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**Chastising Female Chastity
Social Criticisms of Female Virtue in Cyril Tourneur's "The Revenger's Tragedy,"
Thomas Middleton's *The Second Maiden's Tragedy*, and Francis Beaumont & John
Fletcher's "The Maid's Tragedy"**

A Thesis Presented

by

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Social Criticisms of Female Virtue in Cyril Tourneur’s “The Revenger’s Tragedy,”
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The objective of this analysis is to chronicle the idealization and subsequent deprecation of the chaste Renaissance woman in three seventeenth century revenge tragedies. This paper first explores Renaissance society’s expectations for female chastity and examines how these rigidly defined rules for maidens and wives were once strictly enforced by men. Cyril Tourneur’s “The Revenger’s Tragedy” illustrates this obsession with protecting female virtue in a world where women were beginning to break free from the constraints of strict gender and sexual codes of behavior. Next, this paper segues into a discussion of how societal corruption threatens the existence of this romanticized female figure. In Thomas Middleton’s *The Second Maiden’s Tragedy*, the only truly moral woman cannot live a pure life in her sinful surroundings while a formerly virtuous woman learns that guidelines for chastity are useless and worthy of mockery. From there, this piece then examines the eventual disappearance of female chastity in a decadent world that no longer upholds the same moral values. After studying Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher’s “The Maid’s Tragedy,” it is clear that this model of female perfection has faded into oblivion, replaced by women who care more about their needs and desires than their virtue. Finally, this thesis considers what social factors motivated women to rebel from these traditional gender conventions and how Renaissance society was forced to reevaluate its views of women.

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Painting the Portrait of the Chaste Renaissance Woman: An Introductory Guide to Expectations for Female Chastity

Female chastity was the center of attention during the Renaissance. Leading a chaste lifestyle was a woman's primary goal because her virtue was her only source of value in a society that denied her any other means of income. Not only were women taught to protect their modesty, but men learned that it was their responsibility to ensure that their female family members did not engage in sinful behaviors. From this constant spotlight on female conduct, a set of expectations for the "chaste Renaissance woman" emerged. A maiden abstains from premarital relations while a chaste wife refrains from illicit affairs. This woman never allows temptation to corrupt her in any way. Above all, she safeguards her virtue at all costs, even taking her own life in order to avoid contamination of her honor. As these expectations developed, however, many thinkers began to question whether these standards were actually attainable. Chronicling what they saw as the deterioration of society's morals, Renaissance playwrights recognized that these models for female chastity were unrealistic. Over the course of a decade, the chaste Renaissance woman transformed from a strong, morally conscious woman to a pathetic remnant of values that were no longer as highly respected in society. By studying the changing attitudes about female chastity in "The Revenger's Tragedy", *The Second Maiden's Tragedy* and "The Maid's Tragedy", it becomes clear that the chaste Renaissance woman is merely an idealized figure representative of a fading morality in an increasingly corrupt society.

In order to understand the growing angst over female chastity, it is necessary to analyze what Renaissance society defined as a chaste woman. She is unwaveringly modest, meaning that she never flaunts or exposes her sexuality to any male suitors. If she is a maiden, she remains a virgin until her wedding night so that she continues to be a viable marriage prospect. If she is married, she maintains her virtue by remaining faithful and obedient to her husband. It is her

utmost responsibility to ward off any lustful desire so that no man insults her honor by encroaching on her husband's territory. In both instances, her chastity is under constant protection, first by her father or brothers and then by her husband. These ideal women are considered property of male authority and their sexuality is under the lock and key of the men in their lives. Above all, there is no room for error. A chaste woman can never give in to alluring desires. She must act as the pillar of morality because her society regards her as a shining example of how all women should think and behave. Even the slightest tainting of her honor causes her to slip from the pedestal that society places her on, a downfall from which her reputation can never recover. Although this image of female perfection was once widely accepted and enforced, the harsh and unforgiving restrictions associated with this ideal made it difficult for any real woman to live up to the fantasy.

Throughout the Renaissance revenge tragedy genre, there is a grave concern about the disappearance of this chaste figure. It becomes less feasible to find a woman who fits the description, especially in court societies that were dominated by corruption. Men, in particular, were extremely anxious about female chastity, fearful that women were no longer behaving in the manner they wanted and expected them to. In order to rectify the problem, men felt the need to discipline their women by teaching them how they "ought" to behave. Brothers would test whether or not their sister's virtue was intact while husbands would check that their wives remained committed to fidelity. These attempts, however, often caused more damage than they repaired. It is this paranoid anxiety about female sexuality and the need to ensure female modesty that often put women in situations with a greater risk of sinning. Blinded by the vision of the ideal woman, men held women to unattainable standards of perfection, expecting them to easily resist enticement. Furthermore, men wanted women to follow a set of guidelines that were

no longer applicable. As society moved from the reign of Queen Elizabeth to that of King James I, the same codes of behavior could not be upheld in a society that was infiltrated by the vices that ran rampant during the latter's rule. In an environment plagued by immorality, particularly the corrupt court life that is often depicted in such revenge tragedies, it was unrealistic to expect women to be unaffected by these harmful influences. Over time, the chaste Renaissance woman went from being the standard expectation to a rare gem among a sea of loose women.

In "The Revenger's Tragedy," the first traces of this unhealthy obsession with female virtue become apparent. Cyril Tourneur introduces a protagonist who believes that it is his mission in life to protect the honor of his sister and mother after witnessing the corruption of many women around him. He sees a clear division between chaste women and those women who allow sin to overrule their better judgment. In this society, the ideal Renaissance woman is Castiza, the young maiden who resists men's attempts to alter her virtue. She remains steadfast in her beliefs, and it is her firm resolve that makes her such an admirable character, not only in the eyes of her brother but also in the minds of readers. Her commitment to chastity provides some credibility to these ideas about female virtue, but Castiza is a notable exception amidst an array of women who are unable to successfully lead chaste lives. Both Lord Antonio's wife and Gloriana are victims of passionate lust, while Castiza's own mother gives in to greedy impulses. Even the Duchess, the most powerful woman in this society, behaves selfishly and immorally, creating a trickle-down effect for her subjects. Observing this societal trend, Vindice develops a serious mistrust of women in general because many women no longer fulfill the gender roles that he expects them to. Tourneur uses Vindice's skeptical view of women to illustrate that the ideal, chaste figure is quickly vanishing from society, threatening to be forgotten entirely.

Thomas Middleton echoes many of Tourneur's sentiments about the dichotomy between chaste and lecherous women, but he takes these notions to a greater extreme. In *The Second Maiden's Tragedy*, there are only two members of the female sex in the world, the Lady and the Wife, each representing one of two types of women. The Lady is the ideal woman who is true to her love and conservative with her sexuality, while the Wife encompasses all the women in society who have chosen sin over morality. Although the Lady embodies the qualities of a Renaissance woman, by resisting the Tyrant's lust, her untimely death proves that this type of woman cannot successfully exist in this society. The Lady is forced to commit suicide in order to escape attacks on her virtue, demonstrating that her ideals are applicable only in theory, but not in reality. It is easier to believe in a set of principles than it is to actually practice them in a society that reeks of corruption. More importantly, no man can protect her from the dangerous influence of the court, a commentary on the actual royal court of the time, and thus suicide is her only means of escape. The Wife fares no better, living a double life once she realizes that her modesty will never be considered believable. She takes advantage of the expectations for morality that are imposed upon her, concluding that these mandates are merely superficial and easily exploitable. Her descent into an immoral life is a direct result of these unnecessary invasions into her private life. In a society where chaste women are either forced to end their lives or else partake in the sins they are already accused of committing, it is no longer possible for a woman to successfully lead a virtuous lifestyle without severely negative consequences.

By the time that "The Maid's Tragedy" was written, it is clear that the idyllic notions about a chaste Renaissance woman no longer held the same value. In the tradition of the previous plays, Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher pit two women against each other. One woman lives a life consumed by selfish desire while the other tries to uphold her moral values to the best of

her ability. Unlike in the other plays, however, the chaste woman is no longer the admirable figure that she once was. Although Aspatia lives by the same values as the other chaste women, she is shown no respect for her moral life choices. There is a greater emphasis on Evadne, the scandalous woman of the play who receives the bulk of the attention from male suitors because of her alluring nature. Furthermore, even when Evadne appears to seek forgiveness for her lecherous ways, her inability to reclaim her virtue suggests that sinful individuals are beyond redemption. Aspatia, on the other hand, is discarded by her love, Amintor, who pursues a sexual relationship with the immodest woman. In this universe, female virtue is disregarded and relocated to the background of the rest of the action. Aspatia pathetically bemoans the fact that she is spurned by her love rather than being rewarded for being a good, moral woman. In fact, the other characters barely even notice her, making it undeniably apparent that she has no place in this morally bankrupt society. Her values clash with a culture that no longer upholds those principles. By this point in the genre, no one applauds her behavior or tries to protect her from threats against her honor. Beaumont and Fletcher's play is a direct commentary on the evolution of the chaste Renaissance woman who has now become an outdated figure.

After analyzing these three revenge tragedies, it becomes clear that they are each social commentaries on the expectations for female behavior during the Renaissance. Throughout this time period, people struggled to understand a woman's role in society, and that void of uncertainty was temporarily filled by the image of the chaste Renaissance woman. This figure represented a sense of morality that many were desperately trying to preserve as values of the past were being erased by the vice and corruption of the court. During the first two plays, these characteristics still seem somewhat real and attainable because there are still honorable women to admire. Men try to ensure that these chaste women never compromise their modesty, as if a

maiden's tarnished honor places a stain on the whole moral fabric of society. By the third play, however, readers begin to question what sort of values these men are trying to save. The chaste Renaissance woman has transformed from a respectable model of ethics and dignity to a feeble, outdated character who is no longer awarded any praise for her virtuous behavior. Society has tried to shape a maiden into this model image, yet she is easily passed over for the more forceful and brazen woman. By this point in history, Renaissance society is forced to rethink their attitudes toward women and, more importantly, toward female sexuality. They must reexamine what they expect from women and whether or not these standards are applicable in everyday life. Each of these plays gives voice to the increasing anxiety over social changes and how both men and women responded to the shifting perspective on the social significance of female chastity.

**Putting Women in Their Place:
Regulating the Roles and Responsibilities of Women
in Cyril Tourneur's "The Revenger's Tragedy"**

Over time, a clear dichotomy began to develop between the ideal chaste woman of generations past and her scandalous counterpart. Although Renaissance society once seemed confident that all women followed the rules of "traditional" female behavior, it soon became apparent that for every virtuous woman, there was a woman rebelling against these gender conventions. The juxtaposition of these two extremes is the central focus of Cyril Tourneur's "The Revenger's Tragedy". Haunted by the death of the chaste Gloriana, Vindice realizes that female virtue is not as safe or sacred as he once thought. He begins to see the world in pairs, observing that every female role in society is occupied by both a moral woman and her sinful foil. Although there are still faithful wives like Lord Antonio's spouse, there are now those, like the Duchess, who exchange piety for power and pleasure. Similarly, the sanctity of the family unit is upheld by the impeccably chaste sister, but it is compromised by the self-serving mother. Recognizing that corruption is seeping into the female consciousness, Vindice makes it his mission to reform women, but he often causes more damage than he repairs, especially in regards to his treatment of Gloriana. By analyzing the intensity with which Vindice tries to test and restore female virtue, readers realize that the traditional ideals for Renaissance women were beginning to falter in a society that still desperately wanted to believe in their existence.

Women in society learned how to act by modeling their behavior after their superiors, and Lord Antonio's wife is the ideal example of unwavering female virtue. Her unbreakable fidelity and her honorable reputation make her one of the most highly regarded and respected women in the court. She is described as the "blush of many women, whose chaste presence / [w]ould e'en call shame up to their cheeks" because of her virtuous character (I. iv. 7-8). By

guarding her sexuality and remaining entirely faithful to her husband, she is the pillar of virtue and the envy of all women who feel ashamed of their sinful actions when in her presence. Her honor means more to her than anything else, reminding all women about the importance of their virtue. Antonio's spouse is the perfect wife, and she is willing to go to whatever lengths necessary to demonstrate her commitment to both her marriage and her values when those beliefs are called into question.

Despite all the well-deserved praise she receives for her good behavior, however, she quickly loses that level of distinction after suffering a brutal rape at the hands of the Duchess' Youngest Son. The rape is not only an attack on her body, but it is also an attack on her honor, one from which she can never recover in this society. The fact that everyone is aware of the rape makes the situation unbearable for this woman, who crumbles under public scrutiny. Antonio confirms that the perpetrator "harried her amidst a throng of panders," ensuring that the loss of her virtue becomes public knowledge (I. iv. 42). Once put on a pedestal for her chaste lifestyle, the Lady loses all that praise in a brief moment beyond her control. Even though she is the victim, both she and her family, suffer the same amount of shame as if she were a willing participant. For Antonio's wife, a woman who once prided herself on her morally responsible behavior, the weight of shame proves to be a burden too great to endure.

