

How Much is a Woman Worth? Agency and the Commodification of Women in Plays by Centlivre and Gay

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Abstract:

If one wants to understand how society values women's autonomy and economic freedom, examining historical perspectives can provide striking insights. In eighteenth-century England, satire was often employed to tackle such complex societal issues. Two satirical plays, Susanna Centlivre's *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* and John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, written just ten years apart, demonstrate remarkable convergence in their parallel critiques of the commodification of women in eighteenth-century England. Though written from opposing political and gender perspectives—one by a female Whig and the other by a male Tory—both works satirize how women's worth was inextricably tied to market forces.

This paper examines how each playwright embodies a distinct form of commodification in their heroine: Centlivre's Anne Lovely represents woman as a contractual commodity, while Gay's Polly Peachum represents woman as a commercial commodity. Through analysis of period-specific economic language and the influence of events like the South Sea Bubble Crisis, this study demonstrates how each playwright reflected contemporary anxieties about women's roles in emerging economic systems through their heroine. Centlivre presents contractual marriage as a potential path to limited female agency, depicting Anne's marriage contract as a form of consensual liberation from tyrannical guardianship. In contrast, Gay portrays all forms of female commodification—whether through marriage or prostitution—as inherently corrupt, with Polly caught between competing systems of exploitation. Despite the opposing perspectives shaped by their differing genders and political allegiances, neither playwright ultimately

envisions a world where women escape commodification. Neither a female Whig's faith in contractual protection, nor a male Tory's cynicism towards mercantilism could render their heroine any less a commodity in eighteenth-century England. This literary analysis draws on historical context and period-specific metaphors linking women to commerce in satire to contribute to scholarly understanding of how gender and political affiliation shaped dramatic representations of women in the period.

If one set out to design a truly inspired double feature for a playgoing audience in the eighteenth century, one might pair Susanna Centlivre's *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* with John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* in consecutive viewings. At first blush, these two plays might appear fundamentally incompatible. One is a ballad opera written by a male Tory, and the other is a comedy written by a female Whig. They differ in context, tone, and concern characters from very different social classes. One quite literally ends at the gallows, while the other concludes with a triumphant marriage. Yet, both are works of satire and, when viewed alongside each other, reveal compelling parallel viewpoints about complex themes: the commodification of women in eighteenth-century England, the limited roles available to women, the marriage market, and the lack of power of women in society. Commodification was not only a critical factor influencing society in eighteenth-century England; it also lies at the heart of both plays, yet the diametrically opposed gender and political affiliations of their playwrights led to wildly different representations of these themes in their works.

Each playwright embodied a distinct form of commodification in their heroine: Centlivre's Anne Lovely represents woman as a contractual commodity and Gay's Polly Peachum represents woman as a commercial commodity. The relative contemporaneity of the

plays, the opposing gender and politics of the two playwrights, and the influence of economic factors like the South Sea Bubble and new economic systems provide a wealth of perspectives through which to view these characters, including their different representations of class and agency, and their role as commodity in the plays. Contemporary attitudes toward women as commodities can be evaluated through the language used to discuss women and commerce during the eighteenth century. This provides a lens with which to analyze the characters of Anne Lovely and Polly Peachum. Viewing each heroine through the commodified role given to them by their playwright reveals the satirical function they serve in their respective play. When placed in opposition to each other, the characters of Anne and Polly provide compelling evidence for the influence of contrasting authorial perspectives.

In the eighteenth century, women and courtship were spoken of using the language of commerce. As Catherine Ingrassia states in "Money and Sexuality in the Enlightenment," "[t]he language of political economy is never gender neutral" (96). Cheap vernacular medicine books, commonly available on the consumer market, used shipping and commerce metaphors to represent women as "passive goods" to be traded or sold (Fissell 120). Pregnancy, labor, and delivery were discussed like cargo transport. A woman must use "careful conduct" on this voyage to avoid danger: "The chief Concern and Care, is about her right Unloading and Delivery, that being brought safe to Port, she and the Child be well" (120). Nor did a woman's ties to economic language end after pregnancy; women were often used as symbols for unstable economic institutions. Political cartoons include figures such as the Lady of the Bank of England, Lady of the South Sea Company, or fickle characters such as the Lady of Fortune (Ingrassia "Pleasure of Business" 196-198).

