

# Chapter 1

## MARY PIX AS “FEMALE WIT” OF ENGLISH STAGE: THE REPRESENTATION OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY WOMEN IN *THE BEAU DEFATED* AND *THE SPANISH WIVES*

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### INTRODUCTION

Over the centuries, the phallogocentric tendencies of society have constructed and enforced gender distinction by assigning unfair roles, responsibilities, morals, and behaviors to men and women. As women were regarded as physically and mentally inferior to men, they were excluded from public sphere and relegated to private sphere and concrete identities of mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters. They were immured in four walls with caregiving, nurturing, and household responsibilities and expected to behave in accordance with patriarchal moral codes and virtues of ideal woman such as piety, submissiveness, chastity, purity, and self-sacrifice in silence. The patriarchal mentality obnubilated women with the persuasion that they were not fit for public, political, intellectual, and economic participation whereas it granted men to dominate in public sphere and glorified their power and authority as the primary providers and decision-makers in economics, politics, science, and governance.

Due to systematic barriers to entry into public sphere, women were dispossessed of education and discouraged from pursuing creative and artistic endeavors as well, thereby being unable to create areas of influence in theatre quite a while. As Mahl and Koon (1977) express, men were identified by action and praised for their physical prowess which was later transferred into intellectual and artistic terms. Women, debarred from any physical achievement, were also deprived of intellectual and artistic chances through many rationalizations: “as their bodies were weaker, so were their intellects; they were incapable of the single-mindedness demanded by stern intellectual disciplines; their creative faculties were spent in producing and rearing children” (Mahl&Koon,1977). As women

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were not allowed for public visibility and women on stage were regarded as illicit and profane, women playwrights in early modern period tended towards writing closet drama and composed plays which were not intended to be performed on stage but read for a select audience as an alternative way to engage in creative expression and intellectual prowess. However, the revival of theatres in 1660 after the eighteen-year Puritan closure and suppression marked a significant turning point for women playwrights to engage in writing professionally for public theatre and proliferate on English stage. Aphra Behn, the pioneering woman to make a living from her pen, created a public space for professional women playwrights; “cracked the glass ceiling of the male-dominated Restoration theatre” (Fowler, 1996); and paved the way for women playwrights to challenge the male puissance in formalizing women’s identity and desires and reevaluate the aspects of patriarchal ideology.

Despite the remarkable increase in women playwrights in theatre in the last decade of seventeenth century, they were still fraught with struggles and obstacles. They were labelled as unfeminine and accused of being lascivious due to the patriarchal assumption that writing was not conventional for women. As women were ordered to maintain their purity, comply with patriarchal authority, and remain silent and any deviation from being chaste, obedient, and silent resulted in social disapproval or even condemnation in a male-dominated society, their writing acts were regarded as scandalous and disreputable. For instance, in his *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, Jeremy Collier bombarded theater activities, labeling them as morally wrong, and conflated women’s involvement in stage with prostitution in 1698. Straznicky (1997) expresses how women dramatists were associated with prostitution as follows: “for female dramatists, the pleasure-for-money exchange acquired sexual undertones, and this in turn created as association between playwrighting and whoring.” Pearson (1988) also expresses that the early patriarchal society believed that a woman prostituted herself by writing and publishing and it was unnatural because they “usurp(ed) the pen, the male quill.” Furthermore, they had to contend with prevailing biases that underestimated their intellectual capabilities and abilities. Even if they managed to write plays, getting their works published and performed posed challenges. Therefore, some women chose to publish anonymously or under pseudonyms to avoid the biases associated with female authorship. Nevertheless, notable figures such as Mary Pix, Catharine Trotter, and Delarivier Manley managed to gain recognition on English stage in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, dispelling the idea that the virtue of woman vanished if she wrote.

