

“WE NEVER PART WITH OUR MONEY WITHOUT DESIRE”: MARRIAGE  
ECONOMICS AND ATTEMPTED RAPE IN THE COMEDIES OF  
BEHN AND CENTLIVRE

By

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The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation/thesis of LESLIE MICHELLE MORRISON find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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Chair

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Abstract

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Though Restoration comedies by both men and women highlighted the problems inherent in the practical marriages typical of the period, Aphra Behn and Susanna Centlivre are distinctive in their use of drama to explore the conflict between the idealization of marital love and the reality that marriages were often arranged without regard for character or personality. Behn and Centlivre imply that rather than mere aversion, unhappiness, or infidelity, such marriages are inherently dangerous and potentially both physically and emotionally violent. These two playwrights provide an entirely new model for considering the effects of the marriage market by combining stock portrayals of couples negotiating the marriage market with episodes of attempted rape, a popular Restoration theatrical trope typically associated with tragedy. The outbreaks of sexual violence highlight the relentlessly economic nature of the marriage market, which commodifies the female body in ways akin to prostitution and thus licenses rape. This study will analyze three comedies by women in which attempted rapes are perpetrated, Behn's *The Rover* (1677) and Centlivre's *The Basset-Table* (1705) and *The Perplex'd Lovers* (1712), examining in particular the authors' arguments that because the marriage market is uneasily similar to prostitution, rape emerges as a tool which male characters use to determine if a women

is chaste or unchaste. Within the action of the plays the attempted rapes, with their potential personal, social, and economic ramifications, prefigure the patriarchal control over body and financial assets the same characters will experience in matrimony. Ultimately their critique of marriage signifies the emerging eighteenth-century reevaluation of marriage that eventually established the importance of affection rather than mere economic compatibility in marital union.

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“We never part with our Money without Desire”:

Marriage Economics and Attempted Rape in the Comedies of Behn and Centlivre

## INTRODUCTION

A professor I know sums up the entire body of Restoration comedy to undergraduates by claiming that the goal of every play of the period was for the male protagonist to get the girl and get the money.<sup>1</sup> Though obviously simplistic, this assessment does indicate the extreme degree to which money and marriage were perceived as interrelated, a relationship that troubled Restoration dramatists. Also implicit in this definition is the idea that romantic attachments are in constant conflict with economic concerns, a notion evident in a 1670 English proverb, which advises that they “Who marrieth for love without money hath good nights and sorry days” (qtd. in Graff 1). In Restoration comedy these anxieties are enacted through a common plot device requiring the reconciliation of personal choice in a marriage match with financial, class, and familial concerns. Comedies nearly always side with the lovers: generally the young, attractive heir or heiress outwits male relatives and succeeds in marrying the partner of his or her choice (who, fortuitously, is in the same social class and sometimes endowed with an unexpected inheritance). Though these comedies are noted for their lightness and wit, the themes enacted indicate a deep anxiety over marriage as a social, religious, and legal institution. After all, marriage was a lifelong commitment that united families, established social status, decided matters of inheritance, and determined the quality of one’s lifestyle, and the orchestration of a marriage match was the site of perhaps the most significant negotiations between young people and their parents.

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<sup>1</sup> As are many historical labels, the term “Restoration” is contested. While a consensus can be reached as to when it begins—1660—the end of “Restoration” theater and the beginning of “Eighteenth-century” theater is debated, defined variously between 1700 and 1720. In this thesis I will use the long version of “Restoration” theater, categorizing both Behn and Centlivre’s plays as part of the Restoration, with the caveat that Centlivre’s plays do exhibit aspects of emerging eighteenth-century dramatic conventions.

Although love matches are celebrated in Restoration comedy, other aspects of compatibility, such as financial assets and social class, were historically more likely to be a factor in a successful courtship than real affection.<sup>2</sup> As E.J. Graff argues, before the mid-eighteenth century “marriage was society’s economic linchpin”; on both an individual and national level marriage organized business and trade (7). Practical marriages at all levels of social class were the norm, and though depictions of romantic love continued to be as popular in Restoration drama as they were in Renaissance drama, financial, business, and class considerations came first in real-life marriage decisions, as they did during earlier periods. Because marriage was so important to social organization matches could be complicated by familial interference, a parental and fraternal right taken for granted during the Renaissance and earlier but questioned throughout the Restoration. As Lawrence Stone asserts, until the end of the sixteenth century children did not question their parents’ choices in a match, but during the seventeenth century parental control became much more tenuous, as is evident in Restoration drama (127-129). Though clandestine marriages continued to be cause for public concern, increased parental control over when and how marriages were contracted was regarded warily, in part because laws concerning such control over marriage choices were often proposed as part of laws that enhanced state control over courtship and marriage practices (Collins 187-88).<sup>3</sup> Parents could not legally force a marriage on children during the Restoration, but their ability to control marriage choices through the delay of inheritance or complete disinheritance was ultimately just as effective. Even without familial interference, however, young people were expected to make

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<sup>2</sup> Restoration comedy is primarily concerned with the upper classes, a social group for which arranged or forced marriage was a prominent concern, as opposed to other social classes, in which young people generally had more freedom in engineering a marriage match (Stone 182).

<sup>3</sup> Acts legislating marriage reform were proposed to Parliament in 1677, 1689, 1691, 1695, 1711, and 1735, but did not pass until 1753, when the Hardwick Marriage Act, which required public banns, parental consent for children under twenty-one, witnesses, and a specific written legal form for the marriage to be recognized, was made law. On the Continent, comparable laws were passed much sooner as the Protestant Reformation demanded public, legalized marriage ceremonies and parental consent under certain ages (Collins 188, Graff 200-203).



advantageous or at least practical matches. Although personal compatibility was seen as increasingly important, young people “made their choices with an eye toward financial advantage, convenience, and desire to please parents and friends” (Coontz 139). The general social consensus was that love, like beauty, was illusory, and similarities of class and wealth were better predictors of a successful union.

During the Restoration, however, these economic motivations for marriage are portrayed as mercenary compared to matches made on the basis of love and affection, despite the fact that outside the theater practicality in a marriage choice was not only socially acceptable but also desirable.<sup>4</sup> The stock situations of Restoration comedy reveal the problems that occur in marriages arranged by purely practical or economic factors: couples mismatched in age or disposition, lack of mutual respect, husbands and wives living essentially separate lives, and extramarital affairs. Often infidelity was sanctioned not only by society but by one’s spouse, as it was believed that love was something that existed primarily outside of marriage. In contrast to these bleak images of practical marriages Restoration comedy attempts to insert love into the marriage equation by glorifying love matches, particularly in plots focused on courtship. Yet even these matches cannot be described as depicting love triumphing over practicality. The particular pair of lovers might overcome the conventional blocking parent, but their success is always depicted as an exceptional case in which not only does love coincide with practicality (the lovers are of similar age and social class, though the woman is usually endowed with more wealth) but the couple is able to successfully subvert familial control. The difficulty encountered

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<sup>4</sup> In a discussion of the economics of the marriage market it is important to remember that this dichotomy between love in the arts and love in everyday life persists even today. Though the modern western world glorifies romance and “true love” in the arts and entertainment, social class and wealth continue to govern what marriage matches are made. E. J. Graff claims that “marriage is always about money” (2), a sentiment echoed by Laura Kipnis, who argues that today “we choose ‘appropriate’ mates, and we precisely calculate their assets, with each party gauging just how well they can do on the open market, knowing exactly their own exchange value and that of prospective partners” (63).

by these couples prior to their marriage and the characterization of their experience as outside normal marriage practices subtly plays into the underlying paradigm that the institution of marriage not only forced one to choose between practicality and romance, but in fact pitted the desires for money and love against each other.

Though Restoration comedies by both men and women highlighted the problems inherent in marriage as it was conceived of at the time, two playwrights in particular portray the very real violence, particularly toward women, perpetrated under such a system. In the majority of their plays Aphra Behn and Susanna Centlivre use drama to explore courtship and marriage, in particular the conflict between the idealization of marital love and the reality that marriages were often arranged without regard for character or personality. The theme was a common one, evident also in Mary Astell's *Reflections Upon Marriage* (1700): "when they [men] Marry with an indifferency, to please their Friends or encrease their Fortune, the indifferency proceeds to an aversion" (95). Behn and Centlivre write upon the same topic but imply that rather than mere "aversion," unhappiness, or infidelity, such marriages are inherently dangerous and potentially both physically and emotionally violent. These two playwrights provide an entirely new model for considering the effects of marriage by combining stock portrayals of couples negotiating the marriage market with episodes of attempted rape, a popular Restoration theatrical trope typically associated with tragedy. The outbreaks of sexual violence highlight the relentlessly economic nature of the marriage market, which commodifies the female body in ways akin to prostitution and thus licenses rape. This study will analyze three comedies by women in which attempted rapes are perpetrated, Behn's *The Rover* (1677) and Centlivre's *The Basset-Table* (1705) and *The Perplex'd Lovers* (1712), examining in particular the authors' arguments that because the marriage market is uneasily similar to prostitution, rape emerges as a tool which male characters

use to determine if a woman is chaste or unchaste. Within the action of the plays the attempted rapes, with their potential personal, social, and economic ramifications, prefigure the patriarchal control over body and financial assets the same characters will experience in matrimony. By highlighting multiple systems of domination and manipulating dramatic conventions, Behn and Centlivre are able to subvert the limitations of the comic genre, diluting the disempowering effects of comic inversion and the happy ending. Ultimately their critique of marriage signifies the emerging eighteenth-century reevaluation of marriage that eventually established the importance of affection rather than mere economic compatibility in a marital union. These plays thus not only illustrate the changing attitude toward marriage at the turn of the eighteenth century, but also advocate for change.

The anxiety over marriage expressed in Restoration drama can be attributed to a general cultural unease with how marriage was being contracted and defined during the period, but the dramatic trend of onstage rape had more complex roots. In plays from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries it was common for female characters to become sexual victims of drunken rakes, powerful kings, villains bent on revenge, men pretending to be husbands, thwarted suitors, and so on, a trope that “became a new and erotically potent element of Restoration drama, appearing with particular frequency in the serious drama of the period” (Marsden 185). Though the actual rape was left to the audience’s imagination, the attacker’s intentions were quite clear, as vivid descriptions of the impending rape often preceded the actual act. Rape scenes became even more sexually charged after the introduction of actresses on the stage in 1660, especially when they were performed by the likes of Elizabeth Barry and Anne Bracegirdle, actresses famous for their representations of female pathos (Marsden 188). The rape occurred offstage, but the signs of rape—virtuous heroines dragged away by sexual

predators, offstage shrieks, and the later discovery of the heroine disheveled and partially clothed—were visually and audibly evident to the audience (Marsden 191). Like the “breeches roles” that also gained popularity after 1660, rape scenes illustrate how Restoration theater sought new ways to erotically display the female body onstage, to the point of portraying its violation.<sup>5</sup>

The emergence of female actors and playwrights at the same time these rape scenes gained popularity has not gone unnoticed. The popularity of rape scenes has provided critics with ample fodder to analyze Restoration conceptions of sexuality, desire, consumption, excess, violence, gender roles, visual culture, and patriarchy. Cynthia Lowenthal provides an insightful analysis of rape by using monster theory to connect rape to the “insatiable consumption,” “violence,” and “novelty” of monstrosity, which, like rape itself, is both repellent and erotic (156, 163). As evident above, Jean I. Marsden explicitly links rape scenes to the onstage presence of the female body, arguing that these scenes are essentially voyeuristic and pornographic. Like Restoration dramatists themselves, however, these critics and others have privileged tragedy over comedy, ignoring the instances of rape and attempted rape portrayed comedically.<sup>6</sup> Although they purport to study onstage rape scenes, Lowenthal and Marsden not only fail to distinguish between both tragic and comic genres and rape and attempted rape, but neglect to mention that such distinctions exist in the body of Restoration plays. The tendency

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<sup>5</sup> “Breeches roles” were parts that in Renaissance drama necessitated boys playing women playing boys (such as Viola in *Twelfth Night*). In Restoration theater these roles were instead played by women playing boys, allowing the actresses to wear tight-fitting pants, a popular motif for obvious reasons.

<sup>6</sup> Behn and Centlivre’s portrayals of attempted rape in comedy are among the most explicit, but other examples include Vanbrugh’s *The Relapse* (1696) and Sedley’s *Bellamira* (1687). Variations on the rape trope include Shadwell’s *The Virtuoso* (1676), in which a man attempts to rape another man dressed as a woman, and Behn’s *The Luckey Chance* (1687), in which a bed trick rape occurs. There are also innumerable threats of sexual violence toward female servants. While these threats do not constitute a staged rape or attempted rape they do indicate the degree to which sexual violence was an accepted component of comedy.

among critics has been to compare all acts of sexual aggression across all genres, methodology which ignores how these scenes interact in the larger plot structures of tragedy or comedy.

A comedic attempted rape is not merely a failed tragic rape, but instead a fundamentally different spectacle in which the intended victim, the attacker, and the very purpose of the attack are completely different than in tragedy. Both tragic and comic rape demonstrate patriarchal power and control over the female body, but the similarities end there. In tragedy rape is generally enacted upon the most virtuous female character, despite her complete innocence (the most she can usually be accused of is being too beautiful and noble, thus igniting the passions of the attacker). In comedy, however, rape and attempted rape serve as punishment for breaking a rule of decorum: appearing alone in public, entertaining too many male suitors, engaging in masculine pursuits, refusing to marry according to male family members' wishes, and so on. In tragedy the rape is part of a larger cycle of violence, but in comedy the rape is the most serious threat to the play's happy conclusion. Tragic rape operates in the masculine realm of political power struggles, where the victim's rape is a part of larger schemes of revenge and betrayal that have more to do with the play's male relationships than with the woman's own status as daughter, wife, or lover. The real danger of sexual assaults in comedy is not their threat to homosocial relationships, but the crucial transition for the victim from chaste to unchaste and her subsequent exclusion from marriage, the institution at the center of Restoration comedy.