This gendering of language led to the economy being viewed on a gendered spectrum.

Economic interests tied to traditional systems like land and hard currency were seen as masculine, stable, and stoic. In contrast, newer mercantile economic systems involving paper credit, trade, and stocks, as well as those associated with such affairs like stockjobbers and the South Sea Company, were depicted as feminine, greedy, hysterical, and full of ruinous guile and avarice (Ingrassia “Money and Sexuality” 97-99). The ability of women to participate in the economy through speculative activities such as stocks and lotteries gave them the means to obtain a measure of economic freedom not tied to the pin money provided by their husbands (Ingrassia “Pleasure of Business” 202-203). This increased male fears of women’s independence and self-pleasure (204). Anxiety surrounding women and commerce was rife in the public consciousness.

Depictions of the role that women play as commodities are embodied in the heroines of both plays. Anne Lovely from *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* represents a woman as a contractual commodity—such as hard currency or land. Anne’s identity is supremely tied to a physical document, a marriage contract. This contract is stipulated in her late father’s will and enforced by the withheld consent of four contrary guardians holding her and her £30,000 fortune hostage to their whims. This can only be overcome by equally contractarian scheming (Tierney-Hynes 96). Through the intercession of the dashing Colonel Fainwell—the masculine active agent of change to Anne’s passive feminine role of property to be acquired—the play presents marriage as a “rationalizing force, both in the sense of providing a resolution to the plot and in the sense of establishing rationality (96). To deserve Anne’s fortune, Fainwell, as a knight-errant, must rescue Anne from her unreasonable guardians, just like one of her maid’s stories of “ladies delivered from the chains of magic” (Centlivre I.ii.52-53). Only through such bold action can Anne be liberated from her predicament into the bonds of civilized marriage.

Marriage is depicted as advantageous, egalitarian, and acutely commercial. Anne gets her freedom and keeps her inheritance, which she insists upon. According to the bargain Anne strikes with Fainwell, if he cannot obtain consent, he “must not marry me at all,” but if he secures the signatures and thus the money and her freedom from her guardians, Anne promises “to make him master of that freedom” (I.ii.48-51). Fainwell agrees. After all, he knows a good deal when he sees one. He tells his friends, “What would not a man attempt for a fine woman and thirty thousand pounds?” (I.i.140-141). Anne’s position is such that she has almost no agency in the decision outside of making such a deal with Fainwell. She is not free to choose her husband, nor is she free to choose where she resides. She must shuttle between each of her guardians and fashion herself to fit their taste. She has no freedom or agency to affect her situation or location. Anne is static. Just like a county estate awaiting purchase, Anne must await the outcome without the ability to affect circumstances. Her guardians even redecorate her to suit themselves. By way of greeting, once Anne returns to stay in his home, her guardian Obadiah Prim tells her, “Put on a handkerchief, Anne Lovely” suggesting her attire is immodestly low cut, to his Quaker sensibilities (II.ii.53-54). Anne’s best hope is that Fainwell is a better deal for her while bargaining cleverly on her behalf.

In her introduction for *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*, editor Nancy Copeland compares Fainwell to a tradesman who “suits his manner to his customers” to flatter them into bargaining away their consent to marry Anne and sign the marriage contract, with all parties treating Anne like a commodity (903). Part of Anne’s satirical role is reflected in how her guardians abuse their status to enrich themselves, most notably Tradelove, who Fainwell accuses of attempting to trade Anne away like one of his stocks (Burkert 66). Centlivre expressed growing concern about the stock market in the later stages of her career; Tradelove’s actions may be her attempt to critique

the excesses in the financial systems (64). As a woman, perhaps Centlivre believed Anne was a valuable commodity, after all.