## MARY PIX AS “FEMALE WIT” IN ENGLISH DRAMA

Mary Pix, one of notable English professional and prolific women playwrights, gained recognition for six tragedies and six comedies in the last decade of seventeenth and the first decade of eighteenth centuries. After her debut play, *Ibrahim, The Thirteen Emperour of the Turks*, was released in Drury Lane in 1696, Pix gained prominence in theatrical community of London. Pix, regarded as a bridge between female playwrights of the Restoration period and the first half of the eighteenth century, “emulated Behn’s comedies of intrigue” in her multi-plot plays and further modelled her mentor, William Congreve, on her writing style (Finberg, 2009). Following the performance of *The Spanish Wives* (1696), Pix enjoyed more enduring success and filled the void after Behn’s death along with Manley and Trotter. However, while the last decade of the seventeenth century witnessed a boom of women writers in English theatre, an anonymous and caustic farce, *The Female Wits*, was performed in 1696 at Drury Lane. It was acted six days running without intermission as a masculine response to the relative success of these female playwrights (Cotton, 1980). The play lampooned, cruelly mocked, and launched a bitter attack on three women playwrights, Catherine Trotter, Delarivier Manley, and Mary Pix. It was a severe satire against Manley, Pix, and Trotter who posed threat to “the male literary establishment and to traditional perceptions of authorship as a masculine prerogative” (Finke, 1984). Indeed, it was a clear sign of the anxiety about women playwrights and “an attack on a burgeoning feminine literary style and tradition” in the late seventeenth English drama (Burket, 2016). In this respect, it aimed not only to mortify three women playwrights but also to drag all women into silence by suggesting that literature was man’s business and women were deprived of any literary creativity. Moreover, it refused to give women the authority to write by ridiculing them and reinforcing the dominance of masculinity in the realms of art and language. After *The Female Wits* was performed in Drury Lane, Pix left Drury Lane in 1696 as a reaction to the satire and wrote for the rival company (Straznicki, 1997). Pix responded to *Female Wits* by gently satirizing misogynistic plays without directly attacking anyone in her next play, *The Innocent Mistress*, premiered in Lincoln’s Inn Fields whose success was regarded as a revenge against the Drury Lane and the anonymously published play (King, 1994).

After the offence of *Female Wits*, Pix suffered from a plagiarism scandal with the manager of the Drury Lane, George Powell, in the season of 1697-1698 when she submitted her play, *The Decevier Deceived*, to Powell’s company. After the play

was rejected, Powell, he wrote a play called *The Imposture Defeated* whose plot and characters were plagiarized from Pix's rejected play. With the steadfast support of Congreve, *The Deceiver Deceived*, was premiered at Lincoln's Inn Fields with a prologue condemning plagiarist of Pix's play (Finberg, 2009). Powell retaliated with a malevolent letter which offended Pix on various issues. Although Pix had Congreve on her corner and Princess Anne permitted *The Deceiver Deceived* to be dedicated to her, she preferred to absent herself from public scrutiny and publish her works anonymously or unsigned because of the series of controversies she was entangled in (Finberg 2009).

In her witty comedies revolving around the complexities of romantic relationships, Pix deals with social dynamics and gender roles of her time and addresses themes related to social expectations and pressures surrounding marriage choices and the position of women in society. She endeavors to gently reform the prevailing perspectives about women by not transgressing the conventional boundaries of accepted drama of her time. However, she has been criticized for tracking patriarchal routes and not portraying the images of emancipated women in her plays. For instance, Pearson (1988) expresses that Pix's plays hardly air a grievance about the situation of women and instead reiterate and reinforce patriarchal expectations of female behaviors through focusing on "weak, doomed, flawed or monstrous" women. Hughes calls Pix "a slavish upholder of male authority" (qtd in Staves, 2006). On the contrary, McLaren (1990) considers Pix "a feminist before feminism became trendy" because she minds every chance to protect women from any patriarchal impositions despite not overtly confronting with the beliefs and values of the era in her plays. In a period when theatre was dominated by male-centered ideologies and women playwrights were stigmatized as fallen woman and pruriency because of their transgression of private sphere, Pix had to maintain a balance between the expectations of patriarchal theatre and the rendition of pro-woman discourse, abstain from strident evaluations, and employ self-censorship as a protective shield for her plays to be staged. Apart from the usual hurdles faced by women playwrights, she also suffered from the performance of misogynist satire, *Female Wits* and plagiarism scandal. Therefore, she addresses the position of women and demands changes for them, in a timid way, within the constraining context of male-dominated world. As Williamson (1990) notes, she had to "imitate the fads of the times, but with a perceptible sympathy" towards the issues of women. Even though Pix portrays female characters with no vehemence but prudently, she presents a vivid portrayal of the marginalized and suppressed position of the seventeenth century women in her plays, *The Beau Defeated* and *The Spanish Wives*, with her biting satire.

## THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN THE BEAU DEFEATED AND THE SPANISH WIVES

In 1700, *The Beau Defeated* was staged anonymously at Lincoln's Inn Fields as if it was written by a man. As a multi-plotted intrigue comedy, the play features two contrasting wealthy widows: witty Lady Landsworth who searches a virtuous and modest and virtuous man to marry; and foolish Mrs. Rich who desires to have a title. In the season of 2018, the play, retitled as *The Fantastic Follies of Mrs. Rich*, was performed at the Royal Shakespeare. The play embodies distinct characteristics of Restoration comedy including the flirtatious widow, the extravagant snob, and the inept squire as well as signalling "eighteenth-century comedy in its valorization of sober moderation, moral behavior, and economic prudence" (Gollapudi, 2018). In other words, it foreshadows the morally inclined and sentimental comedy that would emerge in the following decades though it is technically categorized as Restoration comedy (Gollapudi, 2018). In the main plot, Pix satirizes the social pretensions of a giddy social climbing widow, Mrs. Rich, who obsessively thinks she can only become a "person of quality" by marrying a man from an upper class. This nouveau-riche widow wants to appear in upper circle, gets robbed by Mrs. Trickwell and Lady La Basset, defeated by a professional beau, Sir John Roverhead, and in the end marries a bumptious squire, Elder Clerimont.

The underlying theme in Mrs. Rich's story is the misuse of marriage as a means of determining social standing. In the seventeenth century, the main reason of marriage for a woman was to elevate her social status. A woman's socio-economic destiny status was completely contingent upon that of her family or husband. She was unable to acquire title on her own; therefore, she was compelled to marry a man of quality if she was not born into a titled family. Moreover, hierarchy and patriarchy etched the widows' fates eternally in stone, and the mere option for them was to marry again due to their socially and economically vulnerable state. Therefore, they spent their life trying to climb the social ladder and gain a title and class through marriage. Pix emphasizes this impasse in which women were trapped through the character Mrs. Rich, a widow who yearns for rising socially through marriage as follows:

MRS. RICH: I had rather be the beggarliest countess in the Town than the widow of the richest banker in Europe. Well, I am resolved. I will be a countess, cost what it will ... Well, I will have a title, and a name. That's resolved. A name that shall fill the mouth (Act I, Scene I).

As marriage is seen as a sole remedy of establishing oneself in society, Mrs. Rich's utterance, after the scene in which a duchess did not give way to her coach, summarizes her priorities as a woman in the late seventeenth century.

During this time, women were subjected to their father from birth, later handed over like chattel to their husband. They had no right to control their property or inheritance. When a woman got married, her belongings, and even herself, were transferred to her husband's property. Being contingent upon her husband's decisions, she had no legal entitlement to manage her wealth. A widow's care shifted to a male relative from either her own family or her husband's, instead of inheriting and managing her late husband's possessions independently. Pix also touches upon this unfairness of depriving women of financial controlling and keeping them under constant surveillance in *The Beau Defeated*. Mrs. Rich, time and time again, verbalizes her disapproval of brother-in-law who control her estate, behaviors, and even idiosyncratic choices and looks for ways to get rid of him as follows:

MRS. RICH: ...I'll absolutely break all commerce with those little Cits by whose alliance I am debased. And I'll begin with Mr. Rich...Mr. Rich is now no more kin to me than my footman. Nevertheless, the fellow is continually a-censuring my conduct and controlling my actions (Act I, Scene I).