Because comic conventions dictated that marriage was essential to a happy ending, comedic rapes almost always end in attempted rape. A completed sexual assault would prevent the victim from marrying both the object of her affections or any other gentleman. The attacks, however, should not be classified as "failed" rapes because in the end the attempted rape accomplishes the same purposes as a completed rape would. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, in

a different context (*Gone with the Wind*) that for a woman the most important element of rape is not penetration but the aggression of the entire assault: “The attack... fully means rape, both *to her* and to all the forces in her culture that produce and circulate powerful meanings. It makes no difference at all that one constituent element of rape is missing; but the missing constituent is simply sex” (10). In other words, these attacks function as rapes despite the fact that the victims are not violated bodily. In most of these attacks the goal is not, in fact, sexual possession but instead revenge, punishment, or persuasion, making the humiliation and terror of the attempted rape as successful a “lesson” as a completed rape for the victim, and a reassertion of masculine dominance on the part of the attacker. One could argue that it does matter if Behn and Centlivre’s heroines are raped, since their virginity is essential to their value on the marriage market. This aspect of the rape, however, concerns the victim’s father and future husband, those who will benefit from her value. For the victim, both rape and attempted rape silence her. A rape in a tragedy requires the death of the rape victim, and a comic attempted rape similarly disposes of the victim by driving her toward marriage, an institution that is at best a mechanism that silences her and at worst a completion of the attempted violation.

Typically the three comedies by Behn and Centlivre use attempted rape in the conventional Restoration manner: as punishment for an improper action on the part of a female character. In *The Rover* the virtuous Florinda is twice punished with attempted rape for subverting her male relatives’ choice for her husband and seeking her own match in disguise and without a male escort. *The Perplex’d Lovers* illustrates the disastrous effects of women’s duplicity as the heroine, Constantia, is threatened with rape after she refuses either to accept or deny her suitors’ offers of marriage. Lady Reveller in *The Basset-Table* is punished with a staged attempted rape for her fondness for gambling and her scornful independence from male

control. But both Behn and Centlivre use the conventions of comedy to tie attempted rape to commodification rather than punishment, in effect acquitting their heroines of blame for the attacks. Neither are these attacks the manifestation of excessive Restoration sexuality, as they persist even in the early eighteenth century, when comic conventions shifted and moralizing plays became the norm. These attacks are most accurately read within the context of the marriage market, and as such they are clearly symptoms of larger systematic problems with the institution of marriage rather than the result of female transgression or male lust. As a whole they advocate for change not only away from forced marriage, but away from marriage as a purely economic union.

Within the marriage market notions of chastity and virtue become conflated with the economic concerns that underpin the entire courtship and marriage transaction.<sup>7</sup> Of course, female chastity had almost always been figured in terms of economics, in which a woman's violation of sexual codes of behavior represented a loss of male control over the productive female body. This central paradigm of woman-as-property was in fact the way rape laws were configured until the twentieth century, "through the back door, as it were, as a property crime of man against man" (Brownmiller 18). While women were still largely regarded in terms of value and property, during the Restoration the distinctions made between chaste and unchaste women depended not only on women's economic value, but on their actions within economic structures. "Public" women participate within systems of exchange, trading their talents for financial gain,

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<sup>7</sup> As this study includes analysis of both unmarried women and widows, the term "virtue" should be clarified. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines virtue as both "Chastity" and "Conformity of life and conduct with the principles of morality." While an unmarried woman would certainly need to be a virgin to be considered virtuous, a widow could be considered virtuous by living according to a moral code and abstaining from sexual activity. For unmarried women "virtue" is essentially synonymous with chastity, but for widows the term carries broader meaning.

while virtuous women remain above such concerns.<sup>8</sup> Yet Behn's *The Rover* and Centlivre's *The Basset Table* and *The Perplex'd Lovers* blur these categories, showing that while the victims of attempted rape are guilty of participating in systems of public exchange or display, they are also potential wives in the marriage market, a system so dependent on financial exchange that it can be likened to prostitution. As these three plays aver in their portrayals of marriage transactions, no woman who seeks marriage can truly remain indifferent to financial concerns. Behn and Centlivre expose the double bind that demands that marriageable women negotiate financial exchange in the context of a physical relationship, while simultaneously never exposing themselves to even a hint of impropriety.

While Behn and Centlivre provide the most direct equation of the institution of marriage to prostitution through portrayals of the physical violence and economic devastation of rape, Restoration comedies in general emphasized the impropriety of trading a woman's body for money, the goal of both prostitution and marriage. Indeed, the confusion between prostitutes and women of good repute in plays like Behn's *Rover* imply that the separation of these two types of women is only a matter of degree. Laura J. Rosenthal links this blurring of categories to the larger nature of theatrical performance, which

created the illusion of the actress as a marriageable woman within the fiction of the play, yet struggled to prevent the collapse of the difference between character and actress. The plays themselves heightened this problem by hinting at the proximity of marriage to prostitution as a system of exchange. Whether a play protests a marriage forced upon children for the convenience of an estate, challenges characters to remove economic barriers to their own marriages, or shows how characters reconcile themselves to

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<sup>8</sup> This definition partly explains the allegations of promiscuity leveled at both actresses and female playwrights, who performed or published for money (though certainly another cause of this accusation was that actresses did often become mistresses to aristocratic men).



marriage as a rational (economic) contract, financial concerns are rarely far from erotic ones. Thus at least in comedy, dramatic performance persistently calls attention to the relationship between sexuality, marriage, and money. (12)

What is at issue is performance and action rather than intent. A virtuous woman acting like a prostitute in any way—even to seek a financially advantageous marriage match—is subject to the threat of sexual assault. While the victim is punished for subversion, duplicity, boldness, or impropriety, the attack in itself forces the audience to consider where the difference between virgin and whore collapses, and whether a clear distinction between prostitution and marriage can be made at all. These three plays mark the emergence of the eighteenth century realization that the marriage market was not only flawed, but harmful. Marriage, intended to tightly knit together a social fabric largely dependent on stable familial relationships, is shown to be a threat to all those values as it pits women against families and men against women in a market economy.

### *THE ROVER*

Throughout her most successful play Behn maintains a suspicious attitude toward marriage as an institution and an outright disdain for arranged marriages in particular, matches which she portrays as benefiting the bride's male relatives at the expense of her happiness. But the alternative to arranged marriage is a system in which couples themselves negotiate the terms of their union, which Behn also finds problematic. While such an arrangement offers more independence for young people in general, for young women this independence exacts a price. By arranging their own matches women become participants rather than mere commodities on the marriage market, a move that threatens to undermine the private/public distinctions made between chaste and unchaste women. Although Behn celebrates female independence in *The*

*Rover*, she also clearly shows that women cannot easily transition between being objects on the marriage market to subjects operating within the marriage market, a profoundly masculine realm where feminine intervention is quickly categorized as an unchaste transgression. *The Rover*'s two attempted rapes in particular show the anxiety surrounding the distinction between whores and ladies, categories that some male characters do away with altogether, leading to indiscriminate attacks on women from all social classes.<sup>9</sup> Although the attacks are forgiven by the victim, whose chastity remains intact, these eruptions of violence seriously undermine the conventional comic ending, questioning not only the danger of courtship, but also the wisdom of contracting a lifelong marriage with men who are characterized by impulsiveness, aggression, and lust.

The play begins with two Spanish heiresses, Florinda and Hellena, who have only until the end of Carnival to secure their own matches before being forced into a loveless marriage and convent life, respectively. Behn's keen eye for comedy is evident in the inherently funny premise of *The Rover*, which pits Florinda and Hellena's search for suitable husbands against both a group of English cavaliers' quest for sexual adventure and two prostitutes' attempts to entice customers, a combination made all the more volatile by the disguises worn by most characters. As these groups interact within the play, it becomes increasingly necessary for

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<sup>9</sup> Rape laws remained largely unchanged between the establishment of the Statutes of Westminster by Edward I in the late thirteenth century and more comprehensive rape legislation in the twentieth century. The Statutes of Westminster severely punished rapes against "a married woman, dame or damsel," a definition that at least in theory included prostitutes (qtd. in Brownmiller 29-30). Chastity figures importantly in this discourse, however. A woman thought to be unchaste was usually unsuccessful in rape prosecution, which explains why an attack against a prostitute was typically not defined as rape (Brownmiller 30, Gowing 90). Rape prosecution was class-based as well: under the statute lower-class women were legally protected from sexual assault, but for various reasons they seldom sought legal recourse after an attack. Economically, a lower-class woman's chastity was less valuable than an aristocrat's, which also explains why lower-class women and prostitutes are often conflated, as in the terms "harlot" and "baggage" (*OED*). Female servants were especially susceptible to rape as "[m]astery in the household naturally carried with it authority over the household's bodies" (Gowing 61). For discussions of seventeenth-century social conceptions of rape (as opposed to dramatic portrayals) see Miranda Chaytor's "Husband(ry): Narratives of Rape in the Seventeenth Century," Laura Gowing's *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* 90-101, and Julie Rudolph's "Rape and Resistance: Women and Consent in Seventeenth-Century English Legal and Political Thought."

characters to read signs of identity and motivation correctly and thus navigate the parties' competing interests. Yet *The Rover*'s characters often fail to accurately pinpoint other characters' personal or even class identity, leading to the play's almost constant cases of mistaken identity. For the male characters, these misunderstandings are comical: characters mistake friends for rivals or blame the wrong man for a particular offense. For female characters, however, the stakes are much higher. An aristocratic identity was an effective deterrent for most sexual attacks, and the loss of that identity represents an increased risk of sexual violence each time the woman ventures outside and into public spaces. As the male characters aggressively search for sexual fulfillment, the distinction between a gentlewoman and a whore becomes vital both to protect a noblewoman's virtue, and to prevent the cavaliers from being, as one states, "trussed up for a rape upon a maid of quality, when we only believe we ruffle a harlot" (228). In a world where the marriage market and sex trade function essentially side by side, the visible manifestation of individual and class identity is vital to the economic success and personal protection of both male and female characters.

Behn complicates the establishment of individual class identity by setting *The Rover* during Carnival, a season characterized by feasting, masking, intrigues, celebration, and freedom from social hierarchies. According to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, such festivity allowed "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (10). *The Rover* exists in a setting temporarily free from overt patriarchal control in which desires are to be indulged and rules broken. Behn celebrates not only the suspension of certain codes of behavior, but the carnivalesque inversion of values, norms, and hierarchies. Throughout the play prostitutes and noblewomen are mistaken for each other as the outward signs of rank are

obscured or disguised completely. The negotiation of class identity is thus problematic, as during Carnival appearances do not necessarily correlate with reality, often by the express choice of the carnival-goers. Class inversion is taken advantage of by the upper-class Florinda and Hellena, who gain freedom as they lose their privileged but restrictive aristocratic identity. Disguised as gypsies or simply masked, the women are able to participate freely and independently in the festivities of carnival without fear of social censure or charges of impropriety. But shedding aristocratic identity is potentially dangerous, as the sisters are abandoning the legal and social protection of nobility along with its restrictions. The naïve Florinda and Hellena do not anticipate the dangers faced by the lower-class women they pretend to be, threats especially evident in the uncontrolled world of Carnival. Instead, the sisters envision their participation as essentially innocuous: they want to “see...the divertissements of a carnival” and “be as mad as the rest, and take all innocent freedoms” (163-64). These “innocent freedoms,” however, are soon supplanted by the excessive and uncontrolled sexual appetites of the play’s male characters, desires which are sanctioned within Carnival disguise. The English cavalier Belvile, for instance, describes the necessity of disguise to Willmore with this logic: “Because whatever extravagances we commit in these faces, our own may not be obliged to answer ’em” (174). Belvile, it should be noted, is Florinda’s choice for a husband and usually the most self-controlled and decent of the cavaliers, making his comment here all the more disturbing. For Belvile, disguise is necessary not only to facilitate class inversion, but also to allow the indulgence of sexual appetites so extreme that even during Carnival one must “answer” to them.

Behn expresses the very real dangers of the competing forces of the marriage market, male sex drive, and prostitution through the character of Florinda. From the start, Florinda’s

position as the promised bride to three men establishes her as a contested object of economic worth. Her father wants to marry her to the wealthy but elderly Vincentio, and her brother, Pedro, has taken advantage of their father's absence to orchestrate a match with his friend Antonio, an arrangement which presumably would facilitate his control over Florinda's financial assets. Florinda even regards herself in economic terms, claiming authority over "what's due to [her] beauty, birth, and fortune" and matching her assets to the man who offers the best return (159). Her assessment of her own value is similar to that of Angellica Bianca, a prostitute who should exhibit the very opposite characteristics of the virtuous Florinda. Angellica's confident asking price of "a thousand crowns a month" (177) instead echoes Florinda's assurance that she knows exactly "what's due" to her, creating a striking comparison early in the play between a noblewoman and a prostitute and between the marriage market and prostitution. Subverting her father's authority, Florinda plots her own engagement to Belvile, exchanging his youth for Vincentio's fortune. Under these circumstances Florinda's virtue should be assured, since no fewer than five men (her father, brother, and three potential suitors) have a stake in her value on the marriage market. But it is Florinda who is the target of both attempted rapes in *The Rover*, attacks which threaten to abolish her economic value and therefore destroy any chance she has to arrange a suitable marriage. Worse, these attacks are perpetrated by the very men who should be defending her honor: Pedro, Belvile's fellow cavaliers, and even Belvile himself.

