

**Stretching the limits of gender and the genre:  
Uncomfortable sexualities in Centlivre's  
*The Basset Table* (1705)**

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## Stretching the limits of gender and the genre: Uncomfortable sexualities in Centlivre's *The Basset Table* (1705)

### Jugando con los límites del género literario y la identidad de género: sexualidades incómodas en *The Basset Table* (1705) de Sussannah Centlivre

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#### Resumen

Centlivre ha sido considerada una de las mejores escritoras de comedia sentimental, un género literario que llegó a su máximo apogeo durante el siglo XVIII. Este ensayo argumenta que *The Basset Table* (1705), una de sus obras más significativas, no es una comedia sentimental al uso, ya que lleva un mensaje social subyacente mucho más profundo de lo que pueda parecer a simple vista y mucho más acorde con sus ideas políticas que los mensajes de la comedia sentimental. Este trabajo estudia también cómo esta obra teatral cuestiona los roles de género establecidos: minando la imagen de la mujer virtuosa y caritativa y del caballero valiente, a la vez que cuestiona la reforma de la viuda y el triunfo del bribón, Centlivre crea una crítica sutil pero extremadamente efectiva de una sociedad que no permite la existencia de las libertades individuales.

**Palabras clave:** Comedia de reforma; Género; Centlivre; Whig; Sexualidad

#### Abstract

Centlivre has been regarded as a master of sentimental comedy, a genre that reached its maximum popularity in the 18th century. This paper argues that *The Basset Table* (1705) is no typical sentimental comedy, since it actually carries a deeper meaning and social message, much more in accordance with her Whig ideas. I also argue that this play questions the established gender roles: undermining the image of the virtuous and charitable lady and the valiant gentleman and questioning the punishing of the widow and the rewarding of the rake, Centlivre builds a subtle, yet highly effective criticism of a society that does not allow for personal freedom.

**Keywords:** Reform comedy; Gender; Centlivre; Whig; Sexuality

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**Sumario:** 1. Introduction. 2. Gender in early modern Britain: the case of the gambling widow. 3. Conclusion. 4. Works cited.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Reform comedy was one of the most popular genres in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Britain and it is one of the types of comedy that has endured the longest in the British stage. This type of comedy was preceded by Restoration comedy of manners and it can even be argued that this reform comedy is a variation of the genre by which Wycherley and Etherege are best-known: while *The Man of Mode* or *The Country Wife* close with some of the rakes suitable matched or married and although there was a theatrical convention by which “rakes submitted to marriage with a suitably witty belle at the end of comedies all the time” (2013, p. 1), there is still a shadow of a doubt about whether Horner and Dorimant, true Restoration rakes, will continue their raillery and philandering once the curtain drops (Martínez-García, 2014). Thus, reformation comedy could be understood as a comedy of manners where the rake finally repents from his life of dissipation and sin and shows an unprecedented remorse about his misdemeanours, thus constituting an entirely new genre.

Gollapudi points out that reform comedy “is plotted around the reclamation of flawed individuals [...] brought to the stage to first parade their folly [...] then, a well-meaning spouse, friend, or lover creates circumstances [...] that force the flawed character to realize the evil consequences and immorality of his or her conduct, thus catalysing remorse and eventual reform” (2013, p. 1). The female playwright Susannah Centlivre was, for a long time, considered a master of this type of comedy: critics like Bowyer (2012), Bevis (1980) or Robert Hume (1983, 1990) argued that at least one of her plays, *The Gamester* (1705), was a sentimental comedy featuring the reformation of a gambler through the intervention of a virtuous lady. Although Victoria Warren has argued that neither *The Gamester* nor *The Basset Table* (1705) should be labelled as sentimental, her analysis centres on the theatricality of the works, while the present essay will focus on the strategies the author uses to question not just the genre, but the validity of the values that sustain a society that uses morality to limit female agency.

The first of these two apparent reform comedies (*The Gamester*) was premiered in Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre and became Centlivre's greatest success to that date (Warren, 2003, p. 609). *The Basset Table*, staged a few months later, was not equally successful (Milling, 2009, p. 1; Warren, 2003, p. 606). The play follows

the adventures of Lady Reveller, a wealthy widow who, to the dismay of her lover, her cousin and uncle, keeps a basset table. The main plot deals with the attempts of these three characters at making the lady quit her gambling, something they finally manage after she is threatened with rape.

*The Basset Table*, in its reformation of a female gambler, is an extremely intriguing example of Centlivre's style, a playwright who is well-known nowadays for her defence of female agency and liberty and for her use of strong female protagonists. Furthermore, "the intersection of gender and political themes has brought renewed attention to *The Gamester* and *The Basset Table*, which contain some of Centlivre's most progressive female characters" (Krstovic, 2005, p. 3); one such woman is Lady Reveller, "an attractive figure" (Milling, 2009, p. 9) who can be considered one of the most interesting female characters the playwright created. In fact, the play is one of Centlivre's most compelling attempts at balancing her career as a playwright and her desire to advance her feminist Whig agenda. Her wish "to reform society's attitudes and thus create a more *woman-friendly* culture" (Fowler, 1996, p. 49) while still catering to the tastes of her audiences can be clearly seen in the dedication to the play, where she states that the aim of her work is to "correct and rectify manners" and that "through the whole piece I have had a tender regard to good manners, and by the main Drift of it, endeavour'd to Redicule and correct one of the most reigning vices of the age" (2009, pp. 42–43). This apparent declaration of intent seems to be in accordance with the aim of reform comedy which "is a mechanism of change, targeting value systems or cultural practices" in an attempt at reforming or changing "not just an absolute moral flaw *per se* but conduct with particular socio-historical implications" (Gollapudi, 2013, p. 3).

Thus, with such an introduction by the playwright herself, it is understandable that *The Basset Table* has been considered a stock piece of the genre for centuries (Warren, 2003, p. 605), since it presents audiences with a group of vicious characters (Lady Reveller and Sir James) who abandon their wrong paths, thanks to the 'selfless' intervention of their 'virtuous' paramours (Lady Lucy and Lord Worthy). Still, and as Gollapudi points out, reform comedy was, very often, not truly sentimental, but satirical (2013, p. 3) and *The Basset Table* is a good example. This essay contends that the terms sentimental or reform comedy are inadequate to describe Centlivre's piece since the author manipulates the conventions of the genre to question the validity of the gender ideology that sustained patriarchy. This paper also argues that, "while producing popular plays that both appealed to their audiences and stayed within the conventional cultural boundaries of accepted drama, [...] [Centlivre] was attempting subtly to modify and reform established attitudes concerning accepted behaviour for and the control of women" (Fowler, 1996, p. 49).