Yet, what makes Anne slightly different from a common stock or goods on the open market is that once the contract is signed, Anne moves into the realm of a landed estate, establishing Fainwell in society. Once Anne is won and the bargain is struck, she is spoken of as a house purchased. Fainwell now has a “lease for life” on his “beautiful tenement” (Centlivre V.i.578-579). Even Sir Philip now refers to him as a “fine gentleman” (V.i.598). Anne is under contract with her new owner and, presumably, will not be back on the market again. This is a lifetime purchase.

Notably, Anne herself appears happy with this outcome. Her final line is to laugh, praising Fainwell’s skill in the trade (V.i.604). She also willingly conspires with Fainwell to deceive the Prims and thus is an active participant in obtaining the final signature for the contract (V.i). It is a choice between living under an unjust contract imposed upon her by her father’s will and another contract imposed by marriage. Anne chooses liberty by electing to make herself the sole property of one man and rejecting the “tyranny,” as she calls it, of the collective of men with competing interests holding her as a joint concern (V.i.33-35). For Anne, a consensual contract is liberation.

The fact that Anne obtains her liberty from one set of guardians by entering a contractual obligation to another is perhaps the most consistent example of Centlivre’s Whiggish alliance to consent-driven, liberal, contractualist principles—the idea that the highest form of liberty is adherence to “a contract made between two consenting parties” (Tierney-Hynes 98). To Centlivre’s view and her Whig politics, a contract entered under these conditions opened a path to sexual equality for women in marriage because it provided a route to negotiation, some

personal liberty, and legal protection for women (Davis 535). Anne's submission to the social contract allows her to access greater agency in the future under her own terms (532). As Centlivre's heroine, Anne, the contractual commodity, legally becomes Fainwell's estate. Hopefully, she will gain more independence and personal freedom by living under a contract she chooses for herself.

On the other side of this equation is Polly Peachum, the heroine of a Tory playwright and propagandist, representing womanhood as a commercial commodity in his critique of Whiggish economics. On that gendered economic spectrum, Polly represents those more unpleasant, wholly feminine ideals of commerce—that of the easily spent coin willfully traded away. Gay's anti-Whig satire of women as commercial symbols subject to market forces is explicit. In the darkly satirical world of *The Beggar's Opera*, Polly is presented with several options for commodification: economic free agent in some form, the property of a husband, or economic manipulation at the hands of another party. None of these options are presented as particularly rewarding or leading to happiness for Polly, but nevertheless, profit is on the table for someone.

Polly's position in her underworld gang life is commodified. Her father looks upon her as something of a business asset stating: "a handsome wench in our way of business is as profitable as at the bar of a Temple coffee house" (Gay *Beggar's Opera* I.iv.82-84). When Peachum demands to know if she has ruined herself by entering into a clandestine marriage, it is under this line of reasoning: Polly would be ruined goods if married, for she would have removed herself from circulation as a salable commodity in her father's eyes (Smyth 488). If Polly were performing her role correctly, according to Peachum, she would employ her charms to make herself profitable to their entire gang (492). Mrs. Peachum also views her daughter and herself in economic terms. To Mrs. Peachum: "A maid is like the golden ore, which hath guineas intrinsical

in't," while a married woman is "like a guinea in gold, stamped with the name of her spouse" (Gay I.v.9-14). To Mrs. Peachum, before a woman is wed, her value is undetermined, but once she is married and stamped with a man's name, once she is fully property, she is merely one coin among many and interchangeable with any other (Piper 347). This is the option of a commodity offered to Polly by her mother. Mrs. Peachum is a woman as a wife – the property of her husband who is worth precisely as much as any other wife, who can be traded freely like any other good at a set market rate without individuality (347). The other option for commodification, encouraged by her father, is to refuse to "make herself a property" and trade her charms for profit as a free agent on the open market (*Gay Beggar's Opera* I.iv.95-96). Polly's parents had conflicting ideas about her worth and future.

