his heightened sense of worth, make him threaten not only his brother-in-law, whom he despises due to his base origins, but his own sister, whom he feels has committed a double offence: first she has «injur'd it [the Honour of his House] too much in marrying you [a merchant]» [Centlivre, 2014: 9], a social inferior and now she is about to damage the honour of her house not just with her illicit affair, but with a liaison with a Protestant «the Strumpet of a damn'd Heretick» [Centlivre, 2014: 8].

Still, the rigid social structure of Centlivre's Portugal and Spain means that Don Lopez must give Don Perriera precedence in the avenging of Donna Perriera's sins, a fact that deeply irritates the Grandee. In fact, since he feels his brother-in-law is too unmanly, he sets about provoking the man into action, displaying a hot-headedness and impulsiveness Centlivre sees as typical of the Mediterranean nations,

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

Don Per. 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.

on Lop. 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, 2014: 10]

Centlivre takes great pains to portray Don Lopez as a repulsive character, the embodiment of all the negative values that make the 'Catholic Other' so frightening: a man obsessed, like Foucault's Medieval Monarch

³ «Your Spado! Employ it against the Man that robs you of your Honour, and not against him that wou'd preserve it» [Centlivre, 2014: 8–9]



with blood, with its purity and the danger of it becoming corrupt through unworthy marriages, with its spilling as punishment for betrayal, disobedience or as a warning [Foucault, 1990: 147]. This portrayal of Don Lopez as Centlivre's chosen representative of a society «in which the systems of alliance, the political form of the sovereign, the differentiation into orders and castes, and the value of descent lines were predominant» and «where power spoke through blood» [Foucault, 1990: 147] not only confirms the author's view of Don Lopez and the Peninsula as a place of irrationality and violence, but helps buttress and reaffirm the positive qualities of her heroes and heroines, who are not just the epitome of what she perceives to be ideal Britishness, but who also are the personification of her feminist and Whig politics.

As is customary in these comedies, the villain of the piece will see his intentions thwarted and his pride chastened; in the case of *Marplot in Lisbon*, Centlivre makes sure that Don Lopez's public shaming will be delivered by Isabinda, the heroine of *The BusyBody* in what «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» [Martínez-García, 2015: 99]. The young woman, who has travelled to Lisbon in pursuit of her husband Charles, intervenes to stop Don Lopez from murdering his own sister, after he has tried (and failed) to push Don Perriera into action; the merchant's daughter exposes Centlivre's view on the ridiculousness of Don Lopez's attachment to what she perceives to be outdated notions of honour that encourage violence against one's siblings rather than friendship,

[Enter Don Lopez with his Sword drawn

Don Lop. 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 Per. [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 [...]

Isab. 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 Lop. Hey Day! What Philosophy have we here?

Don Per. 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 Lop. 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, 2014: 92–93]

With her «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» [Martínez-García, 2015: 99], but tries to convince audiences that her Whig feminism is a far more desirable and fair social system, arguing 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 and O'Brien, 2003: 17].

Isabinda is, without a doubt, the embodiment of Centlivre's Whig and feminist agenda: she is economically independent from her husband thanks to the fortune that her merchant father has left her; such wealth allows her to abandon the British Isles to come in pursuit of her unfaithful husband in a demonstration of freedom that is a stark contrast to the confinement that women in Lisbon suffer. Such a portrayal is not necessarily realistic, since scholarship has proved that Spanish women did enjoy a certain amount of economic independence in the Peninsula for they would inherit the same amount as their brothers and marriage seems to have been more co-operative than Centlivre herself believed [Casey, 1999: 28]. Still, Isabinda's character can be said to be the embodiment of «the concept of liberty, fundamental to Whig ideology [which] connects Centlivre's political views to her feminism» [Copeland, 2001: 903]. Isabinda's passage from Britain to Portugal not only works to communicate Centlivre's support of female agency, but her freedom of movement also «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, 2011a: 121]. Furthermore, Isabinda is the moral authority of the play, a woman who leads by example rather than word: her kindness towards Donna Perriera⁴ and her forgiving attitude towards Charles's infidelity⁵ not only mean that «she emerges from this intrigue as a moral instructor» [Copeland, 2004: 112], but buttresses Centlivre's positive portrayal of Whig politics of class and gender.

The Wonder! is another instance of Centlivre's ideas about female agency and social class; in this play we also have a head of household called Don Lopez, also a Grandee of Spain and Portugal portrayed as a vindictive and violent man. Don Lopez intends to force his daughter Isabella to marry a wealthy Spanish nobleman, regardless of his daughter's opinion on the matter, a storyline that does not differ from the norm. Still, Centlivre intertwines this narrative with the story of Frederick, a Portuguese merchant whose close friendship with Don Lopez's son (Felix) and heightened sense of honour push him to take part in the story.

