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Economics and Mate Selection as Illustrated in *The Beau Defeated*

Mary Pix, in her play *The Beau Defeated; or, the Lucky Younger Brother* (1700), discusses themes of how economic standing plays an important role in mate selection in eighteenth century Britain. In this play, Pix focuses on the ability of the female to acquire a mate through the use of high financial standing. In some instances, this high socio-economic standing allows common people to acquire titles through marriage. In other instances, a woman who may otherwise seem undesirable to a man is able to marry because the potential mate has need of her wealth. Pix does not focus much in this play on how males can acquire a more desirable mate through the use of his income, but instead she fixes her subject matter on the desirability of women who are wealthy. Through the writing of Mary Pix, one is able to observe a different perspective on how eighteenth century British women were able to utilize their wealth to secure both a mate and position within society.

During the eighteenth century, marriage was different from how we view it currently. In modern times, a higher emphasis is placed on love between the couple, and while issues of economics do still figure into mate selection now, they have less importance placed on them than during this period of British history. Love was considered something that could drive a person to madness. Additionally, loving a woman was thought of as being something that did definitely cause mental disorders in men and thereby was not encouraged (Porter 211-42). As a result, love had little importance when dealing with mate selection. Despite this, it is during this period where English subjects began to transition over from marrying purely for financial reasons to those involving love and emotion, and, as a result, this is a theme that is explored extensively in Restoration and eighteenth century theatre as well as other manifestations of period popular culture (Roulston).

As love was not a major consideration in formal mate selection processes, one must ask what could prompt women to want to marry. In eighteenth century England, a primary cause for women being desirous of marriage was to elevate one's social status or to increase one's wealth ("Love and Marriage in 18th Century"). Mary Pix emphasizes this idea through her use of the character Mrs. Rich. A widow, she is consumed with becoming a person of "quality," and seeks a new husband who is titled. She has inherited a considerable income, and, as such, her emphasis

in the process of mate selection is on title. Pix writes "...I had rather be the beggarliest countess in the Town than the widow of the richest banker in Europe" to summarize the feelings of Mrs. Rich's priorities (Canfield and Von 810-56). Due the structure of inheritance during this period of England's history, coupled with the stripping of wealth through high taxation and redistribution from aristocrats, a woman of wealth could effectively purchase a title by marrying a poor noble. Throughout *The Beau Defeated*, Pix consistently uses this approach in her writing of Mrs. Rich's character to denote that socioeconomics play a much larger role in the process of selecting a spouse than love does.

An interesting facet of property and inheritance law during this time is the fact that married women did not typically own or inherit property. Generally speaking, when a woman married, she and her belongings became the property of her spouse, subject to his administrative decisions and she had no legal claim to control any portions of her dowry, other premarital wealth, or their joint fortunes. Although it is true that in some instances married women were able to administer their own accounts or to inherit property from deceased husbands, this was not usually the case. Laws in England were very clear that the premarital property of the wife became part of the husband's property, and that any property gained during their tenure belonged exclusively to him and was used by her only in the instances the husband permitted (Dubler 1641-70). More often than not, a widow, instead of inheriting her husband's property, simply became the responsibility of a male relation of her own or of her husband's. Single women, however, had no such constraints and were able to control their own finances and collect and control inheritances (Offen). Mary Pix demonstrates this issue, again through the use of Mrs. Rich. Pix writes, in reference to the brother-in-law who controls Mrs. Rich's estate, "...[T]he fellow thinks himself of importance and is continually a-censuring my conduct and controlling my actions..." (Canfield and Von 810-56). It is clear in these passages that one of the reasons this character seeks a new marriage is *not* exclusively for the purpose of gaining title, but to gain financial independence from her late husband's relations who control her finances.

The concept of marriage as a form of slavery was also a large issue during this time, due to property and inheritance laws (Mandeville and Goldsmith). Many women believed that by leaving their fathers' houses and going straight into their husbands', often in a situation where the marriages were arranged by the parents without the woman being able to make decisions of preference in whom they might marry, that marriage was akin to slavery. It is understandable that the female might feel this way, particularly when one considers that the woman marries without ever being able to exercise any degree of control over her own finances or personal desires. It is also understandable that men might not have any interest or thought in any direction over whether marriage was actually akin to slavery for women, as they typically were not adversely affected by these marriages; if anything, in many cases the male benefited tangibly from these unions. Pix illustrates this benefit to the male when she describes the character Younger Clerimont reading a letter that says, "I am a mistress, have abundance of money, if you have but little. A wise man may pick comfort out of this" (Canfield and Von 810-56). However, for women of stature, social conventions effectively required that the woman seek a husband to leave her father, and maintenance of expected social norms provided sufficient incentive for women to marry in order to maintain family standing within their social stratum.

