

Article

Squaring the Triangle: Queer Futures in Centlivre's *The Wonder*

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Abstract: Susanna Centlivre's *The Wonder: A Woman Keeps a Secret* (1714) presents a model of female relations invested in queer futurity and queer temporality, disrupting the patriarchal geometry of courtship in order to provide the play's heroines access to an alternate future grounded in their relationship with one another. Though the play ends with both women married, their relationship is central and is cemented by Violante's marriage to Isabella's brother, which transforms the friends into sisters. Their dedication opens up the possibility that a relationship between women might be more important than the marriages they strive for, illustrating an important intervention into the construction of plot in comedy from the early eighteenth century. *The Wonder's* queer potential is developed in the language that both women use to describe their devotion and the actions that embody it. Violante and Isabella are able to expand the triangle of homosocial exchange into a more equitable square that not only allows for happy marriages but visible, loving relationships between the play's heroines. As such, they manage to create a queer future where their relationship can remain at the forefront of their lives and rewrite the marriage plot as a means to an end.

Keywords: eighteenth-century comedy; eighteenth-century drama; friendship; homosociality; queerness; queer futurity; queer temporality; Susanna Centlivre; women's relationships



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1. Introduction

In the introduction to *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz states that “queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (Muñoz 2009, p. 1). This desire for futurity, which Muñoz situates in the context of twentieth-century queer culture, serves as a useful means of opening up a text far-flung from this original context: Susanna Centlivre's *The Wonder: A Woman Keeps a Secret* (1714). This play opens with a simple suggestion—that it would not only be unusual, but positively wondrous for a woman to keep a secret, especially one that belongs to another woman. The content of the play highlights the irony of its title, proving that while women share information with one another, it is not because they are untrustworthy but rather because it is matter of survival in a world where male control is a political, economic, and physical reality. Such secret keeping serves as an important point of female bonding, revealing an even greater wonder within *The Wonder*: its focus on the relationship between Centlivre's two heroines, Violante and Isabella. Through this relationship, she presents a model of female homosociality and plotting that disrupts the centrality of heterosexual marriage in eighteenth-century comedy in favor of a relationship between women—a relationship which, through Violante's marriage to Isabella's brother, transforms the friends into sisters. Their dedication opens up the possibility that a relationship between women might be more important than the marriages they strive for, illustrating an important intervention into the construction of plot in comedy from the early eighteenth century. By focusing on the relationship between women in Centlivre's play, it becomes clear that Violante's primary concern is cementing an unbreakable bond with Isabella through sisterhood, a direct consequence of her marriage

to Felix. This marriage legally cements their relationship with each other in a queer future wherein they may rely upon each other rather than their fathers or lovers.¹

This desire for sisterhood opens up a queer path for women in eighteenth century comedy, and *The Wonder's* queer potential is developed in the language that both women use to describe their devotion to each other and the actions that embody it. As Muñoz explains, “queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing” (Muñoz 2009, p. 1). Violante’s relationship with Isabella reflects ideals of queer futurity through their implicit trust and reliance upon one another to move their plans forward while rejecting those made by their fathers as well as their male lovers—they are looking for that “something” that is missing. While the play’s ending relies upon heterosexual marriage, these marriages not only free the women from their tyrannical fathers but also transform the relationship between Violante and Isabella from a friendship to a legally binding familial connection. In order to do so, the women take a path towards marriage which rejects the typical arc of early-eighteenth-century intrigue drama: while young couples often refuse the plans of overbearing parents, women typically work with their male lovers in order to reproduce structures of marriage and economic security. By re-writing the familiar forward momentum of comic drama so that women work together, *The Wonder* allows space for queer interpretation as the play’s heroines prioritize each other over men.

Centlivre’s revision of the intrigue plot allows her heroines to not only seek a queer future, but to queer the timeline of the play. In *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Elizabeth Freeman defines a “chronobiological society” wherein “the state and other institutions . . . link properly temporalized bodies to narratives of movement and change. These are teleological schemes of events or strategies such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals” (Freeman 2010, p. 4). Though, like Muñoz, Freeman is writing about the twentieth century, these productive impulses and structures are clearly at work in dramatic comedy from the eighteenth century and in the social structures of the period as a whole. As Lawrence Stone explains, during the period, “marriage is primarily a contract between two families for the exchange of concrete benefits, not so much for the married couple as for their parents and kin” (Stone 1977, p. 271). While comic drama took a range of forms during the early eighteenth century, the genre was heavily invested in reproducing social structures through romantic plots—it is rare to find a play that does not end with a series of advantageous marriages that will lead to economic comfort and the continuation of the blood line. Isabella and Violante’s rejection of the familiar, well-worn path towards marriage and all that it provides thus suggests both a longing for queer future and an existence within queer time.

Despite Centlivre’s adherence to the familiar ending of comic drama, by temporarily removing her heroines from the “chrononormative” forward movement of the genre, she allows them space to develop a relationship that is not invested in the “concrete benefits” cited by Stone. Rather, Violante and Isabella’s relationship is rooted in a mutual care for one another. Though their love is not explicitly romantic, their willingness to sacrifice safety and the trust of the men who love them to prioritize each other marks a queering of early-eighteenth-century values. While the play’s ending reaffirms productive heterosexual marriage, Violante’s decision to cast off Felix illustrates her willingness to give up everything for Isabella. Though never explicitly explored in the play, their actions suggest that should the two women find themselves unable to marry the men they choose,

¹ For more about the dynamics of courtship in *The Wonder* and Centlivre’s other plays, see (Airey 2013), “‘I must vary shapes as often as a player’: Susanna Centlivre and the Liberty of the British Stage;” (Fowler 1996), “Rejecting the Status Quo: The Attempts of Mary Pix & Susanna Centlivre to Reform Society’s Patriarchal Attitudes;” (Frushell 1986), “Marriage and Marrying in Susanna Centlivre’s Plays;” (Martínez-García 2017), “Politics of Gender and National Identity in Susanna Centlivre’s Iberian Plays: A Defence of Whig Feminism;” (O’Brien 2001), “Busy Bodies: The Plots of Susanna Centlivre;” (Swenson 2007), “‘A Soldier Is Her Darling Character’: Susanna Centlivre, Desire, Difference, and Disguise;” and (Tierney-Hynes 2016), “Emotional Economies: Centlivre’s Comic Ends.”

