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Marriage and the market in 18th century England

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My paper touches upon several debates all of which have rather fallen out of sight in the past few years. The first is the debate inspired by Lawrence Stone on the affective family and companionate marriage; the second is the role of dowries and marriage settlements in the making of marriages; and the third is the supposed rise of the love match.

In the case of Stone there was a series of furious rebuttals of various kinds then the storm and fury dissipated and everyone just got on with doing more empirical research on marriage and betrothal: I’d particularly mention the work of Diane O’Hara for the late sixteenth century and of Joanne Bailey for the eighteenth century. In the case of dowries, settlements and marriage Lloyd Bonfield and Eileen Spring went at it hammer and tongs in the late ‘80s and Amy Erickson’s book on women and property (1993) saw off a lot of what had, up until then, been speculation. The literature on the supposed love match has spanned a much broader range, taking in writing in cultural studies and English literature and theory.[[1]](#endnote-1) The eighteenth century is often identified as the timing of this change, though the fathers of this discussion (Stone, John Gillis and Alan Macfarlane) differ as to the details.

What this paper is concerned with is the evident differences between the financial information available about prospective brides and grooms in eighteenth century England. The amount of money a prospective bride from a prosperous landed, city or mercantile family had was public knowledge as was the amount of money a recently-married woman brought with her, while the only evident worth of a groom was the amount he was prepared to settle on his wife should he predecease her. It may be that negotiations between the bride’s family and the groom about the dowry and dower revealed more to the bride’s family about the groom’s financial standing, but there’s little public evidence of this.

# The materials

In my synopsis I referred to the two sets of prospective brides I examined: the Since I wrote the synopsis, I’ve come across a further lists of marriageable women, one published a few months before the fortune-hunters’ guide published in 1742 but substantially containing the same women’s names (though no details of their fortunes).

Let me say something about these lists of marriageable women: the first, *The Irish Register*, was advertised for sale in May 1742 costing a shilling. It purports to come from the Dublin Society, a society of ‘gentlemen’ founded in 1731 for the purpose of improving the husbandry, manufacture and arts of Ireland.[[2]](#endnote-2) Inside, it lists English women by title and marital status (widows or spinsters). Where an address is given it is virtually always one in London, though presumably the daughters of aristocrats, such as Leonora and Frances Manners, daughters of the Duke of Rutland, also lived in the country. Although the title page tells us that it was reprinted from a Dublin pamphlet, I can find no evidence of any Dublin publication existing. However, Thomas Prior, publisher of earlier lists of Absentee Landlords of Ireland (which included women), was one of the founding members of the Dublin Society, so the publisher of the *Irish Register* may have been satirising these.

The satire is that advantageous marriages would improve the fortunes of Irish gentlemen. The lie is given to the connection with the real Dublin Society within the pamphlet where the introduction is an address to ‘The Hibernian Society’.

Later in the same year, there appeared *A Master-Key to the Rich Ladies Treasury*. This was a one-off and nothing is known about the anonymous author ‘a younger brother’. Advertised for sale in December 1742, it cost a shilling.[[3]](#endnote-3) *A Master-Key* again lists women by title and marital status, but we also have ‘place of abode’, ‘reputed fortune’ and ‘in the stocks’. So it’s a proper fortune-hunters’ guide. However, a good many of the titled women were marriageable in the sense of having no husbands, but of the eighteen marriageable duchesses and marchionesses listed, only 3 or 4 were under the age of 40.

Table 1 Ages of duchesses and marchionesses in *A Master-Key*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  | Age in 1742 |
| Athol |  | Duchess | 54 |
| Buckingham | St James’s Park | Duchess | 61 |
| Gordon | Pall Mall | Duchess | 54 |
| Hamilton | Pall Mall | Duchess | 62 |
| Hamilton | Pall Mall | Duchess | ? 22 |
| Kendal & Munster | Grosvenor Sq | Duchess (mistress of  George I) | 75 |
| Kent | St James’s Sq | Duchess | 40 |
| Manchester | Dover St | Duchess | c.35 |
| Marlborough | Pall Mall | Duchess | 82 |
| Norfolk | Arlington St | Duchess | c.52 |
| Rutland | Grosvenor Sq | Duchess | 57 |
| Rutland | Chelsea | Duchess | ? |
| Wharton | Soho | Duchess | c.35 |
| Annandale | Pall Mall | Marchioness | c.40 |
| Blandford | Grosvenor Sq | Marchioness | 47 |
| Montandre | Brook St | Marchioness | c.52 |