The Lady's decision to commit suicide, rather than endure a lifetime of indignity and embarrassment, demonstrates the utmost importance attributed to female virtue in this society. She lives by the saying, as displayed in her prayer book, that it is "better to die honorably than live with dishonor" (I. iv. 17). In her mind, it is a more respectable decision to end her life prematurely than to bear the public mark of shame on her honor. She refuses to live a life tainted by sin, allowing others to take away from the chastity that she has worked her whole life to

preserve. The wife takes control of her fate, deciding that the unchaste life is not worth living. Her conclusion shows the lengths to which some women in these Renaissance societies will go in order to maintain a coveted, honorable reputation. Despite the extreme nature of her impulsive decision, however, readers are meant to applaud her deed rather than judge or criticize it. With one act, she repairs her reputation, restores her moral legacy and forever reminds others of her unparalleled purity that she refuses to let anyone take away from her.

The fact that the men in the Lady's life agree with her choice speaks volumes about society's attitude about female sexuality. It is problematic the way that they equate a woman's success with her degree of honor, as if one cannot exist without the other. They think that it is more honorable for the Lady to sacrifice herself than to live with disgrace. Hippolito concurs that "she has made her name an empress by that act," meaning that she has restored some of her lost honor by refusing to live a shameful existence (I. iv. 49). His statement suggests that she must demonstrate her honor because the infamy of the rape threatens to overshadow her former virtue. Although her chastity was never questionable prior to the rape, this physically and emotionally abused woman has to take drastic measures to prove that she is unwaveringly virtuous. Echoing the sentiments of his friends, Antonio takes comfort in the fact that he had "a wife so chaste" that she was willing to die rather than live to see her husband embarrassed (I. iv. 77). For a modern reader, it seems appalling that a husband would encourage his wife to commit suicide as opposed to helping her recover from the emotional repercussions of a rape. In a society defined by rigid expectations for chastity and fidelity, however, Antonio respects his wife's decision, even taking solace in the fact that she will be remembered for her piety rather than for the sins that ravished her. Her death is not even what really troubles him. It actually pains him more to know that his wife was sexually ravaged by another man than to learn that she died as a result of it.

The men's decision to avenge the wife's rape demonstrates their need to continue the moral legacy that the Lady left behind. They refuse to allow female honor to be taken advantage of so easily without any repercussions. As much as they appear to care about the Lady and her honor, however, their concern is more for Antonio than for the Lady because the rape is an insult against the husband as well as the wife. The rape places a mark of shame on the husband's ego because it makes it seem as if Antonio has no control over his wife or her sexuality. When Antonio claims that the display of his wife's lifeless body is "a sight that strikes man out of me," he means that her defacement emasculates him, making him appear incapable of protecting his wife's chastity (I. iv. 5). Even though she is the true casualty, he too feels victimized by the fact that another man has sullied his wife's honor, erasing the distinction that Antonio felt for having such a respectable spouse. Furthermore, the men console Antonio not because of her death, but for the injustice of the rape, hoping for the honor that they "may relieve [Antonio's] wrongs" (I. iv. 21). Diminishing the significance's of the wife's tragic demise, they focus all their attention solely on the fact that Antonio has been personally "wronged" and humiliated by another man's infringement on his wife's body. The rape is what propels the men, particularly Vindice and Hippolito, into action. They vow to avenge the cuckolded husband, but in the process, they also aim to remind this society about the importance of chastity and fidelity.

Unlike Lord Antonio's wife, whose model behavior suggests that fidelity is still alive and well in this society, the Duchess' manipulative, vindictive and sexually suggestive nature reveals that all wives were no longer as inclined to treat their husbands with respect. The Duchess is a sinful and spiteful woman who convinces herself that adultery is the most painful revenge that she can exact upon her husband when he refuse to free her incarcerated son. Taking delight in her wicked scheme, she argues that mark of the cuckold is "deepest though it never bleed" (I. ii.

108). In this society, a wife's betrayal serves as a greater source of agony than any physical wound. Moreover, she doubly humiliates her husband, not only making him the victim of cuckolding, but also allowing his son Spurio, the Duchess' new lover, to usurp the Duke's sexual authority over his wife. Unlike the chaste women in the play, the Duchess uses her intelligence, as well as her sexuality, as a weapon for personal gain. In a clear gender role reversal, it is the Duchess who is willful and in charge of her sexuality, while the Duke is emasculated by her sexual promiscuity and blatant disregard for his role as her husband.

The Duchess' racy behavior, and lack of concern for her marital vows, troubles all the men in her life, notably her husband, who fear that women are becoming autonomous. Even when he is not aware of his wife's affair, the mark of the cuckold still falls upon the Duke's forehead, making it obvious that he has no authority over his wife whatsoever. The Duke's greatest fear, symbolizing the dread of all the men in this society, is the ability of maidens and wives to govern themselves free of men. As long as other people are aware of the Duchess' affair, the Duke is turned into a pitiable fool, and his deepest anxiety becomes his haunting reality. Once he is made aware of his wife's infidelity, the embarrassment is too much for him to bear. As he lies dying, at the hands of Vindice and Hippolito's poisoning scheme, the Duke implores the brothers to "kill [him] not with that sight" of his wife embracing Spurio because that image is far more painful for him to endure than any form of death (III. v. 187). It is a greater Hell for him to be made a cuckold than to die in a revenge plot. It is only upon seeing evidence of the affair, and hearing their declarations of love for each other, that the Duke actually dies, unable to even verbally express his shock and embarrassment at his wife's infidelity. The painful reality, that his wife's sexuality is beyond his control, seals his fate.

If the Duke is unable to restrain the Duchess and ensure that she carries out the role and responsibilities of an obedient wife, it becomes the duty of her sons to teach her what it means to be a virtuous wife and mother. Although Supervacuo and Ambitioso are often more focused on their political ambitions than their family's welfare, they feel ashamed of their mother's affair because her scandalous behavior threatens to undermine the prestige of the family's honor. As Supervacuo observes, the "nobler" their mother is, the "baser she is grown" (IV. iii. 9). Even though the Duchess is now a member of high society, there is nothing refined about her anymore because her lecherous behavior removes that distinction, making her just an ordinary, loose woman. Furthermore, she compromises her virtue for an incestuous relationship with an illegitimate member of society, further tarnishing both her own honor as well as that of her sons. Her deplorable actions make a mockery out of her role as a wife and mother, prompting her sons to take action so that the Duchess learns that this is not acceptable or respectable behavior.

Incited by the shame of their mother's conduct, the brothers believe that it is their task, as the men of the household, to intervene. As Supervacuo states, they must take immediate action "or else they'll sin faster than we'll repent" (IV. iii. 18). They have to restore their mother's virtue, and ensure her repentance, before she has the opportunity to further disgrace herself, her reputation and the family name. The reason for their imminent action, however, is two-fold. First, they have a vested interest in their mother's virtue if they want to rise to a position of power. If their mother behaves with reckless abandon, for the entire world to see, their reputation is subsequently tarnished as a result of their connection to her. Secondly, their intervention can be read as Tourneur's commentary on the rapid disappearance of female fidelity. The salacious wife must be reformed before the entire sanctity of marriage is destroyed, and the sins begin to occur faster than they can be rectified. As a result of giving in to

temptation, Michael Neill argues that this type of female body is “a conduit of pollution, debasement, and usurpation that requires constant regulation,” and the brothers eagerly feed into this notion by assigning themselves to correct this behavior (Neill 407). Before other women begin to imitate her example, by disgracing their marriage vows, it is crucial that the brothers teach their mother to be compliant to male authority. In the brothers’ mind, reforming their mother is a cause worth dying for, which is exactly what happens. They die en route to killing Spurio, the source of their mother’s lust, believing that the death of temptation will prove to be the restoration of her honor.

In the same way that the play analyzes the virtue of the wives of the court, the work also comments on the prevalence of female chastity in the family unit, comparing women who are worthy of praise and those who require male intervention to reform their virtue. In order to understand what is expected of these women, Tourneur immediately introduces Castiza, the perfect model of the ideal Renaissance woman. Unlike many of the loose women around her, the young maiden prides herself on her virginity and virtuous behavior. She firmly vows to remain a chaste woman until marriage, and it is her unwavering stance on this issue that substantiates her spotless reputation. Her unusual upbringing, however, calls into question whether or not maintaining such a spotless reputation is even possible in this society. Critical of a woman’s ability to live an honorable life in the court, Howard Pearce concludes that “one solution is to withdraw from the world, to practice a cloistered virtue...the way Castiza evidently approves” (Pearce 23). It is true that Castiza matured under the umbrella of a sheltered, secluded existence away from court life, escaping some of the everyday temptations that corrupt the other women in this society. By remaining in a remote location, Castiza is able to live the life of an ideal Renaissance woman because she never encounters any threat of sinning or any incentive to stray

from her morals. Therefore, her virtuous nature only becomes evident and impressive when she is forced to exercise moral judgment over enticement.

The merit of Castiza's virtue not only depends on the reports of her upstanding character, but her commitment to a chaste lifestyle must also be proven on command in order for it to be believable. When Vindice, disguised as Lussurioso's servant Piato, tries to convince the maiden to consent to a relationship with the heir apparent, she immediately responds with a confident "box o'th' ear." Literally and figuratively, she strikes away temptation, but her demonstration of her unyielding dedication to her values does not stop there. She then vehemently swears to him that she would "put anger in my hand, / [a]nd pass the virgin limits of my sex" (II. i. 31-32). She furiously refuses the offer, but more importantly, the maiden takes personal offense that such a lewd suggestion is even posed to her, a woman who prides herself on her ability to lead a chaste life when so many other women have failed to do so. Castiza not only wants to prove that her vows of chastity are unwavering, but she also has a need to show that there are still women in this society who adhere to a moral compass. By saying that she hopes to "pass the virgin limits of [her] sex," she implies that many women no longer live by the same values that she does. Castiza later echoes these sentiments, asking Piato to tell his master that "My honour shall have a rich name / [w]hen several harlots shall share his with shame" (II. i. 37-38). Castiza will singlehandedly prove that female virtue is not completely absent from this society because there are still women like her who recognize the larger moral purpose of abstaining from sin. She is the honorable exception to the corruption of her society, giving people reason to have faith that female virtue is still possible and worthy of preservation.

Castiza not only proves her chastity, but she also demonstrates a keen understanding of why female virtue has begun to wane in this society and how to rectify the dilemma so that

women begin to appreciate the value of morality. Castiza first assesses the problem with the sinful women around her, explaining that many women sell their bodies in order to turn a profit or improve their social standing. The young maiden observes that “were not sin rich, there would be fewer sinners” (II. i. 6). If there was nothing to be gained from sinning, no woman would stray from her moral inclinations. Castiza, however, is the shining example of an admirable woman in this society “whose only fortune are her constant thoughts” (II. i. 2). In a world in which women are denied equal opportunities for financial gain and other forms of social mobility, the only thing of value that a moral woman has is her honor because it can secure her a noble husband and a respectable marriage. She prides herself on this fact, teaching other women that their greatest source of wealth should be moral prosperity, not monetary compensation. Women who give in to greed and lust will never achieve the profound degree of fortune that Castiza does. The importance of her “constant thoughts” convinces her that her honor is worth more than any tempting offer, making it easy for her to turn down Lussurioso’s relationship offer.

Even when Vindice continues to test her resolve, presenting every convincing argument that he can think of to sway her mind, Castiza holds firm to her beliefs, teaching him that there are still women who can resist temptation. Vindice does his best to cause her to crack under pressure, arguing that so few chaste women remain because “’tis the poorer / [p]rofession,” but even then she remains strong (II. i. 224-225). Even though she knows that there is no guarantee of ever being rewarded for her honesty and virtue, Castiza maintains her unwavering stance. There is nothing that her brother can say or do that will alter her decision. Vindice’s persistence, however, exposes his strong disdain for the women in this society. Doubting that any woman is capable of leading a moral life, Vindice fully expects his sister to give in to temptation the way that so many other women have. He has a paranoid mistrust of women that makes it difficult for

him to believe that any woman can behave as morally as Castiza claims to. It is only after delivering a series of convincing arguments, none of which have the slightest influence on the unwavering Castiza, that Vindice's cynicism about female modesty is temporarily allayed. She gives him the hope that there are still women worthy of admiration in this world.