they may continue to rely upon one another and potentially continue to live in a queer space that rejects the productive urge to the eighteenth-century stage and culture at large. Such an ending, however, would be difficult to sell to audiences during the period who longed for the romantic resolution of comedy, and would certainly prevent *The Wonder* from becoming one of the most popular plays of the eighteenth century. The traditional comedic ending of the play, however, does not force the women to disavow their love for one another, but rather reaffirms it: their queer future remains as the two become sisters—an affirmation of the relationship that remains at the forefront of Centlivre’s entire play. As such, the relationship between Violante and Isabella complicates how we talk about the homosocial structure of plots in early-eighteenth-century drama, often re-emphasized by scholars who center the use of the contract in Centlivre’s plays.² While scholarship on drama from the period readily illustrates the empowerment of individual heroines, discussions about relationships between women often focus on competition, as even female playwrights are hesitant to allow their characters to prioritize female friends over male suitors.³ The centrality of the relationship between Violante and Isabella in *The Wonder* thus raises the question, what would happen if we took a more homosocial approach to the wonder of this plot between women?

Framing the relationship between Violante and Isabella as the play’s “main plot” and the actions of their lovers and fathers as secondary plots reveals the queer potential of Centlivre’s play. Such an approach is indebted to the wealth of queer scholarship focusing on the long-eighteenth century, which reveals the complex ways in which gender and sexuality were produced during this turbulent period. In her expansive study *The Sexuality of History*, Susan S. Lanser argues that “the story of female same-sex affiliation that preoccupied emergent modernity can be read as a story of modernity *tout court*. Figuring as both agent and emblem, the sapphic became a flash-point for epistemic upheavals that threatened to dismantle the order of things” (Lanser 2014, p. 2). Lanser proposes a pre-history of queer futurity that historicizes the world-making power of same-sex relationships. As Terry Castle, Ula Klein, Lisa Moore, and Elizabeth Wahl, among numerous others, have illustrated, the long-eighteenth century had a complicated fascination with women’s sexuality and their varied forms of intimacy with same-sex partners, whether it be sexual or not.⁴ Though Centlivre’s play does not contain the explicit seduction of one woman by another, there is an undeniable love shared by Violante and Isabella, who sacrifice their safety in order to rely upon one another. Looking directly to the theater of the period, Kristina Straub laid important groundwork about the production of queer gender and sexuality on the eighteenth-century stage for both men and women in *Sexual Suspects*, pointing out the potential pleasure found in the ambiguities presented on the stage—ambiguities that may be found in the language Violante and Isabella use to describe their fidelity to each other (Straub 1992, p. 127). Felicity Nussbaum has illustrated the play of representation and rivalry in eighteenth-century theatre in *Rival Queens*, while Bush-Bailey (2006) emphasizes women’s collaboration, rather than competition, within theatrical companies in *Treading the Bawds: Actresses and Playwrights on the Late-Stuart Stage*. My contribution builds on this work to reassess the radical potential of the relationship between Violante and Isabella, heroines who map the outlines of a queer future within mainstream comedy.

² For more about contracts in Centlivre’s plays, see (Anderson 2002), *Female Playwrights and Eighteenth-Century Comedy: Negotiating Marriage on the London Stage*; (Collins 1999), “Centlivre v. Hardwicke: Susannah Centlivre’s Plays and the Marriage Act of 1753;” (Davis 2011), “Dramatizing the Sexual Contract: Congreve and Centlivre;” and (Rosenthal 1996), *Playwrights and Plagiarists in Early Modern England: Gender, Authorship, Literary Property*.

³ For more about competition between women in drama from the long eighteenth century, see (Nussbaum 2010), *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater*; (Pearson 1988), *The Prostituted Muse: Images of Women & Women Dramatists 1642–1737*; and (Rosenthal 1996), *Playwrights and Plagiarists in Early Modern England*.

⁴ See (Castle 1993), *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*; (Klein 2021), *Sapphic Crossings: Cross-Dressing Women in Eighteenth-Century British Literature*; (Moore 1997), *Dangerous Intimacies: Toward a Sapphic History of the British Novel*; and (Wahl 1999), *Invisible Relations: Representations of Female Intimacy in the Age of the Enlightenment*.

This argument also grows out of the influence of Eve Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, a text which has had an incredible impact on queer scholarship about the eighteenth century despite containing only two chapters on the period.⁵ Sedgwick destabilizes the centrality of heterosexuality by describing the exchange of women as a crucial point of male bonding on the stage and page during this period, suggesting that during the eighteenth century, "the routing of [male] homosocial desire through women is clearly presented as compulsory" (Sedgwick [1985] 2016, p. 49). It is possible, however, that the widespread influence of Sedgwick's approach, which so elegantly outlines homosociality between men, has prevented us from fully exploring homosociality between women, erasing certain stories just as it reveals others. Describing the place of women within the complex male relationships found in William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (Wycherley [1675] 2014), she explains that "the status of the women in this transaction is determiningly a problem in the play: not their status in the general political sense, but their status within the particular ambiguity of being at the same time objects of symbolic exchange and also, at least potentially, users of symbols and subjects in themselves" (Sedgwick [1985] 2016, p. 50). In Centlivre's play, this dynamic is turned on its head, as Violante and Isabella fully grasp the potential that Sedgwick describes and reject their status as exchangeable objects. They do not, however, simply reverse the flow of triangulated power, exchanging men as men exchange women. Instead, the women "square" the homosocial triangle, radically changing the dynamics of relationality so that they can attain a more equitable ending which is more invested in the production of loving relationships than in the economic and social stability that such relationships can provide.

