

Synopsis of *The Beaux' Stratagem*

Set in Lichfield, a village in the English countryside, *The Beaux' Stratagem* opens in Boniface's Inn, a lodging for travelers and a front for thieves. Jack Archer and Tom Aimwell enter, penniless gentlemen in search of wealthy women to marry. Archer poses as a servant to his "master" Aimwell, a disguise designed to help them woo and win a rich wife. The winner will then split half of his share with the other. From Boniface they learn that Lady Bountiful, a local healer, has a beautiful daughter, Dorinda, with a large dowry. Boniface, suspicious of Archer and Aimwell's true identity, asks his daughter Cherry to get information from them. Gloss, the chaplain for the militia and occasional highway robber, also questions Archer. Suspecting him to be a thief, Gloss offers Archer a job robbing Lady Bountiful's estate, planning to turn the tables on Gloss and Boniface by exposing the plan, defeating the thieves and winning the love of Dorinda.

In Lady Bountiful's house, Mrs. Sullen complains to her sister-in-law Dorinda of her marriage to Sullen, her drunken, rude husband. Dorinda reveals her crush on a handsome stranger, Aimwell, glimpsed in church. Curious about his identity, Mrs. Sullen and Dorinda decide to invite his "servant" Archer over for ale. Back at the inn, Cherry learns of the plot to rob Lady Bountiful and refuses to hide any more stolen goods for the highwaymen. Alone with Archer, Aimwell proclaims his love for a woman seen at church—Dorinda. Archer reveals the plan to rob Lady Bountiful's house; he will use the upcoming visit to see how the crime can be prevented. In the meantime, Aimwell decides to pretend to be his older brother, Lord Robert Aimwell, so that Dorinda will think he has a title and a fortune.

At Lady Bountiful's house, Archer and Mrs. Sullen immediately experience a mutual attraction to each other. Archer then declares that Aimwell has become



Jane Gurnett as Dorinda, Matyelok Gibbs as Lady Bountiful and Paul Mooney as Aimwell in Peter Wood's National Theatre Production, 1989. Photo by Clive Barda.

suddenly ill and needs the care of Lady Bountiful, thus getting him inside the house. Aimwell uses the opportunity to woo Dorinda; meanwhile, Archer declares his love for Mrs. Sullen.

Back at the inn, Aimwell and Archer overhear the robbers' plan for that evening. They hurry out to save Lady Bountiful's household. The scene shifts to a bedchamber in Lady Bountiful's house where Dorinda and

Mrs. Sullen discuss their respective passions for Aimwell and Archer. After Mrs. Sullen retires to bed, Archer sneaks through the window. Mrs. Sullen, frightened, nearly shoots him. The servant Scrub enters, announcing the robbery, and Archer declares that he is there to provide assistance. Scrub and Archer capture Gloss when he enters to rob Mrs. Sullen of her jewelry.

In another part of the house, Lady Bountiful and Dorinda are struggling with two thieves. Aimwell engages both of the thieves in a duel while declaring his love for Dorinda. Archer enters and assists his friend. Dorinda and Mrs. Sullen, both wielding swords, jump into the fray. After the thieves have been overtaken, a servant enters, announcing Sir Charles Freeman, Mrs. Sullen's brother. Archer worries that Sir Charles will reveal Aimwell's identity to Dorinda, since he knew the real Lord Robert. Aimwell, however, has decided to be honest and confess their plot to Dorinda. Dashed, Archer threatens to leave, but Dorinda enters with the news that Lord Robert Aimwell has died and has left his brother his title and fortune. Archer reminds Aimwell of their previous agreement to split any money acquired in the course of marrying a rich heiress; Aimwell, now the possessor of Dorinda's fortune as well as his own, agrees. The Sullens agree to divorce, making her available to marry Archer, and, at Cherry's request, her father, Boniface, is forgiven his crimes. A country dance concludes the happy ending.



Beau (pronounced BO, plural Beaux – pronounced BOZE): A man who gives excessive attention to dress, appearance and social etiquette.

Stratagem (pronounced STRAT-uh-gem): A trick or scheme designed to outwit an enemy or obtain an advantage.

Dowry: The money or property that a woman brings to her husband in marriage.

Chaplain: A clergyman who conducts religious exercises, sometimes officially attached to a branch of the military.

TIL DEATH DO US PART

MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE IN 18TH-CENTURY ENGLAND



Photo by Carol Rosegg.

Gregory Wooddell as Mr. Harcourt, Tessa Auberjonois as Margery Pinchwife and Andrew Long as Mr. Dorilant in the Shakespeare Theatre Company's 1999-2000 production of William Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, directed by Keith Baxter.

In the 21st century, we think of marriage as a union between two people who love each other and commit to a life together. If the two become incompatible as time goes on, our society generally accepts that they should part ways to pursue happiness elsewhere—despite the potentially painful impact on children and families. Marriage, as an institution, was not always thought of in this way, and divorce has only recently become an accepted social custom. In George Farquhar's 18th-century England, marriage had an altogether different purpose, and divorce was impossible except in the most extreme situations. It is a sign of a changing society, then, that Farquhar makes part of the happy ending of *The Beaux' Stratagem* hinge on a divorce being granted.