Mrs. Rich yearns for a fresh marriage that will grant her both freedom and financial autonomy from her late husband's relation, along with the added benefit of acquiring a title. Patriarchal order results in diminishing self-sufficiency of women by relegating them to a childlike status, wherein they can only access their inherited wealth under the supervision of a man in the seventeenth century. Even though Mrs. Rich will be attached to another man, she regards matrimony as the sole path for herself due to the patriarchal conditions of time. Thus, throughout her play, Pix reverberates the unjust and coercive inheritance system of the era to draw attention to the glaring gender disparity and how women's lives are affected by this biased legal framework through Mrs. Rich's inexhaustible desire to marry and become a person of quality.

Constrained by patriarchal expectations, naive and uneducated Lucinda, Mrs. Rich's niece, who emulates her aunt also produces another mistaken assumption about marriage. She endeavors to elope with a man in disguise, Sir John, as she seeks for liberation through marriage rather than pursuing it for love, money, or class as she expresses in her following quotes:

LUCINDA: You see I am not furiously in love I run away only for more pleasure, more liberty I will go every day to the play, or else to to the park; and every time I go to the park, to the lodge, to Chelsey: in fine, where I please, or as I run away with you, I'll run away from you, sue for my own fortune again, and live as I please: what I have heard how ladies with fortunes do (Act V, Scene III).

As for Lady Landsworth who is a virtuous and witty widow, her desire for marriage arises from her wish to relish her youth, liberty, and romantic desires after a marriage to an elderly former debauchee without her consent. She describes her late husband as follows:

LADY LANDSWORTH: I was married a mere baby to a very old man, who, is in youth, having been a Debauchee, and dealing with the worst of our sex, had an ill opinion of all, and kept me like a nun, broke off all commerce to London- or indeed with anybody, not excepting relations (Act I, Scene I).

Here, Pix underlines the frequency of arranged marriage and the idea of emotional entanglement which was not seriously considered as a matrimonial requirement in the late seventeenth century. She also portrays hypocrisy of patriarchal logic in the seventeenth century. Men could do whatever they wanted, and they were not required to possess virtue whereas women were expected to adopt a lifestyle akin to that of nuns. Unlike Mrs. Rich, Lady Landsworth desires a spouse who falls in love with her, not with her money. She describes her future husband with new virtues:

LADY LANDSWORTH: He should be Gentle, yet not Beau; Witty, yet no Debauche; susceptible of Love, yet abhorring lew'd Women; Learned, Poetical, Musical, without a Dram of Vanity; in fine, very meritorious, yet very modest; generous to the last degree, and master of no estate; mightily in love with me, and not so much as know I am worth the clothes I wear (Act I, Scene I).

By presenting a heroine wishing for a gentile man to marry, Pix takes a critical stance against patriarchal limits the society constructs for women and arranged marriages. With the character of Lady Landsworth, she underlines the possibility that women can thrive within a marriage as an independent being rather than being treated as a commodity for exchange kept under constant control. While Pix reflects the mentality of marriage for status through Mrs. Rich, she portrays Lady Landsworth as a role model woman who “looks for a convenient partner within her social sphere, who pays attention to the nature and disposition of the man chosen and who does not think of marriage in terms of money and position” (Garcia, 1997). Due to the will left by her former husband which imposes no

obligations to attach to any male relative, Lady Landsworth prioritizes a marriage built on love over the one driven by financial and social considerations. However, Mrs. Rich does not have such a chance; therefore, she attempts to gain her financial freedom and status through marriage.