Don Lopez, as his homonym in *Marplot in Lisbon*, emerges as the defender of the deployment of alliance in *The Wonder!* and the representative

⁴ Donna Per. 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——

Isab. 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, 2014: 91]

⁵ Isab. 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. Cha. But can you save her too?

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

Cha. 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.

Isab. 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, 2014: 89].



of what Centlivre perceives is the Iberian social order. When we first encounter him, he informs Frederick of his intention to marry his daughter to a man who «has two things which render him very agreeable to me for a Son-in-Law, he is Rich and well Born» [Centlivre and O'Brien, 2003: 48], qualities that make the union highly desirable for the noble as they will not just help him recover the fortune lost in the Wars of the Spanish Succession [Centlivre and O'Brien, 2003: 48], but that will not diminish the name and honour of his family. Thus, his daughter's marriage is «a major mechanism for the circulation of wealth among the propertied and moneyed classes» [Velissariou, 1995: 117].

Frederick, as the only male advocate for female liberty complains to the Grandee and expresses Centlivre's own Whig views on the issue of arranged marriages: «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 and O'Brien, 2003: 47] a statement that will be ignored by Don Lopez, whose ideas on marriage and rank remind audiences of his homonym character in *Marplot in Lisbon*.

Like Donna Perriera's brother, this Don Lopez seems intent on this course of action and exclaims he will not tolerate any disobedience on his daughter's part⁶ since he has not managed to force his son into marrying an heiress. Still, the freedom of action that Don Lopez has allowed his son, will not be granted to his daughter or to any Portuguese woman in *The Wonder*, all of whom have been locked up or see their movements constantly monitored by jealous lovers and zealous guardians.

Don Lopez not only adheres to the principles of the deployment of alliance as far as marriage is concerned, but he is a firm believer in its ideology of class: from the outset of his encounter with Frederick, he laments

⁶ «Don Lop. Look ye Sir, I resolve she shall Marry Don Guzman the Moment he arrives; tho' I cou'd not govern my Son, I will my Daughter, I assure you» [Centlivre and O'Brien, 2003: 49].



the merchant's lack of rank⁷ and, consequently, of honour, as he «believes honour is the privilege of a small number of families that have managed to maintain their status generation after generation» [Martinez-Garcia, 2014: 359], an inherited possession equal in importance to the title Grandee. Both Don Lopez in *The Wonder* and his homonym in *Marplot in Lisbon*, believe that Frederick and Don Perriera are not just their social inferiors, but that as such they lack a sense of honour, an idea which Centlivre portrays as so deeply ingrained in the public imaginary of Iberian societies, that even Frederick⁸ and Don Perriera⁹ seem to believe it. It seems that Centlivre, like the *arbitristas*, views «Spanish society as one sunk in the depths of decline: a nation that had wasted the silver it had mines in the Indies on monasteries and religious wars without bothering to invest it productively in commerce» [Kagan, 1996: 425], an enterprise that aristocrats like Don Lopez would consider demeaning.

The displacement of the action to Lisbon then, justifies the characters' following the precepts of the deployment of alliance (as embodied by Don Lopez), while opposing such ideas to the Whig ideology that Centlivre wishes would continue to rule in Britain (represented by Frederick). This early exchange between Don Lopez and Frederick serves to characterise the former as the hateful 'Catholic Other' (unfair to his daughter, to his son, to Frederick and a stubborn violent man), and the latter and his Whig ideals as the hero of the play: from act I «audiences feel sympathy for a man who is more worthy of admiration and honour than any grandee» [Centlivre and O'Brien, 2003: 361].

Frederick, as Centlivre's Whig hero, confronts all of the men in the play who try to abuse their power: not only does he defend Isabella from her

⁷ «Don Lop. 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 and O'Brien, 2003: 47]

⁸ «Fred. 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 and O'Brien, 2003: 47].

⁹ «Don Per. 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, 2014: 9]



