Anti-Woman Invective on the Early Modern Stage: Abuse, Degradation, and Resistance

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On the early modern stage, gendered epithets like “strumpet,” “mermaid,” “minx,” “hobby horse,” “courtesan,” “drab,” and “whore” are not just markers of misogyny. Instead, these insults harm the male user as well as their female target. My cross-playwright and cross-genre connections show the complex, wide use and impact of anti-woman terms. A wide-ranging study of the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries reveals that gendered insults signify masculine mental decline in tragedies as well as comedies and tragicomedies. In tragedy, the increasingly violent language of male slur users – like, for example, the frustrated Othello, who declares, of his wife, “I will chop her into messes. Cuckold me?” (4.1.202) – expresses a psychological deterioration that is exacerbated by the use of anti-female epithets and is supported by a toxic system of male supporters. Violent words lead to violent actions. The word “whore” is an especially potent trigger for a male character. Once he says “whore,” he thinks “whore,” and aims to destroy the woman whom he regards as the source of his sexual and social humiliation. Comedies and tragicomedies, however, offer a chance for masculine redemption, and present female characters who can withstand and refute insults. Tragicomedies go so far as to present a benevolent and feminine Providence to which the wise character, abandoning his controlling ways, submits himself.
ANTI-FEMALE LANGUAGE ON THE EARLY MODERN STAGE:
ABUSE, DEGRADATION, AND RESISTANCE

by

Savannah Xaver

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Savannah Xaver
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Introduction

On the early modern English stage, male characters use sexual slurs in attempts to gain or maintain control over female characters and, ultimately, over their own general fortunes. The use of words like “whore,” “strumpet,” “minx,” “punk,” and other epithets are common throughout Renaissance drama, appearing in comedy as well as tragedy. These slurs – whether employed by a husband, lover, father, brother, son, or some strange combination – signal a male character’s serious obsession with a woman’s ability to act independently as a sexual being. That is, the male characters applying such invective to females exhibit an impulse to control women, or a particular woman; and anger over what they construe as her present or potential future sexual errancy. The obsession that is begun with the man’s use of sexual slurs leads to his real or imaginary social humiliation, murderous behavior, or death—sometimes all three.

The negative power of words like “strumpet,” and the fate of the male using them, depends largely on the genre of the play in which these words are uttered. In comedies, the terms are commonly applied to prostitutes, who refuse to be insulted by them. In such plays, when suspicions of unchastity are expressed about wives or women in general – e.g., the man using such slurs becomes rude, gives speeches on the falseness of women, and attempts publicly to degrade a specific woman – still, the jealous male’s liberty to lash out is constricted by other comic characters (frequently women) who ridicule him. He does not commit serious violence, even though he might talk about doing so. Comedies offer a chance for this foolish man to be redeemed and recover from his dark mentality, either though women ignoring his attempts to insult them or through those women and their male supporters curtailing his attempt to gain
power over them through their own reasoned persuasion or counter-invective, which disempower and overcome his angry rhetoric. Once the man guilty of anti-woman invective is humiliated or even punished in a comedy, his language grows healthier. Either he stops speaking or he begins to address his female counterpart in the more equal terms that characterize his conversation with men. Thus in comedy, controlling obsessions issue finally in a man’s healthful humiliation and redeemed marriage. Tragedy offers no such hope. While the tragic protagonist’s suffering may lead him to some degree of anagnorisis, a recognition of his error, that recognition comes at the cost of his wife’s life, and sometimes his own.

The Shakespearean tragicomic romance presents an interesting “detour,” in which a male character on a tragic track is diverted, by time or other benevolent influences, onto another road, and finally blessed with a comic outcome. A tragicomic character’s use of sexual slurs toward women begins his tragic downturn. He starts to darken mentally, as is manifested in his demonstration of violent or hateful speech and behavior toward a woman or women in general. As his language turns uglier, his actions are directed toward destroying or caging the female in a fruitless attempt to assert control. Yet, fortunately for him, some larger force – comic accident, which saves his female victim, and the passage of time, which enforces patience – offers him healing through repentance, humility, and finally trust, meaning a more expansive and respectful regard for Providence, and for the woman he previously slandered and objectified.

No matter the genre, the men who use sexual slurs do so in an attempt to dominate women through defining them, to keep them “properly” subordinate, if only by reducing them to a worthless sexual “type.” In both comedies and tragedies, female sexuality is thus a recurring focus. Men comment on it, tease women about it, and express a fixation on it. Male and female characters alike remark on sex, but only male characters use sexual slurs against women in a
pattern of defensiveness and attempted control. Although, as I will show, female characters sometimes also use “whore” in insult and aggression, they do not do so in order to control other women. Instead, female characters use sexual slurs to deny them or, in accepting them, to denigrate themselves; or to vie with other females for men’s respect, turning the males’ lexicon of insults against other women competitively for that purpose. Occasionally, female characters “own” the term “whore,” applying it humorously and shamelessly to themselves. Thus their use of sexual slurs is notably different from those slurs as weaponized by men.

