

# Mistress Peachum's Pleasure



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Mistress Peachum was Lavinia Fenton, an eighteenth-century actress who was the original Polly Peachum in John Gay's play *The Beggar's Opera* and became the Duchess of Bolton. Raised in a Charing Cross coffee-house, Lavinia became an actress, and though she was a newcomer to the stage when she was chosen to star as Polly, her combination of a sweet voice, a pretty face and a knowledge of the seamier side of London life made the role her own. Both Lavinia and the play were overnight sensations, but she enjoyed only a few months of fame before she caught the eye of the Duke of Bolton, a married, indolent and childless aristocrat. The Duke was determined to make her his mistress, and she agreed to elope with him, exchanging the rackety glamour of life as London's most celebrated actress for twenty years of retirement. Lavinia gave the Duke three sons, but when she was left a widow she chose her own way once more, and scandalously threw away their fortunes on her younger lover.

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