Moreover, Lady Landsworth behaves like a libertine woman to test Younger Clerimont whereas Clerimont pays attention to his chastity and virtue. He avoids from any immoral acts rather than behaving like a Restoration rake and accepting a masked woman's sexual invitation as indicated in the following quote:

YOUNGER CLERIMONT: She moves like air and throws her charms around. But be not caught my soul! She is, what I would still abhor... [Her vice] checks desire with horror ... me you cannot charm; there's a rustic, out-of-fashion grace, a modest innocence, which only takes my soul (Act III, Scene II).

Despite his disapproval of her immoral acts she pretends, Clerimont has an emotional intimacy with Lady Landsworth. In a period when men were allowed to engage in philandering, Pix represents a departure from the usual sexual dynamics through a male character displaying modesty and chastity. In opposition to drawing a picture of ideal *woman*, Pix reflects an ideal picture of a respectable young man who remains modest and virtuous when faced with a highly tempting and lucrative romantic relationship. Here, Pix gives a radical message-considering the late seventeenth century-that the moral values expected from women must be also transferred to men though she does not take an ardent stance in liberating the sexual roles of women.

As for *The Spanish Wives* performed in 1696, it consists of double plot concentrating on whirling of as in *The Beau Defeated*. The reason why the play is situated in the seventeenth century Barcelona can be attributed to Pix's desire to reflect the position of women without any explicit criticism towards English society and to avoid any potential criticism or censorship directed at the play and herself. Unlike *The Beau Defeated* which includes several major and minor female characters, *The Spanish Wives* has a larger number of male characters. The play introduces a jovial Governor of Barcelona who holds the belief that he can prevent Lady, his wife, from engaging in adultery by granting her freedom and the gloating and envious Marquess of Moncada who mistreats his wife, Elenora, by inflicts cruelty upon her and keeping her locked up to prevent any possibility of infidelity. In the play which revolves around the anxiety of cuckolding, showing different marriage relationships, Pix primarily focuses on the common social problems of the seventeenth century such as forced marriage, female freedom, the



need for love between men and women, and the potential grave effects of jealousy and dishonesty in marriage.

In the beginning of the play, the Governor sings: "Give but a woman her freedom still, then she'll never act what's ill" (Act I, Scene I). He addresses a similar topic in another song and claims that if an elderly man has a beautiful wife he should let her sing, dance, laugh, and enjoy herself without any limitation because, in doing so, she will not think of any other pleasure. Thus, in contrast to other typical Spanish wives, the Governor's Lady enjoys her liberty, dines in public, and dances with a man comfortably. This marriage serves as an example to illustrate the significance of individual freedom in marriage, albeit with the ironic twist that the Governor's wife shares an emotional and sexual intimacy with a younger, more handsome, robust, and charming man, Colonel Peregrine, hinting at a potential infidelity. While Colonel physically affects Lady, she is overwhelmed with betraying her husband's love and respect. Lady verbalizes her dual state as follows:

LADY: 'Tis my Collonel, my Peregrine, sets my Heart on fire; And gives that warmth my old Husband found/ Upon my Lips-But then such a Husband- /So good, so honest, preventing every Wish- /Then such a Collonel, so handsome, so young. /So charming. -Where's the Harm to give a Worthy /Begging Strager a little Charity from a Love's Store /When the kind Old Governor can never never miss it? (Act I, Scene I).

Female sexual desire was waved aside and burked by social formations, and women were expected to keep control over their lust and conditioned to block off their desires and adhere to their purity and pudicity. Pix, here, challenges the established norms surrounding female desire, unveiling female sexual issues clouded by societal pressures. Through the character of Lady, she dismantles the conventions of female desire and brings to the forefront the obscured aspects of women's sexual desires, making them visible. Upon discovering his wife's infidelity, the Governor is moved by Lady's heartfelt plea for forgiveness. In contrast to traditional plots in which it is the wife who forgives her husband, it is the husband who extends forgiveness to his unfaithful wife in *The Spanish Wives*. Furthermore, the Governor pledges to grant Colonel a large state and Lady if he refrains from any romantic or sexual involvement with his wife until his demise as follows: "if ye prove a Man of Honour, about three score years hence I may leave ye Tittup for a Legacy, and abundance of Wealth, a world of Wealth, by Honour of Spain" (Act III, Scene IV). Lady Governor, here, is like a property being handed over from one man to another without her knowledge or consent. Pix overtly reflects the

late seventeenth century perception that woman was a commodity which could be passed from hand to hand.