In the following chapters, I examine scenes, characters, and word choices in a wide variety of plays to show that sexual slurs on the Renaissance stage are used to mark the obsessed male character and to demonstrate the dehumanizing effects of his destructive language. The major character and plot elements playwrights use to dramatize the tragic or comic progress (or, better said, decline) of the male slur-user and the female accused demonstrate a pattern of language-based male paranoia. The degree of power exercised by a male character’s demeaning, misogynistic sexualized language depends, as I suggest above, on the genre of the play, but it depends as well on the relationship between the man and the woman – whether they are lovers, spouses, siblings, or mother and son. The effects of slur-wielding depend also on the woman’s status as innocent victim or partial betrayer, the influence of other characters’ perspectives on the primary staged relationship, the woman’s identity as pagan or Christian, the financial or social status of the male, and whether or not the female character has produced offspring. This long list captures the complex, impressive potential of anti-woman sexual slurs on the early modern stage.

Insults in Renaissance drama have long been popular topics of discussion within early modern scholarship. This is especially so for anti-woman words. Research on the word “whore”
is common. Analyses of its use include that of Kay Stanton, who recognizes the oppressive nature of the word “whore,” but also argues that Shakespeare’s works still promote sexual empowerment, despite some characters’ misogynistic rhetoric.1 “Whore” also shows up in several scholars’ works on misogyny on stage, in books and articles arguing that misogynistic language has destructive power both over those it is used against and those who use it. Such language analyses offer both historical contextualization of sexual slurs in various cultural venues, as well as investigations of the literal and metaphorical uses of anti-female language by men on the early modern stage. Still, while there are lengthy studies of abusive language in Shakespeare and multiple works on misogynistic terms on the stage in general, few prior studies deliberately bring together the “whore” of Shakespeare’s plays and the “whore” of his contemporaries to analyze the effect of this language on the men who use it across the dramatic canon. My comprehensive sampling of the use of anti-female invective from multiple authors – such as Marlowe, Jonson, Webster, Middleton, Dekker, Beaumont and Fletcher, Cary, Ford, and Marston – seeks to make such a cross-playwright connection, not only to show the complex uses of the “strumpet” lexicon, but to discuss these terms’ wider employment.

The following exploration of this lexicon includes some discussion of the status of actual sex-workers in early modern England. Prostitution during the Renaissance has sparked both a discussion of the historical context of theaters and “bawd houses” as well as arguments about the symbolism of prostitute characters on stage. Historical scholarship often includes early modern views on prostitution, and researchers’ analysis of the relationship between the stage and the brothel typically begins with a statement that both institutions were viewed as corrupt places where deception was rife. Catharine Arnold and E. J. Burford have each provided careful and

extensive studies of the London brothel scene, tracing the laws, proclamations, and fluctuating social norms that affected brothels as Shakespeare and his contemporaries would have known them. Prostitute characters on the stage, despite the negative views taken of sex-workers during the period, have allowed theater scholars to build on historical research to discuss prostitutes’ stage representations and metaphorical meanings. Duncan Salkeld, for instance, considers the many dramatic portrayals of prostitute characters in the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, comparing prostitutes as they appear in historical records to Shakespeare’s prostitute characters. My approach is similar to Salkeld’s in that it draws on historical findings about the slurs prostitute women received, and the link between those insults and those meted out to players. During the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, brothels were located near theaters, which resulted in prostitutes being a feature of audience experience both on and off the stage. Playgoers as well as playwrights were aware of prostitution practices; playhouses were a known venue in which prostitutes could look for clients and vice versa. This mixture of prostitution and theater, as well as the fact that prostitutes were frequently comically portrayed on the stage, led many moralists to associate both theater and prostitution with disease, deception, and corruption, as I note above. In my first chapter, I explore this connection, and also examine the ways in which playwrights aligned themselves with staged version of prostitutes in order to fight back, featuring in their plays prostitutes who retaliate against men through their own ingenuity and wordplay. I investigate the power that “whores” thus gained on stage. Although real prostitutes’ lives were treacherous, the comic prostitute character was witty, strong, independent, and, most importantly, able to stand up to masculine verbal abuse. Women like Shakespeare's Doll Tearsheet or Jonson's Dol Common defend themselves and their livelihoods. Tragic prostitutes,
too, can wield this power. *Othello’s* Bianca and Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*’s Bellamira turn insults back on the men. and occasionally women, who use slurs against them.