Ultimately it is Florinda's active participation in the marriage market, particularly her acute sense of her own economic value, which dooms her to be mistaken for a prostitute within Carnival and subsequently attacked. Through Florinda Behn highlights the underlying problem of the ideology of women as property, a problem Sedgwick addresses in her reading of Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675): "The status of women in this transaction [of possession]

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” (50). *The Rover* is an especially potent illustration of this theory, since not only are Florinda and Hellena witty and individualized “subjects,” but their participation within the marriage market demands the adept use of “symbols” of class, desire, and intent. Even Angellica Bianca, who is objectified through numerous posters advertising her services around Naples, is never allowed to be a mere object or stock character but is shown to be adept at managing her own symbolic objectification: she, not a male character, is responsible for the posters. The uncertainty over women’s status as objects or subjects is reflected in the confusion over whether they can assert their own identity as noblewomen or prostitutes, virgins or harlots, identification that becomes more and more important as sexual violence appears with increased frequency and intensity within the plot.

By disguising herself as a gypsy Florinda is able to manipulate signs of identity, allowing her to approach Belvile unchaperoned and arrange a secret meeting with him. Her freedom, however, has unexpected consequences. As Florinda waits at night for Belvile in her garden and “in an undress” she is accosted by Willmore, Belvile’s fellow cavalier and the embodiment of the Carnival spirit, a man whose insatiable sexual appetite seems to be whetted rather than quelled by violence (201). Earlier he professed his aggressive means of procuring a sexual partner, claiming that he is “no tame sigher, but a rampant lion of the forest” (167). This attitude is immediately evident when he propositions Florinda, arguing that the mere presence of two willing partners should lead to a sexual encounter: “let it suffice I am here, child—come, come kiss me” (201). The problem is that Florinda is *not* willing, but the gender roles of Restoration culture make it impossible for her refusal of sex to be taken seriously. Willmore interprets her

reluctance as coyness, answering that her very presence in the garden at night, alone, and dressed as she is shows that she desires sex. Trying flattery to overcome what he sees as shyness, Willmore claims that “those eyes of thine... gave the first blow—the first provocation” (202). When that fails, he points out her inconsistent behavior and accuses her of feigning reluctance: “why at this time of night was your cobweb door set open dear spider—but to catch flies?” (202). Willmore assumes that Florinda is putting on a necessary, even attractive, show of chaste resistance as befits her gender. He sees her as a “dear spider,” an eager sexual predator like his “rampant lion,” but one which sets a trap for a partner rather than pursues one. As this scene illustrates, the danger of Restoration gender roles is that coy female reluctance and real resistance are indistinguishable. Again the distinction between public women and virtuous women, already problematized through the carnivalesque and Florinda’s economic negotiations, is severely blurred, as the genuine demureness of an aristocrat is shown to be impossible to differentiate from the pretended shyness of a prostitute.

While prescribed gender roles certainly played a part in this attempted rape, what the cavaliers see as Willmore’s primary error is not his lack of restraint but his failure to recognize Florinda both socially as an upper-class woman and personally as Belvile’s intended bride. Willmore’s conduct is based on the premise that he voices early in the scene, when he spies Florinda and exclaims, “I’m a dog if it be not a very wench!” (201). Willmore assumes that Florinda is a lower-class woman, specifically an “errant harlot” as he later tells Belvile, a comment accompanied by the unspoken assumption that a “harlot” is either always looking for sex or has no right to refuse it (204). Thus when Florinda threatens “I’ll cry Murder, Rape! Or anything! If you do not instantly let me go” Willmore is confused, as his assumption was that a woman outdoors and alone was looking for a sexual encounter (202). He replies indignantly, “A

rape! Come, come, you lie, you baggage, you lie, what I'll warrant you would fain have the world believe now that you are not so forward as I" (202). Instead of defending himself against the charge of murder, Willmore is most concerned with Florinda's accusation of rape, which he takes as an invitation, defending himself by slyly noting that Florinda "lie[s]," or tells falsehoods, but also implying that she "lie[s]" down like a disreputable woman, one definition of "baggage" (*OED*). Willmore assumes that Florinda's threat is a rhetorical device to make him pay for sex, a request he complies with by offering her a coin (202). In fact, it is not until she refuses the coin that Willmore resolves to rape her, reading her refusal as an attempt to get even more money instead of a sign that she is not, in fact, a prostitute.

The exchange of money is the turning point of this scene in more ways than one. Willmore's offer to exchange money for sex is perhaps more threatening to Florinda than his rhetorical and physical persuasion. Class identity is certainly important to the dynamics of this attack, but more important is the distinction between a virtuous and "public" woman that is interrogated in this scene. Although Behn's characters appear to fall neatly into one category or the other, within the play she questions the differentiation between Florinda and Angellica and between noblewomen and prostitutes generally. As Elin Diamond notes, "Before the virgins are rewarded with the husbands they desire, they will traverse this whore's marketplace. In 'scenes' and 'discoveries' they will market themselves as she does, compete for the same male affection, suffer similar abuse" (519). Florinda is certainly virtuous, but she is herself an object of economic exchange, as Diamond points out, and her explicit goal in participating in Carnival is to negotiate the marriage market, not merely to be a chaste bystander. Willmore cannot tell the difference between Florinda's attempts to secure Belvile as a husband and a prostitute's attempts at luring a customer, a distinction that is of great importance to both Florinda and Belvile, who



arrives just in time to stop Willmore's attack. Even the garden in which Florinda is accosted signifies as both a private meeting place for the couple and a site where Florinda is on public display to passing men. Though the distinction between a virtuous woman and a public woman should be clear, Behn implies that the fact that such a differentiation is difficult to make reflects less on Florinda's behavior than on "how arbitrary the male system of signification is" within the play (Boebel 57).

This "system of signification" defined women in relation to the marriage market as unmarried, married, or widowed. Although the attack on Florinda can be read as a punishment for her inappropriate bargaining and her rejection of patriarchal control, it is clear that problems of identity stemming from the marriage market precede her own individual actions. Willmore's failure to determine correctly Florinda's social status is portrayed as perhaps a *willful* misreading of the situation, an episode that physically illustrates his and other male characters' beliefs about women. Prior to the attempted rape Willmore exposes his distrust of women in general as Blunt describes his encounter with a rich gentlewoman, Lucetta, who seems to be enamored of him. The other cavaliers are suspicious and caution Blunt that the affair might be merely an attempt to cheat him. Willmore, however, claims that it matters not whether Lucetta is actually a prostitute or a noblewoman, as the outcome is the same: "Why yes, Sir, they are whores, though they'll neither entertain you with drinking, swearing, or bawdry; are whores in all those gay clothes, and right jewels, are whores with those great houses richly furnished with velvet beds, store of plate, handsome attendance, and fine coaches, are whores and errant ones" (176). In other words, all women behave the same and it is merely the label of gentlewoman or prostitute that sanctions one set of actions (trading freedom for wealth and security) and condemns another (trading money for sex). As Willmore sees it, marriageable women and prostitutes both offer seductive

incentives, bartering their assets to a male population unable to withstand their charms.

Although Willmore blames women for using their assets to their own advantage, Behn clearly shows the victimization of women through these exchanges, implying that Willmore's comments should be read as a critique of the systems women are commodified within rather than a critique of womankind.

In the second attempted rape there is not even the premise of a misunderstanding of Florinda's class but instead a complete disregard for class distinctions and a deliberate grouping of all women under the category "whore." The attack begins when Blunt, a self-described "dull country rogue," returns in shame after being literally stripped of his clothing and possessions by Lucetta, who was, in fact, a prostitute out to rob him (176). Blunt's humiliation centers on his own naked emasculation, an indication that he has been publicly unmasked as a fool. Enraged, he vows to "never be reconciled to the sex more...O how I'll use all women-kind hereafter!" (224). As he fumes, Florinda enters his lodging fleeing from her brother, an event Blunt interprets as divine providence: "are my wishes granted? [A]nd is not that a she creature?" (225). He proceeds to describe his plans for Florinda:

[Y]es, I will kiss and beat thee all over; kiss and see thee all over; thou shalt lie with me too, not that I care for the enjoyment, but to let thee see I have ta'en deliberate malice to you and will be revenged on one whore for the sins of another; I will smile and deceive thee, flatter thee and beat thee, kiss and swear, and lye to thee, embrace thee and rob thee, as she did me, fawn on thee, and strip thee stark naked, then hang thee out at my window by the heels, with a paper of scurvy verses fasten'd to thy breast, in praise of damnable women. (225-26)

In the previous attempted rape scene violence was a mere avenue to sex for Willmore, a way of persuading an unwilling partner and something of a personal aphrodisiac as well. But as Blunt's rant indicates, in this second scene violence is the point of the rape; the attack is focused on female humiliation and pain rather than male sexual desire. Although Blunt cautions Florinda to "prepare for both my pleasures of enjoyment and revenge," it is clear that Blunt's "pleasures" lean more toward violence and vengeance than the "enjoyment" of sex (226).

Unlike Willmore, whose ultimate concern for social class is evident in his different attitudes toward Hellena and Angellica, for Blunt women are almost literally interchangeable, lacking individual identity as well as class identity. They are all merely "she creature[s]," devoid of personal identity (225). When Florinda begs her innocence it is clear from Blunt's responses that while he understands that Florinda is herself guiltless, the fact matters little to him. While Willmore's classification of all women as whores leads him to act deceitfully in his encounters with female characters, Blunt extends Willmore's logic to conclude that since all women are essentially whores, he can treat them all interchangeably. Blunt's substitution of Florinda for Lucetta is presented within the play as mere coincidence: Lucetta had escaped, and Florinda unfortunately chose to enter Blunt's apartment at the worst possible moment. Blunt, however, realizes the significance of substituting Florinda for Lucetta. Rape against a prostitute was essentially sanctioned during the Restoration, which explains Blunt's desire not only to replace Lucetta with a woman whose rape would signify a transgression, but to publicly expose a "public" woman, which he believes Florinda to be, regardless of class or individual actions.

Although the rhetoric of *The Rover* focuses on the inversion and reinscription of social class within the Carnival atmosphere, in the end what is at stake for female characters is not social class but the categorization of chaste and unchaste. Throughout the play temporarily

permeable class boundaries are conflated with labels of virtue, which are then also blurred. Behn frequently employs the terms “harlot” and “whore,” which had both sexual and class connotations (*OED*). Blunt intends the pejorative “lady-like whore” to indicate Lucetta’s disguise as a noblewoman, but he ends up unwittingly highlighting the surprising similarities between the behavior of ladies and whores (224). There is no sense that Blunt is deceived by Florinda’s appearance and unconventional actions; he and Frederick understand that Florinda is a “person of quality” (226), a “gentlewoman” (227) brought to their chamber by “some very unfortunate accident” (226). But instead of basing their opinion to rape or release Florinda on her class status, they use her chastity as a measure. Blunt refers to Florinda as “a harmless virgin with a pox [syphilis],” an impossibility that indicates Blunt’s belief that virtue is ultimately an illusion and that all women are tainted because they bargain with their physical and financial assets (225). Thus when Blunt vows to “be revenged on one whore for the sins of another,” one might as well replace the word “whore” with “woman.” Virtue is ultimately the deciding factor in this sexual assault, an extremely problematic proposition in a play which repeatedly compares prostitution to the marriage market.

Florinda’s perilous attempt to secure a suitable love-match is paralleled by the courtesan Angellica’s search for a man willing to pay the high fees for her services. Their pursuits are in a sense completely opposite: Angellica would rather conduct her business free of emotional attachment, while Florinda seeks a relationship at least partly based on mutual affection. However, Angellica, like Florinda, is punished for being an unchaste woman and attempting to negotiate a transaction in an unfamiliar realm. In Angellica’s case, the unfamiliar terrain is an emotional as well as physical relationship that does not depend on the man’s ability to pay. As befitting the inverted world of Carnival, Angellica Bianca is in many ways figured as the most

virginal character of the play, if the public/private binary is temporarily privileged over chaste/unchaste. Angellica is the most public of public women, posting images of her face and her fee around Naples, but she carefully guards her affections as extremely private. Willmore, who insults Florinda by offering money for sex, offends Angellica by complaining about her fee, chastising her for “set[ting] such price on sin...whilst that which is love’s due is meanly bartered for” (184). Unable to afford her exorbitant fees, Willmore shames Angellica with a high-minded speech in verse, claiming, “I’m a gentleman, / And one that scorns this baseness which you practice; / Poor as I am, I would not sell myself” (185). Astoundingly, Angellica’s reserve and practicality are affected by Willmore’s flattery and supposed disgust with the mercenary trades of both prostitution and marriage. Angellica, who “never loved before,” enters into what is for her a very serious transaction, demanding from Willmore “thy love for mine,” which she sees as a steeper price than the monetary value she usually assigns to herself (186, 187). Willmore agrees, and Angellica offers her body with the expectation that she is entering into a relationship of commitment and affection.