Like her brother, Castiza believes that female virtue is dwindling, and thus it must be tested, regulated and reinforced. When Gratiana selfishly agrees to sell her daughter's virtue, Castiza pretends to accept the offer for two important reasons. First, Castiza's self-designed test is her opportunity to make her mother conscious of her sins while showing her by contrast what it means to be an honorable woman. Only when Gratiana witnesses Castiza's "surrender" to sin does the mother recognize that she herself has fallen into the kind of immoral life that she does not want for her daughter. After extracting this recognition from her mother, the maiden then tells the repentant woman that she could "kiss [her mother] till [her] soul melt on [Gratiana's] lips" (IV. iv. 147). Symbolically, Castiza wants her own virtue to literally "melt" onto Gratiana, imposing her values onto her mother so that she does not revert to her immoral impulses. Castiza believes that virtue can be drilled into a person's head, replacing sinful desire with pure thoughts. Through this test, Castiza honestly expects that she has made a lasting, unalterable impression upon Gratiana, proving that any woman's virtue can be restored if the right approach is taken. Castiza's method of treatment is making Gratiana aware of her transgressions and providing a new model of chaste behavior to follow.

Castiza also uses this moment as yet another chance to prove her virtuous nature, as if she must silence all doubts once and for all. She reiterates that "no tongue has force / [t]o alter me from honest," meaning that there are no words, said by men or women, that can sway her from her convictions (IV. iv. 149-150). Throughout the play, men like Lussurioso argue that a woman

can be “beguiled” out of her salvation, but Castiza’s statement shows that that is not the case (II. ii. 21). She cannot be tricked into giving in to greed or lust because there is nothing that anyone can say to her that can change what she believes in. From there, she goes on to compare her virginity to a tower that a man cannot penetrate “until she basely yields” (IV. iv. 154). Castiza equates chastity with something sacred that cannot be violated unless the woman “basely yields,” meaning that the woman consents to premarital sex. A woman who easily surrenders her chastity is considered “base” and commonplace because she becomes yet another tart in the wide array of women who live by a loose set of morals. Unlike her brothers, who believe that it is a man’s responsibility to defend a woman’s honor, Castiza argues that a woman has to protect her virtue from outside influences. It is the woman who maintains her beliefs, and remains steadfast in her convictions, that stands out amongst all other women. Her self-empowered attitude allows Castiza to rise above the threat of temptation that devours so many other women.

Although Castiza’s unyielding virtue confirms that there are still morally respectable women capable of sustaining their family’s honor, Gratiana’s sinful yearnings show that there are some women who care more about themselves than their family’s reputation. Unlike her daughter, Gratiana looks out for herself exclusively, doing whatever she has to in order to fulfill her desires, even if that means compromising her, or her family’s, integrity. It is her greedy aspirations that give credence to her son’s worst fears about women. Vindice develops the mindset that the female sex “is easy in belief,” meaning that women are susceptible to tempting influences, and she proves him correct in this instance (I. i. 107). She is easily swayed by the prospect of greed, and because of her lack of discerning powers, she requires outside intervention to return her to the moral path that she strays from. Her behavior is deplorable given the fact that she willingly transforms her daughter into a commodity, whose chastity can be bought for the

right price. Jennifer Panek explains that Gratiana's actions are even more reprehensible because she pales by comparison to the "'natural' mother...one who guards the chastity of her daughter" at all costs (Panek 424). Unlike these matriarchal figures who are inherently trained to protect their daughters' virtue, Gratiana ignores her motherly instincts, allowing herself to be corrupted by outside influences. Her ability to defy "natural" behavior amplifies the level of anxiety that all women will eventually engage in these immoral behaviors.

Gratiana's degrading views of women further highlight the growing mistrust of the female sex, and the importance of correcting these misconceptions. This woman makes generalizations about women in the same way that the men do. First, she implies that the female mind is so fragile that it cannot withstand the lure of temptation. Gratiana bemoans that women "are so weak their words can overthrow us" when she is presented with the offer to barter with Castiza's chastity (II. i. 106). She explains that a woman's resolve is no match for the persuasion of a man's argument, acknowledging and accepting that a man can talk a woman out of her chaste beliefs. She goes on to state that her husband "was too wise to trust [her] with his thoughts," implying that women cannot be trusted because they are so easily able to betray their families (I. i. 130). Although Gratiana herself proves to be susceptible to temptation, it is merely a stereotypical generalization to suggest that all women are untrustworthy. It is difficult to discern whether society's mistrust of women causes her disparaging comments or whether it is the other way around. Either way her statements prompt immediate intervention from her son to test the strength of her values, ensuring that her virtue does not become irreparably damaged.

Gratiana's first response to the test, an initial refusal to be corrupted, suggests that there is hope for her reformation. Despite her desperate financial situation, she initially rejects the proposition, telling the disguised Vindice that "the riches of this world cannot hire / [a] mother to

such a most unnatural task” (II. i. 83-84). She claims that no amount of money could convince her to ignore her duties as a mother. Her reaction can be read in two different ways. She may be genuinely appalled by the suggestion that she would harm her daughter in any way. If she is honest, then she passes Vindice’s test by telling him what he wants to hear. Despite her declaration, however, he remains convinced that her statement is a lie, suggesting that he is able to detect that her initial response is merely superficial. As Robert Ornstein wisely argues, it is true that as her son, he knows his mother better than anyone else, making it obvious that “there was no one better fitted to play the pander” (Ornstein 89). As her kin, it is easy for him to decipher when she is lying, and thus he cannot stop until he uncovers the truth. On the other hand, Vindice may be inadvertently seeking to confirm his own worst fears. He subconsciously pushes her to her limit, fulfilling his expectation that all women are corruptible. Vindice keeps persuading her until he wears down her resolve, and she reconsiders her position.

When Gratiana eventually consents to the agreement, her moral failure is partly the result of her selfish desires, but it is also the consequence of men’s fascination with discovering whether or not female virtue still exists. On the one hand, Gratiana is to blame because her precarious financial position forces her to give in to temptation. It is her fault for being unable to withstand the allure of easy money. On the other hand, Vindice pushes his mother to her breaking point, as if to prove that his fears about women are credible. Even Gratiana herself acknowledges that “no tongue but [his] could have bewitched [her] so,” meaning that there was no other person in this society who could have persuaded her as much as her own child (IV. iv. 34). He does not rest until he confirms the behaviors that he already expects from women. It is impossible to deny Vindice’s immoral mishandling of this situation. He acts as both his sister and mother’s “pander,” yet he lambastes them for doing the same thing. Vindice highlights

female depravity by engaging in his own immoral schemes. Gratiana's behavior is certainly inexcusable, but Vindice's culpability for convincing his mother to sin cannot be overlooked.

Once his mother falters by giving in to the deal, Vindice vows to cleanse her soul, proving that it is his responsibility as a man to intervene. Both Vindice and his brother pledge to "conjure that base devil out of [their] mother," punishing her for her moral shortcomings and restoring her virtue when she is incapable of doing so for herself (IV. ii. 222). Furthermore, they view her salacious actions as some sort of infection upon her soul, a disease that they must remove from her body. Gratiana concurs with their diagnosis. After being chastised for her reprehensible behavior, she implores the heavens to "take this infectious spot out of [her] soul," as if cleansing her soul would restore her virtue (IV. iv. 52). Even as Gratiana expresses disappointment in herself, the brothers continue to browbeat her for her indiscretions. In the same way that they believe a woman can be talked out of her chastity, the brothers think that a woman can also be talked into leading a virtuous lifestyle. They both consider women empty vessels that can easily be taught to accept or reject moral values. From their perspective, a woman is only as virtuous as the men around her convince her to be. In this case, the brother's moral preaching convinces the mother to repent for her sins, transforming her into the pious woman they want her to become.

Unlike the other women in the play, Gloriana has neither a definitive role in society, nor is she clearly labeled as chaste or salacious, making her nothing more than a model of men's unrealistic and easily corruptible expectations for female chastity. When the play opens, Gloriana is like the living embodiment of chastity, a sense of virtue that is slowly disappearing in a society where such values are becoming less respectable and more difficult to maintain. Practicing chastity is no longer as easy to do in this society, nor is it celebrated like it once was. This

corruption of the court, as evidenced by its leader who infects Gloriana's pure soul with his lust, threatens to eradicate the moral principles that this woman represents. Praise for chastity has been replaced by the convenience of sinning, and this depraved society has no place for people like Gloriana who abide by rules of conduct from generations past. Former ideals about female virtue have less applicability in a world where a woman is encouraged to indulge in sin and punished for resisting temptation. Unwilling to allow these standards of chastity to disappear completely, Vindice tries to salvage what is left of her moral legacy, never once realizing that he is just as guilty of corrupting her as the court is.

Although she originally represents untainted purity, Gloriana is turned into a symbol of immorality after she becomes an unwilling participant in her own revenge plot. Vindice adorns Gloriana's skull with clothing and makeup, transforming her into the image of a loose woman who kills the Duke with the allure of seduction. The maiden, who once represented virtue in its purest form, now serves as a tool for revenge, deception and murder. Paralleling the way that the Duke taints the young woman's honor by attempting to rape her, Vindice contaminates her virtue even further by prostituting her body, making her a prop of male desire. According to Laurie A. Finke, Gloriana's skull in this context serves two purposes, representing "woman as ideal, as an object of adoration, and woman as death's head, as a figure which evokes fear and hostility" (Finke 357). Her cranium, which Vindice once carried around like a sacred relic, recalling forgotten codes of chastity and morality, now serves as his source of anxiety that these morals are being stripped from society. In exacting this revenge, however, he overlooks the fact that he is part of the problem. In the same way that the lines begin to blur for Vindice between helping to restore Gloriana's reputation and harming her honor further, the distinctions between female virtue and decadence were becoming equally indistinguishable. More importantly, the future of

female virtue is in peril if male intervention, though motivated by seemingly good intentions, fosters the kind of damage that it seeks to resolve.

Despite the fact that Vindice tries to justify Gloriana's role in her own revenge, it becomes clear that Gloriana is the first real causality of a society incapable of adequately defending female virtue. Demonstrating how men are beginning to lose sight of what female honor actually is, Vindice proudly proclaims that Gloriana's skull "shall bear a part / [e]'en in its own revenge," naively concluding that she will play a role in the restoration of her honor (III. v. 100-101). In actuality, however, he turns her skull into a weapon, transforming her from a symbol of beauty into a harbinger of the death and destruction. Vindice himself even confirms this sinister transformation. As the Duke lies dying from the poisoning, Vindice gleefully informs him that Vindice, Hippolito and Gloriana are "villains all three," thus verifying that Gloriana is now a villain, a morally degraded individual, as a result of her role in the murder (III. v. 151). She has been altered from a sweet, innocent victim into an accomplice to regicide. Vindice thinks that he is guarding her honor, but he simply exchanges one sinful transgression for another, robbing his beloved Gloriana of whatever purity she had left. His implication in her corruption makes it increasingly apparent that women could no longer rely on men solely to protect them from harm, instead causing that burden to fall solely on women themselves, who were forced to become their own defenders. The only women in this society who actually prove the importance of their virtue are the ones, like Lord Antonio's wife and Castiza, who personally guard their honor at all costs. Those who are forced into a powerless position, like Gloriana, cannot prevent the disintegration of their reputation at the hands of inadequate male protectors.

Throughout Tourneur's work, it becomes clear that a virtuous existence is no longer a main concern for all women in a society plagued by depravity, despite men's attempts to prove

otherwise. Certainly, there are still women who adhere to these traditional principles, repeatedly demonstrating their moral beliefs when their chastity is subjected to doubt. Lord Antonio's wife and Castiza keep their virtue intact by prioritizing their honor above any personal desire, even though their immoral environment threatens to undermine their good behavior. Their commitment to an honorable lifestyle, however, cannot overshadow the fact that there are women who no longer fit this traditional mold. Both the Duchess and Gratiana allow their sinful yearnings to take precedence over their responsibilities as wives and mothers. Their immoral behaviors increase the levels of male anxiety about women, prompting men to intervene with often detrimental results. Although Vindice plays some sort of role in Gratiana's spiritual breakthrough, he has no such success with Gloriana, whose honor he further desecrates. The sinful atmosphere he lives in affects how he handles every situation, making Vindice yet another contributor to the immorality of this society. All these women indicate that female virtue is beginning to face an uncertain future, a world where chaste Renaissance women are few and far between. As this play suggests, virtuous women were quickly becoming the dwindling minority, clinging to a code of ethics that had lost its caliber in a corrupt society. In a world where few women could successfully live up to the standards of traditional female chastity, it becomes necessary to question how realistic these expectations are.