My second chapter explores the representation of women slandered as “whores” by jealous men in tragedy. Works of scholarship on courtship, marriage, and love on the Renaissance stage frequently concern the topics of cuckoldry, male jealousy, and female chastity as socially constructed during the early modern period. Scholars such as David Bevington and Mark Breitenberg claim that much male anxiety in this period stemmed directly from irrational jealousy and that in early modern theater, an obsession with female sexuality was nearly inseparable from the presentation of romantic love. On the Renaissance stage, they argue, obsession led to enactments of physical aggression. Feminist critics have also focused on early modern plays and the staging of masculine violence against women, noting the frequent misogyny in language and action. The value placed on virginity by male characters is a related recurring topic. These scholars note that the demeaning language men use toward women on stage is influenced by patriarchal desire to acquire or maintain power. Agreeing, I argue in my second chapter that in early modern tragedy, sexual slurs specifically accompany the degradation of masculine identity and precipitate femicide, demonstrating that the use of slurs destroys men as well as women. In this chapter I investigate the misogynistic slurs that occur in the drama of tragic marriages within Shakespeare’s *Othello*, John Ford’s ‘*Tis Pity She’s a Whore*, and Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam, the Fair Queen of Jewry*. Verbal attacks within these domestic tragedies come from the husband who believes himself wronged by the wife: who feels his wife’s actions have made him a cuckold. The fear of cuckoldry is a crucial precondition for the frequent use of sexual slurs, charged with a painful meaning that maddens the “injured” man and stokes his violence, eventually leading him to destroy the woman he thinks has betrayed
him. Such male characters display an obsession with notions of female falseness as well as anger at a woman’s potential for sexual independence. A man is driven to hurl sexual slurs as a way both to control the woman and to regain power and dignity after being cuckolded in reality or in fantasy. Goaded by other male characters in his rage, the jealous male is eventually provoked to physical violence. This chapter examines the connection between jealousy, misogynistic slurs, homosocial support,2 and murder, arguing that “whore” is the beginning of this pattern of destruction: once a man says “whore,” he thinks “whore.”

Murderous women who appeared in early modern pamphlets, broadsides, and “true crime” plays which dramatized real murders, were given the same “whore” epithets as prostitutes and real or supposedly sexually errant wives. Scholars such as Susan Straub, Juli Parker, and Frances Dolan have investigated the representations of the typical “adulteress and murderess” found in early modern media, arguing that sexual appetite was presented as having fueled the murder of a husband, and thus “whore” was the obvious label for these women. “Whore” thus becomes an all-encompassing insult, and early modern audiences can find condemnations of murderous women, even those who did not engage in an adulterous relationship, as lascivious women. For example, in the introduction to her recent edition of the anonymous 1599 play A Warning for Fair Women, Ann C. Christensen shows that pamphlets and broadsides written by men were used to warn women against having a wandering eye, for she who murders is not only a criminal, but a sexually corrupt social outcast.3 While there is plenty of scholarship, and a growing interest, in the murderous women of early modern society, there has been insufficient discussion of how this stereotype of a female criminal influenced the stage character. This

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connection is vital to my third chapter, in which I show how “whore” and similar epithets can be applied by male characters or authors to any feminine misstep. My investigation begins with a sample of early modern murder pamphlets wherein the murderess also becomes an adulteress as the (male) author uses her as a warning to other women. When the murderess moves to the stage, within Middleton’s *The Changeling*, the anonymous *The Tragedy of Master Arden of Faversham*, and Webster’s *The White Devil*, she meets slurs as well as a bloody end. I argue that each of these murderesses adheres to the stereotype to a different degree. These three works demonstrate the ways early modern playwrights in general varied in presenting their adulteresses/murderesses. Some, like Shakespeare, locate the “adulteress/murderess” link wholly in the diseased imagination of the jealous husband, as when *The Winter’s Tale*’s jealous King Leontes quickly jumps from suspicions of his wife’s chastity into accusations that she and her putative lover were plotting his murder. Other playwrights reproduce the common early modern stereotypes of female criminals expressed in popular pamphlets, suggesting all women are potential whores, whores, or penitent whores; or they challenge the all-encompassing nature of such sexual slurs; or they offer an ambivalent combination of both approaches. In all cases, they disclose the familiar application of “whore” to women suspected of various missteps, or, conversely, general criminality to women suspected of whoredom, as a way of sexualizing all female transgressions.