But for Willmore the exchange has been a mere exercise in rhetoric, a demonstration of his prowess and irresistibility to women. After convincing Angellica of his sincerity he forgets his vow and soon dallies with Hellena, an economically more enticing prospect. His actions are tantamount to an emotional rape of Angellica as he invades not what she makes public, her sexual self, but her private sentiments. Despite her profession, Angellica maintains an emotional chastity, a “virgin heart,” as she calls it, until Willmore’s violation (213). Although Angellica’s pain and humiliation are not physical, the emotional and financial consequences are very real. Behn inverts the circumstances of Angellica’s emotional rape compared to the attacks on Florinda, who openly acknowledges her affections even as she keeps her sexuality private.

Willmore uses flattery rather than violence when he seduces Angeallica, and he offers love instead of money, but in the end the results are the same: Florinda's rape would have erased her value on the marriage market, and Angellica's agreement to have sex without a monetary transaction eliminates her business-minded independence and ability to attach herself to any man for the right fee. What makes the attack on Angellica all the more surprising is that Willmore seduces Angellica with her own rhetoric of economics, a language she should be able to read: "rate," "sum," "bought," (185) "trade," "pay," and "account" (187). Anthony Kaufman also notes Willmore's almost overwhelming capacity for seduction, arguing, "So potent is his charm that even the threadbare and false language of love he speaks, a language that presumably Angellica suspects to be counterfeit, passes current with her" (8). Angellica is schooled in public discourse, the negotiation of the terms of her sexual encounters, but Willmore's conflation of the vocabulary of exchange and the vocabulary of love confuses what Angellica had so long kept separate: her public body and her private emotions. Willmore's change in personality is so profound after he sleeps with Angellica that the whole scene is reminiscent of the "bed trick" rapes popular in Restoration comedy: Angellica goes to bed assuming she is with one person, and wakes up next to someone completely different.

As many critics have noted, Angellica's eventual confrontation with Willmore is a scene that fits uneasily with the bawdy comedy of the rest of the play. As Hellena and Willmore, Florinda and Belvile, and Valeria and Frederick finalize their marriages, Angellica enters with a pistol and threatens to shoot Willmore. It is clear that she considers Willmore's deceit a rape, accusing him of perpetrating a "shameful conquest" in which she lost "my richest treasure...my honor," using euphemisms common to rape rhetoric (235, 237). Although Angellica is placated, disarmed, and conveniently paired off with Antonio (as a mistress rather than a wife), the hasty

match obviously intended to control Angellica interrogates how free, equal, and successful the other matches are. Blunt is too much of a fool to deserve a wife, but Willmore, the potential rapist of Florinda and the successful rapist of Angellica, is rewarded with the most appealing female character. Angellica's armed entrance also takes the audience beyond the temporal scope of the play, implying that the male characters' actions have perpetuated cycles of violence that will not be easily resolved. Her appearance at the moment at which all other conflicts are resolved undermines the conventional elements of the ending, forcing the audience to question if Willmore's deceptive and violent tendencies can realistically be transformed or mediated by Hellena's influence, and if any of the married couples can avoid the sexual violence so prevalent in their courtship.

In the end the main Spanish and English characters get what they desire, preceded by the exchanges and negotiations common to both the endeavors of prostitution and marriage. Such a comparison is evident as Angellica justifies her profession, answering Willmore's earlier assessment of women as whores by noting that her attempt to secure a high price for sex is no different than Willmore's search for the bride with the biggest financial incentive: "Pray tell me, sir, are not you guilty of the same mercenary crime, when a lady is proposed to you for a wife, you never ask, how fair—discreet—or virtuous she is; but what's her fortune—which if but small, you cry—she will not do my business—and basely leave her" (186). Angellica is proven right, as Willmore, without any great pangs of conscience, chooses the heiress Hellena over Angellica. While at the end of the play the chaste/unchaste binary is reaffirmed—the "real" prostitutes remain in their professions and the virgin heiresses are safely married to husbands of their choice—the complications within the action of the play show all the characters participating in economic markets which are disturbingly more similar than different.

The problem of the play's ending has occupied critics since *The Rover*, and indeed Aphra Behn herself, was rediscovered in the past few decades. As scholars have argued Behn's proto-feminism, they have been forced to reconcile the elements of the play that seem remarkably unconventional with its conclusion, which is unremarkably conventional. Dagny Boebel reads the final scene of the play as a triumph for the female characters, claiming, "In the carnival world of *The Rover* signifiers break free from their former moorings in phallic discourse, as Behn liberates the female characters to signify solely themselves" (54). Boebel cites as an example Hellena's claim at the end of the play that she is "inconstant," a powerful and distinctly masculine sentiment (243). Yet though Hellena's marriage to Willmore does represent a rechanneling of his desires toward appropriate fulfillment, Willmore's status as a would-be rapist cannot be merely forgotten, and the clever Hellena's disappearance into marriage is more lamentable than celebratory. Similarly, Linda R. Payne argues that within the play "women refuse their assigned roles as exchange tokens, choosing instead to wrest their bodies and fortunes from patriarchal control and determine their own fates" (42). Although Payne admits that Behn's ending is more "ambiguous" than triumphant regarding the women's marriage matches, both she and Boebel perceive the carnivalesque as a liberating, if at times dangerous, space (48). By contrast I argue that Behn's use of the carnivalesque illustrates how profoundly confined women are, even during Carnival. Despite functioning in an environment supposedly free from social hierarchies, women are still defined by how their behavior corresponds to the labels of chaste or unchaste, which are ultimately as important to women's personal protection as class status. Ultimately Behn's Carnival shows that sexual violence is a threat to all women, regardless of social standing, because, as Willmore and Blunt recognize, all women are for sale in one form or another. In *The Rover* Behn anticipates Astell, who will argue that, for wives, "if



at the very best her Lot is hard, what can she expect who is Sold, or any otherwise betray'd into mercenary Hands" (105).

Although the weddings that complete the play are too coincidental to be convincing, they are realistic in the sense that they portray the choice for marriage that most women made in the face of very limited options during the Restoration. By marrying off her female characters Behn also neutralizes the comparison between the marriage market and prostitution evident in the two attempted rapes of Florinda and the emotional rape of Angellica Bianca. The women are redefined as wives, allowing them not only to escape the virgin/whore binary, but to retreat within the home and disappear from the world. The conclusion is uneasy, however, as the systemic problems of the marriage market persist even as the individual characters paradoxically escape the market through marriage itself. Although Behn clearly exposes the problems inherent in a marriage market that commodifies women, the ending implies that women, despite individual acts of resistance, are unlikely to change the system. It is only when marriage itself is re-evaluated that women will be able to freely arrange their own marriage matches without being threatened with the label of whore or harlot, or worse, the sexual assaults essentially sanctioned against them.

#### *THE PERPLEX'D LOVERS*

Although rape and attempted rape scenes continued to appear on the stage into the eighteenth century, the context of these scenes and the overarching themes of the plays themselves underwent subtle transformation. The major difference is that the bawdiness that characterized the plays of the late seventeenth century began to be replaced by the emphasis on reason that would dominate the eighteenth century, a change best expressed by Richard W. Bevis' characterization of Congreve's *Way of the World* (1700) as "less a comedy of wit than of

prudence” (154).<sup>10</sup> Romantic intrigues were still popular comedic tropes, but the excessive sexuality evident in Behn was replaced by a more restrained fare:

the prevailing change [after the mid-1680s] was one away from the social values that inform so much of Carolean comedy in favor of moral values of a more traditional and timeless sort, values shared in common by many pre-Restoration and post-Carolean comedies. The major casualty is the rake. Rakish behavior does not instantly vanish, but its prominence is reduced, and more talked about—often in the past tense—than represented....Libertine values are replaced by a new set of social virtues that emphasize the importance of honesty, decency, amiability, and integrity. (Corman 65)

Within this new atmosphere the libertinism that characterizes *The Rover* is replaced by a condemnation of rakish vice and a focus on reform.<sup>11</sup> But despite theatrical changes between Behn and Centlivre specifically, and late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century drama in general, the rake does not take the threat of assault with him into dramatic obscurity. Rape scenes persist even when the libertine values of sexual freedom have vanished, meaning that the threat of rape cannot be equated solely with uncontrolled male sexual desire. Rather, the persistence of rape scenes in comedy indicates a systematic problem that transcends libertinism or Carnival freedom and can instead be linked definitively to the marriage market.

Although audience taste was evolving, the mask figures as an important symbol throughout Restoration comedy, representing the element of disguise in intrigue comedies as well as the inversion or interrogation of social class that often occurred in these works. In *The*

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<sup>10</sup> For an extended discussion of the subtle shifts between late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century drama see Robert D. Hume's *The Development of English Drama in the Late Seventeenth Century* pages 432-94 and Richard D. Bevis's *English Drama: Restoration and Eighteenth-Century, 1660-1789* pages 146-67.

<sup>11</sup> The reform movement was at least in part a reaction to outspoken criticism of the licentiousness of the Restoration stage at the end of the seventeenth century, exemplified in tracts such as Jeremy Collier's 1698 *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, which questioned not only the themes enacted onstage, but the very purpose of genre, interrogating "the nature of comedy and...its relationship to the society that produced it" (Loftis, *et al* 53).

*Rover* masks allow the Spanish heiresses to participate freely in Carnival as lower-class women, while prostitutes are mistaken for gentlewomen, an atmosphere which Behn uses to critique the marriage market. Yet Behn was also responding to a very real phenomenon taking place within the theater audience. Samuel Pepys' 12 June 1663 diary entry records the "great fashion among the ladies" of appearing masked at the theater, a contrivance which hid their identities while they experienced the low-brow amusements of the theater (qtd. in Bevis 71). The habit was quickly adopted by prostitutes, who realized the mask's potential to grant at least the appearance of social equality, creating a site in which class identity was extremely difficult to ascertain (Bevis 71). While Behn does not explicitly compare the Carnival world of *The Rover* to the theater audience watching it, Centlivre begins *The Perplex'd Lovers* by highlighting the unique ability of the theater to explore class distinctions both on and off the stage.<sup>12</sup> Centlivre's Prologue points to the very real difficulty of distinguishing between "masks" (prostitutes) and masked upper-class women in the theater, not only because of the physical element of disguise, but because they participate in similar activities:

The Cit for Business early leaves his Bed,  
And Spouse, with other Business in her Head!  
She rises early too by his Example,  
Pretends some Law Case with Spruce Colonel Dimple,  
And gets her Deary's Business done—i' th' Temple.

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The Sweet-condition'd Females of the Pit  
Come not to us in quest of Mirth or Wit;  
Nor care they what becomes of a poor Play:

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<sup>12</sup> In quotes from *The Perplex'd Lovers* long s's have been modernized.

You know their Business lies another Way. (257)<sup>13</sup>

All women are classified as participating in “Business,” a word Centlivre gives a particularly sexual connotation to by juxtaposing it with “lies,” which she uses, as did Willmore, to point to the physical act of lying down. Here Centlivre concurs with *The Rover*’s assertions that all women are essentially interchangeable by labeling all their activities with the same term. The Prologue indicates that the critique of courtship Centlivre offers in *The Perplex’d Lovers* is meant to be contextualized within the real situations of those in the audience, who were well aware that practical marriages often led to extramarital “Business” on the part of both wives and husbands. The Prologue also hints darkly at the deceptive capabilities of women, figured in the “Spouse” who cuckolds her husband and the “Sweet-condition’d Females” who are clearly not as innocent as they appear. Yet *The Perplex’d Lovers* shows that women are forced into duplicity and deception to balance the desires of their fathers, brothers, friends, and themselves in their marriage choices then punished for their perceived indecision or coyness. At stake is the definition and perception of virtue, an attribute that here as in *The Rover* determines if a woman should be sexually assaulted or not.

The play itself is a more conventional portrayal of courtship and marriage and the anxieties surrounding both endeavors than *The Rover*, where courtship is complicated by the limited span of Carnival, the heiresses’ freedom, and the English cavaliers’ stay in Naples. The heroine Constantia must contend with her father’s will that she marry the wealthy and titled Lord Richlove, her brother’s scheme to marry her to Sir Phillip Gaylove, and her own desire for Colonel Bastion. Constantia’s father has obvious reasons to endorse Lord Richlove, and her brother, Belvil, matter-of-factly informs Constantia why he proposes Sir Phillip: “Look ye,

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<sup>13</sup> “Cit” is a class-based epithet that refers to a person with money but no title. “Cit” is “short for citizen” and “usually applied...to a townsman or ‘cockney’ as distinguished from a countryman, or to a tradesman or shopkeeper as distinguished from a gentleman” (*OED*). An example of such a character is Mr. Sago in *The Basset-Table*.

Constantia, I am positively resolv'd to have the Knight for my Brother-in Law; now he has no Sister, and I none but you, then judge how the Alliance must come" (305). Unlike Pedro, who at least pretended to have Florinda's interests in mind when he presented his friend Antonio as an alternative to the elderly Vincentio, Belvil does not disguise his stake in Constantia's match. In Belvil's opinion, marriage is actually more about masculine relationships, particularly the transfer of masculine control over the circulation of money and title and the formation of "Alliance[s]" between men, than about the relationship between the actual couple contracted to marry. Belvil's assertion reveals an underlying system in which women operate essentially as gifts, a system Gayle Rubin in "The Traffic in Women" describes as organizing kinship. Because women are exchanged in marriage, men gain control of kinship and thus social organization:

If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it...If women are the gifts, then it is men who are the exchange partners. And it is the partners, not the presents, upon whom reciprocal exchange confers its quasi-mystical power of social linkage. The relations of such a system are such that women are in no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation. (Rubin 174)

Indeed, when a woman in these plays makes a financially or socially advantageous match, the benefits are usually described in terms of her male relations. The attempts of Florinda and Constantia to design their own marriage matches are thus not only a move toward marital happiness, but efforts to take control of their own value as objects of economic worth. In Rubin's description of power relations, however, this attempt must always be read as a challenge to male authority and to the male relations dependent upon female exchange.