father's and brother's abuse (very much like Isabinda does in *Marplot*), but he defends Violante's honour¹⁰ and confronts his friend Felix when he is being irrational and unfair to his lover Violante¹¹. His ultimate show of strength and Centlivre's strongest criticism of the 'Catholic Other' is his confrontation with a corrupt Alguazil who tries to force his way into Frederick's house to look for his Isabella. Afraid they might find his friend Felix, who has been banished from Lisbon, Frederick tries to block the door. 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, 2004: 13], an action that makes him, by Centlivre's Whig standards, worthy of the highest respect and honour, two qualities which, in her ideal vision of Britain, are completely independent from rank. The fight bears no resemblance to the violent attempts of *Marplot's* Don Lopez at taking revenge on his sister, for, as Copeland argues, «in this case, swordplay is the honourable defence of a gentleman, including a gentleman-merchant» [Copeland, 2004: 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, portrayed as a «autoridade corrupta [...] cuja moral se pauta sobretudo pelo lucro imediato» [2011b: 322]. When the Alguazil finds out that Frederick is hiding the escaped Felix, he offers to remain silent if Frederick parts with the sum of £500; such moral corruption coming from the lips of a man who calls himself «the representative of Majesty [...] I am his Majesty's Alguazile, and the very Quintessence of Authority» [Centlivre and O'Brien, 2003: 77] not only communicates Centlivre's suspicions about the corruption that is rife in the Iberian Peninsula even among the authorities, but

¹⁰ «Fred. Violante. 'Tis false, I would not have you credit him, Colonel [...] This must be a mistake, Colonel, for I know Violante perfectly well, and I'm certain she would not meet you upon the Terriero de Passa» [Centlivre and O'Brien, 2003: 102].

¹¹ «Fred. [...] this from a person of mean education were excusable. Such low suspicions have their source from vulgar conversation. Men of your polite taste never rashly censure. Come, this is some groundless jealousy. Love raises many fears» [Centlivre and O'Brien, 2003: 75].



also works to showcase Frederick's honesty, when he is disgusted at the attempted bribery,

Fred. 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 Alguazile 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.

Iguazil. Fall on, seize the Money right or wrong ye Rogues. [*They fight.*][Centlivre and O'Brien, 2003: 77]

Frederick is «a raisonneur in the play» [DeRitter, 2010: 385], the embodiment of all the good qualities that, according to the author, Whig Protestant British men possess, as opposed to the nefarious 'Catholic Other'; Frederick himself, voicing Centlivre's political leanings, praises Britain and its Whig ideals of freedom and independence, twin pillars of their political manifesto,

My Lord, the English are by Nature, what the ancient Romans were by Discipline, courageous, bold, 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 and O'Brien, 2003: 48].

This comparison between Britain and the great Roman Empire not only inflames the national pride of British audiences, but serves to buttress Centlivre's own belief that a Protestant, Whig Britain is «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 and O'Brien, 2003, 2003].



***A Wife Well Manag'd* and the Corruption of the Catholic Church**

Centlivre's characterisation of both the 'Catholic Other' and the good British citizen would not be complete without a mention of religion, the issue which clearly separated the two nations and which provoked some of the most heated debates in history. While religion is present in both *Marplot in Lisbon* and *The Wonder!* it is not central to the action. In fact, it is not until 1715 that Centlivre would tackle the religious issue in a short farcical piece which was considered too subversive and offensive towards the Catholics in Britain and abroad. This statement enraged the Whig-Protestant author, who would publish a complaint in her dedication of one of her most openly political plays, *A Gotham Election* (1715),

It was said there would be offence taken at the exposing a Popish Priest, Good God! To What Sort of People are we chang'd! Are those worth Gentlemen (the Emissaries of our most irreconcilable Enemy) to be treated with so much tenderness? Is not their Profession Treason in any Subject of Great Britain? [Centlivre, 1715: 3].

In her brief piece Centlivre tackles the issue of violence within the marriage and the disastrous consequences of mercenary or unwanted unions. The action is again displaced to Lisbon, so as to create a safe distance to criticise the Catholic religion which was still being practised the British Isles; there we find Donna Piscalto in love with her confessor, the priest Father Bernardo, who is also in love with her. When her husband, Centlivre's typically violent and cruel Iberian husband, intercepts the letter in which she confesses her love for the priest, he decides to tame his wife back into obedience by dressing up as her beloved and hitting her savagely. After the incident, the lady turns from love and passion to hate and the blame of the affair is put on the priest, who has tempted the lady when he was supposed to be chaste and keep her so too.

The play presents a cast of sinful and wicked characters and leaves no room for any positive quality at all: Don Piscalto is cruel in his treatment of his wife and boastful in his use of violence against her, for he closes the play



warning his wife that should he ever suspect her of infidelity again, he will not be as forgiving as he has been and boasting to the audience about his violent behaviour towards her: «When Wives, like mine, gives Inclination Scope, No Cure for Cuckoldom like Oyl Rope» [Centlivre, 2017: 202]. With this statement, Centlivre reinforces her characterisation of Iberian characters as violent and unnecessarily cruel.