In spite of Centlivre's declaration in the dedication of *The Basset Table* and her supposed commitment to the reform of vices and the 'moral education' of her audiences, Margaret Rubik argues that the playwright "was not seduced into using

her works as instruments for moralising, although she wasted few opportunities to make her zealous political sentiments known, either in the plays themselves or in the prefatory material” (1998, p. 94). In fact, Centlivre’s works include an array of witty and resourceful female characters who represent a new type of woman combining assertiveness and self-assurance with delicacy of feeling (Martínez-García, 2014, p. 313), heroines that embody her Whig feminism in their defence of freedom and agency (Martínez-García, 2015, 2017; Smith, 2014).

Thus, this essay will, through the analysis of *The Basset Table*, argue that Centlivre not only subverts the rules of the literary genre to create a satire of sentimental/reform comedy, but that she also tests the limits of the gender order in her portrayal of male and female characters, especially Lady Reveller’s. Through the analysis of the characterisation of the ‘reformers’ (Lady Lucy, Lord Worthy and Sir James) and of the method they use to convince Lady Reveller of the need to change her lifestyle, this essay seeks to question the assumption that these characters are the ‘well-meaning spouse, friend or lover’ who, Gollapudi argues, bring about a change in the erring protagonist.

## 2. GENDER IN EARLY MODERN BRITAIN: THE CASE OF THE GAMBLING WIDOW

During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, society lived through one of the most important shifts in the discourses of truth that sustained society: Foucault (1990) argues that, with the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, societies moves from a feudal model to a pre-modern one. He also argues that this change is but a substitution of a system of power by another and that both the old social order (deployment of alliance) and the new ordering of society (deployment of sexuality) are equally forceful in their imposition of rules and regulations (1990, p. 106). He contends that while the feudal deployment of alliance exerted its authority openly, cruelly and through the figure of the absolute monarch, the deployment of sexuality was far subtler in this attempt at controlling, regulating and exerting power over subjects: the justification for gender order no longer was the inferiority of women (an idea preached by the Bible and the theory of humours) but difference (Fletcher, 1999). Using scientific knowledge as its basis and biology as a reference, the deployment of sexuality preached that men and women were biologically different and, consequently, naturally more equipped for different tasks. Thus, men were the strong rational creatures that should deal with the rigours of public life and office, while women, more delicate, nurturing and in need of protection, were better suited to the domestic sphere.

Reform or sentimental comedy was then paradigmatic of the feeling of the age and it has been interpreted as a benign genre that tries to root out amoral behaviour, as explained by Gollapudi “reform comedies [...] participated in and drew energy from a broader ethos of moral regulation” (2013, p. 4). But it is precisely this bidirectional

relation between society and comedy that is to account for the genre's being a vehicle for the dissemination and imposition of the gender hierarchy of the deployment of sexuality. In its insistence on rooting out irrational and amoral behaviour, reform comedy is "also the bearer of power differentials that define marital and social inequalities" (Gollapudi, 2013, p. 5), a means to identify and neutralize unruly/irrational behaviours and subversions of the gender order. Centlivre's take on reform comedy makes use of the popularity of the genre in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century to subvert its conventions and question the validity of a system that not only allows women no freedom, but which condones violence against them.

The play opens with Lady Reveller, the gambling widow, and her lady's maid, Alpiev, coming out of the house after a game of Basset. No sooner has Lady Reveller appeared on stage that her uncle, Sir Richard Plainman, comes out in his nightclothes for, as Alpiev announces, "a Sermon of two Hours" (Centlivre, 2009, p. 50) in which he encourages his niece to abandon her life of gambling and marry again.<sup>1</sup> Widows inhabited a strange land in Early Modern and pre-modern England; as women who had outlived not just a husband, but most of the times a father, several brothers and uncles, many, Lady Reveller among them, felt it was their time to enjoy the independence the death of their spouses allowed them. In fact, their independence was even recognised legally, since "under English Common Law, the widow could own property and therefore engage in trade; as *femme sole*, the widow had a legal identity which was not merged with that of a man" (Bacon, 1991, p. 435).

Still, and probably as a consequence of this official recognition of their legal identity, "the figure of the widow was a source of anxiety both inside and outside the theatre" (Goode, 2013, p. 183) since, as a woman of independent means who was no longer under the control of a husband and who could not be subjected to the authority of a father or uncle, she was a subversive and dangerous figure who "existed at the margins of hetero-patriarchal society and accordingly challenged many of its central tenets" (Goode, 2013, p. 183). Because she was a woman ruled by no man, she was deemed untrustworthy; still, as a woman who had been already married and probably had children, she could not be treated as an inexperienced maiden and was to be respected by unmarried kin and friends.

Consequently, and in theory, widows lived in a space of semi-freedom, enjoying the privileges of married women, which implied they should be paid all respects by unmarried members of the household, but without having to obey any husband (Klein, 1992). Nevertheless, most of these women found that, in the absence of a spouse, many were the men that volunteered to fill the position of patriarch: uncles, brothers-in-law, lovers, cousins, etc. soon claimed their rights to control the lady's life, in an attempt at re-establishing the social order that a widow's independence had subverted, as Jankowski explains, "the independent widow was an anomaly" (1992, p. 35).

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1 "So Nice! I find you're resolv'd to keep on your course of Life; [...] give over for shame, and Marry, Marry, Niece" (Milling, 2009, p. 50).