It remains unclear if the Peachums intended that their daughter should be a prostitute or that they wanted to sell her openly as one, although this has been speculated. When confronted by her father about the possibility of her marriage, Polly claims to have granted men "trifling liberties" for a watch and other marks of "favor" (I.vii.5-7). She speaks of what seems to be a shared value of a girl who knows how to "grant some things and refuse what is most material" (I.vii.7-8). Her father encourages her "toying and trifling" with customers "in the way of business or to get out a secret" (I.vii.19-21). This sounds more like capitalizing on flirting and teasing than open pimping and prostitution for money. This is more akin to how a woman might extend the courtship phase of her time on the marriage market for the freedom and profit it affords her than to how a woman might engage in prostitution for economic benefit.

Gay does explore prostitution as an economic possibility for women in *The Beggar's Opera* through other female characters. In a tavern, we meet women who speak openly of working as prostitutes and robbing men while doing so (II.iv). Jenny Diver proudly declares to

“never go to the tavern with a man but in the view of business. I have other hours and other sort of men for my pleasure” (II.iv.82-84). We later meet Trapes, a Madame who prices her “ladies” based on their dresses—from a half crown to two guineas (III.vi.103-105). She owns the clothes, and the customers rent the ladies. The dresses have value to Trapes; the ladies are more of a means to an end—just a part of the trading process. They are not actually people to Trapes, merely commodities on the market to be bought and sold, or more accurately, rented in the manner of circulating assets.

By seeking marriage to Macheath, Polly attempts to leave this traded commodities market and make herself a “property,” as her father sees it, which will remove her from this system. Her mother is less opposed to Polly marrying but wishes she would have picked a better partner. According to Mrs. Peachum, Polly will be “ill-used” and neglected by Macheath, so it would have been preferable for Polly to marry a rich man, not a highwayman (I.viii.28-30). To her parent's dismay, Polly insists she did not marry him “as tis the fashion” for money—but for love (I.viii.66-67). Polly is seeking happiness instead of making economically driven choices.

Not that Polly finds any joy in the institution of marriage. Her new husband only uses marriage to attain wealth and social position and to rebel against the social and economic systems holding him down (Dryden 541). In Newgate Prison, Polly learns that Macheath is involved with other women. She sings “I’m bubbled” alongside his mistress, Lucy Lockit, while heavily pregnant, combining the South Sea Bubble crisis with common metaphors for pregnancy that received gales of laughter from contemporary audiences at the wealth of meanings in the joke for the multiple ways she was being cheated (Fissell 138). The South Sea Bubble was used as shorthand for sex as commerce in a great number of ways, with satirical decks of playing cards from the period showing women reduced to poverty or refusing to trade sex for stock

certificates (115-116). The finale reveals Macheath's multiple marriages as "social acts of piracy" against the corrupt institution of state-sanctioned marriages and the economic systems that support them—Polly is just one more hapless victim in his plots (Dryden 545). Ultimately, everyone tries to control Polly. Her parents value her for her economic utility to themselves, Macheath values her only as a sexual conquest, while Polly herself remains merely a commodity.

