

Uxorial use-value and
marxist marriages:
evaluation of women
and desire in the be...



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Though set in the underworld of thievery, John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* codifies a set of Marxist sexual politics in which marriage stands as the great equalizer of desire and power. An often aphoristic overview of the traditional power struggle between men and women frames a world in which marriage reduces the wooer's desire but raises his power by an equal degree through ownership as a husband. This commodity fetishism of the wife spurs, in turn, the external desire of potential suitors, restoring equilibrium to the scales of eros. I will argue that Macheath's eventual capture (disregarding his brief escape and ironically crowd-pleasing twist-ending) stems from the complications his insatiable desire, at the expense of an all-consuming greed, introduces to a capitalistic society based on indirectly equitable gender relations. Though the opera contains stereotypical evaluations of sought-after virgins, Gay moves beyond this pat system by exploring the source of their appeal in monetary terms. Air V, sung by Mrs. Peachum, equates the virgin with raw, yet to be coined material: "A maid is like the golden ore, / Which hath guineas intrinsical in't, / Whose worth is never known before / It is tried and impressed in the Mint" (I. v). Note the seeming contradiction in that "tried" means "refined" or "purified"; the virgin must undergo some sort of transmutation as she is debauched. The currency conceit, which threads throughout the opera, here is an example of what Marx calls the use-value of an object, which is, essentially, "[T]he utility of a thing" (Marx 421). The virgin is valuable, and her use-value high, because she possesses a heretofore unknown sexual utility. We can see how this leads to a trumped-up desire on her suitors' parts: "Virgins are like the fair flower in its lustre, / Which in the garden enamels the ground" (I. vii). Again, Gay polishes the air's traditional virgin-flower metaphor with the monetary

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imagery of “lustre” and “enamel.” The heightened emphasis on the virgin’s eroticization creates a tension between her purity and the inevitability of sex: “If soon she be not made a wife, / Her honour’s singed, and then for life, / She’s) what I dare not name” (I. iv). In an opera that tosses around the words “hussy,” “slut,” “jade,” and every other permutation of “prostitute,” Mrs. Peachum’s abstention from the label for her daughter is a revealing gesture at this point (she has no problems tagging Polly with “sad slut” two songs afterwards). Furthermore, the passivity of the virgin) “be not made a wife” (as with “It is tried and impressed”)) exposes the threat of coitus against which she must guard herself. Along the lines of this anxiety, Mrs. Peachum stresses the financial particularity with which the virgin must choose her first mate: “But the first time a woman is frail, she should be somewhat nice methinks, for then or never is the time to make her fortune” (I. viii). Despite her apparent choice in the matter, the virgin remains a passive figure, defending her compromised virtue as a dark secret: “After that, she hath nothing to do but to guard herself from being found out, and she may do as she pleases” (I. viii). The implication is that there is no interregnum between a woman’s status as a virgin and doing “as she pleases”) the first act of intercourse is a slippery, slatternly slope. How, then, does the virgin milk her beauty and actively raise her value as a desirable object? Polly is a shrewd flirt, currying Macheath’s favor in exchange for material goods. “A woman knows how to be mercenary,” she tells her father. “If I allow Captain Macheath some trifling liberties, I have this watch and other visible marks of his favour to show for it” (I. vii). The contradictory language of ownership) using “liberties” when her services are anything but free) suggests that this is not simply use-value, but something else. Macheath

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bestows his gifts, as I wrote before, in exchange for sexual compensation from Polly. As Polly's metaphoric technique of coitus reservatus arouses and sustains Macheath's desire, her own value appreciates via his financial expenditure on her. Marx separates the notion of exchange-value from use-value and defines it as a quantity of pure labor: Along with the useful qualities of the products themselves, we put out of sight both the useful character of the various kinds of labour embodied in them, and the concrete forms of that labour, there is nothing left but what is common to them all; all are reduced to one and the same sort of labour, human labour in the abstract. (423) What is now noteworthy and valuable about Polly is not the utility of the watch, which could just as well be broken, but the "visible marks of his favor to show for it." In other words, that the net worth of Macheath's "labor," the act of wooing and the work that accompanies it, is a tangible and quantifiable term. We can also assume that the labor of a lothario as Macheath is worth more, per hour, than a layman suitor's. Considering that an early definition of "mark" is "the stamp or impress of a coin," then Macheath's "visible marks" (Marx?) become more than material gifts, but external signs of corporeal possession by monetary means (OED, 1. 11a). Although Polly has, unbeknownst to her parents, already married Macheath and conceded his ownership, which I will later address, these are ostensibly (and once truthfully were) the rituals of courtship and must be critiqued as such. During the courtship process, the woman continues to absorb her suitor's capital and increase her exchange-value. When Mrs. Peachum laments that she is "sorry upon Polly's account the Captain hath not more discretion," Gay calls our attention to the fiscal pun as Peachum utters "Upon Polly's account!" twice (I. iv). The play on Polly as a depository