By squaring the homosocial triangle, Violante and Isabella reject the movements of exchange and hierarchy, in part because they do not have access to the power necessary to reproduce such dynamics: Isabella cannot "give" her brother to Violante in the way that he might give Isabella to his friend Frederick, for example. Their refusal of these dynamics also illustrates a marked difference in how relationships between men and relationships between women can be conceived. In her introduction to *Between Men*, Sedgwick claims that "the adjective 'homosocial' as applied to women's bonds . . . need not be pointedly dichotomized as against 'homosexual'; it can intelligibly denominate the entire continuum" (Sedgwick [1985] 2016, p. 2). Violante's relationship with Isabella exists within this continuum, as their devotion to one another often blurs the lines between friendship and romantic love and is finally cemented when they become family. As such, it is necessary to reconsider the relational geometry used to analyze the play and, perhaps, eighteenth-century comedy more broadly. While *The Wonder*'s two main couples could be read as distinct plots that move in a single straight line, it is more fruitful to consider the pairs in the formation of a square, with Violante, Isabella, Colonel Britton, and Don Felix at its corners. Such a construction allows for intimate relationships between women in addition to their connections to their lovers, and it is this female relationship that serves to drive the plot forward. By sharing knowledge and desires, including their desire for a relationship with one another, Violante and Isabella re-draw the lines of power that would have made them commodities for men rather than confidants for one another.

The formation of the square also helps illustrate the ways in which queer temporality is at work in Centlivre's play. John O'Brien suggests that "*The Wonder* is less a play where the story hurtles ahead as it is one in which forward motion is frequently interrupted, suspended, or thwarted . . . [It] might perhaps best be described as a sustained display of the relationship between patriarchal obstruction and the plots summoned forth to evade it" (O'Brien 2004 (as cited in Centlivre [1714] 2004, pp. 14–15)). This disruption of chrononormative, forward motion rejects the familiar movement of early-eighteenth-

⁵ Though Sedgwick's study is somewhat dated, it remains one of the landmark texts in queer eighteenth-century studies. A Google Scholar search of citations of *Between Men* in texts about the eighteenth century published between 2010 and 2021 returns approximately 1390 results, including (Farr 2019), *Novel Bodies: Disability and Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century British Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press); (Kavanagh 2017), *Effeminate Years: Literature, Politics, and Aesthetics in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press); (Kelleher 2015), *Making Love: Sentiment and Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century British Literature* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press); and numerous others.

century comedy, primarily invested in the reproduction of economic hierarchies through homosocial and romantic relationships. The movement of the play is queered not only by its focus on the relationship between Violante and Isabella, but by their refusal to participate in the plots that are projected upon them by the men who hold power over them: they instead counter these controlling impulses with creative solutions that prioritize their desire for a queer future together. Because the squared model controlled by women is not built upon the trade of property or power, it is less invested in exchange or contract, and instead rejects competition in favor of sustaining a collaborative relationship. That relationship does not preclude the relative security that comes from marriage, but marriage does not exclude the priority of their relationship. In fact, Violante and Isabella's devotion to one another is further affirmed through Violante's marriage at the end of the play, as the women change from friends to sisters, revising the marriage plot into a tool which builds queer possibilities. Though Centlivre makes it clear that Violante loves her husband, the tempestuous nature of their relationship and her willingness to abandon him in favor of Isabella makes it clear where her priorities lie, and those priorities define the path of the plot. By reading *The Wonder* as a play about Violante and Isabella's relationship, with the failures of male homosociality as supporting storylines rather than the central plot, it becomes possible to catch a glimpse of queer futures for the heroines of eighteenth-century comedy.

2. Bad Daddies, Merchants, and Cuckolding: Failures of Male Homosociality

On its surface, *The Wonder* reproduces the dominant plots of the early eighteenth century. In particular, Centlivre utilizes "the form known as intrigue or 'Spanish' comedy, a genre characterized thematically by patriarchal proscription and structurally by intricate plotting," using the conventions of the genre to reveal and deconstruct the masculine structures the play is built upon (O'Brien 2001, p. 175). Set in Catholic Lisbon, the play features two commanding fathers, their plotting daughters, and a wild and unruly son who initially unites the two families. This "exotic" setting allows Centlivre to present tyrannical fathers who threaten their daughters with convents and violence alongside fiery young men obsessed with honor and reputation, drawing on stereotypes about Catholic countries in order to present the play's men as absurd and overbearing.⁶ Don Lopez, father to Felix and Isabella, is desperate for his children to marry as he wills; their resistance comes in the form of a near-fatal duel fought by Felix and the titular "secret" when Isabella begs her friend Violante to hide her after she flees the marriage her father has planned. Violante is also Felix's lover, but her father, Don Pedro, plans to send her to a convent in order to claim her inheritance for himself. During her flight from her father's house, Isabella is intercepted by the Scottish Colonel Britton; his introduction onto the stage serves to square the triangle made up of Isabella, Violante, and Felix, providing Isabella with an acceptable alternative to the husband her father has selected.