As you can see the numbers of women listed in the two publications are considerable—over 1,000 in the case of *A Master-Key*. *A Master-Key* listed only women with reputed fortunes of over £5,000. The largest fortune listed was that of the Duchess of Marlborough who was simply said to have a fortune of ‘millions’.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Table 2 Prospective marriers 1743

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | The Irish Register  May 1742 | A Master-Key  Dec 1742 |
| Spinsters | 641 (76%) | 682 (62.7%) |
| Widows | 199 (24%) | 403 (37.1%) |
| Totals | 840 (100%) | 1085 (100%) |

The next set of brides I looked at appear in the 400-odd announcements of marriages in the newspapers preserved in the Burney Collection for the following year (1743). A typical example is this:

A few days since Miles Britton, of Tentingdon in Kent, Esq. was married to Miss Whitfield, a young lady of fine accomplishments, and a good fortune.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Thirty five per cent of the notices were in this form, we can only speculate as to what constituted ‘a good fortune’. But of more interest is the sixty five per cent of notices which gave the supposed wealth of the bride but virtually never any indication of the wealth of the groom. A typical announcement went as follows:

On Tuesday last Gilbert Burton, Esq; eldest son to George Burton, Esq; was married at Foot’s Cray near Eltham in Kent, to Miss Craddock, only daughter to Mr Craddock, late an eminent goldsmith in Lombard Street, a beautiful young lady with a fortune of £10,000.[[6]](#endnote-6)

I surveyed only a year (from the beginning to the end of 1743) and there are relatively few announcements of the marriages of peers’ daughters. The majority were of commoners and often of obscure enough families for it to be very difficult to identify the families concerned. The reference to a fortune either in thousands of pounds or described as ‘large’, ‘ample’, ‘considerable’ or ‘handsome’ seems to have begun in about 1711.[[7]](#footnote-1) The volume of such notices had declined by the 1760s and by the 1790s it was unusual to find them.[[8]](#footnote-2)

Table 3 Values of fortunes listed in A Master-Key and Burney Newspapers

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | £1,000 | £1,500 | £2,000 | £3,000 | £4,000 | £5,000 | £6,000 | £7,000 | £8,000 | £9,000 | £10,000 | £12,000 |
| Master Key |  |  |  |  |  | 32 | 21 | 9 | 61 |  | 382 |  |
| Burney | 1 | 1 | 3 | 17 | 21 | 57 | 18 | 12 | 11 | 1 | 59 | 8 |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | £14,000 | £15,000 | £16,000 | £17,000 | £18,000 | £20,000 | £25,000 | £30,000 | £40,000 | £50,000 | £60,000 | £70,000 | £80,000 | Millions |
| Master-Key | 4 | 128 | 8 |  |  | 257 | 4 | 81 | 31 | 14 | 4 |  | 2 | 1 |
| Burney |  | 12 |  | 1 | 2 | 18 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 1 |  | 1 |  |  |

While there’s a high level of overlap between the *Irish Register* and *A Master Key*, especially amongst the titled women. There’s much less overlap with the women whose marriages were announced in the various newspapers in the Burney collection.

Here you can see that the women whose fortunes were announced in the newspapers were generally less wealthy than those appearing in *A Master-Key* which listed only women with fortunes of over £5,000, while the largest number of women listed in the newspapers had fortunes of £10,00 or less.