Nevertheless, there is one factor that in *The Perplex'd Lovers* gives women at least partial control over their own “circulation,” to use Rubin’s term. Unlike *The Rover* Centlivre’s play features a woman with control over financial assets and thus a degree of independence. Constantia’s cousin, Camilla, according to her father “has ten thousand pounds...that I can’t hinder her of, and I shall leave her a Loaf when I die—and let her chuse for herself [whom to marry] and welcome” (297). Camilla’s father implies that the parental ability to interfere with a child’s marriage match is not a right granted by their authority as parents but instead tied to their capacity to control the distribution of financial assets. In short, money is power, a fact Camilla uses to arrange her own marriage with Belvil as well as interfere with Constantia’s match, swearing, “I never will be his [Belvil’s], till thou art happy” (264). Though these two projects appear mutually exclusive, Camilla’s financial independence coupled with Belvil’s infatuation with her allows her to disregard male figures that otherwise would have had authority over her. Camilla’s ability to sustain her independence after marriage is uncertain, however. Although Belvil does not appear to be pursuing Camilla for her wealth, he will almost certainly gain control over her fortune when they wed, reducing the power she has to act independently.<sup>14</sup> But in the brief period between when she gains control over her inheritance and when she marries, Camilla is successfully able to manipulate the marriage market for her own purposes.

Constantia does not have the same freedom as Camilla and must therefore maneuver subversively to avoid an overt challenge to male authority. Although Constantia has no intention of marrying Lord Richlove, she avoids giving a definitive answer to his proposals to protect herself from her brother’s choice of Sir Philip. As long as Richlove is still a factor, her brother

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<sup>14</sup> While late seventeenth-century legislation attempted to protect women’s property rights, the new laws still restricted a woman’s ability to manage her financial assets after marriage. The legislation assured women a regular allowance (“pin money”) and gave them the ability to place their property in the hands of trustees rather than their husbands (Stone 167). In both cases, however, control is still vested in male relatives rather than the woman herself.

has to at least pretend to agree with their father's will, and Constantia for the moment avoids a forced marriage. As she says to Camilla, "now judge, if I have not a difficult Game to play?" (264). Constantia's success depends not on whether she can escape this "Game," but how well she can maneuver within its matrix of rules. She must feign interest in Richlove and Sir Philip even as she quietly pursues a match with Bastion, a feat of performance and artifice that throws into doubt the veracity of everything else she says or does in the play, at least for the male characters. Despite her name and her constant affections for Bastion, Constantia does not, or, more accurately, cannot, exhibit constant behavior within the context of the courtship "Game."

The most important rule of this "Game," of course, is that Constantia must not appear to be aware of it, let alone participate in it. As with Angellica Bianca in *The Rover*, chastity figures in *The Perplex'd Lovers* as a mental condition as well as a physical one, requiring not only sexual purity but innocence as to the public, market-driven world controlled by men. Taking part in the "Game" of marriage negotiations not only challenges male authority but requires that Constantia assess her economic worth and assert her power to arrange her own marriage. Constantia must participate subversively, pretending to ignore the economic considerations of a marriage match and the competing interests of her father and brother even as she arranges her own match and swears constancy to Bastion. Unsurprisingly, Bastion is skeptical, and accuses Constantia of favoring Lord Richlove's wealth over his own affection. Constantia's reply is indignant:

Why do you suspect me? In what Action, since our first Acquaintance, have I betray'd a Soul so mercenary? Think you my Taste's so vitiated, that like common Wretches, I cou'd love for Gold? No, Love is a free-born Passion of the Mind, not to be purchas'd at a sordid Price—Those that can make their Bodies subservient to their Interest, were ne'er

acquainted with that noble Passion, but like the Brutes submit to Nature's Call, unknowing of Love's might Excellence (269)

Though she presumably refers to an unaffectionate but financially secure marriage contract, Constantia's rhetoric also clearly draws on the discourse of prostitution, where "sordid" transactions take advantage of those who must "make their Bodies subservient to their Interest." Yet while Constantia rejects marriages based purely on economic considerations, she herself participates in the very system she condemns. Constantia's love for Bastion is genuine, but to successfully marry him she must be both inconstant and "mercenary," using her physical assets to manipulate other suitors and outmaneuver her male relatives. She must literally make her body "subservient to [her] Interest," smiling, speaking, and pretending interest toward men she despises. Despite her pure motives, Constantia's virtue is questioned by her participation in the marriage market, which even in her own estimation is linked at best to duplicity and at worst to prostitution.

Refusing to participate subversively in the marriage negotiations would doom Constantia to an unhappy marriage, but the attitude of equivocation and duplicity she adopts to prevent such a marriage is hazardous as well. Throughout the play Constantia's professed disregard for economic concerns, even her very name, is in constant conflict with her deception and manipulation. For instance, Bastion rhetorically asks of Constantia, "And how ill does your Carriage become a virtuous Woman?," implying that her actions do not match her character (277). Bastion's question exposes the problems associated with defining virtue itself in Restoration comedy. While wit is prized in these plays, virtue demands a chaste innocence:

Although virtue is inarguably a positive attribute in comedies of manners, it is negatively constructed. That is, a virtuous woman is so because of what she lacks, and what she



lacks that ‘corrupt’ women possess is worldly knowledge and experience. Precisely because they must be acquitted from without, these traits become liabilities. They introduce the duality that threatens virginal integrity. To put it another way, as an honest woman in a comedy of manners, a heroine is unequivocal—she is physically and rhetorically intact. This virtuous heroine...turns out to be an ideal unrealizable by the very logic of her definition. (Gill 153)

Constantia’s duplicitous rhetoric thus reflects negatively on her virtue, and as she and other female characters attempt to arrange their own marriage matches, men become increasingly skeptical of how virtuous such worldly women can be. Belvile angrily tells Constantia (whom he believes to be Camilla) that “thy Tongue is modest, and ashamed to utter the Foulness of thy Purpose” (293). He ultimately concludes that “there never was a Woman true—Inclination, Vanity, Interest or Curiosity, has still prevail’d upon their fickle Natures, and he that trusts their faithless Vows, forfeits his Reason, and destroys his Peace” (293). Women are meant to be “modest” and “true” but are instead revealed to be “fickle,” “faithless,” and foul, causing Bastion and Belvil to conclude, like Willmore and Blunt, that virtue is an illusion or performance rather than a reality. Richlove is also frustrated by the disconnect between Constantia’s supposed virtue and her flirtatious behavior toward him: “indeed, a Woman can’t be virtuous that gives a Man such Encouragement...for a virtuous Woman will not receive a second Visit from the Person she has no design upon—Wou’d Constantia give me such Liberty, I wou’d not fear Possession one way or another” (273-74). Constantia’s inability to refuse or accept a particular marriage partner makes her unable to be “rhetorically intact,” leading Richlove to suspect that her virginity is not intact either.

Male anxiety about the inability to ascertain female virtue becomes so pronounced that rape is invoked as the only way to determine if a character is chaste or unchaste. For Richlove, Constantia's duplicity is so disturbing that he would rather destroy her chastity, thus assuring himself that she is unchaste, than continue to question her virtue. Richlove's motives for the attack are complex. His servant, Le Front, first suggests rape as a way to end the courtship, arguing that "Possession will do your Business" (274). Again the term "Business" is invoked as a synonym for both marriage and rape, as Le Front could easily be referring to either the "Possession" of marriage, in which a woman's identity and assets were absorbed into her husband and his estate, or the violent "Possession" of rape. While Richlove sees the rape as ending Constantia's duplicity by annihilating her value on the marriage market, his ultimate goal is unclear. He tells Le Front that rape is merely retribution, "a Way to revenge myself of her Disdain," but also admits that he is sexually aroused by the plot: "the bare Imagination gives me Pleasure" (274). Most significantly, Richlove views the rape as a way to outmaneuver Constantia and force her into marriage, reasserting control over their courtship. Once raped, Constantia's chances of marriage are unlikely, and, considering the tendency of rape trials to blame the victim, Richlove concludes that Constantia may marry him to avoid scandal.<sup>15</sup> The end result for Richlove—marriage, revenge, or mere sexual excitement—appears to be less important than the fact that after the rape he will no longer have to question her virtue.

The attack simultaneously reveals Constantia's successful manipulation of the marriage market and her extreme danger as a participant in it. So well has Constantia played her part that Richlove renounces all future husbandly authority over her in exchange for accepting his

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<sup>15</sup> Richlove's conflation of rape and marriage is also consistent with the historical definition of rape, which included forced sex as well as forced marriage through kidnapping. *The Lawe's Resolutions on Women's Rights* (1632) illustrates that both definitions were current into the seventeenth century, as it characterizes rape as both "when a woman is enforced violently to sustain the fury of brutish concupiscence" and "when anyone abducts a woman of honest fame," an action often followed by forced marriage (qtd. in Rudolph 175).

proposal, offering “a Heart entirely devoted to your Service; and with it all that I am Master of; so well I love, you shall be Mistress of myself and Fortune” (284). Constantia again refuses to accept or deny Richlove, evasively responding that she is “not dispos’d to marry,” a statement which not only avoids his question but is patently untrue (284). Richlove’s offer attempted to establish Constantia as a virtuous wife, but in the face of her continued deception he decides instead to rape her, fixing her identity as an unchaste and unmarriageable woman. Like Blunt, Richlove seeks an appropriate punishment for what he sees as a public woman, one who makes a show of constancy while entertaining another man: “I can dispense with Ceremony too, and be content to share with him your Favours....By all the Injuries of slighted Love, I would enjoy thee even before his Face. Nay, struggle not, proud Beauty” (284). In a purely economic sense, Richlove demands repayment for his efforts in courtship, an endeavor that should have ended in marriage, but due to Constantia’s indecision ends in attempted rape. Constantia’s attempts to avoid attaching herself to one man ultimately result in Richlove defining her as a public woman belonging to all men and thus unprotected from sexual assault.

Constantia’s attack also reveals the extent to which sexual violence and sexual purity are interdependent in the context of not only *The Perplex’d Lovers* but Restoration comedy in general. Chastity was essentially the only personal attribute possessed by the female which had any significance on her value on the marriage market. In an age in which family lines determined inheritance but paternity was nearly impossible to determine, female virtue and fidelity was one of the most important considerations when choosing a spouse. Ascertaining virtue, however, demanded challenging it, as Florella, Constantia’s maid, notes after admitting Richlove into Constantia’s bedchamber:

Well, am I not a Jade now, to put a Man into my Lady's Bedchamber without her Knowledge? But should not I be a Fool to refuse a Diamond Ring and two Broadpieces? ay certainly—I have only drawn the Wine, she may chuse to drink—besides 'tis a Way to exercise her Virtue—nobody can boast of Honesty till they are try'd—I once thought myself Proof against Temptation, but the dear, bewitching Gold has caught me. (282)

Florella draws an analogy between her own decision to take Richlove's bribe and Constantia's choice to have sex with Richlove or not. Florella's assumption of choice is an echo of the general belief that being raped was in the end a choice, that if a woman fought hard enough, a man could not rape her. Conceived as such, rape legitimizes Constantia as a virtuous woman because she resists Richlove. Rather than characterizing chastity as innocence, Florella argues that exposure to temptation is the only way to assure virtue, a belief echoed by Bastion, who is able to prevent Richlove from even entering Constantia's chamber but instead waits until she is nearly raped because "she may be false? Who can judge the Heart of Woman?" (282-83). It takes Constantia's cries to affirm her virtue, at which point Bastion is assured that "she's spotless!" (284). The assertion that untried virtue is not virtue at all reveals how rape fixes female chastity by either testing it or destroying it altogether. As such, attempted rape is portrayed as integral to courtship because it affirms what a woman's behavior and a father's assurance cannot: if a future wife is, in fact, chaste.

It is not until Constantia is safely—and publicly—matched with Bastion that her virtue is assured. Although Florella and Bastion assert that chastity must be tempted to be truly considered chastity, this belief is difficult to reconcile with the rest of the play, which demands innocence and withdrawal rather than exposure and temptation from its female characters. Even after she convinces Bastion of her virtue by resisting Richlove, Constantia's continued

equivocation and attempts to arrange her own marriage lead her into situations which threaten her virtue rather than prove it. She is briefly accosted by Le Front, whom she mistakes for Bastion as he stands outside her house in the dark. She escapes, only to be again attacked by Richlove, this time in disguise as a Greek merchant selling chocolate. With Richlove's true character revealed and the arrival of a propitious letter informing Belvil that Sir Philip has married someone else, Constantia and Bastion are free to marry. It is only at this point of the play that Constantia's virtue is unchallenged, as she ends her duplicity and permanently matches herself to one man. As in *The Rover*, virtue is portrayed as providing protection from sexual assault, yet Centlivre complicates this concept by noting that the requirements of virtue are themselves contradictory. A virtuous woman lacks exposure to the world, according to Gill, but virtue must also be tested. A virtuous woman would never barter her body for economic assets, as Constantia states, but to avoid such an economically-based match she must participate in the marriage market, which requires a savvy manipulation of others' desires and her own value.