Throughout the play, The Marquess clearly disapproves the Governor's gentle attitudes towards her wife, cannot bear his thoughts, and utters the following venomous and pejorative statements about women: "Oh Women! Women! – They are crocodiles, they are painted serpents, gilded toys, disguised fiends, but why name I these? They are women" (Act II, Scene I). The Marquess perceives his wife, Elenora, as physically and morally inferior to him and believes that he has boundless control and authority over her due to their matrimony. Therefore, he feels justified to chastise Elenora by physical punishment and beatings if she disobeys him. He is inclined to exert control over his wife, violate her emotional well-being, and subordinate her sense of self. Pix attempts to reflect the oppression of women under male dominated ideology through the coercive attitudes of Marquess towards Elenora as follows: "Yes, yes; I have your Body, but your Heart is with the young Count Camillus... ye Eve! Dalilan Devil!...Watch her, Orada... let her not have Liberty to think" (Act II, Scene I).

Elenora, a woman of high birth, was previously betrothed to the young Count Camillus; however, her family arranged for her to wed the Spaniard because of financial considerations. Her true affections lie with Camillus, and her sole concern is to break free from Marquess and reunite with her beloved, annulling her loveless marriage. In contrast to the ideal of obedient and silent wife, Elenora rises against Marquess and tussles with the constraints imposed on her, privileging her feelings over her societal duties in pursuit of her happiness and freedom. Even though Marquess persistently attempts to subjugate her by means of male ideological apparatuses, his cruelty fails to intimidate her, and she does not display the anticipated cynical behaviors and always responds to Marquess' derogatory and toxic statements about herself as follows: "Inhuman Spaniard! ... Am I not immurd, buried alive? ... Monster! be thy self the Butcher, and let my Heart's Blood out" (Act II, Scene I). She is determined to explain to the Marquess the reason why his coercive behaviors are useless to suppress her as illustrated in her following words: "Our Sex, like Water, glides along pleasant and useful; but if grasp'd by a too violent Hand, unseen they slip away, and prove the fruitless Labour vain" (Act III, Scene II). It is Pix's tiny yet efficacious manifesto to the patriarchal tyranny, conveying the message that the incarceration of women within the confinements of patriarchy will only induce their resistance. In this context, resisting undue pressure and evading oppression, Elenora defies and disrupts the patriarchal order of the Marquess and never lets him police her sense of self and feelings no

matter how physically he injures her. In her play, Pix opposes the daunting gaze of patriarchal ideals, creating two female characters-Lady having sexual desires her old husband cannot fulfill and Elenora adamantly resists against her husband's subjugation for her freedom and true love- who are not slaves to their duties and do not abide patriarchal expectations.

## CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, although Mary Pix has been criticized for not displaying the required sensitivity towards women's concerns and creating female characters that perpetuate the patriarchal order, she depicts the plight of women in the late seventeenth century society, vividly illustrating their entrapment within patriarchal hierarchy during a period when women were banned from engaging in public life and their writings were considered tantamount to prostitution and immorality, and even under the pressure of censorship and being ostracized from the theatrical circle. In her two plays, *The Beau Defeated* and *The Spanish Wives*, she, mildly not stridently, satirizes and expresses her disapproval to the abuse of marriage for financial, social, and patriarchal concerns in the late seventeenth century. She also dares to establish female identities beyond the conventional triple concept of chastity, silence, and obedience and celebrates women's refusal to abide the patriarchal order and determination to control their destiny.

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