# The three mysteries

In preparing this paper I’ve encountered three mysteries which I’m no nearer solving than when I started:

1. Why 1742? Why were two lists of marriageable women published that year? I can find no legislation or parliamentary concern. Britain was engaged in the War of Austrian succession and the first army went to Germany in 1742. The land tax was raised to 4/- in the £ and there were several parliamentary protests against the cost of paying foreign troops (soldiers from Hanover) in Germany.
2. Where did the information for *The Master Key* come from? The estimates for ‘reputed wealth’ may have come from Land Tax assessments for London (I haven’t had the opportunity to look at the Land Tax registers in the London Metropolitan Archives).[[9]](#endnote-7) The ‘amount in the stocks’ comes from the lists printed by the monied companies of those whose holding of stock was sufficient to allow them to vote in company meetings or, for a larger holding, to stand for office for the company.[[10]](#endnote-8) [[11]](#endnote-9) Since the amount of the fortune is usually estimated as ten times the value of the stocks, it may be that that was the formula used. It doesn’t solve the problem of where the estimates for those woman who help no stock came from.
3. Where did the assessments given in the marriage announcements come from? Or, in other words, who paid for the advertisement? We simply don’t know.

# Asymmetric information

I’m not concerned here with the question of parental influence over daughters’ choice (though one would suppose that, other things being equal, parents would prefer richer suitors). But what about men’s choice? The evidence of the pamphlets and newspapers in the 1740s suggests that financial considerations were explicit in the case of a bride and implicit in the case of a groom, a case of asymmetric information. A different, though perhaps related, case of asymmetry relates to the public love letters sent by men to women and the absence of reciprocal letters from women.[[12]](#endnote-10) And a third is that while we often know what fortune a woman brought to a marriage, there was not such disclosure on the part of a man. The only semi-public statement of his finances was the arrangements for dower or jointure.

What’s interesting in this material, and relates to the subject of this session, ‘emotions and the economy’, is the complete asymmetry of the information available on the financial standing of a bride and groom. John Habakkuk’s classic article of 1950 talks of there being a perfect market in gentry and aristocratic marriages under the terms in which they took place in the early eighteenth century, that is to say that it was possible to arrive at a position in which what each party brought to the marriage was directly comparable, whether it be money, land, status, connections etc.[[13]](#endnote-11) He noted that by the eighteenth century connections and, to some extent, status had been replaced by money (which could of course supply both if used suitably). He compared the relative values of dower or, as had become by the eighteenth century, jointures with, on the one hand, the values of dowries or marriage portions and, on the other, the wealth of the groom. He concluded that by the eighteenth century portions were substantially larger in relation to the jointure than 100 years earlier and that this relationship was becoming more stable (typically £1,000 of portion to every £100 of jointure).[[14]](#endnote-12) Meanwhile the relationship between the jointure and the husband’s estates (settled on him through his parents’ marriage contract under them terms of strict settlement) was becoming less stable. From having been typically a third of the value of the husband’s estates, it could vary considerably.[[15]](#endnote-13)

Now it may be that there was significant disclosure of his financial standing by the groom to his bride’s family, but given that the jointure didn’t represent a fixed proportion of the groom’s income, there was no requirement for the bride’s family to know the extent of the groom’s wealth. The bride’s portion was normally a cash sum that was used for buying land (it had no direct relationship with the jointure). Landed aristocratic men expected brides from gentry or mercantile families to bring larger portions that those from families of their own rank.[[16]](#endnote-14)

One question that Habakkuk’s work provokes is whether women had become more of a market commodity by the eighteenth century than they had been in the seventeenth century. Habakkuk suggests that landed families were increasingly subordinating marriage to the acquisition of greater landed wealth and that in the seventeenth century portions had been significantly smaller and jointures more commonly followed the convention of representing a third of the husband’s income.[[17]](#endnote-15)

Published lists of marriageable women and their worth would certainly support the idea that women were increasingly regarded as financial assets, but why then make public the worth of women who were about to marry or who were newly married?

Although I’ve dwelt on the asymmetry of information about men and women, there is one counter-example. Published also in 1742, and by the same printer as *The Irish Register,* is *The English Register*, a list of unmarried men. There’s a clue as to its authorship as the introduction includes a part of a poem with the lines ‘The dry, dull, bachelor surveys/Alternate joyless nights and lonesome days’. These lines appear in a collection of poems called *Trifles*, published in 1745 and written by Robert Dodsley, who started life as a footman and became bookseller, publisher and poet. Since I can find no trace of the poem in print before 1745, it seems possible that the author of the poem and the author of the introduction to the *Register* were the same person.