Lady Reveller is an excellent example of a widow's 'self-assertion' and the anxiety it raises in those surrounding her (Conger, 2009): she leads an independent life under her uncle's roof, choosing her company and pastimes as she sees fit, as Alpiev explains, "My Lady's a Widdow, and Widdows are accountable to none for their Actions" (Centlivre, 2009, p. 52). Lady Reveller herself warns Sir Richard, "Looke, Unkle, do what you can, I'm resolv'd to follow my own Inclinations" (Centlivre, 2009, p. 53). Her openly defiant and independent attitude not only surprises audiences and readers, but the rest of characters in the play, who accuse her of insolence and lack of decorum; in her insistence on remaining unmarried and in her determination to follow her inclinations, Lady Reveller not only exhibits a most unfeminine independence, but she asserts her claim to self-ownership, both of her person and her wealth and it is precisely this attempt at reclaiming and maintaining agency and freedom that would be most dangerous for the status quo (Bacon, 1991, p. 427).

Jankowski explains that "the widow's legal identity invested her with a power that was as anomalous as it was frightening" (1992, p. 209), since the her autonomy and her role as head of her own household both "contradicted and was a threat to the patriarchal order that saw all women as needing a man's control" (Jankowski, 1992, p. 35). Thus, Lady Reveller's insistence on continuing with her life of gambling and socialising is targeted as an unnatural behaviour that threatens the social order. Her 'unwomanly' behaviour is seen as inappropriate and she is accused of lewdness, following a social custom that has is an attempt at containing "that one group of women who could exist with a legal identity and without the control of a man" (Jankowski, 1992, p. 35). In Act I, her uncle scolds her, arguing that her gambling not only brings shame to her, damaging her virtue, but also to his own household, as her actions render him unmanly since he is unable to control her,

LADY REVELLER: Lookye, Uncle, do what you can, I'm resolv'd to follow my own Inclinations.

SIR RICHARD: Which infallibly carry you to Noise, Nonsense, Foppery, and Ruin; but no matter, you shall go out of my Doors, I'll promise you; my House shall no longer bear the scandalous Name of a Basset-Table: Husbands shall no more have Cause to date their Ruin from my Door, nor cry, There, there my Wife gam'd my Estate away – Nor Children curse my Posterity, for their Parents knowing my House.

LADY REVELLER: No more Threatening, good Uncle; act as you please, but don't scold, or I shall be oblig'd to call Alpiev again.

SIR RICHARD: Very well, very well, see what will come on't; the World will censure those that game, and, in my Conscience, I believe not without Cause

For she whose Shame no good Advice can wake,

When Money's wanting will her Virtue stake. [*Exit.* (Centlivre, 2009, p. 53)



In this instance, Sir Richard is repeating one of the most widely spread tropes of the age and one of the most recurrent motifs of reform comedy: the association between female gamblers and virtue (or lack thereof). Gambling became the focus of heated discussion and debate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Britain, as a most pernicious vice that was especially dangerous for women: not only would they gamble all their husband's money away, but they would stake their reputations, it was feared, if the money ran out. Considering that their bodies were also their husband's possession, the staking of a woman's virtue at cards would reflect back on their husbands and their masculinity (or lack thereof). At this point, and as Rosenthal explains, "the trope of the female gambler takes on a life of its own, embodying more than the general concern for women's chastity" (Rosenthal, 1996, p. 230) and betraying the real reason why a female gambler would be such a worrying figure: through their gambling, these women become possessors and circulators of property, rather than properties themselves. Thus, Lady Reveller's gambling is dangerous because it asserts her independence and it places her outside the power of the men that surround her.

While the trope of the female gambler is recurrent in traditional reform comedies, "Centlivre finds in this popular trope a range of feminist possibilities" (Rosenthal, 1996, p. 233) by representing this female gambler as able to own and circulate property, thus becoming an independent individual which embodies her Whig ideas on female individualism and independence.<sup>2</sup> As Rigamonti and Carraro explain, "gambling, more than the butt for customary reprimands, can be seen as the occasion for creating a social enclave in which ladies can venture into behaviours which are distinctively different from the dominant ones" (Rigamonti & Carraro, 2001, p. 53) and which allow them to turn the balance of power: Lady Reveller not only commands her fortune at the basset table, but she also commands the attention of her lover, Lord Worthy, in a reversal of the archetypal gender roles assigned to men and women during courtship. Lady Reveller's independent spirit and unwillingness to relinquish her freedom for a husband is clearly seen at the end of act II, when she declares,

Not to controul, but readily obey;

For he that once pretends my Faults to see,

That Moment makes himself all Faults to me. (Centlivre, 2009, p. 88).

With this statement, she strengthens her characterisation as a strong-willed woman who does not allow herself to be ruled by any of the men around her, while

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2 See Laura Martinez-Garcia's *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 BusyBody (1710) and Politics of Gender and National Identity in Susanna Centlivre's Iberian Plays: A Defence of Whig Feminism*, as well as Hannah Smith's "Susanna Centlivre, 'Our Church's Safety' and 'Whig Feminism'" for detailed accounts of Centlivre's gender and political ideologies.

she also dramatises and exaggerates the type of companionate marriage that Centlivre advocated for in all of her plays: a marriage of equals in which women were allowed their independence and freedom.

Her attitude towards her lover would seem strange for eighteenth-century audiences, as she forgoes the role of the passive object of admiration; instead she places her own interests (gambling and socialising) above those of her lover when she tries to avoid his presence at the basset table as a means of ridding herself of the nuisance she perceives him to be, “I must not be friends with him, for then I shall have him at my elbow all night, and spoil my luck at the Basset table—Either Cringing or Correcting, Always in Extreams” (Centlivre, 2009, p. 88). This dynamic in their relationship seems to be a constant, as we can see in Act II, when Lady Reveller tells Alpiev a story that confirms the widow’s unwillingness to bend to the wishes and desires of her lover if it means having to abandon her own pursuits and desires,

[...] Alpiev, he vexed me strangely before this grand Quarrel; I was at Piquet with my Lady Lovewit four Nights ago, and bid him read me a new Copy of Verses, because, you know, he never plays, and I did not well know what to do with him; he had scarce begun, when I, being eager at a Pique, he rose up and said, he believ’d I lov’d the Music of my own Voice, (crying Nine and Twenty, Threescore) better than the sweetest Poetry in the Universe, and abruptly left us (Centlivre, 2009, p. 64).