Gay himself even tried to regain control over Polly by making her the subject of his dramatic sequel after commenting that he privately feared her popularity surpassed that of the play itself (Brewer 50). In *Polly: An Opera*, Gay further subjects his heroine to market forces, albeit ones she might have some control over. The play follows the possibility hinted at by Macheath in *The Beggar's Opera*, that Polly might travel to the West Indies to find a new husband (or two) and enrich herself — although she actually pursues Macheath there after his transportation (51). Of course, Polly is then duped and sold into slavery to the wealthy, powerful Ducat. This new "owner" declares that she is as much his legal property "as any woman is her husband's who sells herself in marriage" (Gay *Polly* I.xi.63-65). This reiterates Gay's theme of the commodification of women as the property of their husbands in marriage. Despite Polly's misfortunes, she retains her innocence and moral virtues not shared by the characters around her (O'Shaughnessy 225). After all, Polly explicitly refutes claims of complicity with her parents' actions back in England claiming that, "I never engaged in my father's affairs" (Gay *Polly* I.v.14-15). Even in her distress, Polly declares, "My freedom may be lost, but you cannot rob me of my virtue and integrity" (I.xi.94-95). Gay appears to have added these lines to respond directly to the initial audience's perceptions of Polly since they directly refute the accusations that Polly was corrupt, a prostitute, she married for reasons other than love, or was anything less than virtuous (O'Shaughnessy 226-227). Polly might be as subject to commodification and market forces as all

other women in the political world that Gay depicts. Still, as a propagandist, Gay also seems to have understood her value as an untarnished economic symbol.

Gay's issue with marriage, as a Tory, was that by its contractual nature, it made women property and could be manipulated by men for their gain and profit (Dryden 459). With all his rights, the Whig sovereign subject was a male subject, and under the bonds of a contractual marriage, the wife was merely an object of his ownership (Smyth 493). The commodified woman of *The Beggar's Opera* is either an unmarried economic free agent fully subject to the whims of the market but without any of the actual protections of full personhood, or the property of her husband rendered into a different sort of object by ownership under the contractual bonds of marriage. Neither appears to be a bright prospect. While she symbolizes the only relatively virtuous person, Polly, can be "bubbled" and cheated alongside everyone else. Her goodness does not save her one drop of trouble or pain. The economy does not care.

Anne Lovely and Polly are two sides to the same coin. Each of them speaks to the missing pieces in the other. Anne has an inheritance once married but no say in who she will marry, unless her guardians agree. She cannot choose her husband freely. Her economic liberty is tied to a successful marriage contract. Polly has no inheritance, and thus, her guardians have no say in her marriage. Yet for Polly, this limits economic liberty as she removes options for "favors" and "trade" by marrying for love and taking herself off the marriage market. Neither woman has any actual economic agency on her own, neither practices an independent trade, nor has any liberty outside of male suitors. Both Polly and Anne have their fortunes tied up in what they can receive from men within their societies. They both have their worth tied to their status as goods on the market—one as a property owned as an estate and the other as a good to be traded. Neither are truly valued for their worth as a person.

Both playwrights wrote about the struggles of women in the eighteenth-century and the economic conditions surrounding them. Their opposing political affiliations and gender gave them very different approaches to that material, and thus, they treated their heroines quite differently. While Centlivre believed in the power of a well-negotiated contract that carries the strength of the law provided all parties agree to it, Gay had no such faith in contracts nor in capitalist ventures. Ultimately, Centlivre and Gay gave their heroines little agency in either story. While Anne Lovely agrees to her marriage, it could be argued that it was the lesser of two evils, and she remains someone's property at the end of the day. Polly fares little better, for could any of Gay's liberated prostitutes be said to enjoy their economic freedom in *The Beggar's Opera*, where the best one can hope for is to escape to the colonies in the sequel? Women and the economy were inextricably linked in the public consciousness of the eighteenth-century. Though Centlivre and Gay wrote from opposing perspectives, their heroines represent two sides of the same economic coin –whether as contractual property or commercial commodity, a woman's worth in eighteenth-century England was inextricably linked to the market forces that sought to trade her. Neither a female Whig's faith in contractual protection nor a male Tory's cynicism towards mercantilism could render their heroine any less a commodity.

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AI Tools and Works Consulted

I used Claude.ai to pre-read articles and sort them. I also used Grammarly to check spelling, grammar, and punctuation. However, I do not utilize Grammarly's "premium" features that include tone suggestions and offer rewriting assistance.