Many families, primarily in the lower classes, during this time opted instead for informal,

or common law, marriages. This was of great benefit to women because it allowed the female to mate for love rather than money. In abstaining from formal marriage, the female was able to retain all legal rights to her wealth and through this she had the privilege of needing not worry what happened to her property under the law when she engaged in a long-term relationship. Additionally, in instances where the female owned a business or otherwise had control of large sums of money, she was able to mate to the man of her choice without losing control of her assets. It is likely that this was advantageous to the man as well, as he could mate for love while still obtaining the practical benefits of her financial status through informally shared household wealth, even if he did not control her money legally. In situations where social status plays a role in the mate selection process (as would be seen in the middle and upper classes), formal marriage was more conventionally appropriate and thus men had little incentive to be amenable to the idea of informal marriage. For the male to eschew formal marriage in favor of informal, he was then open to social repercussions such as the loss of inheritance or perception of those within his social milieu as a man who acted honorably and in accordance with the standards with which he was expected to conform.

The social status of the eighteenth century British woman was entirely linked to that of her parentage or husband. The female herself had little ability to control her socioeconomic destiny, excepting through marriage. Titles were something a woman was unable to acquire on her own, and thus, the woman was forced to find someone of quality to marry if she was not born into a titled family. Pix again uses Mrs. Rich to demonstrate this fact. Mrs. Rich's extreme obsession with leaving the middle class and becoming a person of quality is reflected in Mrs. Rich's desire to marry Sir John Roverhead, whom she believes possesses a title. Although Roverhead is poor, Mrs. Rich is able to use her wealth to acquire a title through him. Pix cleverly expresses the ease with which a woman in the wealthy middle class might be deceived into giving up her wealth without getting the title for which she attempted to barter her wealth. When it is discovered that Roverhead does not have the ability to confer the desired title upon her (because he is not actually a man of quality), Mrs. Rich does not marry Roverhead. Instead, Pix writes of another means of gaining title. In place of a marriage with someone who already possesses title, Pix's character, instead, marries someone whose family was once possessed of title, and her money can then be used to buy the title back. Pix also addresses the issue of women of quality who are seeking a husband. She here creates the character Lady Landsworth, a titled, wealthy widow who is seeking true love and therefore attempts to conceal her wealth in order to marry someone who cares for her instead of her position or money. In both of these situations within the play, issues of female status are addressed from opposing starting points: one widow wishes to gain title through marriage while the other has high status and money already and, wanting only love, seeks that instead. As widows who derived social status from that of their deceased husbands, these characters had great freedom in selecting a mate without requiring consent from a relative as they may have needed while single women.

As outlined above, women during this period had very little control over their own financial well being, and legal statutes were written to reflect this as a desire of the state. Through legal regulation of a single woman's financial status, England was able to encourage women to marry and act in accordance with the social customs preferred by this society. Widows in particular had a special legal status. While it is true that in some instances widows did have control over their own affairs, this was largely a rare occurrence because legal statutes favored

people other than the widow in the issue of estate management. As the widow was no longer technically married, she fell into a legal grey zone partly reflective of a married person and partly reflective of a single one. The widow is thought of as being separate from other types of single women in part because she *had* been married, but also because her status is still determined in relation to the status of her deceased husband. This makes legal decisions relating to widows more complicated, and laws reflect this conflict. Pix herself makes clear her desire to see laws governing women's fortunes modified through *The Beau Defeated* by creating a play filled with a stunning role reversal regarding the machinations of men and women to secure a healthy financial future and self-determination through the use of mate selection and formal marriage (Evans 15-33).

Widows in eighteenth century England had varying legal rights to their husbands' estates, dependent on whether the couple produced offspring. In instances where the couple remained childless, the widow was legally entitled to full life possession of the land and chattel she owned prior to her marriage. For the duration of her married life, the woman retained no possession of her premarital assets; instead, ownership of these items was transferred wholly to her husband. Additionally, she was entitled to one third of her husband's land and half of his chattel. In instances where the couple had borne children, the widow received only one third of her husband's land and chattel. It is important to note here that the widow inherited life possession of this land, rather than full and proper ownership, as she was not free to deed the land to anyone else effective upon her death. Upon the widow's death, this land reverted back to any existing male heirs in the husband's family line. In effect, Britain's laws allowed the widow to borrow this land from her husband's male relatives rather than inheriting it directly (McGranahan 356-67). Because wives were legally considered to be the property of their husbands and additionally possessed no property of their own, they were disallowed the right to create wills while their husbands were still living and therefore had no say in the dispensation of their premarital property in instances where the husband survived the wife (ibid).