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of savings is clarified when Filch acknowledges that love comes with a price tag: “ For suits of love, like law, are won by pay, / And beauty must be fee’d into our arms” (I. ii). When the suitor’s desire peaks, and when the woman’s exchange-value reaches its breaking point (for no reasonable man would continue to ply his lady with gifts if it came to no fruition), she accepts marriage, becoming her husband’s property and forfeiting her gains, as Peachum moans: “ If the wench does not know her own profit, sure she knows her own pleasure than to make herself a property!” (I. iv) The legal union and possession, as marriage therapists are all too familiar with, usually quells the husband’s desire as a typical push-pull antithesis, as Polly and Lucy express in a duet (one that applies to all relationships, but especially marriage): “ LUCY: If we grow fond they shun us. POLLY: And when we fly them, they pursue. LUCY: But leave us when they’ve won us” (III. viii). The possible pun of “ pursue” on “ purse” reminds us of the investment suitors are willing to make, and of which husbands may ignore. The eroticism of the chase of the virgin is gone, and the wife’s exchange-value is restored to a use-value, albeit one of a different composition, as Peachum observes: “ A good sportsman always lets the hen partridges fly, because the breed of the game depends upon them” (I. ii). The wife’s sexuality (even, one may infer, her genitalia), formerly the prime indicator of her mysterious use-value as a virgin, turns from stoking the man’s desire, now absent, to the purely utilitarian (and narcissistic for the man, in that it preserves his name and blood) task of reproduction. Under her husband’s control, the wife emerges as his commodity. Recall that the virgin was “ tried and impressed” as a coin; Polly and Macheath both later refer to the tactile act of pressing in courtship. Polly announces that she was compelled to marriage “ When he

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kissed me so closely he pressed," and Macheath simply includes this in a list of directions for seducing a virgin: " Press her" (I. viii, II. iii). The " visible marks" of the husband become so prominent as to overshadow the rest of the wife's identity. Marx uses similar imagery in his classification of commodity fetishism: " A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour" (436). The value of the labor, or what one might call the humanity, of an object is minimized in the face of the evaluation of the final product. Before marriage, a woman's commodity fetishism was derived from her clothing, perhaps bought with the aid of a suitor, but independent from him: " If any wench Venus's girdle wear, / Though she be never so ugly; / Lilies and roses will quickly appear, / And her face look wond'rous smugly" (I. iv). After the fetishism of marriage, however, other men perceive a wife only as a transferable (hence, the coin analogy) object of the husband's possession in what Marx describes as a " definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things" (436). Who her husband is and the labor/wooing he has invested, at this point, is fairly immaterial to other men, according to Marx: " There, the existence of the things qua commodities, and the value relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom" (436). In a particularly telling quote, Mrs. Peachum backs up this notion: " All men are thieves in love, and like a woman the better for being another's property" (I. v). The thrill of luring away a married woman is enough for the suitor, and his skyrocketing desire balances out the

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husband's discounted passion, who simultaneously compensates for his lost lust of the flesh with his tightened leash of financial power. In this roundabout triangle, everyone profits and loses in terms of power, if we take the presence of desire as a benefit to one's life: 1) The wife no longer has financial or sensual power within the confines of her marriage over her 2) husband, who has forsaken his desire for the power that comes with economic ownership, but this libidinous power is externally restored to the woman (since the husband is now jealous) by the increased appetite of the 3) suitor, who has lost his claim to any legal possession of the wife, who is now desired again by the 4) husband out of jealousy, until he again loses interest, and the cycle continues ad infinitum. For society to proceed orderly and harmoniously, the equation must cancel itself out, so that each player is as powerful after, as he or she was before, the marriage. How does Macheath upset this harmony, and how does this inevitably lead to his capture? His resistance to the traditional behavioral cycle as defined above is what denies him access to the staid safety a conventional marriage offers, one in which libidinous lack is compensated for by pecuniary profit. His carnal appetite does not leave room for a pragmatic main course; he gorges himself on dessert. In front of Polly, he sings " My heart was free, / It roved like the bee, / 'Till Polly my passion requited" and satisfied his need for more flowers (I. xiii). In parting, he even draws a direct parallel between his love for Polly and a miser's love for money: " The miser thus a shilling sees, / Which he's obliged to pay, / With sighs resigns it by degrees, / And fears 'tis gone for aye" (I. xiii). His sincerity is quickly demolished when he later reverses this monetary analogy: " And a man who loves money, might as well be contented with one guinea, as I with one woman" (II. iii). He is not

