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Reintroducing Renaissance Revenge Tragedies Into the Current Colloquium

Author(s): Samantha Karasik

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"My Rest is Lost; Thou Must Restore it Again': Reintroducing Renaissance Revenge Tragedies Into the Current Colloquium"

by Samantha Karasik

Renaissance revenge tragedies are some of the richest works in English literature, yet they are rarely given the credit they deserve in the present day. Modern readers mistakenly think that they cannot learn anything from these eccentric accounts of sins and retribution, but many of the themes about gender and sexuality are still contemporary social issues. For example, women today can appreciate the struggles that Renaissance women faced, regarding guidelines for their sexuality, because there are still social expectations for female behavior. The only difference is that punishments for defying gender constraints are arguably not as extreme in the twenty-first century as they were during the Renaissance. Teaching these works takes on new meaning when instructors are able to draw comparisons between the characters' daily struggles with honor and self-worth and a student's own question of identity. These dramas merit future discussion in the classroom because they chronicle the deconstruction of an unrealistic chaste Renaissance woman and introduce a new set of characteristics for defining women. A close analysis of these changing attitudes towards female chastity

and sexuality in three Renaissance dramas proves that these plays still appeal to a current audience and deserve their place in a modern curriculum.

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 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, 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. 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 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. 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, 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.

The Restraining Roles of Women in Cyril Tourneur's "The Revenger's Tragedy"

In Cyril Tourneur's "The Revenger's Tragedy," the first traces of this unhealthy obsession with female virtue become apparent. The protagonist, Vindice, 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. Castiza admirably resists men's attempts to alter her virtue, while her own mother gives in to greedy impulses.

Observing this societal trend, Vindice develops a serious mistrust of women in general because all women no longer act the way that he expects. He makes it his mission in life to protect the honor of his sister and mother after witnessing the corruption of many women around him. 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.

Women in society learn how to act by modeling their behavior after their superiors, and Lord Antonio's wife is the ideal example of unwavering female virtue. 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, Antonio's spouse is the perfect wife. 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. Even when she loses that level of distinction, after suffering a brutal rape at the hands of the Duchess' youngest son, the Lady takes drastic measures to prove that her honor means more to her than her life. 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 than to bear the public mark of shame on her honor. 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 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.

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 own sexuality, while the Duke is emasculated by her sexual promiscuity and blatant disregard for his role as her husband.

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. She firmly vows to remain a chaste woman until marriage, and it is her unwavering stance on this issue that substantiates her spotless reputation. The merit of Castiza's virtue not only depends on 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 her brother Vindice, disguised as Lussurioso's servant Piato, tries to convince the maiden to consent to a relationship with the heir apparent, she 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 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 will singlehandedly prove that female virtue is not completely absent from this society because there are still women like her who recognize the 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.

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 does whatever she has to in order to fulfill her own desires, even if that means compromising her integrity. Her greedy aspirations give credence to her son's 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 (I .i. 107). She is easily swayed by the prospect of financial gain, which motivates her to sell her daughter's virtue. Her behavior is deplorable given the fact that she transforms her daughter into a commodity, whose chastity can be bought for the right price. Jennifer Panek explains that Gratiana's behavior is 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. It is only when her sons intervene, convincing her of her sinful and unnatural behaviors that Gratiana finally recognizes the error of her ways and returns to the moral path.

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. There are still women who adhere to these traditional principles, 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. All these female characters 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.

Combating Convoluted Expectations for Female Virtue in Thomas Middleton's "The Second Maiden's Tragedy"

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, 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. 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. 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 lead a virtuous lifestyle without severely negative consequences.

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 her 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 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. 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. First, she rebuffs the Tyrant’s sexual advances, proving that she would rather be thrown in jail than consent to an act that goes against her ethics. Even the Tyrant himself is astonished by her unyielding virtue. 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. 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. In the same way that female chastity is deemed 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 Helevitus instead implores the Lady to proceed “gently to [the Tyrant’s] bed of honours” (II. i. 87). He cares more about the Tyrant’s

honors, referring to the leader's good graces, than his daughter's maidenhood. It was once expected that men would protect the virtue of their female family members at all costs. Now, fathers sell their daughter's chastity to advance their social position without feeling guilt for their actions. The Lady can only protect herself for so long when everyone in her life threatens to derail her progress.

