

# The original gig economy: ‘Harlots’ is a parable of economic compromise

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“Morals are a luxury of the rich.” — *George Bernard Shaw*

“Any woman who chooses to behave like a full human being should be warned that the armies of the status quo will treat her as something of a dirty joke. That’s their natural and first weapon.” — *Gloria Steinem*

It’s quite an accomplishment to tell a tale about the business of sex without veering off into either salaciousness or tragedy — but out of the starting gate, Episode 1 of “Harlots” deftly defies the usual pitfalls of its subject matter. It’s not pandering to the male gaze, moralizing... And perhaps most striking, not grasping at faux neo-feminist arguments about the survival instincts/resilience/ empowerment of women determined to exercise whatever power they can grasp within the unfair confines established by the patriarchy. This show has simply crafted a brutally honest story about the world that women lived in then, while drawing some subtle yet painful parallels with the world we inhabit now. And it’s very much a story about economic privilege, or lack thereof.

The pilot introduces us to intriguing anti-hero, Margaret Wells (Samantha Morton). If you were to judge this character through the lens of relative economic privilege, you’d be *required* to hate her. The main storyline of this episode involves Margaret auctioning off the virginity of her pubescent daughter Lucy (Eloise Smyth) to the highest bidder, as was done with Margaret’s eldest daughter, and Lucy’s sister, Charlotte (Jessica Brown Findlay). By relative terms (pun both intended and not), Charlotte is a success in Margaret’s eyes: Charlotte lives comfortably (at least financially so) as a kept woman, albeit one subjected to the childish mood swings of her high-class benefactor and lover.

Thing is, selling Lucy literally makes Margaret sick to her stomach; while she’s a hardened realist with ambition, she’s not heartless, and this is an important distinction. Margaret herself was sold to a brothel as a child in exchange for a pair of shoes, and her origin story is repeated many times (much to her daughters’ exasperation) for deliberate effect. Margaret does in fact care about the welfare of her daughters — it’s just that she’s got the end game in mind. In 18<sup>th</sup> century England, financial independence (however attained) was essentially the only chance at freedom, which appears to have been the closest approximation of “happiness” for women living in a man’s world: It’s not like a woman born of the lower class had much chance of marrying above her station — the path of upward mobility was precipitously narrow.

With that goal in mind, Lucy’s sale fits into a grander scheme: Charlotte intends to use the money to move their brothel to a less desperate neighborhood, one less likely to be raided by torch-bearing authorities and moralists — a pivotal setback that takes place at Charlotte’s current address, at the outset of the episode.

Naturally, the raids are conducted at the behest of a rival madam, Mrs. Quigley (Lesley Manville), who has every intention of retaining her stranglehold on the more upscale market and its higher-paying patrons. She’s a “have” who intends to keep the “have-nots” like Margaret in their natural habitat — the slums. Accordingly, Quigley’s girls are fastidiously

groomed to appeal to their more sophisticated market: Polished to a shine in both appearance and mannerisms, while still ultimately employed as sexual wolves in sheep's clothing. Of course, with more money at stake, Madam Quigley's got her girls on a short leash via indentured servitude, as an unfortunate girl named Emily Lacey (Holli Dempsey) soon discovers after defecting from Charlotte's brothel.



You could argue that this story is *less* about gender than it is about economic equality, although there is the inevitable intertwining between the two. And of course, men in 18<sup>th</sup> Century England had pretty much all the economic power: Both Margaret and Mrs. Quigley are simply fighting hard for a small market share, in the scheme of things. Nonetheless, Episode 1 of "Harlots" lays out an intricate chessboard upon which power and self-determination against incredible odds are at stake. And as we lament how very *backward* things were back then: "Harlots" has made headlines *in this day and age* for being executive-produced, with a practically all-female cast, created by and directed by women: Still a headline grabber in 2017.

This "not knowing our place" is certainly something we could get used to. At a time when women are still encouraged to fight one another for a place at the table, and when the wage gap and birth control are somehow still debatable "issues" and not simple facts, like climate change, we could learn a lesson or two about disruption.

We should always resist the temptation to make a story about marginalized people into a metaphor for anyone else — sex work and survival sex are still very much a part of our culture — but it's hard to resist playing with this crucial and timely idea here:

For as long as there have been rules, women have been forced to break them if they want to build a life. We can all benefit from a little less worrying about what "women" are up to — and a little more focus on our own hustle: In the end, *harlot* is only a slur if they've already got you on your knees.

"Harlots" premieres new episodes [early Wednesdays mornings, on Hulu.](#)

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