Lady Reveller’s dissatisfaction with her gallant and her determination to remain unmarried are then significant in that they are not only a testament to her independent spirit, but in that they stem from her awareness of her privileged legal position and the power her widowhood carries. At an early point in the play, she scolds Lord Worthy and scorns his attempts at preventing her from attending her usual game of basset saying, “Dare you, the Subject of my Power--you, that petition Love, arraign my Pleasures? Now I’m fixt--and will never see you more” (Centlivre, 2009, p. 88); her words both portray her as the powerful partner in this relationship and inform both Worthy and audiences of her intention to continue doing whatever she pleases. Worthy’s response buttresses her role as the dominant partner and his own as the subservient one, “I cannot bear that Curse--see me at your Feet again. [*Kneels*] Oh! you have tortur’d me enough, take Pity now dear Tyrant, and let my Sufferings end” (Centlivre, 2009, p. 88).

The lady gambler revels in her independence (both economic and personal) and certainly knows that accepting Lord Worthy’s attentions and proposal would mean a “loss of legal identity” (Jankowski, 1992, p. 35) and freedom. Thus, her negative reaction to Lord Worthy’s advances stems from her desire to maintain her liberty and her attitude serves to bolster her image as the theatrical advocate of the Whig feminism that Centlivre herself, as a professional woman of independent means, embodied.

The playwright seems to follow the conventions of the genre when she poses Lord Worthy and Lady Lucy as the good influences that will make the protagonist

see the error of her ways. In fact, Lady Lucy's description as a "religious, sober lady" and of Lord Worthy as "a hater of Gambling" (Centlivre, 2009, p. 47) seem to strengthen their adequacy as the reformers of the female gambler; still, while the playwright portrays Lady Reveller as a sympathetic and attractive character, the same cannot be said of her portrayal of Lady Lucy and Lord Worthy.

An archetypical reform comedy would present audiences with a hero who embodies all the manly virtues of the age: a man characterised by his self-restraint and self-control, able to rein in his passions and to display his reasonable nature at all times. As Shepard explains, "self-government [...] was the basis of men's claims to authority" (2006, p. 70) as it naturally followed that a man who was in control of his own emotions would find no difficulty in exerting control over others.

Lord Worthy does not seem to possess this manly virtue, as evidenced by Lady Reveller's account of his character in Act I, "my Lord Worthy is so peevish since our late Quarrel, that I'm afraid to engage the Knight in a Duel" (Centlivre, 2009, p. 56). With this description of the gentleman, Lady Reveller gives audiences a hint about Lord Worthy's irascibility, a perception that is reinforced by the gentleman's first appearance on stage, right after his beloved has left the stage, unseen. After he declares that he is "out of humour" (Centlivre, 2009, p. 56), Sir James argues that his insistence on visiting Lady Reveller while she is gambling is what has made him fell out of sorts.<sup>3</sup> Lord Worthy then describes her and their relationship in the following words,

Thou hast hit it, Sir James, I confess I love her Person, but hate her Humours, and her Way of Living; I have some Reasons to believe I'm not indifferent to her, yet I despair of fixing her, her Vanity has got so much the Mistress of her Resolution; and yet her Passion for Gain surmounts her Pride, and lays her Reputation open to the World. Every Fool that has ready Money shall dare to boast himself her very humble Servant; S'death, when I could cut the Rascal's Throat (Centlivre, 2009, p. 57).

Lord Worthy's words are not just violent ("cut the rascal's throat") and full of jealousy against Lady Reveller's gambling companions ("every fool"), but they are also quite out of character for the well-intentioned suitor that Gollapudi mentions as willing to help his beloved reform: not only does he declare that he has despaired of trying to change Lady Reveller, but he also declares he loves her person, rather than her humours. This statement can be understood as a confession, as the gentleman seems to be admitting that he desires Lady Reveller's body but does not actually like her personality.

Sir James's response to Lord Worthy's confession seems to buttress this image of Lord Worthy as hotheaded and violent, "Your Lordship is even with her one Way;

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3 SIR JAMES: Why then I can tell you; for the very same Reason that made your Lordship stay here to be Spectator of the very Diversion you hate, (Gaming) the same Cause makes you uneasy in all Company, my Lady Reveller (Centlivre, 2009, p. 56).

for you are as testy as she's vain, and as fond of an Opportunity to quarrel with her, as she of a gaming Acquaintance" (Centlivre, 2009, p. 57). Lord Worthy's hasty exit and parting words<sup>4</sup> reinforce Centlivre's characterisation of the gentleman as impulsive and lacking self-control and question his role as the heroic gentleman whose virtuous intervention will reform the gambling lady and commenting on the unfair treatment that society gives to women who exhibit a behaviour that is deemed inappropriate.

When in Act II Alpiew and Buckle (Lady Reveller's and Lord Worthy's aids) meet, he soon tells her of their masters' latest quarrel, which not only has left Lord Worthy seething with rage, but which also adds to his characterisation as a jealous man who cannot contain his anger when Lady Reveller teases him, in an attempt at asserting her independence and power,

BUCKLE: In a Raffling-Shop she saw a young Gentleman, which she said was very handsome – At the same Time, my Lord praised a young Lady; she redoubles her Commendations of the Beau. He enlarges on the Beauty of the Belle; their Discourse grew warm on the Subject; they pause; she begins again with the Perfections of the Gentleman; he ends with the same of the Lady: Thus they pursued their Arguments, still finding such mighty Charms in their new Favourites, till they found one another so ugly – so ugly – that they parted with full Resolution never to meet again. (Centlivre, 2009, p. 60)

Lady Reveller herself is taken aback when she witnesses Lord Worthy's treatment of his servant Buckle in Act I; after she sees him hitting the servant who has not brought him a message from Lady Reveller, she states, "Where did you learn this Rudeness, my Lord, to strike your Servant before me? [...] The Affront was meant to me – nor will I endure these Passions—I thought I had forbid your Visits" (Centlivre, 2009, pp. 87–88)<sup>8</sup> warning herself and audiences of Worthy's violent character and arguing that the blows that are raining on Buckle, were really intended for her, a woman whom he has declared, two lines previously, to hate.<sup>5</sup>

Worthy's exasperation with Lady Reveller's constant defiance and displays of self-assurance frustrate the gentleman to such a point, that by the end of Act II, and after Lady Reveller has escaped his company once more, he is willing to find an alternative way to make the Lady follow his inclinations, rather than hers.<sup>6</sup> In Act IV

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4 "LORD WORTHY: Thou'rt of a happy Temper, Sir James, I wish I could be so too; but since I can't add to your Diversion, I'll take my Leave; good Morrow, Gentlemen" [*Exit*. (Centlivre, 2009, p. 57).