**Martyrdom and Mockery:
The Destruction of Female Virtue
in Thomas Middleton's *The Second Maiden's Tragedy***

Knowing what it means to be a chaste Renaissance woman and actually living a life that embodies those ideals are two entirely different things. Although they were aware of what it meant to be a decent, honest woman, many Renaissance women struggled to apply those principles to their own lives. Society was slowly beginning to descend into a state of corruption, a reflection of the sinful transgressions emanating from the court of James I. It became increasingly difficult to live a model existence in a world where errant behaviors, and anxieties about errant behaviors, were at an all time high. Even when women tried to live the moral existence they thought they were supposed to, they still had trouble fitting into a society where their chastity was the subject of intense scrutiny. In Thomas Middleton's *The Second Maiden's Tragedy*, the playwright introduces two women whose chaste lifestyles are no longer practicable in the face of temptation and speculation from the men around them. The Lady is steadfast in her moral beliefs, but she soon realizes that she must take drastic measures in order to escape the sins that threaten her honor. The Wife, who was always faithful to her husband, recognizes that her declarations of fidelity will never be sufficient for her husband, causing her to descend into a web of sin and lies. Middleton uses the play to comment on and critique society's harmful obsession with female virtue. After analyzing the detrimental effects that both the Lady and the Wife suffer as a result of male intervention in their lives, readers become aware that a purely chaste lifestyle is becoming a vision of the past, not an attainable reality.

The Lady is the last remaining trace of the chaste Renaissance woman. Without a proper name, she is defined solely by her ability to remain a respectable woman. Her title, the "Lady," conjures up the image of a woman who is known for living a life of dignity and decorum. Her

worth is measured by her virtue, and she does everything in her power to ensure that she lives up to her name. The Lady commits to a celibate lifestyle, refuses sinful temptation and balks at the opportunity to stray from her moral convictions. When the Tyrant tries to initiate a sexual relationship with her, she adamantly rejects the offer on moral grounds, even though the match would guarantee her money, fame and social status. Not only does she turn down the suggestion, but her refusal reinforces her steadfast dedication to her beliefs. She gallantly tells the Tyrant that she is “not to be altered,” a statement indicative of her inability to be influenced by anyone else (I. i. 122). She will not compromise her values for him, meaning that her chastity cannot be altered by the threat of corruption that he poses to her. More importantly, this is her first line in the play, a declaration that defines who she is and what principles she stands for. Immediately, her virtuous nature makes a striking impression upon readers. She stands out as a pillar of morality in a world where everyone else appears to have been negatively impacted by sin.

The Lady’s commitment to chastity is even more commendable given the obstacles set against her by the men in her life. Her first act is to rebuff an invitation for sex from the most powerful figure in this society. Whereas any other woman may have accepted the Tyrant’s offer for money and pleasure or even for the threat of upsetting the leader, the Lady prioritizes her virtue over her own life. She is willing to be thrown in jail rather than consent to an act that firmly goes against her ethics. Even the Tyrant himself is astonished by her unyielding virtue. He expects her to gladly accept his proposal, and he is stunned when she takes such great offense to his offer. In his eyes, the Lady is “the first / [o]f all her kind that ever refused greatness” in a society of women who eagerly seek out money and power (I. i. 181-182). He assumes that women are, by nature, excessively greedy and ambitious. His statement suggests that there is a drastic change in the way that women are being perceived. Men no longer expect that women

will behave morally. They automatically surmise that women will do whatever it takes in order to advance their social standing in life. A new image of women is beginning to emerge, one that paints women in a scandalous light, making the Lady a notable exception to the common expectation. Therefore, the Lady has to work twice as hard to preserve her chastity as she would in a more morally inclined society. Not only does she have to resist the Tyrant's lust, but she also has to overcome the assumption that she is sinful by nature. In order to live the virtuous life that she intends to, she must rise above the increasingly degenerative attitude towards women.

In the same way that female chastity is deemed questionable and even nonexistent in the eyes of the court, the protection of female virtue is no longer prioritized in the family. The Lady expects that her father will support her decision to abstain from the Tyrant's advances, but he instead tries to bargain with her chastity in order to serve his own interests. Helvetius implores the Lady to proceed "gently to [the Tyrant's] bed of honours," suggesting that the meaning of the word "honor" has been corrupted by the vices of the court (II. i. 87). He cares more about the Tyrant's honors, referring to the leader's good graces, rather than his daughter's maidenhood. There is no longer the same code of defense that existed previously. It was once expected that men would guard the virtue of their female family members at all costs. Now, fathers can sell their daughter's chastity to advance their own position in the world without feeling any guilt for their actions. Even the Tyrant is somewhat baffled by Helvetius' disregard for his responsibilities as a father, telling Helvetius that he "talk[s] unkindly" (I. i. 188). It is completely unnatural for a father to allow his daughter's virtue to be compromised, let alone participate in the seduction of his flesh and blood. Furthermore, Helvetius is not alone in his abandonment of female protection. The Tyrant's own servant, Sophonirus, has no qualms about the leader having sex with his wife. In fact, he encourages it, saying that he wishes that his wife "were so preferred" (I. i. 35). In this

society, male family members are panders, not the defenders of female virtue. Instead, women themselves are forced to become the guardians of their chastity, a responsibility complicated by the men's attempts to sabotage their efforts. The Lady can only protect herself for so long when everyone in her life, even her own father, threatens to derail her progress.

The Lady's virtue is further exemplified by her ability to discredit Govianus' general skepticism of female morality. Even the dethroned leader, the only man in the Lady's life who does not try to exploit her chastity, has doubts about what a woman's true motivations are. Although the Lady has never given him reason to believe that she would accept the Tyrant's proposal, he assumes that she will not be able to escape the desire for power. He bemoans the fact that "she's a woman, and her eye will stand / [u]pon advancement" (I. i. 62-63). Govianus perceives a direct correlation between female nature and sinful impulses, a natural instinct that he does not think the Lady can suppress. He believes that the only way he can win her back is to regain control of the court, as if she is willing to surrender her chastity to whoever is in power at the time. His attitude is clearly disparaging toward women, but it is indicative of what his entire society expects from women. Govianus and the Tyrant, the protagonist and the antagonist, do not share much in common, but their cynical attitudes about women are almost direct parallels of one another. No man in this society, moral or immoral, believes that a woman can lead a life free from sin, making it all the more challenging for the Lady to prove them wrong.

The Lady realizes that the only way that she can escape the threats against her virtue is through death, but she executes the act herself for two important reasons. First, she cannot rely upon the men in her life, notably Govianus, to protect her virtue any longer. Already, Govianus has proven himself to be a weak-willed man whose entire kingdom has been usurped from him. If he cannot prevent his own political overthrowing, it is unlikely that he is capable of shielding

the Lady from the same corruptive forces. Similarly, when the Lady concludes that she can only escape sin through death, Govianus' subsequent demonstration of incompetence proves that the Lady is in charge of her own protection. Govianus laments the thought of having to kill his precious Lady, even though he has failed to assist her up until this point. He appears to have no regard for his responsibility to preserve his Lady's virtue, suggesting that men were no longer willing or able to step into this role. Sensing his reluctance, the Lady tries to appeal to his sense of manhood, saying "Honor remember thee!" (III. i. 147). She has to remind him that it is his job as a man to defend her, but her plea goes unanswered. Instead, Govianus falls into an unmanly swoon, rendering his efforts completely useless. From his lack of action, the Lady realizes that women are completely on their own when it comes to guarding their chastity.

Another reason why the Lady commits suicide is that this action, in her mind, is the only way that she can resist the immorality that her entire society is engulfed in. Praising the Lady for acting "heroically," Anne Lancashire explains that the chaste woman "determines that she must die to save her honour" (Lancashire 267). By considering the Lady's options in this way, it is clear that she has to either reclaim her honor or continue to live her life, but she cannot do both. She has to decide what is more important to her, making it apparent that her chaste beliefs clash with her corrupt surroundings. Ultimately, she decides that it is more admirable to die with her virginity intact than to live as a dishonorable woman. Her attitude may seem extreme to a modern reader, but it is an outlook that is characteristic of her time period. Her actions directly parallel that of Lord Antonio's wife in "The Revenger's Tragedy", another woman who values her chastity more than life itself. Whereas Lord Antonio's wife turns to suicide after having her honor disgraced, the Lady takes preemptive measures to avoid the contamination of her honor all together. She explains her logic by comparing herself to a highly coveted treasure, saying that "a

resolute captain / [w]ill rather fling the treasure of his bark / [i]nto whales' throats than pirates should be gorged with't" (III. i. 69-71). A treasure hunter would prefer to have his findings devoured by whales than to having them stolen from him by someone else. Similarly, in her mind, it is better for her to die with her virginity still intact than to allow it to be taken from her in an undesirable, immoral way. She would rather permanently lock up her chastity through death than allow a man to rob her of her prized virtue. Without her honor, she has nothing left to live for because that is the only quality that she prides herself on.

The audience is encouraged to applaud the Lady's suicide, but this drastic action calls into question this society's convoluted expectations for women. In this world, female virtue cannot peacefully coexist with the increasing levels of sin and the constant pressure of temptation in both the courts and family life. The Lady is unable to live the life of a chaste Renaissance woman because there is always a prevalent need to guard her virtue when the men in her life are incapable of doing so. If the only chaste woman in this society has to die in order to prove the importance of her values, this ideal lifestyle is becoming unrealistic. These rigid guidelines for female chastity do not create authentic women who can successfully negotiate a moral life in this society. Rather, the Lady is a martyr for female chastity, a woman who is so devoutly committed to her beliefs that she is willing to die for them. She is characterized by Kevin Crawford as a woman who is "superhumanly resolute and will not be taken and ravished" (Crawford 112). He commends her virtue, but his statement also suggests that her impenetrable resolve is abnormal because no human can live up to the high standards that she sets. Although there are individuals who will go to extreme lengths for their beliefs, it is unrealistic to expect that the everyday woman in this society would express the same exorbitant level of commitment that the Lady does. The fact that suicide is the Lady's only option speaks volumes about the

impractical guidelines imposed on the chaste Renaissance woman. Readers are supposed to find her actions honorable, but they must also be aware that they are applauding a type of life that is virtually unlivable. Middleton's decision to kill the heroine, the most honorable woman in this society, represents his commentary on the disappearance of the chaste Renaissance woman.

After the Lady's suicide, it would appear that she had escaped the threats against her virtue, but even in death her body is still subjected to contamination. Unable to quench his insatiable lust, the Tyrant removes her body from its resting place so that he can have his sexual way with her. Although this episode of necrophilia is certainly a disturbing look into the mind of an unhinged man, it also demonstrates that female chastity was constantly being tainted by sin. When she is alive, the Lady is able to ward off unwanted attention, even taking the drastic step of ending her life so that she cannot be forced to participate in these illicit behaviors. Once she dies, however, she loses that minimal sense of control over her virtue. The Lady thought that suicide would free her from these harmful influences, but she overlooks the fact that her body is now defenseless against defacement in this sinful environment. Furthermore, no one prevents the Tyrant's contamination of the corpse, forcing the Lady to return from beyond the grave to monitor her body. Sheetal Lodhia stresses that the "Ghost's reappearance to police her corpse is motivated by more than one anxiety" (Lodhia 145). First, the Lady realizes that her honor is still in jeopardy after she sees the Tyrant fondling her corpse. Secondly, the Lady's ghost must "police" the situation because she knows that Govianus' resolve is not as strong as hers, and he often hesitates when he should take action. She has to remind him her "rest is lost; [he] must restore't again," urging him to restore her tarnished honor (IV. v. 79). The Lady could not rely on Govianus to protect her when she was alive, and she certainly cannot count on him to do so now that she is dead. She has to reiterate the importance of her honor to him, as if these values

are no longer as important to men as they are to virtuous women like the Lady. Until she gets him to intervene, her body is exposed and violated, erasing all her effort to live an honorable life.

Despite her attempt to leave a lasting legacy of honor, the Lady is further victimized and exploited when Govianus employs her body in his revenge plot. Mirroring the events of earlier revenge tragedies, Govianus uses her body, laced with poison, to seek vengeance on the Tyrant. This moment is highly ironic for two reasons. First, Govianus has to prostitute this chaste woman in order to seek revenge for the suffering she endured. In an instant, he transforms her from the exemplar of chastity to a lethal enchantress who delivers the kiss of death. He reverses all the good behavior that she has devoted her life to. Lodhia criticizes Govianus' actions, explaining that he "fails to understand that he too mistreats the Lady's body" because his plan "depends upon a material fashioning of the Lady's corpse" (Lodhia 144). Govianus is not aware of the fact that he is guilty of the same offense that he punishes the Tyrant for. The Tyrant alters the Lady's appearance to satiate his lust, while Govianus converts her pure body into a deadly instrument for vengeance. In both instances, the sanctity of the Lady's body is compromised.