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merely an 18th-century version of the reluctant-to-commit male as stereotyped by the modern sitcom and Hollywood vehicle but, rather, a man burdened (or blessed, depending on one's viewpoint) with an infinite scale of desire. While other men in Gay's London follow the adage "You can never be too rich or too thin" (perhaps inverting the "thin" component for the times), Macheath would add "or have too many women." Since no woman can dampen his lust, none holds a distinctive place in his heart. When the Captain pleads to Polly "Suspect my honour, my courage, suspect anything but my love" (65), Gay alludes to Hamlet's love letter to Ophelia. But Macheath's indecision is less like Hamlet's paralytic oscillations than it is akin to Macbeth's ever-ambitious grasp for more power by whatever means; it is the indecision of the narrator in John Donne's poem "The Indifferent," who "can love her, and her, and you, and you." Macheath's boundless reservoir of desire prefers the "free-hearted ladies" of the town to the maidens (II. iii). The prostitutes' promiscuity is an obvious boon, but their deep-seated connection to money give them an additional appeal for Macheath. The prostitute is a self-reliant wage-earner (if we ignore her debt to her madam), allaying Macheath's conventional masculine fears of a dependent woman, financially or otherwise. The emotionally independent and indifferent prostitute also bears the seemingly paradoxical relation to a "court lady, who can have a dozen young fellows at her ear without complying with one," as Peachum wishes his daughter comported herself. More important to the highwayman, the prostitutes in *The Beggar's Opera* are all thieves-kindred spirits with Macheath, to be sure—who, combined with the selling of their bodies, develop as sexualized commodity fetishes of theft and commerce, in that they are represented by the handkerchiefs they steal and

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the sex they ply. This is irresistible to Macheath, and Freud might read his capital/material goods-fetish for the prostitutes as a “ token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it” by replacing their absent phalli with shillings or another physical manifestation of money (Freud 154). In Macheath’s case, castration is giving way to a sentimentality (which sometimes seems to pop up for him) that leads to a regular marriage, one which would effectively kill his superhuman libido, much as the greed-fetishist Inkle fears his marriage to the “ Indian Maid” Yarico will expose his repressed sentimentality in a popular 18th-century tale. But is Macheath truly so fixated on sex as to ignore money, as when he claims “ Money is not so strong a cordial [as women are] for the time”? (II. iii) In fact, he loves gambling just as much, if not more, than sex. Compared to pursuing virgins and dallying with prostitutes, gambling captures the best of both worlds; it delivers the thrill of an unknown outcome or value of the former activity, while it is free of the emotional responsibility (except for payment of debt) the latter also disregards. Gay drops a hint to the sex/gambling connection when he has Peachum declare that daughters take “ as much pleasure in cheating a father and mother, as in cheating at cards” (I. viii). Ma” cheat” h would certainly agree, except that he probably takes more pleasure in cards, because he knows he can seduce any woman)winning at cards still requires some luck. His luck runs out, however, when the prostitutes betray him, citing his dishonorableness: “ Cards and dice are only fit for cowardly cheats, who prey upon their friends” (II. iv). This statement insinuates that alongside Macheath’s distrustful life is a buried distrust of women epitomized by his resistance to marriage. Jenny Diver then “ takes up [Macheath’s] pistol”

while Suky Tawdry takes up the other; to continue the Freudian motif, the <https://assignbuster.com/uxorial-use-value-and-marxist-marriages-evaluation-of-women-and-desire-in-the-beggars-opera/>

women in the opera symbolically castrate Macheath, appropriating phallic power when he threatens to lure them all into his trap. If this logic seems specious, consider that in the previous act, after Macheath delivers his Hamlet allusion to Polly, he exclaims “ May my pistols misfire, and my mare slip her shoulder while I am pursued, if I ever forsake thee!” (I. xiii) The male/female juxtaposition of pistols and the mare blends similarly in the ambush (the women seize the pistols, and they slip out from under Macheath’s predatory position), and for further linguistic evidence, note Suky Tawdry’s spiteful explanation to Macheath directly after they take his pistols: “ Beside your loss of money, tis a loss to the ladies. Gaming takes you off from women” (II. iv, italics mine). Excluding brief moments of freedom, Macheath spends the rest of the opera fettered and in a cell. At one point, Polly even latches herself on to him, crying “ O! Twist thy fetters about me, that he may not haul me from thee!” (II. xiv) Macheath’s desire is finally and symbolically tamped down, and this is when she feels closest to him: “ No power on earth can e’er divide, / The knot that sacred love hath tied” (II. xiv). Macheath’s “ poetical justice” (III. xvi) of being hanged may as well be a lifetime spent in fetters, for his symbolic castration is not so much Gay’s comment on Macheath’s immorality, of which everyone in the opera is culpable, but on his uncompromising sexual greediness in a society that functions only when the libido and the purse hold each other in check. Whether this is an attack on Macheath’s philosophy or on society at large is unclear, although the Beggar’s final statement, if not taken as parody, favors the latter: ““ Twould have shown that the lower sort of people have their vices in a degree as well as the rich: and that they are punished for them”

(III. xvi). Works Cited: Freud, Sigmund. The Standard Edition of the Complete
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