5 "LORD WORTHY: What has this Dog been doing? When he was only to deliver my Letter, to give her new Subject for Mirth – *Death, methinks I hate her*--Oh that I could hold that Mind What makes you in this Equipage? Ha, Sirrah? [*Aside*]" (Centlivre, 2009, p. 87 – Author's emphasis).

6 LORD WORTHY: Gone – now Curses on me for a Fool – the worst of Fools – a Woman's Fool--  
Whose only Pleasure is to feed her Pride,  
Fond of her Self, she cares for none beside:  
So true Coquettes their numerous Charms display,  
And strive to conquer, purpose to betray (Centlivre, 2009, p. 89).

Lord Worthy, tired of trying to forget his ‘passion’ for Lady Reveller, has reached the end of his rope and enlists Sir James’s help to try and win the widow’s heart,

SIR JAMES: Well, my Lord, I have left my Cards in the Hand of a Friend to hear what you have to say to me. Love I’m sure is the Text, therefore divide and subdivide as quick as you can.

LORD WORTHY: Could’st thou infuse into me thy Temper, Sir James, I should have thy Reason too; but I am born to love this Fickle, Faithless Fair – What have I not essay’d to raze her from my Breast: but all in vain! I must have her, or I must not live.

SIR JAMES: Nay, if you are so far gone, my Lord, your Distemper requires an able Physician – What think you of Lovely’s bringing a File of Musketeers and carry her away, Vi & Armis?

LORD WORTHY: That Way might give her Person to my Arms, but where’s the Heart?

SIR JAMES. A Trifle in Competition with her Body.

LORD WORTHY: The Heart’s the Gem that I prefer.

SIR JAMES: Say you so my Lord? Ill engage three Parts of Europe will make that Exchange with you; Ha, ha, ha.

LORD WORTHY: That Maxim would hold with me perhaps in all but her; there I must have both or none; therefore, instruct me, Friend, thou who negligent in Love, keeps always on the Level with the Fair--What Method shall I take to sound her Soul’s Design? For tho’ her Carriage puts me on the Rack when I behold that Train of Fools about her, yet my Heart will plead in her Excuse, and calm my Anger spite of all Efforts.

SIR JAMES: Humph? I have a Plot, my Lord, if you will comply with it.

LORD WORTHY: Nothing of Force (Centlivre, 2009, p. 90).

Lord Worthy claims to cherish the lady so much that when his temper rises at her taunts, his love for her makes his anger die down, a statement that all of his previous interactions with the widow clearly contradict. His supposed love for her is also undercut by the words he uses to describe his desire for her (“I must have her, or I must not live” “I must have both or none”), forceful words that show not just his violent and jealous nature, but his selfishness, as he speaks only of his own wishes, disregarding Lady Reveller’s. It is not until the opening scene of Act V that audiences (and Lady Reveller herself) learn of the gentlemen’s plot to get the widow to accept Lord Worthy’s attentions: taking advantage of the closeness and privacy that the basset table affords, Sir James will pretend to rape Lady Reveller, only to be prevented from doing so by Lord Worthy’s valiant and well-timed intervention. Lord Worthy’s involvement in this fake-rape seems out of character for a man who has claimed to be utterly besotted with Lady Reveller and who has asked his friend to find a plan that does not involve any force used against her; in fact, once Lady Reveller has realised that Sir James’s words are not a jest, but in earnest, he becomes

more forceful and physical, blocking her from the exit, then trapping her inside the room with him and, finally, laying his hands on her so she cannot escape.<sup>7</sup>

From this point onward, Sir James's words become more cruel: while his previous advances were punctuated by 'playful' words of love and admiration, he now attacks Lady Reveller and her virtue, arguing that should she try to scream for help, her servants will come and her reputation will be destroyed by their gossip, if, on the contrary, she remains silent, he will not tell anyone of his actions and will, thus, keep her reputation intact,

LADY REVELLER: Unhand me, Villain, or I'll cry out.

SIR JAMES: Do, and make yourself the Jest of Servants, expose your Reputation to their vile Tongues, --which, if you please, shall remain safe within my Breast; but if with your own Noise you blast it, here I bid Defiance to all Honour and Secrecy,--and the first Man that enters, dies. [*Struggles with her.* (Centlivre, 2009, p. 106)

Up until this point Lady Reveller has been in complete control of her actions and has managed to keep her suitors at bay and her Virtue intact, but this scene makes her confront her own vulnerability and the precariousness of the power and freedom widows enjoyed at the time: in spite of all her witty remarks and her intelligent repartee, Lady Reveller is an innocent and naïve character who believes that the patriarchal forces at work in her society will allow her the freedom she feels she is due, a fantasy that is shattered in this scene. Her freedom and independence are taken

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7 SIR JAMES: Oh, I'm tir'd with Cards, Madam, can't you think of some other Diversion to pass a chearful Hour? --I cou'd tell you one, if you'd give me leave.

LADY REVELLER: Of your own Invention? Then it must be a pleasant One.

SIR JAMES: Oh, the pleasantest one in the World.

LADY REVELLER: What is it, I pray?

SIR JAMES: Love, Love, my dear Charmer. [*Approaches her*

LADY REVELLER: Oh, Cupid! How came that in your Head?

SIR JAMES: Nay, 'tis in my Heart, and except you pity me, the Wound is mortal.

LADY REVELLER: Ha, ha, ha, is Sir James got into Lord Worthy's Class? You that could tell me I should not have so large a Theme for my Diversion, were you in his Place, ha, ha, ha: What, and is the gay, the airy, the witty, inconstant Sir James overtaken? ha, ha.

SIR JAMES: Very true, Madam, you see there is no jesting with Fire. Will you be kind? [*Gets between her and the Door*

LADY REVELLER: Kind? What a dismal Sound was there? I'm afraid your Fever's high, Sir James, ha, ha.