The idea of painting women also becomes an ironic commentary on male attempts to change women. The Tyrant employs a painter to transform the physical appearance of the Lady's corpse, making her resemble the kind of woman that he imagines for himself. He wants her to appear lifelike, but also like a woman who would be receptive to his lustful advances and willing to behave immorally. That is exactly what she becomes. The only caveat is that instead of engaging in the transgression of lust, she becomes an unwilling participant in the sinful act of murder. In this moment, Middleton criticizes society's attempts to mold women according to a set of rigid expectations. When the men try to change the Lady, their efforts backfire. The Tyrant's desire to paint her in a lifelike, seductive way leads to his own demise, and Govianus'

efforts only corrupt her body further. Once the Lady is dead, her body is in the hands of men living in a society that no longer shows women the same degree of respect as it once did.

By the play's conclusion, Govianus claims to have restored the Lady's honor, but readers are left questioning if the transformed version of the Lady is a figure worthy of admiration. Having reclaimed his throne, Govianus crowns the deceased Lady as his queen, and he praises her unparalleled life of virtue. He encourages all women to emulate the Lady's moral behavior, saying that "we cannot reverence chastity too much" (V. ii. 209). He suggests that the Lady is an example to women everywhere, but Govianus fails to realize that the Lady is more of an idyllic figure than a realistic woman. When he parades her as his queen, his awe of her chastity sounds more like idolatry. He worships her for her virtue, yet he overlooks the fact that she was only able to preserve her chastity because she committed suicide, and even then her body was still tampered with. Govianus wants the women of his kingdom to behave like the Lady, but no woman can live up to the model of perfection that she represents. In making this unrealistic plea to his citizens, Govianus expresses a desire to return to a former way of life when women were expected to be as virtuous as the Lady. Now that the Lady's spirit has been set to rest, however, there is no one in this world who can match her high standard of morality. As Crawford notes, the play is often referred to as "The Lady's Tragedy," suggesting that it is the corruption of the chaste Lady's honor, and her disappearance from society, that is the greatest tragedy (Crawford 101). The chaste Renaissance woman no longer has the same voice in society.

Although her degree of honor may pale by comparison to that of the Lady, the Wife also starts out the play as a virtuous woman. The first insight into her character comes from her husband's best friend, who compliments the Wife by calling her "a kind, worthy lady" who is known for being a "chaste wife" (I. ii. 22). His declaration clears up any doubt about her fidelity.

By calling her a “chaste wife,” Votarius explains that the Wife has never strayed from her marriage vows to Anselmus, nor has she ever given him any reason to question her faithfulness. Her chaste lifestyle makes her “worthy” of admiration. The Wife’s initial comments about her marriage further demonstrate her honorable, unyielding devotion to her husband. Her first thoughts are of her husband and her desire to rekindle the passion that has seemingly faded from their marriage. As she recalls watching Anselmus walk alone in the woods at night, she longs to be intimate with him, saying “I want his company” (I. ii. 98). The Wife spends all her time worrying about her husband’s affection towards her, leaving her no time to stray from her marriage vows. Not only does she express her desperate yearning to regain her husband’s love and attention, but she does so while basking in the moonlight. The Wife explains that the moon “liberally bestowed her graces” upon her, meaning that she is showered by the pure light of the moon, an important symbol of chastity in the Renaissance (I. ii. 105). By having the moonlight cast a glow over her, it is as if the moon highlights her virtue for all to witness, even if her husband cannot see the sign. The powerful connection between the moon and the Wife’s chastity makes it clear that the Wife has, up until this point, behaved virtuously. This suggests that any deviations from this moral conduct are caused by forces beyond her control.

What separates the Wife from the Lady is the drastic transformation that she undergoes from an honest woman to a manipulative adulteress. Middleton purposely depicts such a drastic change in character in order to criticize his society’s callous judgment of women. The playwright uses the Wife as a foil character for the Lady in order to highlight the latter’s unparalleled degree of virtue. Middleton’s society believed that only two types of women existed, those who are perfectly modest like the Lady and those who succumb to temptation like the Wife. If a woman cannot live up to the standards of perfection that the Lady aspires to, then she must be a sinful

woman who has no moral values. Middleton invites readers to compare and contrast these two characters, especially when it comes to their names. In the same way that the Lady's name reveals her respectable personality, the Wife's title illustrates what her society expects from her. As a proper wife, this woman is supposed to be faithful, loyal and obedient to her husband. Given the fact that she has no identity outside of being Anselmus' wife, her sole mission in life is to serve her husband, yet the only thing that she serves him is humiliation.

The play is purposely constructed in such a way that the Lady lives up to every standard for chastity, whereas the Wife falls short of that distinction. Richard Levin observes that both women are given tests of their virtue that directly parallel one another, making it impossible for readers to judge one woman's response without looking at the results of the other. Unlike the Lady, who successfully proves her moral convictions, the Wife "fails her test by giving herself to Votarius, and therefore her life takes an opposite course" from that of her counterpart (Levin 221). The two women start off on the same moral path, but then quickly diverge based on their reactions to temptation. The Wife cannot escape this connection to the Lady, causing her to pale by comparison to the exemplar of chastity. Middleton uses the Wife's descent into an immoral lifestyle to explore the harsh lens through which women were viewed. More importantly, he uses the Lady's imminent corruption to prove that the Wife cannot escape the same vices. If the noblest woman in the court cannot fully escape the sins around her, it is only a matter of time before the common women of society, like the Wife, will be harmed by the same sins.

Middleton also uses the Wife's downfall to critique male anxieties about female virtue. When the play opens, the Wife has behaved commendably, and it is only after her husband relentlessly questions her fidelity that she falls from grace. Anselmus is so paranoid that his wife has cheated on him in the past or will do so in the future that he cannot lay the issue to rest. By

establishing what he perceives as a foolproof test of his Wife's chastity, Anselmus essentially orchestrates his own cuckolding. His endless doubts cause him to place his Wife in a sinful situation that she would not have otherwise engaged in. She never expresses any attraction for Votarius until her husband employs his elaborate test. Had he left well enough alone, there is no evidence to suggest that she would ever have been unfaithful to him. Although the Wife must share some blame for her affair, the burden of responsibility for her corruption falls largely on Anselmus. His obsession with finding concrete proof about his Wife's covert behaviors backfires, producing the kind of woman that he despises. Anselmus himself says it best when he comments on the dangerous capabilities of a man's imagination. He explains that "the unbounded kingdom of the mind / [i]s as unlimitable as heaven," suggesting that his mind is his greatest enemy (I. ii.13-14). It allows him to imagine an array of possibilities of shame that he could suffer if his Wife disgraced him. His paranoid thoughts overpower his better judgment, causing him to place his Wife in harm's way. In this world, it is only when men interfere in women's lives that a woman's chastity is in danger of contamination.

Middleton uses Anselmus' insecurities about his Wife's chastity to illustrate the detrimental effects of society's general mistrust of women. In both the main plot and the subplot, it is the male preoccupation with female virtue that leads to the corruption of women. Both Anselmus and his brother Govianus assume the worst in women without having been given any evidence to support their claims. Observing this trend, Votarius compares the men in this society to workmen and women to the parts of a machine that the men try to repair. He explains that "the workman/[n]ever gives over tampering with the wheels / [t]ill either spring be weakened, balance bowed, / [o]r some wrong pin put in, and so spoils all" (II. ii.13-16). These "workmen" attempt to fix what they perceive as a problem with female chastity. Husbands feel compelled to restore

their wives' fallen honor, even if no problem actually exists. Male preoccupation with female chastity is not a new occurrence in Renaissance society, but now this involvement threatens to derail women who would otherwise act morally. If men cannot trust women, they will never be able to accept that there are chaste women who do not require close examination of their values.

Once this general mistrust of women sets in, it is difficult to erase the seeds of doubt that have been implanted in the minds of men. Society cannot revert to a time when women were thought of as virtuous by nature. As the Wife explains, it is relatively simple "to draw a lady's honour in suspicion, / [b]ut not so soon recovered and confirmed / [t]o the first faith again from whence you brought it" (IV. i. 4-6). In other words, it is easy for a woman's honor to be called into question, but it is hard for her to regain her esteemed reputation once it has been deemed suspect. The same rule of thumb applies to society's attitude towards women. By this point in time, the fear of female immorality has reached an all time high, making it difficult, if not impossible, to alleviate those concerns entirely. As long as men feel that it is their right to test women, these investigations will inevitably do more harm than good.

As a direct result of men harboring mistrusting attitudes of women, women begin to express their own doubts about their ability to lead chaste lives. Even though the Wife initially does nothing to warrant Anselmus' ire, she soon believes that she cannot resist temptation. His attitude influences her self-image as well as her view of all women. Once men claim that all women are susceptible to sin, women start to believe these suggestions, thinking that they are incapable of upholding moral values. This is a troubling development in a society where women are vulnerable to corruption. Unlike the Lady, who can take care of herself when she is alive, the Wife fears that she is not mentally or emotionally strong enough to ward off temptation. She questions how any woman can "withstand her enemy" and protect her virtue from sin "when her

distresses take away her strength” (I. ii. 243-244). The Wife suggests that a woman’s resolve is not strong enough to withstand a man’s enticement. She is left in an emotionally vulnerable state of mind as a result of male skepticism of her. She thinks that she needs the protection and surveillance of others, notably her maid, in order to protect herself, but in reality the Wife is the only person who can ensure her own virtue. The degrading attitude toward women clearly seeps into her mind, altering her self-perception. She is taught to believe that women are inclined to sin, and she quickly decides that she will not fight this “natural” instinct.

After realizing that her husband’s expectations for her virtue are superficial, the Wife quickly exploits these unrealistic standards. In order to pursue an affair with Votarius, all that she needs to do is physically show her husband that she resists temptation. She stages a test of her own to prove that she is an honest wife who will refuse to engage in lecherous behavior. The Wife uses her test to cast off any suspicion of her so that she is free to live her life as she pleases. Her performance of virtue speaks volumes about the state of female chastity at this point in history. The chaste Renaissance woman is not a real person that women can emulate, but rather she is a part that women can act. The Wife plays the role of the chaste wife in the presence of her husband, but she removes that mask in the company of her lover. Her maid Leonella recognizes that her mistress treats her chastity like a disguise so that “she will seem / [t]’act wonders for her juggling honesty” (IV. i. 154-155). All that the Wife has to do is make it appear as if she is acting virtuously, and it is this visual confirmation of her abstention from sin that convinces Anselmus. Literally, the Wife has a “juggling honesty,” meaning that she is able to balance two conflicting personas by convincing her husband that she is the woman he wants her to be. From her manipulative behavior, it is clear that the respectability of female chastity is beginning to decrease significantly. Not only are moral values fading from society, but these expectations are

being mocked and taken advantage of by shrewd women. The Wife's ability to pose as a chaste wife proves that this ideal figure of virtue is nothing more than a façade.

Anselmus has only himself to blame when he is tricked by his Wife's performance of chastity. He creates a model of expected behavior, and she uses that ideal to her advantage. When she was a dutiful wife, he was unable to accept her fidelity because he could not see any concrete proof of it. It is only when he witnesses a physical demonstration of her virtue that he retracts his former doubts, but by this point, destruction has already set in. Anselmus, the Wife and Votarius all die because of this fixation with female virtue, proving that nothing positive comes from these expectations. Furthermore, Anselmus is reduced to a pitiable fool when he finally believes that his Wife is virtuous. He drags his body near hers in order to be "close by the chaste side of [his] virtuous mistress" (V. i. 138). Anselmus thinks that he can die peacefully knowing that his Wife was always loyal, yet readers are aware of how pathetic the situation is. Middleton uses this moment of dramatic irony to stress how damaging the preoccupation with female chastity is. This obsession creates an inverted world where men doubt faithful women, yet they trust cunning women who create the impression of virtue. These men are responsible for turning female morality into a presentation rather than a realistic code of conduct.

When Anselmus finally learns the truth about his Wife's performance, he explodes into a rage of hatred and mistrust of women, an attitude that is characteristic of his society's degrading view of women. After receiving the startling revelation about his Wife's infidelity, Anselmus curses her, the "beguiler of man's easy trust," and he concludes that "the serpent's wisdom is in woman's lust" (V. i. 179-180). He suggests that women are the cause of men's downfalls, but his statement is highly ironic. Despite claiming to easily trust her, it is actually because he does not believe her that her virtue is exposed to vice. Anselmus, however, does not see his error, instead

deciding that a woman's cunning is a man's worst enemy. He paints all women as manipulative creatures who deceive men in order to engage in sinful behaviors. He dies believing that immodest women are the problem in this society, and no one corrects his ignorant statements. The fact that this is how the subplot ends suggests that male skepticism of female virtue is a growing problem with no end in sight. In this case, it is the catalyst for the destruction of the family unit. As long as men continue to hold women to standards of perfection and test them repeatedly, they will always find faults or create faults where there are none.