Although Constantia and Camilla are successful in arranging their own marriages, Centlivre illustrates that the terms under which the two characters gain their autonomy are tenuous. After the threats to Constantia's honor caused by her contested position on the marriage market, her father allows that arranged marriage is inherently problematic and should be effectively done away with. While his renunciation of arranged marriage implicitly indicates that factors other than money and title should be considered in a marriage match, his phrasing reveals a persistent belief in parental authority: "therefore by my Consent, my Daughter shall chuse for herself for the future" (314). Constantia's choice is ultimately not free, but instead attained through the permission of her father, which implies that he can revoke her freedom at will. Similarly, though Camilla's father has described her as wholly personally and financially

independent, he berates Belvil for not informally involving him in the marriage negotiations: “methinks, Kinsman, you might have made your Love known to me...why what, cou’d not we have smoak’d a Pipe, and crack’d a Bottle together, and settled Matters in order for the cracking my Daughter’s Pipkin, ha?” (297). Both Camilla’s and Constantia’s fathers attempt to reinscribe patriarchy, allowing for the possibility of free marriages by their daughters even as they reassert their own authority over the proceedings. Just as these women gain control over their own circulation, the terms of their freedom are kept within male power.

Even more than *The Rover*, Centlivre’s *Perplex’d Lovers* focuses on the inherently economic nature of the marriage market. The wish of Camilla’s father to have “settled Matters” again invokes the mercenary language which punctuates the text, particularly the notions of “Business” and “Interest.” Centlivre shows that many configurations of relationships, from marriage to prostitution to rape, are in the end aspects of the same “Business.” As in *The Rover*, “Interest” retains the sense of investment in the impending marriage, but in *The Perplex’d Lovers* the term also conjures up the distinction between public and private, chaste and unchaste. Florella, who claims that “Self-interest governs the World,” is literally invested in the action of the play through Richlove’s bribes (258). Although *The Perplex’d Lovers* has no prostitute characters, Florella invokes the discourse of prostitution in that she sells sex, though she does not offer her own body. Instead Florella essentially acts as a pimp for Constantia, highlighting the corrupting power of money on relationships. What is most significant, however, is that Florella’s base assertion that “Self-interest governs the World” reminds viewers that Belvil and Constantia’s father are not only pursuing their own “Self-interest” but also are using Constantia in much the same way as Florella, the difference being that their prostitution of Constantia is sanctioned within the marriage market, while Florella’s is not.

Florella's practicality is contrasted with Constantia's disdain for "those that can make their Bodies subservient to their Interest" and marry with regard to money rather than affection. The independent Camilla also rejects personal gain as a motive, as Bastion notes to Constantia: "she's ours you know, and will scruple nothing for our Interest" (278). Yet Centlivre carefully constructs circumstances that make the scorn for self-interest dependent on financial circumstances, a setup especially evident in the comparison between Florella and Constantia. Florella will not marry a rich husband, so she takes advantage of her temporary position of power over Richlove to accept a small portion of his vast wealth. On the other hand, Camilla assures Belvil that Constantia, though she might refuse his choice of a match, will "never wed below her Birth" (281). Constantia's lifestyle will not drastically change because she is assured of marrying someone within the same socio-economic group, so she can therefore reject matches based on financial gain rather than personal compatibility. Camilla herself is free to pursue the interests of Bastion and Constantia because her own economic security is assured by her inheritance. Though she may destroy her match with Belvil, she is well aware that she is an attractive match for any number of men or could live alone on her income. Ultimately just as the freedom to marry is conferred by patriarchal figures, freedom from "Self-interest" is itself dependent upon financial independence.

Although "Self-interest" is somewhat negatively characterized in *The Perplex'd Lovers*, Centlivre also laments that for most female characters such a consideration is not even possible. Constantia's virtuous disdain for those "Wretches" who "make their Bodies subservient to their Interest" is in many ways a profound misreading of the marriage market. It is not for their own "Interest" that women submit to practical marriages, but for the "Interest" of fathers and brothers, as Constantia's experience shows. Constantia would like to separate the "sordid"

transactions of arranged marriages from her own pure agreement with Bastion, but as Centlivre shows such a differentiation is difficult to make, as Constantia must still negotiate the “Game” of courtship and thus jeopardize her virtue. Like Behn, Centlivre argues for changes in marriage as a social institution rather than more tolerance on the part of fathers or brothers by showing that the rules of courtship require women to be deceptive or, in Constantia’s rhetoric, sacrifice their own bodies to economic considerations. Conceptions of both virtue and rape are complicated within *The Perplex’d Lovers*’s portrayal of the marriage market, which makes virtue nearly impossible to assure and transforms rape into a tool of “persuasion” in the marriage negotiations. Such a portrayal exposes how mercenary terms like “Business” and “Interest” disguise not only the greed evident in arranged marriages but also the close relationship between both rape and virtue and rape and marriage.

#### *THE BASSET-TABLE*

Although Centlivre’s *Basset-Table* presents yet another virgin heiress torn between her family’s desires for a marriage match and her own, the play’s focus instead rests on an entirely new type of character.<sup>16</sup> In the last play analyzed here the marriage market is critiqued through a portrayal of a widow, Lady Reveller, who operates as both former wife and potential wife within the text, allowing Centlivre to illustrate to devastating effect not only the problems associated with the marriage market, but also the ensuing effects on the marriage relationship itself. Because of her social position Lady Reveller, unlike Florinda and Constantia, can challenge male dominance within the play, rejecting male characters’ claims to patriarchal familial authority and financial authority. The most potent symbol of this independence is the basset table Lady

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<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that *The Basset-Table* is generally regarded as a poorer version of *The Gamester*, one of Centlivre’s most popular plays. As such, *The Basset-Table* has received much less critical attention, though Robert D. Hume assesses it as “more thoughtful but less focused” than the earlier play (469). The most significant change between the two plays is that in *The Gamester* the gambling addict is the male Valere rather than a wealthy widow.



Reveller runs, which tarnishes her image as a respectable noblewoman as it facilitates corrupt exchanges of money among a socially mixed crowd. Lady Reveller's free behavior must, of course, be contained, a feat achieved by making her physically and legally subject to male control via attempted rape and marriage, which are portrayed as intrinsically linked. *The Basset-Table* presents rape not only as a possible precursor to marriage, but, conversely, argues that marriage is an essentially economic transaction tantamount to rape.

As a foil to Lady Reveller's free, flirtatious ways Centlivre creates Valeria, Lady Reveller's niece and a young woman in essentially the same dilemma as Florinda and Constantia. Valeria desires Lovely, but her father, Sir Richard, intends to marry her to Captain Hearty, whose brash character is best summed up by his own words: "I hate the French, Love a handsome Woman, and a Bowl of Punch" (23). It is soon obvious to both partners that Valeria, who loves natural philosophy and relies on reason, is not suited for Captain Hearty: in fact, at their first meeting the captain declares that Valeria is "fitter for Moorfields [asylum] than Matrimony," while Valeria calls the captain "an irrational Being" (24). Centlivre twists the typical forced marriage plot by having both partners realize their incompatibility, a move that exposes Sir Richard's motives as more prominently selfish than the fathers or brothers in *The Rover* and *The Perplex'd Lovers*. Even Valeria's fortune cannot tempt Captain Hearty toward marriage, and he agrees to help her marry Lovely instead by disguising the young man and praising his military skill. Sir Richard is fooled, and immediately transfers his offer of Valeria from Captain Hearty to Lovely. This plot marks one of the easiest reconciliations of the typical Restoration love triangle, an interesting move that places Sir Richard, rather than another lover, as the only obstacle in the way of a successful match.

Valeria, who has not been informed of Lovely's disguise, is crushed. She held the assumption that though her father might compel her to marry, he would at least have some regard for her own values and interests, telling Lovely, "do not believe he shall Force me to any Thing that does not Love Philosophy" (29). Faced with imminent marriage to a man she does not know but who is obviously incompatible with her, Valeria tells her father, "Duty compels my Hand,—but my Heart is subject only to my Mind...I here protest my Will shall ne'er assent to any but my Lovely" (39). Because she has not offered her consent, Valeria describes her marriage as a form of rape, allowing that though her husband might possess her body through a forced transaction, her "Mind" has not been sold. The speech is intended to appeal to Sir Richard's fatherly affection, but his response reveals Valeria's utter lack of value or identity beyond the marriage market and subsequent production of heirs:

Ay, you and your Will may Philosophize as long as you please,—Mistress,—but your Body shall be taught another Doctrine,—it shall so,—Your Mind,—and your Soul, quotha! Why, what a Pox has my Estate to do with them? Ha? 'Tis the Flesh Huswife that must raise Heirs,—and since I knew the getting of the Estate, 'tis fit I shou'd dispose of it,—and therefore no Excuses, this is your Husband do you see,—take my Word for it. (39)

Here the binary Valeria created between body and "Mind" is denied as she is stripped of "Mind" and "Soul" and instead figured as mere "Flesh," another asset for Sir Richard to use to advance his own foolish interests. Rather than being drawn to a rich or titled suitor for his daughter, he wants to use the match to produce grandchildren who will become an army of French-hating English soldiers, advising Valeria, "get me but Grandsons and I'm Rich enough" (38). Through the character of Sir Richard Centlivre portrays forced marriage in the extreme, showing the

miserable) and arguing for the ability of young people to choose matches for themselves.

Throughout the play other characters recognize that only Lovely is fit for Valeria, a fact she says she knew from their first meeting: “your Temper being Adapted to mine, gave my Soul the First Impression” (29). This assessment seems much more rational than Sir Richard’s inflexible belief that as Valeria’s father and as the family’s provider he can marry her to whomever he chooses. Centlivre thus transfers authority from Sir Richard, who has obviously abused his position, to Valeria, who understands the lasting implications of an ill-fated marriage match.

Throughout *The Rover*, *The Perplex’d Lovers*, and *The Basset-Table*, but particularly in the latter play, the right of parents to force marriages is questioned. These plays reflect the societal debate over the same issue that was being waged during the Restoration and would eventually transform marriage as an institution. Stone argues that between 1660 and 1800 the balance of power in families slowly moved from parents to children regarding marriage matches, leading to “a marked shift of emphasis on motives away from family interest and towards well-trying personal affection,” though not toward passionate love (183). Passion was still regarded as suspect, a temporary condition that could not possibly be sustained for the duration of a marriage. Instead, what Astell called “settled Happiness” was to be sought (93). The best example of this idea is the relationship between Valeria and Lovely.<sup>17</sup> Although Lovely is initially described as “sick [with love] for Valeria,” it is soon apparent that the best argument for their union is that they share compatible personalities rather than overwhelming passion (16). Lovely is the only one patient enough to live with Valeria; he asserts he “deserve[s] her by meer Dint of Patience,” a sentiment echoed by Captain Hearty, who tells Lovely, “if you can bear with

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<sup>17</sup> In fact, many critics think that the character of Valeria is based on Astell herself, although whether such portrayals are “sympathetic” or satirical is debated (Hill 17).

the Girl, you deserve her Fortune (16, 30). For her part, Valeria is all reason, to the extent that Lovely complains, “You have not Love enough; that Fire would Consume and Banish all Studies but its own; your Eyes wou’d Sparkle, and spread I know not what, of Lively and Touching, o’er the whole Face; this Hand, when Press’d by him you love, would Tremble to your Heart” (29). Though Lovely teases, both he and Valeria understand that passion is impossible to sustain and a marriage based on reason and affection—her sometimes ridiculous intellectualism coupled with his indulgence and patience—has a greater chance of success. This match is not what we would term today a match made purely for love, but the very fact that Lovely and Valeria themselves construct a match based on both equal social standing and affection represents a reconceptualization of marriage both in society and within representations of marriage on the stage.

Both here and in *The Perplex’d Lovers* Centlivre takes Behn’s argument that arranged marriage is unfair a step farther, asserting that young people can successfully choose their own marriage matches. The marriages which conclude *The Rover* are hastily contracted, and in the Carnival atmosphere it seems unlikely that prior to matrimony the couples considered the prudence of their match, but in Centlivre’s plays young people are portrayed as able to competently assess their wants and needs and subsequently arrange an appropriate and fulfilling match. In both *The Perplex’d Lovers* and *The Basset-Table* the characters do not make rash choices based on emotion but instead consider a range of factors. Social class remains vital, as evident in Camilla’s confidence that Constantia will not embarrass her family by marrying beneath her class, but other concerns, such as personal compatibility and affection, are also considered. Centlivre does not merely critique marriage and the marriage market, as Behn does, but rather subtly advocates for increased freedom for young people, giving evidence that such

reform would not lead to unwise marriages. Instead, marriages arranged by fathers or brothers are revealed to be short-sighted, impulsive, and ultimately harmful.

Centlivre not only argues that marriage reform would be a positive development but also vividly illustrates how necessary such reform is. Lady Reveller is the counterpart to Valeria and a character whose straightforward enjoyment of widowhood implicitly questions why any woman would not prefer widowhood to a forced marriage. Her devoted maid, Alpiev, certainly agrees, noting, “my Lady’s a Widdow, and Widdows are accountable to none for their Actions— Well, I shall have a Husband one of those days, and be a Widow too, I hope” (13). In fact, no direct mention of Lady Reveller’s husband is ever made, leading one to assume that not only was their marriage a purely practical union, but that Lady Reveller vastly prefers her husband dead to alive. Captain Hearty asserts the same, saying that husbands “hale out, and leave you Liberty and Money, two things the most acceptable to a Wife in Nature” (23). This assessment of marriage is in itself a concern for all of the male characters in the play, but most troubling is the manner in which Lady Reveller not only rejects marriage, but rejects all male control. In Lady Reveller’s estimation of marriage, men are ultimately dispensable, which leads her to question whether male control in other arenas is necessary either. On this point Lady Reveller shares an unlikely similarity with the unmarried women of the previous plays. Both chastity and widowhood represent positions in which women are in some ways outside of male control as they are neither sexually nor legally possessed by husbands: “Virginitie and widowhood were usually thought of as temporary situations, though they became increasingly more threatening if the woman in question tried to avoid direct male control” (Jankowski 24). Lady Reveller is menacing for precisely this reason, resisting any checks on her freedom and telling her uncle, “I’m resolved to follow my own Inclinations” (13). Unlike Camilla, who used her financial

assets to assert a limited independence from patriarchy to help Constantia, Lady Reveller admits that her “Inclinations” lead toward gaming and flirting, selfish pastimes she does not intend to give up.