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 reasons. First, she cannot rely upon the men in her life, notably her love Govianus, to protect her virtue. If Govianus cannot prevent his own political overthrowing, it is unlikely that he is capable of protecting the Lady from the same corruptive forces. Similarly, when the Lady concludes that she can only escape sin through death, Govianus hesitates rather than helping her execute her own death. Sensing his reluctance, the Lady has to remind him her "rest is lost; [he] must restore't again," urging him to restore her tarnished honor (IV. v. 79). She tries to tell him that it is his job as a man to defend her, but her plea goes unanswered. From his lack of action, the Lady realizes that she must guard her own chastity. Secondly, the Lady commits suicide because this action is the only way that she can resist her society's immorality. Praising the Lady for acting "heroically," Anne Lancashire explains that the chaste woman "determines that she must die to save her honour" (Lancashire 267). The Lady has to choose what is more important to her, her honor or her life, making it clear 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 disreputable woman. Without her honor, she has nothing to live for because that is the 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 constant pressure of temptation. The Lady is simply a martyr for female chastity, a woman who is so 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 these high standards. 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 be aware that they are applauding a type of life that is virtually unlivable. Middleton's decision to kill the most honorable woman in this society represents his commentary on the disappearance of the chaste Renaissance woman.

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. As Votarius explains, she is a “kind, worthy lady” who is known for being a “chaste wife” (I. ii. 22). His declaration clears up any doubt about her fidelity. The Wife has never strayed from her marriage vows to Anselmus, nor has she given him any reason to question her faithfulness. The Wife’s initial comments about her marriage further demonstrate her unyielding devotion to her husband. As she recalls watching Anselmus walk alone in the woods, she longs to be intimate with him, saying “I want his company” (I. ii. 98). Not only does she express her desperate yearning to regain her husband’s love, 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. 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. 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 always pale by comparison to the exemplar of chastity. Furthermore, Middleton 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.

After realizing that her husband's expectations for her virtue are superficial, the Wife 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 to ward off any suspicion so that she can 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. Based on her manipulative behavior, it is clear that the expectations for female chastity are being mocked and taken advantage of by shrewd women. The Wife's ability to pose as a chaste wife proves that this ideal virtuous figure is merely 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 that she uses to her advantage. When she was loyal, he was unable to accept her fidelity because he could not see 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. The obsession with female

chastity 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.

In a world where women must constantly defend their commitment to their moral beliefs, it is 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. Therefore, Middleton 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.

The Absence of the Chaste Renaissance Woman In Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's "The Maid's Tragedy"

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 an honorable life, she is shown no respect for her moral choices. There is a greater emphasis on Evadne, the scandalous woman who receives attention from men because of her sexual allure. Furthermore, even when Evadne appears to seek forgiveness for her lechery, 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. Her values clash with a culture that no longer upholds those principles. Beaumont and Fletcher's play is a commentary on the evolution of the chaste Renaissance woman who has now become an outdated figure.

Evadne's manipulative actions and sinful disposition make her 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. This brazen woman confidently explains that she will mimic fidelity in her marriage to Amintor so that she can continue her affair with the King. In her mind, it is the performance of virtue that matters, not the beliefs beneath the exterior. Furthermore, 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 ridiculous that Amintor thinks that she refuses to be intimate with him because of her chastity. It is unrealistic to maintain that outdated view in a world where such beliefs are no longer adhered to. Evadne 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). She does not refer to chastity as a woman's resolve, phrasing that would suggest self-control or self-empowerment. Instead, she calls a woman's virtue her "strictness," insinuating that chaste women are rigid shrews as opposed to a woman like herself who follows her passions freely. 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.

Evadne agrees to atone for her sinful behavior only after facing an intense interrogation by her brother Melantius, but readers are left questioning the sincerity of her declaration. First, her 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). The longevity of her “leprous” past challenges the legitimacy of her sudden change of heart. Furthermore, Evadne claims to repent for her sins, but her supposed conversion can easily be interpreted as yet another appearance that she puts on. Her brother’s use of intimidation tactics forces 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. 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. Men think that they can change women’s beliefs on the spot, but all that teaches these women is how they are “supposed” to think and act, producing trained responses to simulate virtue.

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). 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 and incriminates herself 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. 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.

Evadne's suicide, an act of desperation after realizing that redemption is unattainable, emphasizes the self-destructive nature that destroys the possibility of a moral universe. Evadne initially 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. 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. 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, she is now rendered helpless and hopeless because she can never recover from her tainted image. 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. Once a woman in this society loses her chastity, it can never be reclaimed, and her sins will never be forgotten or forgiven.

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, respectable 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. 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.

Aspatia's morose demeanor presents an unflattering portrait of chaste women. She repeatedly discourages other women from practicing her virtues because they create 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 her servants that women who believe that virtue is important are the ones who become victims of abandonment because their loves desert them for more sexually intriguing women. Moreover, she 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. Aspatia’s wretched state of desolation and her self-indulgent cries convince readers that virtue is a useless endeavor. 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 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 causes readers to 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.

Aspatia is forced to impersonate her own protective male family member when no man is willing to help avenge her fallen honor, but her performance comes off as more desperate than heroic. Her 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. 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. Aspatia's charade is more pathetic than anything else. She 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. Once chaste women are dishonored, with no one else in the world who values their virtue as much as they do, it becomes an insurmountable challenge to regain respect from others and restore a disgraced reputation.