Furthermore, the author's representation of the priest, Bernardo, is a harsh criticism on the corruption that, according to passionately Protestant Whigs like Centlivre, riddled the Catholic Church and against the corruption and unnecessary wealth of the Spanish Catholic Church that Scottish thinkers had commented on¹². When Bernardo first appears on stage he is talking to Don Piscalto about his wife, supposedly praising her as a virtuous lady but really praising her as a beauty (a quality which, according to the author and any anti-Catholic thinker, would be lost in a really chaste priest) and wishing that her respect for him were love, in an aside that would be more fitting to a dissembling rake from a Restoration comedy. The second time we encounter the priest, he is entering Donna Piscalto's bedchamber to exorcise the demons her husband claims are possessing her. But the priest soon expresses his passion for her, describing her as a lover would: first as a delicious food he would like to devour and then claiming he feels sick, when the symptoms he describes are closer to an erection «Bern. I feel a strange Disorder on the sudden, - my pulse beats quick, and every sense seems ravish'd at this Object. - Ha! We are alone, - What hinders me to make use of this opportunity?» [Centlivre, 2017: 199]. A part of the audience would be outraged at the audacity of the priest, and would probably think that his own conscience should prevent him from attempting rape. Still, the priest claims that his habit allows him more privacy with the ladies and that should Donna Piscalto shout and resist, her husband will think it is her possession and will not suspect him.

¹² «The enormous and expensive fabric of their ecclesiastical establishment [...] greatly retarded the progress of population and industry» [Robertson in Kagan, 1996: 426].



If blood was Don Lopez's symbol and that of the Spanish deployment of alliance, violence and force become the cornerstones of the discourse of this priest in what can be read as Centlivre's attempt at portraying the debauchery and sinfulness that Whig Protestants saw inherent to the Catholic Church. His soliloquy is full of terms related to food and eating ('morsel', 'feast') which objectify the body of the woman and turn her into an object to be consumed, an implication related to Bernardo's use of terms related to violence and forced sexual intercourse like 'ravish', 'resist', 'possession' or 'rapture'. Interestingly enough, all of these terms are also related to the Catholic religion and the visions that certain saints claimed to have. Thus, Centlivre paints Bernardo, and all the Catholic priests by extension, as perverting religious principles and precepts.

With this short piece the playwright completes her Lisbon cycle and her portrayal of the hateful 'Catholic Other', a distorted portrait based on the Black Legend, forged by Spain's political enemies during the country's conquest of the Americas and Britain's break with Rome. This legend «portrayed the Spanish especially as tyrannical, bigoted, superstitious, violent and cruel», [Daly, 2013: 42] like both Don Lopez in *Marplot in Lisbon* and his homonym in *The Wonder* and Don Piscalto in *A Wife Well Manag'd* and with a twisted and distorted moral compass like the Catholic priest Bernardo in *A Wife Well Manag'd*. To her obnoxious representation of the Iberian character, she opposes the Whig Protestant ethics of the merchants Frederick and Isabinda, defenders of individual freedom, of female agency, of honour as an innate set of principles independent from social rank and titles.

Conclusion: Displacement, Politics, Feminism and National Identity (the Catholic Other)

In the three pieces studied, the playwright uses the Iberian Peninsula as a theatrical device that gives the play more plausibility, with Portugal emerging as neutral in the battle between Britain and Spain, while still adding



an element of the exotic and the unknown that would justify the rash actions and passionate diatribes of the Iberian characters. This unfamiliar (or rather 'un-British') behavior not only offers comic relief and sets the action in motion, but serves a higher political interest: to bolster the image of Spain as the 'Catholic Other', while Britain emerges as the exemplary nation. In the three works studied, Centlivre's attempts at creating and supporting a strong national identity, need to be buttressed by the creation of an Other against which the uniquely English/British character can be outlined. Thus, «the internal characteristics of (say) early modern England would be built in relation to the construction of [...] Spain, the great rival for Atlantic hegemony. Imagining Spain in one or another way [...] became a way of sketching England's own contours, which were similar, but differentiated» [Lezra, 2009: 120].

Furthermore, the Iberian settings, characters and plots not only serve to affirm British national identity, but also work as a vehicle to create a safe and liminal space where Centlivre can express her extreme political views on the British reality and everyday life: through the technique of *déplacement* [Puga, 2011a: 113, 2011b: 325], Centlivre creates a safe distance from the Isles, a distance that allows her to question the unfairness of Tory policies and of the class system that still ruled Britain.

Lisbon then, emerges as a liminal space, «a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise» [Turner, 1987: 97], where Centlivre can openly express her Whig proto-feminist political ideas; it no longer is a mere tool to create comedy or to justify the cases of mistaken identity and female imprisonment, but it becomes a political arena where the playwright can freely use her voice, a privilege that, at the time, was denied to women. Thus, in these very political plays, Centlivre presents her defence of female agency and of a national identity which features the Protestant merchant classes as example of good British citizenship.



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