The Purpose of Marriage

During the 18th century and before, marriage served many purposes in society—the least of which was true love and companionship. Marriages, especially in the property-owning classes, were arranged by families as financial transactions or property exchanges. Society operated by the concept of primogeniture: the eldest son was the sole inheritor of his father's estate. For that reason, marriage was vital for child-bearing purposes—a family needed to find wives for their sons so that more male heirs could be produced. For women, marriage was essentially a security. By law, women could not inherit or own property, so they depended on their husbands or fathers for support. When a family married off one of their daughters, they would attach a large sum of money or property to be given to her husband. This sum was called a dowry, given to the husband in exchange for taking on the care and support of his wife. In *The Beaux' Stratagem*, Archer and Aimwell arrive in Lichfield to find and marry wealthy women with large dowries. In addition to property exchanges, marriage was also used as a way to keep order in society. A man was considered the head of his household—that included his wife, children, family and any servants or farmers who lived on his estate. In a society almost completely without a police force, this arrangement helped to keep order, since each “head of household” was responsible for enforcing the behavior of those who lived under his “roof”.

Tying the Knot

While some may say that organizing a wedding today is extremely complicated, in the 17th and 18th centuries, marriage involved many more steps than saying “I do” at the altar. First, the families of the two spouses would meet to work out the financial arrangements. Then, a couple would exchange spousals, or promises to get married. (Sometimes these spousals were considered legally binding.) Then they would post bans, or engagement notices, three times in the church, declaring to the community that the two would soon get married. Finally, the couple would get married in a church or civil ceremony. Once the couple participated in this ceremony (and in certain cases, after the spousals), they were considered legally bound together for life, as well as joined together in the eyes of God. The only way this union could be dissolved was by annulment, if there turned out to be something that prevented the union before it actually happened—for example, if one of the parties had already exchanged a spousal with someone else, or if the husband and wife turned out to be related by blood.

Seriously—Get Me Outta This

“Divorces” could sometimes be arranged in cases of adultery or extreme cruelty, but it wasn’t a divorce as we think of it today. It was technically a separation from bed and board, which meant that the couple would be living in different places and a monetary settlement would be agreed upon. However, remarriage for either party was not allowed by any means, and the couple was still viewed as legally and spiritually bound together for life, and breaking that bond would mean severe dishonor.

This arrangement was not satisfactory for the property-owning upper classes. If a wife committed adultery before she provided her husband with a male heir, then the husband was left without a son to inherit his property, and without the option of remarriage. In the late 17th century, very rich noblemen in this predicament could get a divorce by a private Act of Parliament, after which remarriage would be legal. This process was very expensive, and was typically only consented to in cases where there was a large amount of property and fortune at stake. Women, of course, did not have this option.

For the lower classes, marriage could often be dissolved simply by running away—if a spouse had been abandoned for seven years, she was considered a widow and free to remarry. In addition, with a lack of coherent police force, it was easy for a peasant to run off and never be found. Bad marriages, then, were mainly an unsolvable problem for the middle classes—while they were not rich enough to obtain an Act of Parliament, they were also too well-known and respected in their communities to be able to simply skip town.

Milton to the Rescue

In 1643, an English writer and Puritan named John Milton published a pamphlet titled *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*. This pamphlet was revolutionary at the time and was certainly read by George Farquhar. While many Puritans at the time advocated remarriage for the innocent party in cases of adultery, Milton went much farther than that. He demanded the right for absolute divorce from any marriage, and expanded the grounds for divorce to include incompatibility. While this may seem reasonable and common to people in the 21st century, remember that the purpose of marriage in 17th-century England did not include love and companionship—it was mostly arranged for financial security and for the purpose of procreation. Milton wrote, “Where love cannot be, there can be nothing left of wedlock but the empty husk of outside matrimony.” He was the first to state that the spiritual and emotional connection of husband and wife should be the most important thing in a marriage, and that “natural hatred is a greater evil in marriage than the accident of adultery.” (Milton’s feelings on the subject can be traced back to an unhappy marriage of his own—as a 33-year-old scholar, he was married to an uneducated 17-year-old girl, who subsequently ran home to her parents and refused to return.)

Of course, Milton’s appeal for emotional compatibility in marriage still applied only to men. He advocated for change in divorce law if a man was unhappy with his wife, stating that a wife’s role was to act as a helper and companion for the husband. He wrote specifically that a request for divorce from the wife alone was not grounds for the dissolve of the marriage union. (The feminist movement, at this point, was still several centuries off.)

Influence in Farquhar

The influence of Milton in *The Beaux’ Stratagem* is profound. Farquhar had clearly read the pamphlet, and snatches of dialogue from the play are lifted directly from Milton’s language. For example, in the *Doctrine*, Milton upturns the usual metaphor of man and wife as “one flesh” to state that a bad marriage is like the union of two corpses. As Sullen yells against the institution of marriage in *The Beaux’ Stratagem*: “One flesh! Rather two carcasses joined unnaturally together.” Perhaps Farquhar read Milton’s *Doctrine* so avidly because he was trapped in a frustrating marriage of his own—while he had hoped to marry a rich widow, the woman he wedded turned out to be no richer than himself.

Farquhar certainly seems to end the play with a pro-divorce attitude. Mrs. Sullen, stuck with a drunken, boorish husband, has found a mutual attraction with Archer. By the end of the play, both Sullen and Mrs. Sullen agree that they are incompatible and must divorce. The ending may have been wishful thinking on Farquhar’s part, as such a divorce at the time of writing, despite Milton’s pamphlet, was still illegal. However, Farquhar acknowledges this in the final couplet of the play: “Consent, if mutual, saves the lawyer’s fee. Consent is law enough to set you free.” 