SIR JAMES: If you think so, Madam, 'tis time to apply cooling Medicines. [*Locks the Door*

LADY REVELLER: Ha, what Insolence is this? The Door lock'd! What do you mean, Sir James?

SIR JAMES: Oh, 'tis something indecent to name it, Madam, but I intend to shew you. [*Lays hold on her* (Centlivre, 2009, p. 105).

from her not through the use of convincing words and well-reasoned discourses that help her see the error of her ways, but through the use of physical and sexual violence and the fatal consequences this could have for a woman at the time.

Rape was a common motif in the theatre of the time, even in comedies; while *Centlivre* presents us with a supposedly comic scene where no actual violation takes place, the scene is quite dramatic and intense, as it works as a cathartic moment in which Lady Reveller is made aware of her actual lack of power. Several elements contribute to the drama of this scene: the fact that the two gentlemen have plotted this trick to tame the wild widow into obedience, the cultural implications of rape, the words Sir James's uses to justify his actions and Lord Worthy's own 'reaction' to the scene. All of these shall be analysed in detail.

While it is true that (Ritscher, 2009, p. 6) by the end of the eighteenth century the nature of rape as a crime was changing from a property crime towards a crime against a person (Airey, 2012, p. 8; Catty, 1999, p. xiv), during the 1700s and even at the end of the century there was still a deeply ingrained belief that "as a woman belonged to her husband or father, in accordance with the rules of coverture, her violation represented an encroachment on male property rights" (Airey, 2012, p. 8). Thus, a woman who was raped was 'damaged goods' and a burden for her father, husband or closest male relative; in fact, and as Ritscher explains, "rape laws [...] reflected the patriarchal view that considered women as the property of their husbands and conduits of male inheritance" (2009, p. 1). Because Lady Reveller is no man's property and has claimed ownership over her own body, the threat of rape is even more damaging for her, as it means that she will be her own damaged goods; furthermore, this direct attack on her independence and on her self-government divest her from all of her self-possession and leave her doubting her identity. Sir James's comments on her virtue reinforce these doubts that not only undermine her confidence but will also be the cause of her surrender to Worthy's entreaties.

During their struggle, Sir James verbally abuses Lady Reveller, telling her that because of her passion for gambling her reputation has been put into question and that where debts cannot be paid with money, they should be paid with other favours. He also argues that because Lady Reveller has openly flirted with men to win money from them and because of her mode of sociability, she is believed to be a woman of loose morals, confirming the words her uncle Richard threw at her in Act I.

Why this Question, Madam? Can a Lady that loves Play so passionately as you do,-- that takes as much Pains to draw Men in to lose their Money, as a Town Miss to their Destruction, that caresses all Sorts of People for your Interest, that divides your Time between your Toilet and Basset-Table; can you, I say, boast of innate Virtue?--Fye, fye, I am sure you must have guess'd for what I play'd so deep; we never part with our Money without Design,--or writing Fool upon our Foreheads; therefore no more of this Resistance, except you would have more Money. (*Centlivre*, 2009, p. 106)

With his words, Sir James not only buttresses the strategy used to control the power that gambling women possessed, but he is also reinforcing gender ideas related to rape: that only unchaste women could be violated (Ritscher, 2009, p. 69). Thus, Lady Reveller, the female gambler who has been already warned about the risks to her reputation associated with her pastime, is not perceived by society and Sir James as a chaste lady, invulnerable and safe from violence and assault, rather, she is seen as a loose woman who should have no qualms about using her body as form of payment when the money is not at hand. Lady Reveller's view of her own virtue is completely different to his and that of most of the Town: in spite of the common trope of the women gambler as unchaste, she sees herself as completely virtuous and she explains to her cousin that, unlike Lady Lucy herself, she possesses innate virtue and chastity rather than the outward appearance of it. It is precisely this belief that pushes her to cry out and raise the house to her help, since she feels that Sir James's advances are an attack on that virtue,

LADY REVELLER: [*Strikes it down*] Perish your Money with yourself, you Villain! there, there; take your boasted Favours, which I resolv'd before to have paid in Specie; basest of Men, I'll have your Life for this Affront. What ho, within there.

SIR JAMES: Hush! 'Faith, you'll raise the House. [*Lays hold on her*] And 'tis in vain--you're mine; nor will I quit this Room 'till I'm possess'd. [*Struggles*].

LADY REVELLER: Raise the House! I'll raise the World in my Defence; help. Murther! Murther. A Rape, a Rape

*Enter Lord Worthy from another Room with his Sword drawn.*

LORD WORTHY: Ha! Villain, unhand the Lady or this Moment is thy last.

SIR JAMES: Villain, back my Lord. Follow me. [*Exit*]. (Centlivre, 2009, p. 107)

Sir James's attempts at possessing Lady Reveller fail in that the gentleman never manages to make the lady his own, but they are also extremely successful in that they confront Lady Reveller with her vulnerability and precarious situation, pushing her into the arms of her 'saviour' Lord Worthy, who will finally take possession of the lady's body and fortune. From the moment that she accepts Lord Worthy's help and protection, Lady Reveller relinquishes her independence and the power she formerly had over Worthy, as their conversation proves,

LADY REVELLER: By the bright Sun that shines, you shall not go – no, you've sav'd my Virtue, and I will preserve your Life – let the vile Wretch be punish'd by viler Hands – yours shall not be prophan'd with Blood so base, if I have any Power---

LORD WORTHY: Shall the Traytor live? --Tho' your barbarous Usage does not merit this from me, yet in Consideration that I lov'd you once--I will chastise his Insolence. (Centlivre, 2009, p. 107)



Before this scene, Lady Reveller always had the last word in all of their conversations and quarrels and Lord Worthy was, more often than not, ignored, cut mid-sentence or dismissed. In this case, the roles have been inverted and Lady Reveller is divested of all her power which is now in the hands of Lord Worthy, who now becomes the dominant partner in this relationship. Lord Worthy's words to Lady Reveller are of reproach for all of her slights, and although he does claim to have loved the lady once,<sup>8</sup> audiences are left questioning the worthiness of a man who has allowed his friend to abuse his future wife.