In a world where women must constantly guard their chastity with their lives and defend their commitment to their moral beliefs, it is nearly impossible for the chaste Renaissance woman to survive. Both the Lady and the Wife initially fulfill all expectations for female virtue, but they are each backed into a corner where they must decide if maintaining their virtue is worth the hardships they endure. Unable to successfully practice her chaste beliefs without being bombarded by the sins of the court, the Lady has no choice but to commit suicide. The Lady, however, is a martyr of chastity, not a realistic example for women to follow. Thus, Middleton includes the Wife to show that common women faced the same struggles with virtue. She too is victimized by this degrading view of women, causing her to give in to the sins she is already accused of committing. In both instances, the chaste Renaissance woman is made a spectacle of. In the former, she is an idyllic figure meant to be idolized rather than emulated. In the latter example, she is a guise that can be embraced or removed at will. Middleton asks readers to question what has become of the chaste Renaissance woman and what her future holds. He uses the play to prove that female chastity is not being assessed through the same lens that it once was. Society no longer gives honest women the credit or respect that they deserve, making it unrealistic for a woman to live a moral life without having her beliefs challenged by men.

**“That Never-Cured Dishonor”:
The Irreversibility of Female Immorality
in Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher’s “The Maid’s Tragedy”**

Female virtue thrives in a society where it is respected and cherished, but it quickly vanishes from a world where it is defined by expectations. When women lead honorable lives for the purposes of modesty and spiritual salvation, female chastity becomes a noble achievement that both men and women admire and seek to protect and preserve. Conversely, when women think that they deserve to be rewarded for acting in such a virtuous manner, chastity becomes the subject of intense parody and ridicule. In Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher’s “The Maid’s Tragedy,” two women each claim to follow a moral code of conduct, but neither adequately qualifies as a virtuous woman. Evadne constantly tries to convince others that she is chaste, but what she says and what she does are two entirely different things. Repeatedly, she vows that she will commit to a moral existence, but she cannot escape the urge to sin, proving that lost virtue cannot be restored. Aspatia, on the other hand, lives a pure and celibate lifestyle, but her good deeds go unacknowledged. She does not take this lack of recognition lightly, transforming from a woman worthy of praise to a pathetic complainer who discourages other women from behaving chastely because there is no praise or incentive for doing so. Both women are prone to selfish concerns and desires, forgetting the sacredness of their chastity in the process. In a world where corrupt women deceive everyone with the appearance of virtue and principled women bemoan the lack of attention for their morality, true models of female chastity no longer exist.

Evadne’s manipulative actions and sinful disposition make her character nothing more than a parody of female chastity, a commentary on how society’s expectations for female virtue are mocked in this parallel universe. She is yet another woman wearing a mask, pretending to be a faithful wife in order to engage in lecherous behavior without making her sexual indiscretions

public knowledge. In her mind, it is the performance of virtue that matters, not the actual beliefs beneath the exterior. What separates her from other licentious women of previous revenge tragedies is that she does not make the same drastic transformation from modesty to impiety. Most salacious women of this genre are initially good women who become increasingly corrupt to the point where they lose all sense of moral direction. Evadne, however, goes through no such process. When she makes her first appearance, she is already immersed in the corruption of the kingdom which has erased any virtue that she may have had previously. Even though her brother swears that she was once a pure-hearted maiden, his claims are without merit because readers never see any evidence of her virtue firsthand. Right from her entrance, she confidently explains that she will mimic fidelity in her marriage to Amintor so that she can continue her affair with the King. Clearly, she is not a moral woman fighting to maintain her principles in the face of temptation. Rather, she knowingly engages in sinful behavior with no visible remorse for living a duplicitous life. She expresses no qualms about the moral repercussions of her actions because her virtue is never given time to develop in this corrupt society.

Evadne's cynical attitude about the state of female chastity in this society suggests that no woman can or will continue to abide by these values. She finds it completely ridiculous and laughable when Amintor thinks that she refuses to be intimate with him because of her chastity. Astounded by the naivety of his insinuation, Evadne questions how he could possibly believe that she could still have "a maidenhead...at [her] years" (II. i. 190). Her reaction to his assumption is important for understanding the increasingly degrading attitude towards female virtue. Formerly, it was automatically expected that a maiden would refrain from sex until marriage, regardless of her age, because that was the only moral way to behave. Now, it is unrealistic to maintain that outdated view in a world where such beliefs are no longer adhered to.

Evadne finds it absurd that there are still men in the world who think that a woman can keep her virginity intact, especially when sins run so rampant in this scandalous court. For Evadne, maintaining her modesty is the farthest thing from her mind, especially when she has the opportunity to use her sexuality to advance her social standing.

Evadne goes on to explain that female modesty is constraining and unappealing. She expresses her disdain for chastity when she asks her husband how he could think that she has “put on / [a] maiden’s strictness” when she clearly displays a “hot and rising blood / [u]napt for such a vow” (II. i. 283-286). Her critical choice of words emphasizes her disparaging view of female modesty. She does not refer to chastity as a woman’s resolve or commitment, phrasing that would suggest self-control or self-empowerment. Instead, she calls a woman’s virtue her “strictness,” insinuating that all chaste women are rigid and prude shrews as opposed to a woman like herself who follows her passions freely. She makes chastity seem restrictive in contrast to her insatiable lust which is too powerful to contain. If her responses are any indication of the larger social attitudes toward women and morality, female virtue is now considered more of a self-inflicted punishment than an honorable feat. A chaste existence is not only largely idealistic and impractical, but it is also a limiting lifestyle that should be avoided rather than sought after.

Unable to remain a meek and obedient maiden, Evadne asserts control over her life as well as her sexuality by engaging in a gender role reversal with her husband. This brazen woman is the opposite of what one would expect from a traditional Renaissance wife. Unlike the chaste wives whom she despises for their submissive nature, Evadne dictates whether or not the marriage is consummated. She also confidently stands up to her husband, making it clear that she will only appear to be a faithful wife when it is in her best interest to do so. In this society, women are no longer content to remain silent and subservient to male authority. In fact, these

bold women are forced to abandon typically feminine traits in order to free themselves from their husband's reign. Sid Ray notes the way that Evadne "acquires power by appropriating the man's dominant position in the hierarchy of familial and social relations" (Ray 95). In other words, she takes charge of the relationship by embodying the "dominant," masculine role in the household, forcing her husband to take orders from her. Evadne's assertiveness emasculates Amintor and challenges his role as her husband. When it becomes obvious that the woman holds all the power in the marriage, the man is forced to rely on her performance of chastity in order to protect his own reputation. Amintor cannot change her willful demeanor nor can he prevent her from having her affair, and thus he too becomes an accomplice in the mimicking of female virtue. He has to pretend to have consummated the relationship, so as to give off the appearance that he has control over his wife's sexuality. It is no longer women alone who put on the air of modesty for the sake of their public image. In this society, both men and women participate in the presentation of female virtue, acting in the way that they believe an ideal husband and wife are supposed to appear and behave. Both Amintor and Evadne's primary concern is that she comes across to others as a loyal wife, regardless of what actually occurs behind closed doors.

Unlike Amintor, who is unable to curb his wife's salacious behavior, Evadne's brother Melantius determines to restore his sister's virtue, but his self-serving motivations for this intervention compromise Evadne's "reformation." He wants to ensure that Evadne repents for her sexual promiscuity, but he is not concerned about her salvation so much as he is worried about his own reputation. Her lecherous behavior disgraces his honor and shames the family name, something that he is not willing to let her get away with. Once again, the primary focus is on the public perception of female honor, not whether the woman actually believes in or practices those virtues when she is not in the public spotlight. Melantius reprimands her

deception and impiety, harshly declaring that “‘Tis, to be thy brother, / [a]n infamy below the sin of coward. / I am as far from being part of thee / [a]s thou art from thy virtue” (IV. i. 61-64).

There is no brotherly concern for his sister’s well-being, nor any attempt to guide her in the right direction. Rather, he puts up a barrier of distance, saying that he is no more her brother than she is a truly virtuous woman. He is only bothered by the fact that his name will become “infamous” because of her malice. Unlike Vindice, who genuinely tries to help his mother achieve penance, Melantius degrades his sister with threats of violence and reproachful reminders of her wicked nature. His severe condemnation of her character does not resemble male protection of female chastity. Melantius simply wants Evadne to change in order to please him, regardless of whether she acknowledges the error of her ways. Without ensuring that she has this moment of recognition, his brutal intervention jeopardizes her ability to attain true repentance.

By the end of his intense interrogation, Evadne finally agrees to atone for her sins, but readers are left questioning the sincerity of her declaration for a number of reasons. First, her moment of conversion is so abrupt and out-of-character for a woman who has never expressed any concern for her virtue before, that it is difficult to take her newfound outlook on chastity seriously. One minute she relishes the fruit of her sinful ways, and the next she conveys total remorse for her behavior. Even Evadne herself subconsciously questions the authenticity of her instantaneous conversion, explaining that “[her] whole life is so leprous it infects / [a]ll [her] repentance” (IV. i. 196-197). She does not fully believe that her virtue is restorable after unapologetically living such a sinful life for so long. The longevity of her “leprous” past challenges the legitimacy of her sudden change of heart. If she expresses her own misgivings about the validity of her repentance, readers cannot help but doubt whether she actually intends to recommit to her chastity.

Furthermore, Evadne claims to repent for her sins, vowing to live a life of virtue, but her supposed conversion can easily be interpreted as yet another appearance that she puts on. Her brother's use of intimidation tactics has forced her to make this immediate transformation, something that she was not willing to do previously, and she has virtually no choice but to agree to his demands in order to appease his anger. It is impossible to decipher whether she seeks repentance because she legitimately believes that she has sinned or if she does so because her brother has caused her to fear for her safety if she does not tell him exactly what he wants to hear. She puts on an exaggerated display of regret for her behavior, regurgitating the same moral messages that he tries to implant in her, so that she can escape his preaching. Ronald Huebert correctly asserts that Evadne's behavior can always be interpreted as another performance, insinuating that "her ethical position is built on the quicksand of equivocation" (Huebert 606). His critique suggests that Evadne's first instinct is to avoid people's judgment of her by appearing to consent to their demands. The fact that her name bears a close resemblance to the word "evade" implies that she frees herself from confrontation by producing artificial responses with the semblance of modesty. It is only when she agrees with Melantius that he finally lays the issue to rest, suggesting that it is more important for Evadne to convince him of her conversion than to actually believe his lessons of virtue. In that case, her insincere, instant transformation demonstrates how ineffective it is to try to restore a sinful woman's fallen honor by this point in time. Men think that they can change women's beliefs on the spot, but all that teaches these women is how they are "supposed" to act and what they ought to say, producing trained responses to simulate virtue.

Evadne's ability to restore her virtue is further undermined by her society's attitude that corrupt women cannot refrain from sinning once they have already given in to temptation. This

skeptical view of female repentance is articulated by the King when he believes that Evadne is cheating on him. Even though she swears that she will take no other lovers, he is unable to accept that this formerly loose woman can return to a virtuous existence or even a monogamous relationship. Doubting her capability of resisting temptation, he states that “they that break word with heaven will break again,” thus emphasizing the irreversibility of female wantonness (III. i. 166). Once a woman acts immorally, she exposes herself to a world of sin from which her honor can never recover. His statement suggests that there is little hope of reforming women like Evadne who have already allowed sin and corruption to infiltrate their souls. Once these women have sinned, and been exposed to the fruits of their desire, there is no turning back to a mundane, chaste existence. If his attitude is emblematic of the changing attitude toward female repentance, then women like Evadne are unfixable. As soon as she behaves immorally, her sins define her for life, and the impulse to engage in sinful behavior will follow her wherever she goes.

Evadne’s deconstructive method of restoring her virtue further solidifies the fact that she can never return to a life of morality. Rather than repenting for her lechery, Evadne’s agrees to kill the King at her brother’s command, essentially replacing one sin for another. She justifies the motives for her decision to commit regicide, stating that she “[has] begun a slaughter on [her] honour, / [a]nd [she] must end it there” (V. i. 24-25). This woman thinks that the only way to return to a state of virtue is to be the avenger of her chastity, but all that she does is incriminate herself to an even greater extent. Having lived a life of depravity for such a long time, her mind is so corrupted by sin that she no longer knows how to behave morally. Rather than trying to heal the “slaughter” of her honor, by apologizing to her cuckolded husband or committing to her marriage, Evadne destroys her virtue even further. She becomes a murderess in order to be forgiven for being a seductress, a convoluted logic that demonstrates how unable she is to

divorce herself from sinning now that these sinful thoughts have taken control of her mind. As she literally removes temptation from her life, she also echoes her society's views that this civilization has reached the brink of corruption from which its citizens may never recover. She explains that "'Tis so many sins / [a]n age cannot repent'em," suggesting that this society is so infiltrated with sins that one person, or one generation, cannot begin to repair them all (V. i. 21-22). There is no way to turn back time and return to an age when individuals, particularly women, were pure and chaste. So much damage has already been done that these ideals have vanished from society, causing people to forget how to live noble lives. If Evadne does not know how to atone for her mistakes without reverting to sinful instincts, there is no hope that her honor can be restored, nor can she ever become a morally respectable woman.

