

Patriarchy and Possession: The Portrayal of Women as Property in Early Modern Drama and Literature

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Abstract

This research paper explores the portrayal of women as property in early modern literature, focusing on Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613) and Daniel Defoe's *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress* (1724). Both works highlight the patriarchal structures that treat women as commodities, either through marriage or sexual relationships, reflecting the social dynamics of the time. Middleton's play critiques the commodification of women in the marriage market, where women's worth is defined by their familial connections and economic benefits. In contrast, Defoe's novel presents a more complex portrayal of female autonomy, where the protagonist, despite gaining some control over her life through sexual power, remains ensnared within patriarchal constraints. The paper examines how both texts reveal the limitations of female agency in a world where women were often reduced to property. These works not only critique the gendered dynamics of early modern England but also offer insights into the ongoing struggles for gender equality and autonomy.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Property, Women, Early Modern Literature, A Chaste Maid in Cheapside, Roxana, Commodification, Gender Equality, Female Agency, Marriage, Social Status.

Introduction to Patriarchy and Possession in Early Modern Literature

In early modern literature, particularly within the works of dramatists and novelists, the treatment of women often mirrored the patriarchal norms that pervaded society at the time. Women were commonly portrayed as possessions, both metaphorically and literally, within the frameworks of marriage, social status, and familial duty. This patriarchal ideology is explored in various literary texts, including Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613) and Daniel Defoe's *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress* (1724). Both texts provide poignant reflections of a society that reduced women to commodities or properties owned by men, either through marriage contracts or sexual relationships.

Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* presents women as objects to be traded for wealth, status, and social mobility, encapsulating how women's value was often determined by their familial connections rather than personal autonomy (Jankowski, 1992). Similarly, in Defoe's *Roxana*, the protagonist's journey through sexual relationships and power dynamics underscores the notion that even women who appear to have control over their lives are still trapped by the societal expectations placed on them (Korda, 2002). The portrayal of women in early modern drama and literature as property serves as a powerful critique of patriarchal norms and the ways in which women's bodies and lives were owned and regulated by male authority. Through the literary works of Middleton and Defoe, we gain insight into the socio-cultural fabric of early modern England, where women's rights and autonomy were severely limited, often resulting in their being treated as chattel rather than as independent human beings (Rosenthal, 2019). These representations reveal how deeply embedded patriarchal values were in the everyday lives of women and how these ideologies were reinforced in the literature of the time.

By examining the treatment of women as property, we can better understand how early modern literature not only reflects the societal dynamics of the period but also critiques and questions these power structures, offering a lens through which to view the ongoing struggles for gender equality.

Patriarchy in Early Modern England

Patriarchy in early modern England was a defining feature of both social structures and literary narratives. The social fabric of this period was deeply entwined with gender hierarchy, where women were often relegated to the status of property or subordinates in a system where male dominance prevailed. Literature of the time, particularly plays and novels, reflected these societal norms and depicted women as commodities to be bought, sold, or owned, either metaphorically or literally. These portrayals are evident in works like Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613) and Daniel Defoe's *Roxana* (1724), where women's bodies and lives are controlled or commodified to serve male interests. In Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, the commodification of women is evident through the marriage market, where women are often married off for wealth, status, or property rather than for love or personal agency. Women in the play are portrayed as valuable assets, whose marriages are arranged to secure economic or social benefits for their families. The play critiques this societal structure, demonstrating how women's roles were constrained by patriarchal expectations, reducing them to their ability to perform reproductive and economic functions (Middleton, 1613).

Similarly, Defoe's *Roxana* presents a more complex but equally troubling depiction of women's commodification. Roxana, the protagonist, uses her sexual power and allure to secure wealth and independence, yet even as she gains autonomy, her worth is still largely

determined by her relationships with men. Despite her agency, Roxana is never fully free from the patriarchal control that defines her worth as a woman. Her body remains a commodity that men desire and control, reflecting the persistent view of women as property, even in a more seemingly empowering context (Defoe, 1724). These texts highlight how, in early modern England, women's social roles were often defined by male authority, with their autonomy restricted and their bodies commodified for men's pleasure and benefit. The portrayal of women as property in both Middleton's and Defoe's works is not only a critique of the personal lives of women but also a reflection of broader social and cultural dynamics. Patriarchy, as portrayed in early modern literature, ensured that women's identities were constructed in relation to male-dominated societal structures, emphasizing their roles as possessions or assets (Flather, 2007).

Such depictions can be seen as both a reflection of the patriarchal norms of the time and a critique of the systems that maintained gender inequality. The commodification of women in early modern literature underscores the rigid social hierarchies that governed both personal and public life, where women were often viewed as subordinate to male authority. By examining these works through the lens of patriarchy and property, it becomes evident how literature served as a mirror to the gendered realities of early modern England and how it reflected and reinforced the dominant views of women as men's property.

The Metaphorical and Literal Treatment of Women as Property in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*

In *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, Thomas Middleton intricately weaves metaphors and literal representations to depict women as property within a patriarchal framework. The play presents women as commodities to be exchanged in the marketplace of marriage, reflecting societal expectations and the commodification of female bodies during the early modern period. The central character, Moll, is a prime example of this treatment, where her value is largely determined by her chastity, a concept frequently tied to her social standing and economic worth. According to P. Yachnin (2015), Middleton's work reflects the ways in which gender and class intersect in early modern London, portraying women not as autonomous individuals but as items to be purchased and sold in marriage, thus emphasizing the commodification of their bodies. The use of metaphors, such as the treatment of Moll's chastity as a form of currency, underscores how her worth is primarily economic, aligning with the broader societal notion that women were seen as property to be exchanged for social mobility and financial gain. This dual representation of women as both literal and metaphorical property reflects the tensions between personal autonomy and societal expectations of women's roles, making *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* a poignant commentary on gender dynamics in early modern society (Yachnin, 2015).