The remainder of the play relies on the complex conflicts created by Violante's secret, and the tension over whether or not she will choose to prioritize her love for Felix over her commitment to Isabella. Will she remain a part of the seemingly inevitable, chronobiological status quo of patriarchal heterosexuality, or will she reach for something new, a queer future presented by her relationship with Isabella? As men breach the privacy of her quarters, she must protect her friend while misleading her lover, father, and Britton, who all hold misconceptions about her motivations. Despite the various threats she faces, Violante remains loyal to Isabella throughout and is rewarded when both women circumvent the obstacles of their fathers and marry the lovers they have chosen while cementing their bond with one another. As Nancy Copeland explains, "the conventional plot involving these conventional characters is . . . also the site of Centlivre's innovations, to which her characterization of Violante is central" (Copeland 2004, p. 133). Despite the limitations of

⁶ For more about Centlivre's use of Catholic and Mediterranean stereotypes in *The Wonder*, see (O'Brien 2001), "Busy Bodies," and (O'Brien 2004 (as cited in Centlivre [1714] 2004, pp. 14–15)), Introduction to *The Wonder*.

the various patriarchal structures she inhabits, Violante is capable of carefully navigating them in order to gain the largest possible reward through marriage. Laura Rosenthal suggests, “Centlivre’s feminist individualism takes the form of the temporary claims to inhabit the position of individual and owner, as well as a preparedness to back off from those claims when confronted with their gendered limitations” (Rosenthal 1996, p. 215). Violante’s relationship with Isabella, however, disrupts the individualism that Rosenthal identifies, replacing it with a form of relationality that refuses the typical model of competition found between women in drama from the period.⁷ Their relationship, along with the failures of masculine bonding and a rejection of chronobiological production, allow for the creation of an alternate relational geometry with queer potential.

The Wonder opens with Don Lopez discussing his children with Felix’s friend, Frederick, neatly presenting the primary problem of the play: that Lisbon’s Catholic fathers want nothing more than to utilize their daughters for economic gain. Despite Frederick’s concerns for Isabella’s happiness, Don Lopez declares “Is a Husband of twenty thousand Crowns a Year, no Consideration? Not I think it is a very good Consideration” (Centlivre [1714] 2004, p. 49). This is not, however, a consideration for his daughter; he had already stated that he would be able to “rule” Don Guzman, his daughter’s intended husband, “as I think fit” (Centlivre [1714] 2004, p. 48). Don Pedro shares this self-interest, intending to send his daughter to a convent in order to maintain control over her inheritance—as Flora reminds Violante in act 2, “your Father *Don Pedro* designs you for a Nun, and says your Grand-father left you your fortune upon that Condition” (Centlivre [1714] 2004, p. 57). This condition is later revealed to be a lie: in an aside to the audience, Don Pedro explains that “did she know that she might command her Fortune when she came at Age, or upon Day of Marriage, Perhaps she’d change her Note” (Centlivre [1714] 2004, p. 95). These economic concerns are also present in the play’s ending. When the pairs of young lovers have been successfully married, their fathers are more concerned about the financial consequences than their children’s disobedience:

Don Pedro: But your Son shall be never the better for’t my Lord, her twenty Thousand Pounds was left on certain Conditions, and I’ll not part with a Shilling.

Don Lopez: But we have a certain Thing call’d Law, shall make you do Justice, Sir. (Centlivre [1714] 2004, pp. 115–16)

The union of the two families, which would have been celebrated had it been produced through a homosocial exchange between the two fathers, is reduced to a legal struggle over money. *The Wonder* thus presents two common forms of the marriage contract: that which is controlled by the father and is meant to ensure complete patriarchal control, and that formed by a daughter and her lover. Misty Anderson argues that “Centlivre used the extension of contracts into the domestic realm to support her heroines’ claims to domestic authority,” yet even when a woman is allowed input about the contract, it serves to reproduce the same structures that already exist, though perhaps a kinder, gentler version (Anderson 2002, p. 110). By exposing the reproduction of these structures, Centlivre’s attention to the relationship between Violante and Isabella opens up an alternative, even if it is embedded in an existing model of heterosexual patriarchy.

The fathers’ misplaced concerns are a constant tension in Centlivre’s play, for while neither Violante or Isabella are primarily concerned with their financial security, the blocking moves made by both Don Pedro and Don Lopez serve to frustrate their daughters’ designs. The fathers only appear when it is least convenient for their children, intruding into personal spaces and refusing to see their daughters as anything more than objects that hold economic value. Despite these risks, however, Violante and Isabella succeed in rejecting their fathers plans. This is not unusual for intrigue comedy—countless plays from the period rely upon the younger generation duping their elders, but in this version of the story, fathers threaten extreme violence in the face of their children’s disobedience:

⁷ In *Playwrights and Plagiarists*, Rosenthal (1996) explains that, in other plays by Centlivre, “. . . full individuality . . . is (temporarily) achieved by some women at the expense of other women” (p. 223).

Isabella: I am your Daughter, my Lord, and can boast as strong a Resolution as your self; I'll die before I marry *Guzman*.

Don Lopez: Say you so, I'll try that presently. (*Draws.*) Here let me see with what Dexterity you can breath a Vein now (*offers her his Sword.*) The Point is pretty sharp, 'twill do your Business I warrant you. ([Centlivre \[1714\] 2004](#), p. 55)

Her father meets her bid for the right to map her own future with his willingness to make sure she has *no* future, laying bare the violence that underlies patriarchal prerogatives. After offering to assist in a forced suicide, he then “*takes hold of her . . . Pushes her in, and locks the Door*” ([Centlivre \[1714\] 2004](#), pp. 55–56). The fear of further violence leads to Isabella's flight and the terror that she and Violante share should their fathers learn of their secret. Within *The Wonder*, the options provided by fathers are untenable, as they either place young women in spaces of constraint, such as the convent, or send them to their death. For Violante and Isabella, remaining in this structure of old patriarchy, which is rendered visible in violently embodied spatial terms, is to give up hope for the future. They must remove themselves from this structure in order to thrive.