Lady Reveller is neither bound by daughterly duty nor financial dependence to abide by anyone’s rules but her own as far as how she chooses to spend her time and money. Widowhood represented one of the few avenues for women to gain a level of independence unavailable to unmarried women and wives.<sup>18</sup> While the independence and wealth of widows varied by the individual, the period, and the location, generally widows were left at least a share in the estate, they were free to remarry when and if they chose, and were allowed a legal identity (married women were absorbed into a husband’s legal identity) (Jankowski 35-36). Lady Reveller, it is soon obvious, lives a very comfortable and independent life as a widow, a position in direct contrast to Valeria, Florinda, and Constantia, who must carefully balance their own marriage choices between their own desire, family opinion, and economic feasibility. Certain stereotypes, however, reduced the widow’s freedom, particularly a reputation for sexual voraciousness which demanded remarriage and the reassertion of male control.<sup>19</sup> Although Lady Reveller’s sexuality is not as blatant as in some popular portrayals of widows, she does display the negative traits associated with widowhood. She has a reputation for entertaining too many men at her basset table, and she brazenly displays her independence, defying her prudish uncle and cousin’s admonishments to guard her reputation.

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<sup>18</sup> Of course, lower-class widows were much less free. They might be left destitute without their husband’s income, and be forced to remarry to support themselves and their children. Upper-class widows, however, could be provided a dower (one-third of the husband’s estate, in exchange for her dowry) or jointure (property deeded to the wife by her husband) (Jankowski 35). Widows could also act as “executors of their husbands’ estates and trustees of their children’s inheritance,” thus awarding them financial power and independence (Jankowski 36).

<sup>19</sup> Jennifer Panek writes extensively on the lusty widow tradition in *Widows and Suitors in Early Modern English Comedy*.

Lady Reveller is free to marry or remain single, a position which allows her to entertain potential suitors without being obligated to pick one. But as in *The Perplex'd Lovers* a woman's identity as chaste or unchaste (or in Lady Reveller's case, a virtuous woman and a woman of ill repute) is linked to the perception of innocence. Both Florinda and Constantia risked their virtue by assessing their own value on the marriage market and arranging matches based on love and affection. In contrast, Lady Reveller evaluates her physical and financial attractiveness and uses these assets not for marriage but to perpetuate multiple relationships: "I slight the malicious Censure of the Town, yet defy it to asperse my Vertue; Nature has given me a Face, a Shape, a Mein, an Air for Dress, and Wit and Humour to subdue. And shall I lose my Conquest for a Name" (15). Lady Reveller's disdain for marriage is evident in her desire for "Conquest," an achievement not possible within marriage, where a wife's legal identity was absorbed into that of her husband, and only possible in flirtatious courtships at the basset table.

Lady Reveller's reputation is linked to her skill at both courtship games and gambling games, and her success at both is what dooms her. Gambling not only places Lady Reveller in close physical proximity to a variety of men, but it also exposes her excessive interest in making money. As her frustrated suitor Lord Worthy notes: "her Passion for Gain surmounts her Pride, and lays her Reputation open to the World. Every Fool that has ready Money, shall dare to boast himself her very humble Servant" (16). Even without her flirtatious behavior Lady Reveller's "Passion for Gain" would figure her as a promiscuous character within town gossip. Not only does Lady Reveller gamble, but she runs a basset table, a fact that her uncle, Sir Richard, describes as much more damaging socially than occasional gaming:

Can you that keep a Basset-Table, a publick Gaming-House, be insensible of the shame on't? I have often told you how much the vast concourse of People, which Day and Night

make my House their Rendezvous, incommode my Health; your Apartment is a Parade for Men of all Ranks, from the Duke to the Fidler, and your Vanity thinks they all pay Devoir to your Beauty. (12)

As Sir Richard's comment illustrates, gaming is a "publick" pastime that imparts "shame" on those who indulge in it, whether or not participants actually engage in promiscuous behavior. Although the loss of a fortune is a distinct possibility in gambling, in *The Basset-Table* the real danger lies elsewhere: "What can be lost at the gaming table...is not aristocratic honor, but female sexual virtue" as women flirt with male gamblers and reveal a voracious mercenary appetite (Wallace 26). Lady Reveller's relatives fear that in her pursuit of money she has sacrificed her most valuable possession: her reputation, and thus the chance to remarry.

Sir Richard's complaint, however, also brings up another concern that arose as gambling gained popularity during the Restoration: the permeability of supposedly rigid social boundaries at the gambling table. Lady Lucy laments the fact that her cousin mixes with people from outside her social class: "you entertain such a Train of People, Cousin, that my Lady Reveller is as noted as a publick Ordinary, where every Fool with Money finds a Welcome" (14). Just as Lady Reveller gains authority and confidence via her skill as a gambler, gambling can legitimize other behaviors that extend outside the game itself: "it can probably be discerned that as they mix their cards, gamblers seem to mix something more: social levels, genders and opportunities" (Rigamonti and Favero Carraro 53). Such mixing was looked at with suspicion, sometimes outright fear: "Middle rank reformers deplore the destabilizing effects of the gambling table, in particular its arbitrary and 'hyperactive'...redistribution of wealth" (Wallace 23). In a context in which gambling was characterized as socially promiscuous, it is likely that its participants were characterized similarly. Such a conception is particularly evident in Centlivre's portrayal of Mrs.



Sago, a social-climbing drugster's wife who "has a vast Passion for...Lady Reveller, and endeavors to mimick her in every thing" (17) and is only accepted at the basset table because she has money, as Lady Reveller herself notes: "A Citizen's Wife is not to be endur'd amongst Quality; had she not Money, 'twere impossible to receive her" (21). Mrs. Sago appears willing to sacrifice everything to transcend her status as a "Cit" wife, bankrupting her husband and even engaging in an extramarital affair with Sir James Courtly. As Mrs. Sago's fortunes appear to rise she becomes financially as well as morally bankrupt, eventually ruining her husband. In the character of Mrs. Sago the fear of destabilizing, uncontrolled monetary exchange is conflated with uncontrolled and promiscuous female behavior. Although Mrs. Sago's downfall necessitates her return to "Cit" status and the renewed dominance of her husband, she demonstrates the potential for gambling to invert both social class and gender hierarchies as the desire for money on the part of the aristocracy supersedes the desire to maintain rigid class boundaries.

Through Mrs. Sago and even Lady Reveller herself *The Basset-Table* illustrates a world in which gambling facilitates a variety of inversions reminiscent of the carnivalesque in *The Rover*. Just as in Behn's *Carnival* all celebrants are supposedly equal, gambling, like any game, necessitates "creating an absolute, albeit fictitious, equality among the players" (Rigamonti and Favero Carraro 57). Although the game of basset favored the dealer and thus equality was somewhat of an illusion, gambling as a whole did assist social climbing: "As a result of its appeal to a broad range of society, gambling allows people to pass themselves off as what they are not" (Rigamonti and Favero Carraro 23). Mrs. Sago is the most obvious example of this principle, but the basset table itself functions as a space in which not only social class, but daily routines and gender roles are upended, challenged, or done away with. Centlivre carefully builds

the sense of inversion in the first scene of the play, progressing from portraying the cheerful topsy-turvy lifestyle of the gamblers to illustrating how these unconventional values persist even after the game of basset has ended. The play begins with a group of footmen grumbling as they wait for the gamblers, who have played all night, to end their game and be escorted home. One of the footmen complains that his lady “Games all Night, and Sleeps all Day,” a criticism echoed in other characters’ concerns over the larger implications of this lifestyle (11). As Lady Lucy warns Lady Reveller, “Shou’d all the rest of the World follow your Ladyship’s Example, the order of Nature would be inverted, and every good, design’d by Heaven, become a Curse.... You cross the purpose of the Day and Night, you Wake when you should Sleep” (14). Although Centlivre here and elsewhere characterizes Lady Lucy as comically shrill, her point is still valid. Lady Reveller refuses to adjust her daily routine to fit the conventions of the town, and her gambling habit instead creates the rhythms by which she organizes her life.

The inversion characteristic of the basset table and Lady Reveller’s lifestyle in general is meant to be troubling, but not in the way audiences might first perceive. Throughout the play Centlivre has demonstrated the chaos caused by Lady Reveller’s unconventional lifestyle, but a closer look reveals that the widow disturbs her fellow characters and amuses audiences precisely because her beliefs about marriage follow logic rather than invert it. Presumably Lady Reveller fulfilled her duties as a daughter by marrying according to her family’s wishes or financial compatibility, and her attitude toward husbands—hers or anybody else’s—is justly practical. Should she be forced to marry again, Lady Reveller would pick a sea captain, preferably one who travels often: “Oh! ay, it is so pretty to have one’s Husband gone Nine Months of the Twelve, and then to bring one home fine China, fine Lace, fine Muslin, and fine Indian Birds, and a thousand Curiosities” (23). A wife brings a dowry to her husband, and, in Lady Reveller’s

logic, a husband is meant to provide his wife with material possessions. Companionship and affection, not a concern prior to marriage, should not be a concern within it. Lady Reveller's attitudes toward widowhood follow the same logic evident in Alpiew's assessment of the superiority of widowhood. If husbands exist to provide financial support for wives, then widowhood offers the financial security of a husband without the bother of an actual husband. Lady Reveller has no need for a second husband's financial assets and apparently has no desire for monogamous companionship, so she does not seek a second marriage. In this way the widow herself functions as an indictment of marriages based on purely economic concerns, as her extreme practicality is an example of the type of character produced by such matches.

The widow is portrayed as essentially governed by practicality and her own "Inclinations," a characterization that Centlivre emphasizes as not only unfeminine but demonstrably masculine. Lady Reveller's confidence in her own ability to run a household and handle financial matters is itself a statement of authority, but it is her behavior toward men and relationships that showcases the extent of her confidence and masculinity. Patsy S. Fowler notes that "Lady Reveller exhibits what would be considered very masculine attitudes toward love" by seeking the devotion of a number of lovers, like a rake, and by choosing financial gain over friendship (53). While Lady Reveller is certainly not a male version of Behn's Willmore, she does use men in the same way that Willmore uses women: for her own pleasure. In a direct contrast to Camilla, who displays the feminine attribute of sacrifice by helping Constantia and Bastion, Lady Reveller has no scruples about interfering in Valeria's courtship. As Sir Richard works to persuade Captain Hearty to marry his daughter, Lady Reveller begins flirting with him, causing her uncle to comment in an angry aside that "rather than let another Female have a Man to her self, she'll make the first Advances" (23). Sir Richard's interpretation is certainly suspect,

but Lady Reveller's own words reveal her bold "Advances": "I have a Passion, an extream Passion, for a Hero—especially if he belongs to the Sea; methinks he has an Air so Fierce, so Piercing, his very Looks commands Respect from his own Sex, and all the Hearts of ours" (23). Even as Lady Reveller professes her attraction to the distinctly masculine qualities of a sea captain, she demonstrates her own masculine boldness by flirting with a man intended for her cousin.

Worse than the danger to her own reputation, Lady Reveller's masculinity forces her most earnest suitor, Lord Worthy, to take on feminine characteristics to avoid challenging the authority she has established for herself. Lady Reveller's gambling certainly requires control and an authoritative attitude, but "it is in her relationship with Lord Worthy that Lady Reveller makes her clearest statement that she is the one who leads the game. In this relationship, roles are swapped" (Rigamonti and Favero Carrero 56). Lord Worthy admits that Lady Reveller "knows her Power" over him, while he is unable to hide his affections, an inversion also evident in Belvil's infatuation with the independent Camilla (21). Mrs. Sago characterizes him as "a meer Woman, full of Spleen and Vapours," an appropriate evaluation considering Lord Worthy's inability to ignore Lady Reveller despite his frequent claims to indifference (26). Lady Reveller's triumph—and Lord Worthy's utter humiliation—occurs when his servant appears with a letter indicating Lord Worthy's imminent departure and proceeds to describe the reason for his master's flight: his frenzy over the widow, which causes him to throw himself on his bed, cry out with "a Violent Passion," pace his room "casting up his eyes...Biting his Thumbs," and finally fall into an exhausted sleep (33). Unmoved, Lady Reveller laughs, reveling in her ability to reverse gender roles and occupy a position of power rather than subservience.