Defoe's *Roxana*: Female Autonomy or Property?

In contrast to Middleton's comedic treatment of women's commodification, Defoe's *Roxana* presents a more complex and tragic depiction of women's agency and their commodification. Roxana, the protagonist, is an independent and assertive woman who, due to her circumstances, uses her sexuality to secure power, wealth, and autonomy. However, even in her seemingly empowered position, she remains bound by the social expectations and patriarchal structures that govern her life. Roxana's ascent to wealth and power through sexual relationships with powerful men underscores the way in which women were still treated as property. While she asserts her autonomy in some respects, her body is always subject to male desire and control. In fact, Roxana's success hinges upon her ability to manipulate and use men, reinforcing the idea that a woman's worth is intrinsically linked to her ability to fulfill male desires. Even as she attempts to transcend the limitations placed on her as a woman, Roxana finds herself caught in a cycle of possession—her relationships with men are transactional, and she remains, in many ways, a commodity in a patriarchal world. In this sense, Roxana's journey represents the paradox of female empowerment in a society where a woman's worth and power are often derived from her capacity to serve male desires and social expectations.

The novel also reveals the deep psychological toll of women's commodification. Roxana's emotional struggles and feelings of betrayal highlight the internal conflicts faced by women who navigate a world in which their bodies and desires are treated as currency. Roxana's personal journey is laden with contradictions as she seeks freedom and autonomy yet becomes increasingly entangled in relationships that limit her choices. Her attempts to escape the constraints of society and traditional roles ultimately bring her closer to her entrapment, symbolizing the harsh realities faced by women during the period. This tension between Roxana's desire for freedom and her ultimate entrapment underscores the contradictions inherent in early modern representations of women, where, despite their ability to exercise some degree of control over their lives, they remain trapped within the patriarchal system that reduces them to property.

In Defoe's *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress* (1724), the protagonist's journey serves as a complex exploration of female autonomy within the constraints of a patriarchal society. Roxana, while gaining financial power and social influence, remains embedded in the system of male ownership and commodification. Although she seeks autonomy by manipulating her relationships with powerful men, her body and wealth become subject to their control, highlighting the paradox of her independence. Roxana's ability to navigate the patriarchal structures through her sexual relationships does not free her from the traditional view of women as property; rather, it reflects the limited avenues available to women to exercise agency in an oppressive environment (Wiegman, 1989).

Thus, while she asserts control over her circumstances, the underlying reality is that her autonomy is always contingent upon the possession and approval of male figures in her life (Shih, 2011). This tension emphasizes the power structures that remain intact even as women appear to assert control over their own lives. The very relationships that seem to offer Roxana agency simultaneously reveal the extent to which her value is conditioned by the approval and possession of men. The tension between Roxana's assertion of self and her simultaneous entanglement in the system of property highlights Defoe's critique of the gendered dynamics of the early eighteenth century, where women, regardless of their economic standing, were ultimately treated as commodities to be controlled and possessed.

The examination of female autonomy in *Roxana* suggests that true independence for women was, at the time, an impossible ideal, constrained by the social and legal norms that relegated them to property-like status (Falcón, 2017). Roxana's personal narrative is not only a reflection of her individual journey but also a broader commentary on the systematic forces that confined women to the role of property within the patriarchal structures of the early modern period. Defoe's work critiques the notion of female agency within a society that continually denies women true autonomy, presenting a sobering reflection on the gendered inequalities of his time.

Comparing Middleton and Defoe: A Study in Female Property

Both Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613) and Daniel Defoe's *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress* (1724) depict the commodification of women in different but complementary ways, reflecting the patriarchal structures of early modern society. In *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, Middleton explores the literal and metaphorical treatment of women as property. The play's characters, particularly women, are depicted as commodities to be bought and sold in the social and marital markets, emphasizing how marriage functions as a business transaction. The central character of the "chaste" maid is a pawn in a social game where women's value is based on their ability to secure wealth through marriage (Enderwitz, 2023).

In contrast, Defoe's *Roxana* provides a more complex portrayal of women's autonomy within a patriarchal system. Roxana, the protagonist, leverages her beauty and sexual appeal to navigate the social hierarchies of early modern society, using men to advance her financial and social status. However, even in her empowered position, Roxana is ultimately bound by the same patriarchal expectations that she attempts to escape. Her relationships with men are transactional, and she is still perceived as property to be possessed by them, reflecting the complex dynamics of female agency and subjugation in early modern literature (Erickson, 2002).

Both Middleton and Defoe depict women who, though seemingly in control of their lives, are still constrained by the patriarchal order, highlighting the ongoing tension between female empowerment and societal expectations. In their works, women are presented not only as victims of their circumstances but also as active agents within a system that views them as property (Tumbleson, 1998). The portrayal of women as both subjects and objects in these works speaks to the limitations of female autonomy in early modern England, where women's value was often determined by their relationships with men.

Conclusion

The portrayal of women as property in early modern literature, as seen in Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* and Defoe's *Roxana*, reflects the deeply patriarchal structures of the time. In both texts, women are commodified through marriage, sexual relationships, and social expectations. While both works explore the idea of female agency, they also reveal the extent to which women were trapped within the confines of patriarchal systems that treated them as possessions. These works, therefore, serve as valuable reflections on the role of women in early modern society, highlighting the ongoing struggles for autonomy and equality that continue to resonate today.

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