In the end, the only woman in this society who vaguely resembles the chaste Renaissance woman dies, fading into the background with an ignored whisper. Believing that virtue and happiness are two incompatible feats, Aspatia decides to end her life. As she 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 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). When he speaks of his error in judgment, it is as if he represents his entire society, a corrupt world that could not 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 clear that there is no woman who tries to remain chaste 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. Aspatia embodies the qualities of a chaste woman only so that she can receive praise for it. Neither woman serves as a suitable model of female chastity, and they both die without achieving 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. Aware of the trickle-down effect that this corrupt court has had on its citizens, the new king 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 to prevail, the traditional chaste

woman will never be able to lead a successful life. Now, this society must reevaluate the expectations for female virtue and reconsider what qualities will earn a woman respect.

Reassessing the Wants and Needs Of Renaissance Women

After analyzing these three revenge tragedies, it becomes clear that 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 opinions. Instead, they accepted being told how to think, feel and behave by the controlling men in their lives. 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, 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 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 she begins an affair to inflict shame upon her husband, she quickly derives satisfaction from maintaining control over her sexuality. Similarly, the Wife breaks out of the confines of sexual containment, engaging in a relationship that is characterized by pleasure 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 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 her. Now it is the woman, not the man, who determines if and when the couple is sexually intimate.

The men 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

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. Once women begin to realize that they are in charge of their own bodies, they can never regress back 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 and futures 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 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 lives when the men around them prove to be ineffective authority figures. The Lady is self-reliant, meaning that she has to stand up for her principles in a society that encourages her to comply 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 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 own lives, they could no longer blindly accept the gendered rules of behavior created by a patriarchal society. Furthermore, men's ability to monitor female behavior 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. As men become less fixated on female chastity, it is up to women to determine the importance of their virtue. 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. Whereas a man's worth or fortune was measured by his income or vocation, a woman's life was once only deemed successful if she maintained her virtue. Many women, however, were no longer willing to be defined by chastity. While women were 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 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 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 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.

After analyzing these plays, and studying the new characteristics and ambitions that women began to embrace by the end of the decade, readers can 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 implicitly without considering that there was more to life than their virtue. 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, 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 presence for a society that was nostalgic for the traditional, moral past. Her relevance in society quickly evaporated as she faded away into permanent silence.

Common Concerns, Freedoms and Desires:

The Importance of Renaissance Literature in a Modern Classroom

These three revenge tragedies not only provide fascinating insight into life and society during the Renaissance, but they also evoke issues that pertain to a modern audience. Women still experience cultural pressures regarding their virtue and sexuality, trying to negotiate between the extremes of total celibacy and scandalous promiscuity. In contemporary times, however, few modern, 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 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, 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.

It is critical that these plays continue to be included in the modern teaching curriculum because they explore a variety of topical subject matter that is relevant in the college classroom. First and foremost, these plays preserve a record of Renaissance social attitudes and behaviors. Although the study of Renaissance literature is enhanced by the healthy discussion devoted to Shakespearean studies, one playwright is not enough to represent a generation widely accredited for its literary contributions. Reading these works provides a modern audience with a greater understanding of how important the issue of female chastity was during this time period. The fact that three playwrights devoted entire works to the subject, chronicling the evolution of expectations for female sexuality, proves that this topic deserves considerable attention.

These plays not only deserve a place in literature studies, because of their rich social commentaries and engaging characters, but they also correspond to several other modern scholastic disciplines. Evaluating the changing perspectives of female virtue is

arguably as much of a sociological study as it is a literary analysis. These plays capture the progression of an entire society's perspective on social interactions and relationships, revealing important insight into how and why gender and sexual guidelines for female behavior began to change. Furthermore, it is necessary to examine the psychological effects that these rigid restrictions have on each female character. Many of these women become self-retrospective, considering what it is that they want in contrast to what their society demands of them. Finally, these plays comment on the contentious political situation at the time. The works focus on how corrupt political leaders cause their subjects to rebel against social mandates that are no longer practiced by high ranking officials. It is useless for a woman like the Lady to maintain her virtue in a society run by a Tyrant who is driven by lust. These three plays evoke debate in many different fields of study, illustrating that these works are not confined to the time in which they were written.

Incorporating these revenge tragedies into modern academia is key to students understanding how rapidly social attitudes about gender and sexuality change over a short period of time. In the example of the Renaissance, the principles about virtue quickly grow obsolete as they become difficult to enforce and impossible to follow. Society changes at such a rapid pace that it is important to record the progression of these standards and ethics in order to recognize the effect that this evolution has had on the modern era. Modern students would greatly benefit from such discussions lest the

literary, social and political contributions of the Renaissance fade into oblivion. As this analysis of the social commentaries on Renaissance female chastity illustrates, these works present characters who want the basic social liberties that all modern individuals would expect for themselves. These women simply want to be free to express themselves and their sexualities without any outside influences. Any college student today, experiencing that same kind of freedom for the first time, could relate to these desires.

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