Furthermore, as Airey argues, rape is disempowering not just for the victim, who is robbed of her identity and of the ownership of her body, but also for the rapist himself, whose manliness and claim to authority over women is questioned (2012, p. 12). While nowadays we understand rape as "the vehicle of [the rapist's] victorious conquest over [his victim's] being" (Airey, 2012, p. 56), Restoration society usually associated rape with the rapist's failure to buttress his own authority over women: this violent act was emasculating in their eyes. More interestingly, during the 1660s, the image of rape was used in drama and pamphlets as political propaganda by both Whigs and Tories (Airey, 2012, p. 6). Susan J. Owen explains that "both Whigs and Tories used rape as a trope of the monstrous, associated by Tories with rebellion and by Whigs with popery and arbitrary government" (Owen, 1994, p. 37); Susannah Centlivre's openly Whig sympathies and her feminism associate rape and violence with Lord Worthy and Sir James's attempts at limiting Lady Reveller's independence; for the playwright, these two men and their plot to tame the widow into marriage are equated with the degeneracy of rape and with the illegitimacy of their claim to authority, on the basis of their deviant behaviour. Thus, Lord Worthy, as enabler and willing participant into the deception that brings Lady Reveller's life of independence to an end, cannot fulfil the role of the well-intentioned reformer; in fact, Centlivre's characterization of the gentleman, from his name to his actions, is intended as a satirical comment on the genre and the gender notions that sustained her society.

It is quite clear that "Lady Reveller renounces gambling, not because she realizes it is morally wrong, but because she is threatened with rape" (Warren, 2003, p. 615). This ending makes readers question the fairness of the classification of the play as 'sentimental', since the genre is characterized by moral reformations, rather than

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8 LORD WORTHY: Yet how have I been slighted; every Fop prefer'd to me – Now you discover what Inconveniency your Gaming has brought you into this from me would have been unpardonable Advice – now you have prov'd it at your own Expence.

LADY REVELLER: I have and hate myself for all my Folly – Oh! Forgive me – and if still you think me worthy of your Heart I here return you mine and will this Hour sign it with my Hand.

SIR JAMES: How I applaud myself for this Contrivance.

LORD WORTHY: Oh, the transporting Joy, it is the only Happiness I covet here.

Haste then my Charmer, haste the long'd-for Bliss. The happiest Minute of my Life is this. [*Exit.*]

by forced or practical reformations and such changes in attitude, “the protagonist’s progress from ‘folly’ to realization, and then to remorseful transformation [...] is [...] as much an ideological journey as a moral one” (Gollapudi, 2013, p. 3). In fact, the lady’s acceptance of the marriage can be seen as a commentary on the unfairness of a society which looks upon the widow with suspicion as “threat to the social order” (Jankowski, 1992, p. 35) that needs to be contained and controlled.

Since Lord Worthy proves inadequate to fulfil the role of the heroic reformer without whom the play would be incomplete, it falls to Lady Lucy, the widow’s cousin, to play the part of the virtuous relative who helps the gambler see the dangers of her vice. Described as “a religious, sober lady” (Centlivre, 2009, p. 236), Lady Lucy seems to be a good example of all the natural virtue and chastity women were privy to. As a representative of ‘honourable’ behaviour, she always compared to her cousin Lady Reveller and she is constantly trying to convince her to abandon her life of vices and frivolity. When she enters the stage in Act I, she, as her uncle has already done, immediately starts a sermon to reform her cousin, arguing that her liberal behaviour goes against nature, “Should all the world follow your Ladyship’s example *the order of Nature would be inverted*, and every good designed by Heaven become a curse; health and plenty no longer would be known among us” (Centlivre, 2009, p. 24. Author’s emphasis).

After the decline of the deployment of alliance and with the arrival of the theory of the complementary spheres and a gender order based on difference (Fletcher, 1999; Shepard, 2006), Nature came to be invoked as the order of all things, especially of gender relations; thus the image of the obedient, meek maiden came to be regarded as ‘normality’, the normative gender role, while any other behaviour was classified as unnatural. An independence such as that of Lady Reveller would be considered to be a monstrous behaviour that went against all the inherent qualities of the female sex; as Bacon explains, “the widow is not a figure representative of Restoration society, but a figure at odds with that society, whose patriarchal conventions were designed to deny her autonomy” (Bacon, 1991, p. 436). Thus, Lady Lucy provides a conduit for the patriarchal naturalization of gendered behaviour and its division of females in normal and abnormal. While Lady Reveller’s life of sociability and her independence would be perceived as unnatural and contravening the natural order of things, Lady Lucy’s insistence on a virtuous life, would be the ideal femininity preached by the system and buttressed by the archetypical characters of reform comedy.

Lady Lucy is very wary of her honour and reputation, of her fame as a proper lady; she sees her cousin’s behaviour as a threat to the good name of the whole family, and she is quick in her attempts at rehabilitating the gambling lady. As the potential heroine of this play she is very concerned about the reformation of the sinners around her and she tries to bring Lady Reveller and Sir James back to the righteous path. Just as her uncle Richard and Lord Worthy do, she associates

gambling with flirting, representing “the loss of chastity as the greatest danger to betting women” (Rosenthal, 1996, p. 229),

[...] Oh, shame to virtue, that women would copy men in their most reigning vice! Of virtue’s wholesome rules we most unjustly complain,  
When search of pleasures give us greater pain  
How slightly we our reputation guard,  
Which lost but once can never be repaired (Centlivre, 2009, p. 256).

Lady Lucy’s concern for her cousin’s reputation stems from the same place as Sir Richard’s: the damage that Lady Reveller’s actions may cause to their own fame and reputation as a noble lady. In fact, when she comes across Sir James after the mock-rape scene, her anger at him stems not from the violence he has subjected her cousin to or from the betrayal that his seduction attempt entails, but from the loss of honour that his actions have brought to her family, “Stand off, thou, basest of men, I have heard too much. Could’st thou choose no other *house* but this to act thy villainies in? And could’st thou offer vows to me, when thy heart, poisoned with vicious thoughts, was harbouring this design against *my family*?” (Centlivre, 2009, p. 285).