Frederick, a merchant, illustrates the complex shift taking place from an old system of class that is rooted in family and blood to a new system held up by economic status. Though he is a close friend of Felix, Frederick is an untitled merchant, and thus holds a complicated position within the social world of aristocratic Lisbon. During the opening scene, Frederick confronts Don Lopez, exclaiming, “You will not sure Sacrifice the lovely *Isabella* to Age, Avarice, and a Fool, . . . my concern for your beauteous Daughter transports me beyond that good Manners which I ought to pay your Lordship's presence” ([Centlivre \[1714\] 2004](#), p. 48). Frederick's reference to the respect he owes to Don Lopez is explained earlier in the scene, when Don Lopez references Frederick's “want of noble birth”—a lack that proves to be the sticking point that prevents the exchange of Isabella between her brother and his friend ([Centlivre \[1714\] 2004](#), p. 47). Though Don Lopez would never consider Frederick as a suitable match for his daughter, Frederick's lines immediately following his departure suggest that he had thought of this possibility: “Monstrous! These are the Resolutions which destroy the comforts of Matrimony—he is Rich, and well born, powerful Arguments indeed! Could I but add them to the Friendship of *Don Felix*, what might I not hope? But a Merchant and a Grandee of *Spain*, are inconsistent Names” ([Centlivre \[1714\] 2004](#), p. 49). Despite his interest in marrying Isabella, however, Centlivre does not choose to have Frederick pursue her any further. Instead, he facilitates Britton's introduction as a viable alternative for Isabella. By removing himself from the potential triangulation of competition and ownership, his understanding of friendship more closely resembles that found between Isabella and Violante than the other men in the play.

Just as the triangulated exchanges of Isabella between Don Lopez and Don Guzman and of Violante between Don Pedro and her grandfather both fail, the attempts at homosocial triangles between Felix, Britton, and Frederick consistently break down. The relationship between Felix and Britton proves to be an interesting test of Sedgwick's theory of cuckoldry, as their attempts at masculine bonding are grounded in an anxiety about—but ultimate lack of—infidelity. In *The Wonder*, the specter of cuckolding floats around the text as Felix fears that Violante is having an affair with Britton. Felix and Britton, as Sedgwick suggests, “each has the page from the rule-book that the other one is missing, and each thinks that his page is the whole rule-book,” and are forced to operate in the dark while Violante and Isabella control the plot ([Sedgwick \[1985\] 2016](#), p. 51). When Britton first meets with Frederick, they engage in the period's equivalent of “locker room talk”—describing the temptations of a convent, he announces, “to behold such Troops of soft, plump, tender, melting, wishing, nay willing Girls too, thro' a damn'd Grate, gives us Brittons strong Temptation to Plunder” ([Centlivre \[1714\] 2004](#), p. 51). Though Frederick willingly participates in this discussion, when Britton attempts a similar conversation with Felix he reveals details about Violante's chambers that convince Felix that they are having an affair. Britton expects these disclosures to secure his friendship with Felix, but they instead bring about a violent conflict that nearly ends in a duel. Their masculine bravado,

which they have been trained in as a means of developing relationships between men, serves to destroy homosocial bonds rather than construct them.

Frederick's relationship with Britton and the tension it causes between him and Felix thus creates another form of triangulation, but one consisting of men only, placing Frederick in the typically feminized position that links Felix and Britton together. Though Sedgwick's arguments about homosocial triangulation are heavily invested in the exchange of women, the classed aspect of Frederick's identity places him in the triangulated "female" position and illustrates "the symbolic fractures such as class . . . [that] are abundant and actively disruptive in every social constitution" (Sedgwick [1985] 2016, p. 10). Centlivre does not feminize Frederick through cuckolding or another form of emasculation; rather, his class position as a merchant removes him from the masculine circuits that his two friends inhabit. He instead serves as a mediating figure between his friends, helping Felix move through the city while under threat of arrest, opening his home to Britton, and working to keep peace between the two.⁸ While he is not exchanged between Britton and Felix like a woman would be, his lower-class status allows him to hold this position, further complicating the failures of male homosociality in this play. Though Frederick is a loyal friend—at one point, Felix declares that "I have nothing left, but thee, in Lisbon, which can make me wish ever to see it more"—he is not rewarded with marriage at the end of the play (Centlivre [1714] 2004, p. 75). When he enters at the close of act 5, Felix declares that "I sent for thee to be Witness of my good Fortune, and make one in a Country-Dance," yet there is no woman for Frederick to find happiness within these closing moments (Centlivre [1714] 2004, p. 116). Because of his class position, Frederick is unable to gain the rewards of successful male homosociality despite his loyalty. Just as Isabella and Violante would be denied a future had they participated in the patriarchal structures controlled by their fathers, Frederick's willingness to follow those rules prevents him from marrying beyond the constraints put in place by his class position. In his relationship with Felix, however, Frederick imagines a queer future that does not have to be cemented by the exchange of Isabella through marriage, but can instead, like the relationship between the play's heroines, rely solely upon the friendship that exists between the two men. His loyalty to Felix, like Violante's to Isabella, proves to outlast the heterosexual disappointments of the play.

Though Frederick does not marry at the end of *The Wonder*, Felix and Britton are both successfully maneuvered by Violante and Isabella so that the women may end the play safely married and legally bound as sisters. For Felix and Britton to participate in the square that Violante and Isabella control, however, reform becomes a necessity. No longer motivated by a circuit of homosocial masculinity invested in the control of women, Britton becomes a tamer version of himself, choosing to reform "through the language of gender and religion" (Anderson 2015, p. 138). Similarly, Felix must exchange his jealousy for trust to marry Violante, as "the well-worn conventions of Spanish comedy are employed in the service of contemporary gender ideology to stage Violante's moral superiority" (Copeland 2004, p. 138). The reforms in Britton's and Felix's character thus allow them to participate in the play's new geometry: reconciled with one another at the end of the play, Felix declares "I heartily ask the Colonel Pardon, and wish him Happy with my Sister" (Centlivre [1714] 2004, p. 116). While their conflict would have previously fueled a system of male power, their reconciliation at the end of the play further stabilizes the square that Violante and Isabella have constructed, suggesting a happy future for the two couples who are drawn together less by the familial tie between Felix and Isabella and more by her friendship with Violante.