My fourth chapter investigates the anti-female language of the violently jealous male character in Renaissance drama by considering slurs applied to mothers, sisters, daughters, and male bastards. On stage, fathers and brothers use such insults as they seek to control the sexuality of their sisters, daughters, and mothers in order to protect and maintain their familial honor, thus linking female chastity to their own personal worth and exhibiting the same behavior as jealous
husbands. This concern for family honor is seen also in the early modern stage representation of bastards, offspring produced outside the legitimate family line. My discussion of bastards and of the word “bastard” builds on contemporary scholarship on bastardy on the early modern stage, which includes not only historical discussions of illegitimate offspring, but also a fair amount of analysis of the meaning of “legitimacy.” (Michael Neill, for instance, discusses bastard characters’ ostracization from the father’s family, the consequent interruption of their patriarchal lineage, and the metaphorical uses of the word “bastard,” which is commonly likened to counterfeit currency.) While some scholars note the existence of sympathetic bastards, like Shakespeare’s Philip the Bastard, son of Richard Lionheart, most note that bastards on the early modern stage tend to be a disruptive force, and that their bitterness is often contagious. Allison Findlay’s comprehensive discussion of Renaissance stage bastards ties the bastard’s characteristic malevolence to the experienced social and economic consequences of his illegitimacy, and her work offers readers an understanding of generalized male anxiety on this score. Birth in general is a troubling topic on the Renaissance stage, because of the paternal uncertainty with which it is always associated. Maternity is known, paternity could not be. A child called “legitimate” might actually be the product of adultery – a hidden bastard. Patriarchal concern about such a bastard’s ability illicitly to acquire inheritance must always be grounded in doubts about the fidelity of the mother, as the word “whoreson,” a common synonym for “bastard,” suggests. Thus fear of bastardy is aligned with men’s fears of women’s lustiness. Male bastards themselves, however, relish their lascivious roots, often claiming to be superior to their legitimate brothers. Men like Edmund from Shakespeare’s King Lear and Spurio from Middleton’s The Revenger’s Tragedy do not curse their mothers for engaging in illicit sexual behavior, but instead curse legitimate men who dare to think illegitimate sons are less worthy
than they. Other bastards, like Shakespeare’s Caliban, can even become their mother’s champions, taking pride in her actions. The bastards, or “whoresons,” constitute a unique category of men who have their identity determined by female sexuality, yet celebrate that facet of themselves, ignoring homosocial pressures to the contrary. Thus, discussing the use of the stage bastard as an indirect expression of misogynistic fear, my fourth chapter will also explore how the bastard defects from the masculine misogynistic alliance to become an erring mother’s champion, a man who stands up for the sexual deviance that resulted in his own existence. The bastard is the “whore’s” advocate.

My fifth chapter extends the complex meaning of “whore” when applied to the exotic woman in Renaissance drama. Plays set in pre-Christian societies like that of Ancient Rome, or exotic domains like Dido’s Carthage or Cleopatra’s Egypt, offer some liberation to the sexually independent woman, who is at least partly justified by her likeness to or involvement with pagan goddesses of fertility or love, as well as by the more permissive rules of her pre-Christian society. (In her work on the meretrix, or Ancient Roman prostitute, Anise Strong demonstrates that Roman women could legally be either wife or whore, either a domestic woman or a loose woman.) Cleopatra, the sexually profligate Egyptian queen, appears as something of a sexual goddess because of her likeness to Isis, fertile goddess of the Nile. Thus I examine Cleopatra and other exotic, pseudo-divine, mythical “whores” in this section. Unlike the heroines described in my second and third chapters, the exotic woman is not expected to stay sexually pure to uphold her own and her family’s honor. Her freedom from paternal authority figures, as well as her pagan environment, allows her freedom of sexual expression. Still, these women take lovers who express recognizably Elizabethan views about women, after which, demonstrations of masculine

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frustration and, consequently, sexual slurs are heard on stage. The women’s once appealing voluptuousness becomes a stain, as displeased male characters begin to judge them, sometimes anachronistically, by the (usually Biblical) standards by which they would judge an early modern wife. Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* is characterized by this phenomenon, but so too are Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Titus Andronicus*, Christopher Marlowe’s *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, and other plays which register the recurrent early modern bewhoring of Helen of Troy. Still, ultimately, like the comic prostitutes I discuss in my first chapter, some exotic women escape the violence that, in other tragedies, follows from the “whore” insult. Their strength and luck flow from their exotic location, but also from their mythic, quasi-divine sexuality.