While arguing with Lady Reveller about her refusal to quit gambling, Lady Lucy and her cousin debate the true nature of virtue and which pastimes encourage or discourage vice.<sup>9</sup> In this exchange, audiences realise that Lady Lucy’s main concern is not whether Lady Reveller has committed any indiscretion, but rather whether the Town believes she has done so,

LADY LUCY: Methinks my Lord Worthy ‘s Assiduity might have banish’d the admiring Crowd by this Time.

LADY REVELLER: Banish’d ‘em! Oh, mon cœur! what Pleasure is there in one Lover? ‘tis like being seen always in one Suit of Cloaths; a Woman, with one Admirer, will ne’er be a reigning Toast.

LADY LUCY: I am sure those that encourage more, will never have the Character of a reigning Virtue.

LADY REVELLER: I slight the malicious Censure of the Town, yet defy it to asperse my Virtue; Nature has given me a Face, a Shape, a Mien, an Air for Dress, and Wit and Humour to subdue: And shall I lose my Conquest for a Name?

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9 LADY LUCY: I think the Playhouse the much more innocent and commendable Diversion.

LADY REVELLER: To be seen there every Night, in my Opinion, is more destructive to the Reputation.

LADY LUCY: Well; I had rather be noted every Night in the Front Box, than, by my Absence, once be suspected of Gaming; one ruins my Estate and Character, the other diverts my Temper, and improves my Mind. Then you have such a Number of Lovers (Centlivre, 2009, p. 54).

ALPIEW: Nay, and among the unfashionable Sort of People too, Madam, for Persons of Breeding and Quality will allow, that Gallantry and Virtue are not inseparable.

LADY LUCY: But Coquetry and Reputation are; and there is no Difference in the Eye of the World, between having really committed the Fault, and lying under the Scandal; for my own Part, I would take as much Care to preserve my Fame, as you would your Virtue. (Centlivre, 2009, p. 54).

Her statement not only chips away at her façade as a virtuous lady, but makes audiences question her validity as the reformer that will help Lady Reveller return to the good path: rather than a virtuous lady, Lady Lucy seems to be a lady worried by the appearance of virtue, an impression that is reinforced by her reaction to the news of Sir James's behaviour against her cousin, discussed above. As it was the case of Lord Worthy, the player's characterization of Lady Lucy is punctuated by inconsistencies and statements that make audiences question her true intentions; for instance, although she claims that "the truest pleasure must consist in doing good" (Centlivre, 2009, p. 97), she advises Sir James to spend his money in good deeds since such a donation would serve not to improve the lives of those in need, but as a way to better his name and fame and be remembered as a philanthropist, "Would it not leave a more glorious fame behind you to be the founder of some pious work, when all the poor, at mention of your name, shall bless your memory?" (Centlivre, 2009, p. 97). In fact, although she is outraged at her cousin's gambling, she seems "simultaneously disgusted and attracted by her suitor's gaming habits and profligacy" (Kreis-Schinck, 2001, p. 82), by a behaviour which is certainly more censurable than that of her cousin and which comes from a man that she decides to marry.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Although some critics have argued that *The Basset Table* is an example of a reform comedy of manners where the female gambler is reformed through the intervention of one or more virtuous friends, an analysis of the characters, the motifs and words of the play prove that, in fact, this is a satirical play which not only turns the conventions of the genre upside down, but which uses these conventions to put forward the playwright's feminist Whig agenda. Rather than a tale of sin and redemption, Centlivre created an ironic play which criticises the lack of freedom that women had at the time and the unfair treatment society gave to those ladies who dared reclaim their bodies and persons as their own.

Centlivre's heroine is a sympathetic character who dares appropriate the manly privilege of individualism and is made to pay the price for her incursion into the male province of power: confronted with Lady Reveller's independence and self-possession, society reacts by making her feel vulnerable to attack while providing the 'safety' from these attacks in the figure of Lord Worthy and his offer of marriage.

Thus, the supposed sinner does not reform because she sees the error of her ways, but because her integrity is threatened and because she is scared into compliance.

Furthermore, an analysis of the characters shows that there is no reformer that brings about the eye-opening experience that the sinner needs to ultimately renounce her misguided ways: while Lord Worthy and Lady Lucy seem good candidates on paper, their characterization as violent and jealous (in the case of the gentleman) and as selfish and frivolous (in the case of the lady), not only disqualifies them as heroes, but it also satirises the conventions of the genre, adding to the playwright's criticism of her own society.

Thus, the subversion of the ideals preached by the system and by the dramatic genre is complete and absolute. Centlivre appropriates and subverts, one by one, the topics, plots, characters and theatrical devices of sentimental comedy, creating a most subversive play that clearly puts into question an unfair system that denied women their freedom and agency. Still, and because Centlivre was aware of the need to satisfy her audiences, at the end of the play, Lady Reveller accepts Lord Worthy's proposal although she is made aware of the trick that has been played on her. Thus, the play closes with a marriage, as customary, and order seems to be restored. It seems that, as Rosenthal explains, "in spite of Centlivre's clearly feminist intervention into the lady gambler trope, the ending of *The Basset Table* reveals the inherent limits of her feminist individualism" (1996, p. 237) which is reined in by her need to please audiences as a way to make a living: although the ending might seem anticlimactic for modern audiences, the fact remains that, "in comic as well as in social constraints, [Lady Reveller] has to get married before the play is over" (Rigamonti & Carraro, 2001, p. 62), a convention that, actually, does not take away from her feminist message, but rather strengthens it. In fact, Lady Reveller's marriage serves as a way to comment on the unfairness of a system that uses marriage as a way to control women and limit their agency, especially in the case of a legally independent widow whose passion for gambling invests upon her an unprecedented level of self-sufficiency which poses a threat to patriarchal power. Thus, the only solution is to force this widow into matrimony, since "a remarried widow would again become governed by a man and thus acceptable to the patriarchal social structure" (Jankowski, 1992, p. 35). Thus, in this play, we can conclude that rather than creating a true reform comedy, Centlivre subtly "criticizes a patriarchal society that strove to control and dominate women physically, emotionally, and financially" while still catering to the tastes and wishes of her audiences allowing for certain theatrical conventions to be maintained so as "to meet accepted dramatic conventions, thereby assuring the success of her play" (Fowler, 1996, p. 59)

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