3. Friends over Lovers: Female Friendship and Queer Futures

While the men in Centlivre's play struggle and fail to cement their relationships with one another, her heroines find unparalleled success in prioritizing their devotion to

⁸ Sedgwick's thesis depends on René Girard's concept of mediated triangulation; see *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (Girard 1965). While Girard describes the mediator as a rival in "Chapter One: Triangular Desire," Frederick's class position prevents him from being a rival for either Britton or Felix.

one another, creating new structures of relationality and embracing queer futures that were previously unavailable to them. *The Wonder's* exploration of productive female friendship in its main plot is not, of course, entirely unique. Plays from earlier in the period often consider the benefits of having intimate female friends; these relationships, however, are often abandoned in the pursuit of marriage. In Colley Cibber's *Love's Last Shift* (Cibber [1696] 2001), for example, Amanda, Hillaria, and Narcissa present a model of non-competitive alliance, but they are more focused on winning their individual beaux than assisting one another. Even female playwrights fail to show many examples of relationships between women that are prioritized over courtship. While Aphra Behn shows female cooperation in plays such as *The Rover* (Behn [1677] 2019) and *The Lucky Chance* (Behn [1686] 2001), the women at the center of these plays are far more interested in their own ends than those of their friends. Anderson notes that Centlivre herself shies away from such sacrificial female friendships in *The Busy Body* (Centlivre [1709] 2017) and *The Perplex'd Lovers* (Centlivre 1712), choosing instead to keep her heroines focused on their romantic relationships (Anderson 2002, p. 125). This is not always the case, however. Patsy Fowler explains that "Centlivre presents true female friendship as a means for conquering, or at least improving, a society in which women must question the motives of each other almost as seriously as they question those of men" (Fowler 1996, p. 57). Looking to *The Wonder* specifically, Anderson suggests, "the effects of Violante's affection for Isabella change the dynamic of the plot's formula drastically" (Anderson 2002, p. 125). While Fowler and Anderson make these observations, however, they do not make explicit claims about how these changes play out in *The Wonder*. By framing Violante and Isabella as its center and putting them in charge of the homosocial square that structures the play, Centlivre disrupts and restructures the typical marriage plot in a way that opens up the potential for queer temporality and futurity. Her heroines become more invested in each other than in the men who may provide them with security, and as such, are able to find alternatives that do not require competition or objectification.

Though many of the most popular plays of the period relied on competition between women for both comedic effect and conflict in the plot, ideas about female cooperation and community were circulating throughout the Restoration and early eighteenth century. Margaret Cavendish's closet drama *The Convent of Pleasure* (Cavendish [1668] 2012) creates a Utopian space for women who are resistant to marriage and puts an explicitly queer romantic relationship between two women on full display—the only wrinkle is that the woman Lady Happy falls in love with turns out to be a man. Despite this twist at the end, the play illustrates the potential for women's happiness outside of and, in fact, beyond marriage to men: their relationships with other women serve as protection from the potential trials of relationships with men. A more realistic version of this Utopian space is presented by Mary Astell in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694). Astell argues for a Christian monastery made up entirely of women, a space that will allow women to move freely and pursue education. Such a space removes women from the influences of a society that teaches them "that the best improvement we can make of these, is to attract the eyes of men. We value *them* too much, and our *selves* too little, if we place any part of our worth in their Opinion; and do not think our selves capable of Nobler Things than the pitiful conquest of some worthless heart" (Astell 1694, pp. 14–15). Isabella rejects the man her father has chosen for her to marry because he has a large fortune, and he sees his daughter as nothing more than an object to sell to the highest bidder; under Violante's care, she is able to assess her own desires and pursue them. And though Violante rejects the idea of living in a convent in favor of marrying Felix, Centlivre's clear critique of the Catholic patriarchy suggests that the convent she is destined for would be a space of oppression rather than freedom. She and Isabella therefore seek to make Violante's apartments a safe haven for them both: while it is not the extensive community presented by Cavendish or Astell, they make their own world which, like Cavendish's convent, is invaded by men who seek to carry them away.

Later in the period, the novel becomes a space to explore intimate female friendships with more psychological depth than drama, proving an interesting point of comparison to Centlivre's play. Discussing the all-female, Utopian space of Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* (Scott [1762] 1995), Lisa Moore explains that "repeatedly, in choosing their female friends over their male lovers, this novel's women characters direct their attention away from their current lives toward 'the life to come'" (Moore 1997, p. 38). In the context of Scott's novel, this "life to come" is rooted in Christian visions of purity and heaven, yet there is a distinct parallel with *The Wonder*. By choosing to prioritize female friends, women are looking towards futures—in this world or the afterlife—beyond relationships with men. For Violante and Isabella, their "life to come" is rooted in their sisterhood, a bond that allows them to access possible queer futures that are inaccessible if they rely on men who are too invested in patriarchal rewards to imagine alternatives that privilege women. Maintaining their relationship with each other thus becomes the primary goal of the play: while they each take steps to build or maintain bonds with men, at crucial moments such bonds are sacrificed in order to protect one another. This commitment, like the failures of male homosociality outlined above, reveal the ways in which *The Wonder* rejects the temporal trajectory of most early-eighteenth-century comedy to instead foreground women's desires for something more than an advantageous marriage. By choosing a future in which they can be with each other over futures only defined by heterosexual marriage, they map a new set of relational options that protect them from the structures of patriarchy enforced by their fathers and lovers. The goals of the play therefore shift from an expected investment in economic and social stability towards a more fulfilling and expansive desire for a relationship that pushes past the limitations of marriage: while neither Isabella or Violante swear off men completely, they are not divided at the end of the play, as is so often the case for female friends. Instead, they become sisters and are able to embody the queer future they devote themselves to attaining.