It seems to me that these publications lurk at the borders of satire and reporting, but the newspapers leave us in no doubt that money made marriages.

## References

1. See the discussion of public love-letters in Nicola Eustace, ‘”The cornerstone of a copious work”, love and power in eighteenth-century courtship’, *Journal of Social History* 34 (3), 2001, pp.517-46. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. There’s no trace of it having actually been published in Dublin before it appeared in London. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *The London Evening Post* 30 Nov-2 Dec 1742, as being ‘this day’ published and another in the *Daily Post* 2 Dec 1742 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. One of millions; 2 of £100,000; 2 of £80,000; 4 of £60,000; 14 of £50,000; 31 of £40,000; 81 of £30,000; 4 of £25,000; 257 of £20,000; 8 of £16,000; 128 of £15,000; 4 of £14,000; 136 of £12,000; 382 of £10,000; 61 of £8,000; 9 of £7,000; 21 of £6,000; 32 of £5,000 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. London Daily Post & General Advertiser 14 January 1743 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Universal Spectator & Weekly Journal 4 September 1742 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. ‘Last Tuesday Squire Ewers of Pall Mall was married to a lady of considerable fortune.’ *Original Weekly Journal* 26 April 1718 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
8. ‘Yesterday was married at Hampstead church, Robert Storey Esq. late physician to his Highness the Nabob of Ascot(?), to Miss Gillis, daughter of the late Major Gillis, in the same service, with a handsome fortune’, *World* 20 June 1788; ‘The Hon Miss Eardley will bring Lord Saye and Sele the very handsome fortune of 50,000l down—a fortune that would make the brightest beauty and merits shine more bright’. *Oracle & Public Advertiser* 12 August 1794 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
9. The order of entries in all the published lists is curious. It’s not alphabetical or geographical. The London Metropolitan Archives guide suggests that the order of Land Tax assessment entries depended on the route taken by the assessor which varied as he moved from main street to side street to alley and back to main street. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
10. No-one is recorded as having more than £11,000 in the stocks because the listing are by minimum holdings. So some of the women may have been considerably richer from much larger stock-market holdings that are recorded here. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
11. There are other lists of people with their wealth specified such as the lists of Absentees of Ireland with the value of their estates and the incomes spent abroad, including women, published in 1729, 1730, 1745, 1767, 1769, 1783 by Thomas Prior. Thomas Prior (ODNB) (1681–1751), author and a founder of the Dublin Society, lifelong friend of George Berkeley. In 1729 Prior published his *List of the Absentees of Ireland*, which contained details of estates and incomes from rents. In 1731 Prior and twelve others established the Dublin Society for the Promotion of Agriculture, Manufactures, Arts and Sciences. It was incorporated, and in 1749 received a grant of £500 per annum from parliament; it subsequently became the Royal Dublin Society. See also *Kent’s Directory* in which appeared the names of directors of public companies, commissioners for excise etc (1736, 1745, 1759, 1763, 1766, 1768, 1769, 1771); *Harris’s List of Covent Garden Ladies* (1773, 1788, 1789, 1790, 1793). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
12. Nicola Eustace, ‘”The cornerstone of a copious work”: love and power in eighteenth century courtship’, *Journal of Social History* 34(3), 2001, p.518 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
13. H.J. Habakkuk, ‘Marriage settlements in the eighteenth century’, *Trans RHS* 32 (1950), p.26. See also H.J. Habakkuk, *Marriage, Debt and the Estates System: English Landownership 1650-1950*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994, esp pp.83-9 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
14. Habakkuk, ‘Marriage settlements’, pp.21, 25 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
15. Habakkuk, ‘Marriage settlements’, pp.26, 27 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
16. Habakkuk, *Marriage, Debt etc*, p.151 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
17. Habakkuk, ‘Marriage settlements’, p.24. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)