Regardless of whether Evadne honestly seeks forgiveness or simply does what she thinks is expected of her, her attempts to alter people's perceptions of her are ultimately unsuccessful. Even though her brother is the one who goads her into changing her behaviors, Melantius remains unconvinced that she is able to repair her corrupted virtue. Barbara J. Baines even speculates that Melantius never believed that his sister could redeem herself, concluding that "the self-righteous brother has taken advantage of her deformation in an attempt to benefit himself" (Baines 168). There is certainly merit to the idea that he uses his sister, whose honor is forever corrupted, as a tool to carry out the immoral act of revenge that he is unable to do himself. Furthermore, Melantius unapologetically tells Evadne that all hope for her is lost, cringing at the thought of "that never-cured dishonour of [his] sister / [b]ase stain of whore" (V. ii. 46-47). Although she follows his instructions explicitly, the residual effects of her sins still linger in her soul, forever presenting the temptation to behave immorally again. Once a woman sacrifices her chastity for pleasure, she will be branded a sinner for the rest of her life, in spite of any good that

she tries to do. Evadne's tainted virtue can never be "cured," meaning that a virtuous existence will forever be beyond her reach. She is now defined by her sinful indiscretions, suggesting that she will never be able to embody the qualities of a chaste woman.

Evadne's subsequent suicide, an act of desperation after realizing that redemption is unattainable, emphasizes the self-destructive nature that destroys the possibility of a moral universe. At first, Evadne believes that eliminating the King has restored her virtue, but Amintor's horrified reaction proves that she cannot redeem herself, nor does she even understand what it means to be a pure woman. Upon seeing this woman's bloody hands, a visible sign of sin to match the "base stain" that tarnishes her honor, Amintor reprimands her, saying that she has merely "raised up mischief to his height, / [a]nd found one to out-name [her] other faults" (V. iii. 131-132). Evadne has reached a new level of wickedness that surpasses her previous immoral behaviors. It is as if she has a compulsion to act impiously, one from which she can never free herself. The concepts of virtue and chastity are now beyond her means of comprehension. Cristina León Alfar correctly asserts that Evadne's suicide "represents her powerlessness to recover the value she once embodied" (Alfar 329). After spending most of the play in a position of power and status, she is now rendered helpless and hopeless because she can never recover from her tainted image, nor can she become the confident woman that she once was. Scarred by the realization that she will never be able to reclaim her honor, or at least maintain the appearance of morality, she ends her life. Evadne's demise proves just how rapidly virtue began to disappear from this society. Once a woman loses her chastity, it can never be reclaimed, and her sins will never be forgotten or forgiven. In a society where women must behave immaculately in order to be considered respectable, despite the high levels of sin that corrode their judgment and threaten their honor, the ideal chaste woman cannot realistically exist.

Unlike Evadne, Aspatia never compromises her virtue, but simply living a chaste life is not enough to earn her society's respect. She is the closest trace to a traditional, honorable woman in this society, but men ignore her in favor of more desirable women like Evadne. Even though Aspatia remains committed to her vow of chastity, by abstaining from premarital sex and patiently waiting to become Amintor's faithful wife, her good deeds are not commended or rewarded. Rejection transforms this innocent woman into a bitter shrew, the living embodiment of a woman scorned. Unlike the other chaste Renaissance women of this genre, who care more about their virtue itself than public admiration of their morality, Aspatia cannot get past the fact that no one applauds her chastity. She repeatedly tries to steal the spotlight back from Evadne, but her attempts to be heard come across as desperate and deplorable. Every time Aspatia speaks, she descends into a whining, self-pitying mode, and it is these constant complaints about the lack of respect that she receives, that makes it impossible to consider her a strong, laudable woman. The true tragedy of the play, as the title suggests, is that the only maiden in this world has been cast aside, turning her into a pathetic remnant of her formerly admirable self.

Like many chaste women, Aspatia becomes isolated from the rest of her society because of her values, but, in this play, the alienation is of her own doing. She spends so much time wallowing in her sorrows that she pushes everyone away from her, making her a polarizing figure rather than a venerable woman. There is no one who wants to be in her presence because Aspatia "carries with her an infectious grief / [t]hat strikes all her beholders" (I. i. 97-98). At every possible opportunity, she brings down the group morale by constantly feeling sorry for herself. No one can respect her morality because she repeatedly reminds everyone that her purity deserves to be acknowledged, and she depresses them with her misery when her calls for

attention go unanswered. If she cannot be happy, she purposefully ensures that no one else can relish their own joy without being reminded of her suffering.

The first moment that she speaks, Aspatia bemoans the fact that she is forsaken in spite of the fact that she has lived an idyllic moral existence until this point. While helping to prepare Evadne for her wedding night, Aspatia dolefully declares that “this should have been / [her] night,” (II. i. 44-45). Showcasing her “woe is me” attitude, she gripes that this “should” have been her special event because her virtuous behavior “should” earn her a happy and successful union in a world where such values are respected. In this corrupt society, however, there is no recompense for moral behavior, making her claims sound ridiculous and obsolete. Furthermore, Aspatia sarcastically chastises Evadne’s “worth,” telling Evadne that she would have been the bride “would my worth / [w]ere great as yours” (II. i. 48-49). The definition of worth has become completely inverted in this society. The chaste woman, who was formerly considered a worthy marriage prospect, is worthless, while men now consider a woman’s physical attractiveness her most worthy and desirable asset. Spurned by the realization that her virtue, the only thing that she has to pride herself on, is unappreciated in this society, Aspatia concludes that there are no benefits for leading an honorable life. Her good behavior has gotten her nowhere in the court or in Amintor’s heart, and she refuses to let anyone forget that.

Aspatia’s morose demeanor presents an unflattering portrait of chaste women, discouraging other women from practicing these virtues. She repeatedly states that virtuous women are destined to a life of melancholy, dissuading others from emulating a life that is plagued by pain, disrespect and neglect. When discussing virtue with her servant women, she describes her own misfortune, saying her mistake was to “believe all faithful, and be miserable” (II. ii. 10). Aspatia advises these women not to think that they are living in a moral universe

where ethics are respected and faithfulness is the norm. In reality, the women who trust in virtue are the ones who become victims of abandonment because their loves desert them for more sexually intriguing women. Throughout the work, Aspatia plays up her victimization, letting others know that her chastity has brought her emotional anguish rather than the happiness and recognition that she thought it would ensure her. In contrast to chaste women like Castiza and the Lady, whom readers revere because they derive contentment and satisfaction simply from living honorable lives, Aspatia's wretched state of desolation convinces readers that virtue is a useless endeavor. Her prolonged, self-indulgent cries make it seem as if chastity leads to a life of anguish, a future that readers would not willingly embrace for themselves. In the same way that she sees no incentive for behaving virtuously any longer, readers are given no reason to abide by these standards of morality if pathetic despondency is the end result of such a righteous life. Rather than encouraging women to maintain their chastity at all costs, like the previous plays do, this tragedy satirizes the chaste woman, demonstrating how "good" people suffer endlessly in a corrupt world where such values have no place.

As if to stress the fact that the idealization of female chastity has figuratively disappeared from this society's thoughts, the playwrights literally remove the virtuous woman from the action of the play for an extended period of time. After repeatedly complaining that fortune is not on her side, Aspatia vanishes for more than two acts of the play which is a considerably prolonged departure. More importantly, no one notices her absence. In the past, chaste women would temporarily disappear from the immediate action of the play, but they would always remain on the minds of the other characters because protecting female virtue was their central focus. Even when the Lady dies, her ghost returns to monitor the events going on. In these cases, chaste women always made an impact on the action of the play even if they were not physically present.

In this play, however, Aspatia literally vanishes, and it is alarming how no one misses her when she is not there. Her nonappearance is not an oversight by the playwrights, but rather they purposely conceal her so that readers lose sight of her, and the values that she is supposed to stand for, as well. As readers begin to forget about her, in the same way that the characters do, they too become implicated in this general disregard for female virtue. The playwrights intend for readers to recognize the significance of her absence and understand how the importance of female virtue is quickly fading away from this society's consciousness. There is no longer a place for her in this sinful world where her values are not worthy of safeguarding. For the majority of the play, Aspatia is entirely alone and, even when she is in the presence of others, she is still on her own because her intense despair prevents anyone from wanting to help her.

Aspatia's depressed attitude causes all the men in her life to lose respect for her, and, because they do not hold her or her values in high esteem, they do nothing to protect her chastity. Her father, Calianax, is aware of his daughter's disgrace, but the cause is not worthy enough for him to get involved. Instead, his primary concern is fighting back against those who have insulted him, rather than avenging his daughter's slighting. With no male family members willing to right the wrongs of her injustice, the next logical source of male protection would be her love, but he too ignores her. Even though Amintor momentarily expresses guilt for deserting his virtuous fiancé, the radiating glow of his new bride easily outshines Aspatia's gloomy disposition. Immediately, he becomes spellbound by Evadne, "the luster of whose eye / [c]an blot away the sad remembrance" of his thoughts of Aspatia (II. i. 133-134). The allure of temptation outweighs the importance of morality in his eyes. Furthermore, he refers to his memories of Aspatia as his "sad remembrance," suggesting that her sullen demeanor has turned her into a now unappealing prospect. Even if he felt remorse for abruptly abandoning her, those

thoughts of regret instantly vanish from Amintor's mind because Aspatia is now a depressing reminder of the past, as opposed to Evadne who is a breath of fresh air. The fact that he considers Evadne an upgrade from Aspatia suggests that he has no respect for the virtues that Aspatia is supposed to represent. There is a major shift in men's priorities when it comes to marriage. Beauty and sexual attractiveness now outweigh the importance of having a virtuous wife. Men are not willing to defend female virtue, because it is no longer their main concern, and thus women must protect their own honor.

Aspatia is forced to impersonate her own protective male family member, but her performance comes off as more desperate than heroic. Aspatia has no one in her life who is willing to stand up for her. Thus, she has to step up to the task herself, masquerading as her own long-lost brother who seeks revenge for the abuses that his sister suffers. In some way, she subconsciously longs for the protection of a brother, like Melantius, but she has no such figure to defend her honor. Therefore, Aspatia's charade is more pathetic than anything else. She cannot find a single person who respects her chastity as much as she does because these values are no longer upheld in this sinful environment. Aspatia tries to restore respect for female virtue, but the fact that she has to feign male protection for female chastity means that her thinking is archaic. Her presentation reminds readers that it was formerly a man's responsibility to step into the role of guarding female honor, but they are no longer capable of doing so, nor do they take the issue all that seriously. Instead, women like Aspatia have to compensate the best way that they can. Furthermore, the disguised Aspatia reiterates the difficulty that virtuous women face now that they are on their own. Pretending to be her brother, she remarks that she "would be loath to lose / [h]onour that is not easily gained again" (V. iii. 62-63). It becomes increasingly apparent to her that it is difficult, if not impossible, to reclaim her dignity. Once a chaste woman is dishonored,

with no one else in the world who values her virtue as much as she does, it becomes an insurmountable challenge to regain respect from others and restore her disgraced reputation.

Believing that virtue and happiness are two incompatible feats, Aspatia decides to end her life, but her self-motivated demise is executed for the wrong reasons. Unlike the previous chaste women like the Lord Antonio's wife and the Lady, who commit suicide because they care more about their chaste principles than their lives, Aspatia initiates her death because she feels unwanted. Her demise is motivated by selfishness and self-pity, making it a decision that is unworthy of admiration because it has no noble purpose behind it. She is not trying to prove a point so much as she is resigning herself to the fact that her values are now worthless in this society. Although she thinks that she is ending any further humiliation, her final act actually disgraces her honor even more for two reasons. First, she allows her anger, hurt and resentment to get in the way of her moral values, causing her to participate in such a violent battle. Aspatia becomes forceful and hostile, behaviors that are not characteristic of a meek, chaste woman. Arguing that an admirable Renaissance woman is defined by "passivity and obedience," Adrienne L. Eastwood explains that "Aspatia defies such ideals by aggressively seeking to end her life" (Eastwood 15). It is true that in this moment, Aspatia distorts the image of a reserved, virtuous woman by displaying tough, even masculine traits in order to challenge her former love to a duel. Not only does she compromise her own morals, but she also threatens Amintor's morality by manipulating him to become her murderer. She makes him an unwilling accomplice in her assisted suicide, jeopardizing any chance that he can return to a moral life. Secondly, the fact that she enlists Amintor's help in taking her own life makes her appear to be a very weak-willed woman. She is not strong enough, mentally or emotionally, to execute the deed herself. This suggests that she is incapable of taking whatever measures necessary to prove her

commitment to her honor on her own. Neither her life nor her death merit any respect in this corrupt society.