Though Violante and Isabella's devotion to one another proves to be the driving force of *The Wonder*, it is important to note that their relationship grows and changes over the course of the play. When Isabella arrives at her home, Violante's concern is first for her reputation—"Was you distracted *Flora*? To tell my name to a Man you never saw!"—and then for Felix: "Ah! Defend me Heaven, 'tis *Isabella*, Sister to my *Felix*, what has befall'n her? Pray Heaven he's safe" (Centlivre [1714] 2004, p. 62). Once Isabella is revived from her faint, Violante's focus shifts off of Felix and onto his sister; learning of Isabella's daring jump from her window to escape her impending marriage to Don Guzman, she pledges herself to her friend's protection. This change is motivated by Violante's understanding of the threat posed by Don Lopez, but also by the realization that their cooperation has the power to remove them from circuits of masculine control. Though the play is a comedy, Don Lopez's threats against Isabella are serious, a fact that persuades Violante to risk her own safety in order to hide her friend: when Isabella sighs over "the fear of falling into my Father's Clutches again," Violante assures her that "you command my House and Secrecy" (Centlivre [1714] 2004, pp. 63–64). This moment represents an important shift in Violante's priorities that anchor the plot of the play. While she is still concerned about maintaining her relationship with Felix, Violante is more worried that he will find out that she is hiding his sister, which will put both women at risk. Violante's loyalty to Isabella thus requires a great deal of sacrifice, and though Isabella never does the same for her friend, Violante's devotion never wavers.

Due to its unusual focus on women's relationships, Centlivre's play illustrates a new way in which the intrigue drama can operate, with its shift in plot structure allowing for a queering of the expected movement and outcomes of the play. O'Brien explains that within this genre, "the younger generations must exercise [ingenuity] to evade their arbitrary authority and surveillance exposes the capricious and destructive character of their elders' behavior and proves the justice of their overthrow" (O'Brien 2001, p. 176). This normally requires the full participation of all young men and women seeking marriage: in *The Wonder*, however, Felix and Britton are in the dark just like Don Lopez and Don Pedro. Rather than

receiving help from their male counterparts, Isabella and Violante face Felix and Britton as obstacles in their escape from patriarchal control. Paired with their inability to build constructive relationships with other men, their ignorance of Violante and Isabella's plans further emphasizes the masculine failure that is threaded through the play, illustrating a breakdown of the chrononormative production of patriarchal structures expected from early-eighteenth-century drama. Violante is thus required to rely upon Isabella, their maids, and her own quick thinking to successfully elude the men who would undermine their plans, with men often becoming objects controlled by their female counterparts in order to achieve a favorable outcome—a direct reversal of typical eighteenth-century plots. Time and again, Violante must come up with explanations for her secrecy, often having mere moments to imagine excuses, a feat that Felix cannot help but be impressed by late in the play: “The Devil never fail'd a Woman at a Pinch, what a Tale has she form'd in a Minute” (Centlivre [1714] 2004, p. 110). Though Felix ultimately benefits from Violante's plotting, he, Britton, and the other men in the play are, at best, pawns in the women's game, or, at worst, actively destructive forces whose agency must be neutralized.

While Violante must often work alone in order to protect Isabella and their secret, her power is rooted in the queer futurity represented by their relationship: their devotion to one another creates an alternative exit from the dead ends presented to them by their fathers. By prioritizing Isabella over Felix, Violante sets up one of the major conflicts of Centlivre's play while also enacting her longing for an alternative solution—one in which she is able to rescue herself and Isabella from their fathers' plans while affirming their bond through marriage to Felix. In order to do so, however, Violante repeatedly risks Felix's love: as act 2 draws to a close, Violante exclaims, “Oh exquisite Tryal of my Friendship! Yet not even this, shall draw the Secret from me, *That I'll preserve, let Fortune frown, or smile, / And trust my Love, my Love to reconcile*” (Centlivre [1714] 2004, p. 69). These closing lines clearly illustrate her priorities within the play: though Violante loves Felix, the dangers posed by Don Lopez's anger at Isabella and her longing to protect their relationship outweigh that love. While the repetition of “my Love” denotes Felix and affirms her love for him, the connotation of her love for Isabella in her refusal to let nothing “draw the Secret” from her includes Isabella as another love this plot must reconcile in its ending. It is typical in plays from this era for romance to win out over friendship; after all, a husband can provide far more security than a female friend. But Violante and Isabella's devotion to one another disrupts the chronobiological trajectory of the play, wherein the women reject one form of patriarchy, embodied by their fathers, to embrace another, embodied by their husbands. Another love is motivating this plot. Though the play does end with both Violante and Isabella married, the path they take to get there is almost wholly reliant on the choices they make for one another, as Isabella repeatedly asks Violante for help and Violante is more than willing to oblige. By refocusing on the relationship between these two women as the main plot of the play, its outcome is less about the reproduction of new form of heterosexual patriarchy and more about the potential embodied in their new, legally recognized bond as sisters. It comes as no surprise, then, that Violante chooses to guard Isabella “at the Hazard of [Felix's] love” (Centlivre [1714] 2004, p. 65).

Centlivre tests Violante's devotion to both Isabella and Felix time and again over the course of *The Wonder*, and her dedication to her friend is often framed in scholarship as an adherence to a “masculine” construction of honor that was circulating during the period. Jacqueline Pearson suggests that Violante “is a strong and virtuous woman, who insists that woman's honour lies not only, as convention suggests, in chastity but also, like a man's, in being faithful to a friend and keeping one's word” (Pearson 1988, p. 211). Such a framing of honor and friendship, however, undermines the extreme risks that Violante takes in order to preserve the queer future she imagines with Isabella. Unlike Violante and Isabella, Felix is incapable of viewing women as having motivations outside of patriarchal structures: repeatedly questioning Violante's fidelity, he makes it clear that he can only imagine that her secret is about a man and scorns her for her supposed lack of chastity.

When Frederick is in a similar position, however, he readily takes his friend's word rather than basing assumptions off of evidence:

Felix: Now Frederick, tho' I ought to thank you for your Care of me, yet till I am satisfied about my Father's Accusation, I can't return the Acknowledgements I owe you: Know you aught relating to my Sister?

Frederick: I hope my Faith, and Truth, are known to you—And here by both I swear, I am ignorant of every Thing relating to your Father's Charge.