Lord Worthy's frustration is partly the result of his failure to understand the reason Lady Reveller rejects him as a suitor. As Lady Reveller laughs over his servant's description, Lord Worthy appears, and though it is obvious the widow finds his devotion comical rather than touching, he completes his degradation by asking if she is in love with someone else. This question, with its assumption that Lord Worthy has the authority to inquire into Lady Reveller's love life, enrages her, and she again asserts her independence: "Dare you, the Subject of my Power—you, that Petition Love, Arraign my Pleasures?" (35). Lord Worthy's question reveals a profound misunderstanding of Lady Reveller's reasons for rejecting his proposal. It is not personal dislike for Lord Worthy that prompts Lady Reveller to decline his offer but an unwillingness to sacrifice her freedom as a widow. So fiercely does Lady Reveller cling to her independence that she is not only unwilling to consider Lord Worthy as a husband but rejects his friendship as well because then she would "have him at [her] Elbow all Night, and spoil [her] Luck at the *Basset-Table*" (36). Lord Worthy attempts to give Lady Reveller what she wants by kneeling and begging forgiveness, calling her his "Dear Tyrant" and essentially agreeing to let her rule their relationship (35). Yet the widow realizes that any commitment to Lord Worthy requires a sacrifice of power on her part, as her activities will be subject to his (dis)approval. Lady Reveller is too enamored of her status as a "Tyrant" over her house, social life, finances, and relationships to accept a marriage proposal in which she would lose her freedom in exchange for mere companionship.

While *The Rover* and *The Perplex'd Lovers* interrogated the marriage market in part by revealing potential matches as profoundly inappropriate (Antonio, Vincentio, Lord Richlove, Sir Philip, and Captain Hearty), in *The Basset-Table* Lady Reveller does not merely reject a particular suitor but rejects marriage in general. There is an underlying anxiety within the play

that widowhood, which was conceived of as a temporary position, would become permanent by the widow's own choice. Lady Reveller must be married, according to the play's male characters, but the normal means to check her power are unavailable. Unlike Florinda, Constantia, and Valeria, Lady Reveller cannot be cowed by fatherly disapproval or the loss of an advantageous match. As with Constantia, rape is proposed as a means to force a woman to change her behavior. Sir James suggests staging an attempted rape of the widow, a move that not only allows Lord Worthy to "rescue" her, but more importantly justifies the attack by linking sexual impurity to gambling. During a game of basset Sir James "Slips a purse full of gold into the Furbeloes of Lady Reveller's Apron," a move that illustrates the close physical proximity of the gamblers as well as the inappropriate actions taking place under the table or behind the scenes (43). The basset-table has already been linked to promiscuity through Mrs. Sago (in terms of both monetary circulation and sexual activity), and Lady Reveller's own physical violation by Sir James as she gambles implies that women who gamble stake their virtue as well as their money.

To stress how sexualized gambling is Sir James lasciviously suggests "some other Diversion to pass a chearful Hour" after the gambling guests have left, implying that there is very little difference between gambling and sex as pastimes (45). When Lady Reveller resists, Sir James claims that not only has he purchased her through his generous gift, but that her gambling habits have destroyed any claims she might make to virtue:

Can a Lady that loves Play as passionately as you do—that takes as much Pains to draw Men in to lose their Money, as Town Miss to their Destruction—that Caresses all Sorts of People for your Interest, that divides your time between your Toylet and the *Basset-Table*; can you, I say, boast of Innate Virtue?—Fie, fie, I am sure you must have guess'd

for what I Play'd so Deep—we never part with our Money without Desire—or writing Fool upon our Foreheads;—therefore no more of this Resistance, except you would have more Money. (45)

Lady Reveller's virtue has already been sacrificed by playing "passionately," "draw[ing] men in," and "Caress[ing] all Sorts of People" according to this statement and others made by male characters; thus she can have no objections to Sir James' advances. As in *The Perplex'd Lovers*, Lady Reveller's "Interest" is condemned and associated with profligate sexual freedom and a relentlessly mercenary nature. Faced with rape, Lady Reveller is forced to give up her freedom, and the first indication of her subservience occurs immediately after the attack. After Lord Worthy appears and sends Sir James away he admonishes, "Now you Discover what Inconveniency your Gaming has brought you into," to which Lady Reveller answers "I have, and hate myself for my Folly" (46). Ostensibly the male characters have punished Lady Reveller's gambling, but her reply, although a renunciation of the game, is also a renunciation of her independence as she essentially repeats Lord Worthy and Sir Richard's earlier criticism of gambling.

*The Basset-Table*'s overt moralization and condemnation of gambling make it easy to see why the play was for years labeled a "sentimental comedy." While this term has fallen out of fashion because of the negative connotations of "sentimental," Victoria Warren points out that even modern categorizations such as "humane comedy" participate in the same ideology, namely that there is a unified moral message to be gleaned from the text (606). While it is difficult to argue that this play does not have a moral message, Warren argues that "if we deconstruct the text of these comedies, we find innumerable threads of difference that are in tension with the ostensible moral of the plays" (607). External factors must be considered as well, since

Centlivre's plays depended on audience taste as well as the willingness of her male managers and producers to fund and present them. Warren argues that instead of seeing Centlivre as vehemently against gaming, readers should remember that the playwright was likely responding to the combined factors of Jeremy Collier's attacks on the theater, Sir Richard Steele's very successful and very moral *The Lying Lover* (1703), and Queen Anne's 1704 proclamations requiring play licensing (612-13). In short, the attack on *Lady Reveller* should not be viewed as a simple equation of vice and punishment, especially in regards to the play's framework of marriage relations and the underlying corruption of marriage relationships and paternal power. Both *Lady Reveller* herself and the plot that she is embroiled in are too complex to be described under a single moral message of the corruption of gambling. Rather, gambling legitimizes the attack on *Lady Reveller*, which is designed to curtail her freedom instead of her gambling. It is *Lady Reveller*'s independence which is truly threatening, but because such freedom is legally sanctioned another factor must be proposed as a substitute. Gambling emerges as the ideal solution, for if nothing else *Lady Reveller* can be accused of facilitating the promiscuous spread of money to social climbers like Mrs. Sago. It is worth noting that Sir James, who was also an avid gambler, undergoes reform without the threat of violence, another indication that the attack on *Lady Reveller* was meant to curb her freedom rather than her gambling habit.

Read through the lens of the marriage market, *Lady Reveller* emerges as a character who challenges the market by extending its own logic and ultimately concluding that marriage is unnecessary. If marriages are financial transactions, then a rich widow has no need for a husband. Without financial incentive, the only way to persuade *Lady Reveller* to marry is through outright force, an echo of Valeria's earlier indication that a forced marriage can be likened to rape. The violence of the attack is mitigated by the audience's awareness that the rape



is staged and will never be completed, but the fact that Lady Reveller must be “persuaded” so violently indicates how very serious she is about maintaining her independence and avoiding a second marriage. It is difficult to argue that the attack is in Lady Reveller’s best interest either, as Lord Worthy himself is suspect as a match. His femininity and the fact that he can only reassert masculine control through deception and violent means supports Lady Reveller’s initial rejection of his proposal of marriage. Warren also points out that Lord Worthy, despite his subservience to Lady Reveller, has a darkly violent side (618). After his servant relates Lord Worthy’s passion for Lady Reveller and the widow laughs, Lord Worthy, humiliated, hits his servant in an act Lady Reveller recognizes as an “Affront...meant to me,” subtly indicating the possibility of domestic violence after their marriage (35). As in *The Rover*, the supposedly happy marriage between Lord Worthy and Lady Reveller is undermined not only by how it is contracted (through violence) but also by the nature of the husband himself.

Lady Reveller’s transformation at the end of the play from independent and witty widow to submissive and silent wife (she speaks three lines in the last five pages of the play) also interrogates the problematic nature of reform. Moral decay is usually portrayed as destructive, thus moral reform should figure as productive, but Lady Reveller’s silence indicates that reform silences rather than re-licenses a person to speak with authority. Centlivre also questions whether Lady Reveller actually undergoes reform at all, since her transformation is achieved through sexual terrorization rather than free choice. Even the necessity of her reform is questioned: if Lady Reveller’s nature is inherently logical, and her independence legally sanctioned, then what reform is needed? Certainly Lady Reveller is not a heroine in the traditional sense of the term. Her promiscuous gambling and flirting problematize her virtue, and she is much more hard-hearted and arrogant than Florinda, Constantia, and Valeria.

Centlivre links her most disturbing qualities, however, to the marriage market rather than individual personality. In the end it is not Lady Reveller's gambling that is at the root of the play's moral dilemma, but her power and masculinity, traits that likely stem from her initial experience as a wife and the subsequent freedom she enjoys as a widow. Lady Reveller is neither virtuous heroine nor villain in need of reform but instead a woman who envisions widowhood as a permanent rather than temporary position, a concept threatening to the male characters of the play, who gain power by manipulating the marriage market.

While Florinda and Constantia attempt to subvert male authority as they negotiate the marriage market, Lady Reveller threatens to take men out of the marriage equation altogether. Her position seems extreme, but it is part of a larger scheme of polarization throughout the play. *The Basset-Table* argues for a new ideology of marriage by showing alternately a sphere in which men possess unlimited power (Sir Richard's insistence on unlimited fatherly control) and a sphere in which men are essentially powerless (Lady Reveller's confident flirtation at the basset table). These extreme cases are both linked explicitly to courtship and marriage, illustrating the necessity for balance, particularly in the marriage market. Indeed the unbalanced nature of the entire play—the substitution of day for night, the social mobility afforded by gambling, gender reversal, and both Lady Reveller and Sir Richard's tyranny—represents a world turned upside-down, a problem that the marriages which conclude the play can only superficially solve. Here marriage is not a solution, but an institution that is in itself a problem, at least the way it is enacted. In *The Basset-Table* Centlivre twists the expectation of reform at the play's conclusion to show that it is not Lady Reveller who needs to reform, but the institutions which have created her mercenary character.

## CONCLUSION

Although rape might seem to be an unlikely component of a successful comedy, the comic genre provides a unique space in which rape can signify more than just male aggression. Like Carnival itself, comedy asserts and denies, masks and disguises, and entertains and terrifies, providing a rich backdrop for the consideration of rape and marriage, topics which themselves are portrayed in *The Rover*, *The Perplex'd Lovers*, and *The Basset-Table* as both attractive and repulsive. But comedy can also be profoundly limiting. Susan Carlson in *Women and Comedy* argues that two features of comedy, inversion and the happy ending, allow female characters temporary freedom and power but ultimately reassert masculine power: “when comedy ends, the role reversals are *reversed*, the misrule is curtailed, and any social rebellion is tempered by the good feelings presumably attached to the reestablishment of order” (21). Yet both Behn and Centlivre seem especially aware of how to undercut comedy’s limitations. The comic inversions of aristocrats for prostitutes in *The Rover* and the Prologue to *The Perplex'd Lovers* are not neatly ended in the plays’ conclusions. Instead, both Behn and Centlivre show how such inversions persist in the marriage market and in the very audience viewing the play. In *The Basset-Table* Lady Reveller’s inversion of gender roles is revealed to be not illogical but instead the logical extension of marriage ideology, challenging the very notion of “inversion” itself. Although the marriages ending each play do limit female power, the fact that the matches are not portrayed as unequivocally happy in turn fails to legitimize marriage as an institution of reform for either rakes or independent women. The plays’ endings are still problematic—potential rapists are rewarded with wives and fortunes—but as a whole these pieces provide sharp critiques of gender relations in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, which argue for a reading of their work as more than the coarse comedy, romantic fluff, or moral lessons in

disguise, as they were dismissed by earlier critics. Behn and Centlivre are instead able to limit the effects of comic inversion and the happy ending and thus extend their critique of courtship and marriage.

The plays are limited, however, by the basic necessity that although comedy can be a vehicle for social criticism, it must also be humorous. For this reason Behn and Centlivre's plays mainly present the problems in the Restoration marriage market rather than a viable alternative to economically-based marriages. Yet this body of work still represents an important shift away from portrayals of social problems associated with the marriage market common in other Restoration plays, such as infidelity, and toward the perception of the marriage market as physically and emotionally harmful to women in particular. It is impossible to determine the effect of these portrayals, or even the exact point in time in which marriage changed from being an economic and family alliance to a personal relationship based on affection, but Behn and Centlivre's work should be considered both as vivid discrete portrayals of the ill effects of the marriage market and voices in the larger, decades-long debate over what constitutes a proper marriage match or marital relationship, a discussion that prompted a vast shift in the way marriage was conceptualized during the eighteenth century.

In short, throughout these three plays Behn and Centlivre challenge the underlying assumption of Sir James' claim that "We [men] never part with our Money without Desire" by denying the right of men to purchase women to satisfy sexual desires and the right of fathers to exchange daughters and dowries for their desires of alliance or title. The episodes of sexual violence that punctuate these plays show the emerging conceptualization of economically-based marriages as akin to prostitution, in which a woman's body is given to whatever man can offer the most advantageous pecuniary or class incentive. Women who attempt to subvert patriarchal

control and arrange their own matches (or forgo marriage altogether) are controlled by sexual assault, highlighting not only the violent response to this sort of female independence, but also the tenuous distinction between a virtuous woman and a “public” woman. The anxiety surrounding the division between chaste and unchaste women in these plays is ultimately linked to female characters’ attempts to be both subjects and objects in the marriage market, a project which causes male characters to resort to rape to not only determine chastity, testing virtue or destroying it altogether, but also to fix a female character’s status as only an object. The marriages that conclude these plays are thus not mere comic convention, but an illustration of how the marriage market strips women of their identity and voice, a project begun in the attempted rapes and ended in the women’s’ silence after marriage. The context of these plays further argues that “Money” should have little relationship with “Desire” in the context of a marriage match. Ultimately, the use of sexual violence to expose the dangers of the marriage market in *The Rover*, *The Perplex’d Lovers*, and *The Basset-Table* represents a new strategy of interrogating marriage within Restoration comedy and, more broadly, an emerging belief that the marriage market needed reform.

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