In the end, the only woman in this world who even vaguely resembles the chaste Renaissance woman dies, fading into the background with an ignored whisper. As Aspatia lies dying from her wounds, her pathetic cries go unnoticed, as if she cannot even draw attention to herself or her beliefs as they threaten to disappear from this world forever. She is once again relegated to the background, with her voice silenced, as Evadne enters and usurps her final attempt at getting others to notice her. Female virtue is literally and figuratively disintegrating and, for the first time, no one cares because it means nothing to this society anymore. Moral values cannot be resuscitated or resurrected from the past because no one even notices that they are gone until it is too late. Only after Aspatia dies does Amintor finally recognize the gravity of his mistake in disrespecting the only truly virtuous woman in this society, saying that “I wrong / [m]yself so long to lose her company” (V. iii. 242-243). Not only does he physically kill her with his sword, but he emotionally destroyed her long ago by rejecting her for another woman. When he speaks of his own error in judgment, it is as if he represents his entire society, whose morality has now become completely corrupted because they were unable to appreciate virtue while it still existed. Now, there is not even a remaining trace of a chaste Renaissance woman.

Throughout “The Maid’s Tragedy,” it becomes increasingly apparent that there is no woman who tries to remain chaste simply because she believes in the importance of her virtue. Evadne wants to present herself to others as an honorable wife so that she can escape judgment for her lecherous behavior. When she finally promises to turn over a new leaf, it is unclear whether she actually intends to live a moral lifestyle, given her inclination for performing chastity to appease others, or if it is even possible for her to stop sinning now that this type of

behavior has defined who she is. Aspatia embodies the qualities of a chaste woman, but she does so with the wrong intentions in mind. When she realizes that her honorable actions cannot prevent maltreatment, she descends into a state of utter despair, repelling everyone with her self-absorbed and pathetic cries. Neither woman serves as a suitable model of female chastity, and they both subsequently die without having achieved any level of respect. Beaumont and Fletcher end the play with a somber outlook for the future of the chaste Renaissance woman, a result of the decaying morality in this corrupt society. By the conclusion, nearly everyone is dead, and Melantius, the only individual who still embodies moral values, vows that he will not do anything to preserve his life. Aware of the trickle-down effect that this corrupt court has had on its citizens, the new king Lysippus realizes that society must begin to reexamine its values and, in this case, how women are treated. As long as the kingdom disrespects chastity and allows sin and corruption to prevail, the traditional chaste woman will never be able to lead a successful life. Now, it is up to this society to reassess the expectations for female virtue and reconsider what qualities will earn a woman respect.

What Do Women Want? Conclusions about Changing Gender and Sexual Norms in Renaissance Society

The chaste Renaissance woman was once a beloved figure because she represented a simpler age, a world that existed before corruption took hold of people's minds. When women still adhered to these ideals, they did not have the luxury of expressing their own opinions. Instead, they accepted being told how to think, feel and behave by the controlling men in their lives. These men wanted to preserve female virtue and contain women's sexuality so as not to face the fact that society's moral values were no longer being upheld and respected by future generations in the way that they had been previously. As corruption enveloped society, however, women began to experience a world outside of these strict social guidelines. Women started to desire more opportunities for themselves, and it quickly became clear that many women could never revert back to the simple, chaste existence that they once knew. Men, in particular, tried to forestall this social change, labeling these defiant women as sinful individuals in need of reformation, but they could not prevent the inevitable. Tracing the degeneration of female chastity throughout these plays demonstrates the rapid pace by which these former ideals were breaking down. By the conclusion of the final work, readers are left to wonder why these ideals have deteriorated so quickly and how Renaissance society had to revise their views of women. For the first time, it was necessary to question what women want for themselves. The female characters in these plays exemplify women's desire for freedom of sexual expression, control over their future, and a greater sense of self-worth than simply the satisfaction of a chaste life.

Whereas many Renaissance women once remained reserved and conservative in regards to their sexual nature, the women in these plays exhibit a burning need to express their sexuality without any imposed restrictions. For example, the Duchess discovers the importance of a

sexually gratifying relationship. Even though the original intent of her affair is to inflict shame upon her husband, she quickly derives satisfaction from maintaining control over her sexuality, something that she is unwilling to surrender even when her sons try to force her to do so. Similarly, the Wife breaks out of the confines of sexual containment, finally engaging in a relationship that is characterized by pleasure and fulfillment rather than doubt. She has been denied sexually by her husband for so long that her relationship with Votarius is the first time that she actually feels wanted and desired. By the final play, women are not only taking charge of their bodies, but they are also becoming confident about their sexuality. Evadne proudly informs her husband that no one has any authority over her body but she. Now it is the woman, not the man, who determines if and when the couple is sexually intimate.

The men around them attempt to vilify these women, suggesting that they are depraved, unconscionable creatures, but from a modern perspective, these women illustrate that female sexuality can no longer be contained. Certainly, these women should not be commended for their extra-marital affairs. By that standard, their behavior is deplorable. Modern readers, however, realize that any woman who tries to explore her sexuality or break free from these social confines is characterized as evil and adulterous, as if only unfaithful women have sexual desires. Recognizing that women are becoming more self-empowered, the husbands and brothers try to prevent women from taking control of their sexuality by chastising them as wayward individuals, the prime example of what is wrong with society. They fear that women will realize that their sexuality is not something that they should repress, but rather a part of their identity that they can be proud of. These female characters are the first signs that women want sexual freedom, and it is no longer easy for men to enforce restrictions on female sexuality. Women's growing self-awareness of their sexuality marks a turning point in society. Once women begin to realize

that they are in charge of their own bodies, they can never regress to a life of sexual suppression, a requirement necessary to fit the mold of a chaste Renaissance woman.

The second factor contributing to the breakdown of ideals for female virtue is women's desire for autonomy. Women want to govern their own lives, taking an active role in the direction of their future rather than passively allowing others to manage their lives for them. In each play, female figures acquire power over their lives, either defending their beliefs or pursuing their ambitions. In "The Revenger's Tragedy," Castiza cannot obey all forms of male authority in a world where the rulers of the court threaten to corrupt her. She must become self-sufficient, capable of defending her values because no one is going to do it for her. The Duchess and Gratiana also begin to realize that they can take measures to improve their social standing, and once they discover personal sovereignty, it is difficult to remove that power from them. Similarly, in *The Second Maiden's Tragedy*, both the Lady and the Wife take command of their own lives when the men around them prove to be ineffective authority figures. The Lady is self-reliant, meaning that she has to guard her body and stand up for her principles in a society that encourages her to be compliant to the deplorable demands of corrupt leaders. The Wife also breaks free from her society's expectations for female virtue, realizing that there is more to life than the superficial guidelines for female behavior. Finally, in "The Maid's Tragedy," women even begin to defiantly declare their independence to men. Evadne unapologetically tells Amintor that she has no intention of submitting to his will. The next step to obtaining complete autonomy would be for a woman to proclaim her sovereignty publicly. Based on the increasing level of female self-empowerment within each play, it is only a matter of time before that occurs.

The early glimpses of female liberation demonstrate the weakening hold that men had over women in this society. Once women realized that they were capable of running their lives,

they could no longer blindly accept the gendered rules of behavior created by a patriarchal society. Furthermore, men's ability to control women and monitor their behavior quickly became an ineffective practice. In the first play, men still believe that it is their responsibility to make women conform to their expectations for virtue. By the second and third plays, however, women become their own self-regulators when men fail to perform this authoritative role. When women like the Lady are still willing to safeguard their chaste beliefs, female virtue continues to exist. In societies where women no longer prioritize chastity, however, these values disappear because there is no one to enforce these codes of moral conduct. As men become less fixated on female chastity, it is up to women to determine the importance of their virtue, deciding what it means to them and the extent to which they are willing to protect it. Although these women are still centuries away from achieving modern rights and full control over their lives, these female characters represent the initial stages of a larger social movement.

Finally, the disappearance of the ideal chaste woman forced Renaissance society to rethink how they defined a woman's worth. A woman's sense of value was originally determined by her chastity and reputation. Whereas a man's worth or fortune was measured by his income or vocation, a woman's life was only deemed meaningful and successful if she maintained her virtue. A life of modesty was her only means of advancing her social standing or acquiring a suitable spouse. Many women, however, were no longer willing to be defined by chastity, nor were they able to accept that their lives had no merit if they did not follow these moral ideals implicitly. While women were certainly not able to attain social equality at this time, they wanted the kind of wealth and worth that men were able to acquire freely. Whereas some women like Castiza still believed that their chastity was their greatest accomplishment and source of self-worth, others like Gratiana wanted monetary prosperity and social mobility. These women

longed for more fulfilling lives where chastity was not their only reason for living. As illustrated by these revenge tragedies, a society that judges a woman's worth solely by her virtue often sets unrealistic expectations for women that cannot be met. Furthermore, as demonstrated in "The Maid's Tragedy," the connection between female self-worth and modesty was beginning to sever entirely. Female virtue was no longer accepted, acknowledged or applauded by both men and women. Instead, female beauty and enticement became a new gauge of female worth, completely inverting its former definition. If the previous attitudes about female worth were no longer applicable, they needed to be revised by society.

These plays invited a Renaissance audience to reconsider what constitutes a woman's worth. Some of the female characters live impeccably moral lives that are deserving of recognition, but their chastity is not their only asset. Many of these women are much stronger, smarter and self-confident than their society gives them credit for. Castiza's worth could just as easily be attributed to her ability stand up to others, vocalizing her objections to mistreatment and corruption, as it could be accredited to her chaste beliefs. Similarly, the Lady's worth is not simply her impeccable virtue. She is also both mentally and emotionally stronger than the hesitant men in her life, and arguably more courageous than they are. Even the sinful women of the play display some positive traits, notably the intelligence necessary to outwit the men around them. Although they use their cleverness for sinful purposes, they do prove that women are not the idle, incapable creatures that this society expects them to be. These female characters have more to offer than simply the demonstration of chaste behavior if only their society would give them the chance to prove their worth in other ways.

Modern readers can appreciate the struggles that these women experienced because there are still social expectations for female behavior, although arguably not as extreme as during the

Renaissance. Today, women experience cultural pressure regarding their virtue and sexuality, trying to negotiate between the extremes of total celibacy and scandalous promiscuity. The difference in contemporary times is that the consequences of straying from society's expectations are considerably less severe than they once were. Few modern, western civilized cultures would argue that a woman with a disgraced reputation deserves death. Today's societies have evolved to allow women to reshape their public perception and recover from moral shortcomings. The modern world has realized that women are not mindless, passive individuals whose chastity defines who they are. Although the present world is far from perfect, and women still face struggles for full gender equality, many modern women refuse to follow society's unattainable standards of perfection for women, instead living their lives as they see fit. Renaissance society was still in the process of learning these lessons, but the social commentaries in these plays suggests that individuals were starting to recognize the problem and attempting to correct outdated gender and sexual restrictions on women. The initial groundwork for change was there.

After analyzing these plays, and studying the new characteristics and ambitions that women began to embrace by the end of the decade, readers are able to conclude that the chaste Renaissance woman is a myth, not a reality. She is a figment of the romanticized Renaissance past, a time when women followed ideals for female behavior indubitably without considering that there was more to life than their virtue. Women once attempted to embody this idyllic image, sacrificing their lives for their chastity, but they merely became martyrs of a cause that was dying both literally and figuratively. The progression of the plays chronicles the disappearance of women whose goodness is too pure for a world polluted by corruption. Once society begins to lose respect for these ideals, and men are no longer capable of shielding women from temptation, it is only a matter of time before there are no models of female virtue left. By

the final play, this unrealistic image of chastity is beyond salvaging. All these plays remind readers of the importance once bestowed on female chastity, how its existence in society was the last remnant of a system of morality that was rapidly collapsing. Once it vanished completely, Renaissance society was forced to realize that attitudes about gender and sexuality were changing beyond anyone's control. The chaste Renaissance woman was no longer a dependable, constant presence for a society that was desperately nostalgic for the traditional, moral past. Her relevance in society quickly evaporated as she faded away into permanent silence.

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