Felix: Enough, I do believe thee! Oh Fortune! Where will thy Malice end! (Centlivre [1714] 2004, p. 78)

Violante pleads with Felix in this way repeatedly, yet his faith in her continually fails. Like the fathers in the play, Felix views Violante's value as so deeply embedded in her chastity that her word is not enough. His inability to trust her reinforces the importance of her relationship with Isabella. Unlike men, who can maintain friendships with relative ease, Violante must face verbal abuse and threats of violence in order to protect her friend because female honor is defined only by sex. Centlivre allows Violante to embody a queer form honor, rejecting the assumed value of her chastity in favor of the value of her friendship in order to imagine a future that remains faithful to her love for Isabella as well as her marriage to Felix.

This queer honor is most evident when Violante and Isabella discuss their trust in one another. A sharp contrast to her brother, Isabella trusts Violante fully and innately; when she arrives at her friend's home, she asks "What kind Star preserv'd, and lodg'd me here?" viewing Violante's home as a heavenly safe haven away from her father (Centlivre [1714] 2004, p. 62). To Violante's credit, her dedication to Isabella's safety never wavers, even when Isabella doubts its limits. When it appears that Felix is concealing his own affair from Violante, Isabella fears that her brother's behavior might have an impact on her, and that she no longer has a claim to Violante's friendship:

Isabella: Then I am most unhappy; my Brother was the only Pledge of Faith betwixt us, if he forfeited your Favour, I have no Title to your Friendship.

Violante: You wrong my Friendship, *Isabella*; Your own Merit intitles you to every thing within my Power. (Centlivre [1714] 2004, p. 87)

Violante and Isabella make a pledge that defies the triangulation of their relationship through a man and squares the lines of devotion to allow for an independent connection between the two women. Their language is romantic, but it is this claim to their relationship on its own structural terms that opens up queer potential of the plot. By telling Isabella that "Your own Merit intitles you to every thing within my Power," Violante makes her own contract with her friend—it is this contract that cements their queer future. Unlike marriage contracts controlled by men that center upon the exchange of property, the framing of friendship as something that Isabella can claim as a *thing unto itself* transforms their relationship into something that has value. As such, the contract that they form with one another not only pre-dates the contracts that Violante forms with Felix and Isabella with Britton, but also transcends the economic concerns their fathers quibble over at the end of the play, rejecting the chronobiological urges embedded in the marriage contract. They have quite literally invested in each other over the course of the play, and their contract, which is built upon their devotion to one another, is legally affirmed when they become sisters at the end.

The contract that Violante and Isabella form with one another depends not only on words and feelings, but also on actions. Though Violante spends the majority of the play defending her quarters from a variety of male invaders, in one crucial moment she welcomes Britton in at Isabella's request, and it is in this moment that she illustrates the power that has come along with her sacrifice. Disguised with a veil, Violante meets with him in order to arrange his marriage to Isabella, and while the Colonel initially attempts to dodge questions of matrimony, as he did when talking with Isabella on the *Terreiro de passa*, he eventually consents when he learns that Violante can promise him the hand of

the woman he had caught falling from a window the night before. She explains that she is not the woman he seeks, “but I can give you an Account of Her; that Lady is a Maid of Condition, has ten Thousand Pounds; and if you are a single Man, her Person, and Fortune are at your Service” (Centlivre [1714] 2004, p. 91). No longer the object of a triangular exchange between men, Violante is now the broker of a marriage contract, one that will affirm primary bonds between women and (at least temporarily) reject the patterns of chronobiological production so often embedded in marriage plots. Because she does not hold power over Isabella and therefore seeks no material reward from her marriage like a father or brother might, Violante’s conversation with Britton helps construct a square of mutual relationality rather than a triangle that cuts the women off from one another. Convincing Britton to marry Isabella not only provides for Isabella’s future, but secures Violante’s relationship with Felix, providing an explanation for Britton’s presence in her chambers and her insistence on being secretive throughout the play. Violante’s control of this situation thus reinforces all sides of the square: Britton and Felix can now become friends, secure in the knowledge that they are not competing for the same woman; Isabella and Violante will marry by choice, removing themselves from the plans their fathers have made; and, crucially, the relationship between the Violante and Isabella will be elevated from friendship to sisterhood in the eyes of the law and their families. They engineer a plot that cements their relationship to each other.

If we adjust the lens used to consider the plotlines found in early-eighteenth-century drama so that we focus on relationships between women, the queerness of *The Wonder* becomes clear. By utilizing Muñoz’s and Freeman’s exploration of queer futurity, queer temporality, and chrononormativity, Centlivre’s revision of the familiar intrigue plot transforms into a consideration of the queer potential of women’s relationships. The relational geometry taking place in Centlivre’s play still relies upon the structures of heterosexual patriarchy—it is not so radical as to suggest that Violante and Isabella can maintain the safety of their all-female safe haven permanently—but the movement of the plot rejects chronobiological impulses and exposes the cracks in patriarchal structures. Those cracks, which can be easily ignored if one focuses exclusively on the shift from old to new patriarchy or the way women are exchanged as property by men, serve as a breeding ground for queer futurity, allowing space for women to seek alternative relationships and goals outside of previously existing structures. By exploiting the breakdown of men’s relationships, Violante and Isabella are able to invest in their own bond, write their own contract of devotion, and navigate their way out of the traps laid by the men who surround them. Without Violante’s help, Isabella was doomed to a marriage she did not want or, quite possibly, death at her father’s and brother’s hands. Without Isabella’s intervention, Violante might not have escaped with Felix and may have been sent away to a convent while her father hoarded her inheritance. These women have no future without one another and are therefore determined to create a future where they remain united. Together, they are able to pull off something truly wondrous: they not only keep the title’s secret, but embody the queer potential of an intimate sisterhood, reaching to find, in the words of Muñoz, the “something” that is missing.

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