An examination of the characters Mrs. Rich and Lady Landsworth makes it clear it is clear that Lady Landsworth is widowed by a man who left a will allowing greater relief to his wife than he had any legal obligation to provide. Lady Landsworth's focus is on obtaining a marriage based on love rather than economics, something she likely would have been unable to do while maintaining her accustomed lifestyle, had her husband left her only the legally required portion of his estate. Mrs. Rich, however, was clearly not provided for in these terms. Her brother-in-law, who maintains control over the late Mr. Rich's estate, uses his legal possession of the estate as the method through which he attempts to control the widow's idiosyncratic choices. She longs to marry, not only to become a woman of quality, but also to be free from the rule of her brother-in-law. Had she received full ownership and control of their joint property, Mrs. Rich may also have sought a relationship based on affection in lieu of one related to economics and status. Ideally, Mrs. Rich requires a husband who is not only titled, but also one who has uxorious inclinations if she wishes to maintain her freedom from masculine control of her finances.

Although financial stability clearly plays a role in mate selection, these are not the only criteria involved in such processes. One must not discount the involvement of physical attractiveness, facial symmetry, and body construction when a man selects his future wife in

modern times, and factors such as these should not be discounted when examining the mate selection process of the eighteenth century. Pix makes mention of these factors, writing “I appointed to meet here the prettiest rosebud; if her fortune equals the widow, she secures me[,]” and “...to show how awkwardly an old woman makes advances” for the character Sir John Roverhead (Canfield and Von 832, 822). These lines are suggestive that Pix is aware of the cost of aging for a single woman in terms of attracting a mate. However, as this line is spoken by a character who is seeking a marriage with the woman who carries the largest purse, there is an implicit statement by Pix that although physical concerns are relevant when seeking a spouse, money has more relevance to the eighteenth century Briton.

A person’s character also has some bearing on the type of mate he or she will acquire, and Pix mentions this concern through a conversation between Jack and Younger Clerimont. Jack inquires, “Do you think ye shall know her, sir[,]” to which Younger Clerimont replies, “[s]he is what I would still abhor...” and Jack reminds Younger Clerimont that “[i]f she has a world of money, sir... But abundance of money covers a multitude of faults, that’s all, sir[,]” demonstrating great concern that her appearance may be something to “abhor” even though financial considerations still take precedence (Canfield and Von 810-56). This section of the play indicates that despite these routine considerations, ultimately finances must have the greatest importance when seeking a mate.

Although in modern times, one has a tendency to associate marriage with love rather than economics, this is a relatively recent development in marital history. Likewise, one also tends to view marital property as something both marriage partners possess equally, but this too is a fairly recent development. In the United States, one typically sees community property in states near the American-Mexican border, as the American tradition of ensuring financial security for widows is a provision inherited from Mexican property law (Couturier 294-305). In states with a higher English influence, community property laws are less common. The modern reader of Restoration and eighteenth century plays may forget that love and community property are recent developments and thereby become confused by Pix’s commentary. Pix, however, lived during the height of the British patriarchal system and commented on, what were for her, new transitions and interests in English marital practices.

Through the use of her characters in *The Beau Defeated*, Mary Pix makes bold and definitive statements regarding her ideology surrounding the purpose of and reasons for marriage, as well as how economics tie so strongly into mate selection. Pix wrote this play during the transitory period during which the focus on marriage for economic purposes was moving toward a focus on marriage for love, and shows examples of how either reason for marrying may be personally satisfying or validating while still exposing some of the issues in British inheritance law. Throughout the body of this play, issues surrounding whether one should marry to increase financial or social status, for love, or to gain some measure of freedom from relatives are explored. In all of the scenarios Pix presents, inheritances and the laws surrounding them play a substantial role in how the question of marriage is approached by each character. In cases like Mrs. Rich, whose fortune is controlled by in-laws, it becomes abundantly clear that the law results in the mistreatment of women by assigning her to a child-like status with regard to her inherited wealth. For Lady Landsworth, her husband was kind enough to wish a happy marriage for her once he passed, and had sufficient foresight to set his will in accordance with

his desires for her so she had the privilege to marry for love. Even in the circumstances of the males who sought marriage, as we see above, socioeconomic factors played a fundamental role in mate selection for those who did not already possess wealth or title. Throughout the play, Pix nods at the structure of the inheritance system to demonstrate the lack of inequity between men and women and showcases the way lives were affected because of this style of highly gendered legislation. Through Pix's work, one may observe the beginnings of modern feminist thought from learned women and may extrapolate how these beginnings have carried us forward into the type of culture and society we currently enjoy.

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