My final chapter focuses on the masculine verbal abuse in stage dialogue of abstract forces that are gendered female, like Fortune. Male characters who curse Fortune, the wind, or money as “whore” and “strumpet” are projecting their misogynistic hatred onto an entire universe that has dared to wrong them. As when used against real, physical female characters on the stage, these epithets grant angry male characters a temporary sense of power, or valiant manhood, as they engage in a verbal battle to subdue a force imagined as female. It is not their fault, it was that whore, Fortune! Dangerously, tragic men who yell “whore” at the wind often interpret Fortune as a mirror of their allegedly promiscuous wives. Because they cannot ultimately destroy bad Fortune, they punish the physical women whom they suspect of engaging in Fortune’s typically deceitful behavior. In tragedies, such two-tiered misogyny has a predictably disastrous result. However, in tragicomedies, time offers the jealous or angry man a chance to repent, to redefine Fortune as a Lady and even a benevolent goddess, and, accordingly, to see human female characters in a more generous light. Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*, *Pericles*, and
The Tempest are all works that argue the good that can come from a humble and patient attitude toward Fortune. Of all early modern plays, these late-Shakespearean romances best dramatize the humane and creative liberation of the masculine imagination from the damaging fear of the “whore.”
1. Early Modern Prostitutes and Their Theatrical Representation

Words and phrases like “whore,” “punk,” “creature of sale,” “hobby-horse,” “money creature,” “harlot,” “laced mutton,” “courtesan,” “strumpet,” “commodity,” “drab,” “minx,” and “bawd,” all synonymous with the modern word “prostitute,” are common on the early modern stage, suggesting that prostitute women had a lively presence in early modern life – and were well known to the writers who represented them in their plays. Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights depicted “punks” as colorful figures. Crafty courtesans, savvy mistresses, and witty whores intermingle robustly with drunken tavern dwellers, chaste maidens, and heroic soldiers on the stage. Carefree, amusing, and cunning prostitute characters – played, of course, by artfully disguised young men – provided audiences not only with salacious humor, but with the sense that they as playgoers were being granted a privileged peek into the London underworld. However, the dolls and mistresses of early modern comedy presented a much prettier picture of a prostitute’s life than reality offered. Female prostitute characters celebrated not only feminine wit and strength, but more economic and social power than most real sex workers enjoyed.

Playwrights, themselves dependent, to a certain extent, on patrons, were positioned to be somewhat sympathetic to prostitutes’ dependence on their “patrons”: bawds, pimps, and even sugar daddies. Playwrights often elided the true social, physical, and financial struggles of the female prostitutes in their comedies, even as they paid tribute to feminine intellect by showcasing “whores” as powerful figures who could stand up to the verbal abuse of male characters.
What was life like for the actual early modern London prostitute? In the first half of the sixteenth century, the proclamations and laws of Henry VIII shaped prostitution into the urban practice with which Shakespeare and other early modern playwrights would later become familiar. In their discussions of the early modern sex trade, Catharine Arnold, E. J. Burford, and Wallace Shugg each note the significant changes brought about by Henry’s 1546 order to close brothels in London, due, possibly, to his anger at having personally contracted syphilis. Arnold explains that Henry’s “proclamation stated that any brothel keeper who ran one of the distinctive whitewashed houses must cease trading immediately.” Burford refers to this proclamation as Henry VIII’s “bombshell,” and notes that by its order, all licensed and marked brothel houses were to be cleared of all “bag and baggage.” The proclamation displaced hundreds of female prostitutes. Brothels in Southwark, Shoreditch, and Bankside were ordered to close, leaving prostitute women with few options apart from beggary. Wallace Shugg contends that still, many prostitute women then flocked to alehouses and taverns, serving drink as a cover for their actual trade. Thus, despite the king’s order, prostitution continued to grow. Shugg notes the irony in the fact that Henry’s order actually allowed prostitution to spread more widely: “the abolishment of the licensed brothels in Cock Land (Smithfield) and Southwark scattered many of the resident prostitutes around London, making supervision of them more difficult.”

With the spread of prostitution came the spread of syphilis during the later sixteenth century. In England, the first recorded case of syphilis – xenophobically called the “French pox”

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7 Burford, 125.
9 Ibid., 294.
– dates from the end of the fifteenth century.¹⁰ The first symptom of the sexually-communicated disease was a spot on the skin, which grew to an ulcer, which then spread to cause agonizing pain in the arms, legs, and skull. In some cases, the nasal bones would be eaten away, sometimes exposing the brain.¹¹ Sexually transmitted diseases, of which syphilis was the worst, were a grave risk to a prostitute, as her profession made them nearly unpreventable. As suggested by the frequent raucous insults delivered against prostitute characters on the early modern stage, prostitutes rapidly became the single scapegoats for the rapid spread of syphilis throughout the sixteenth century, even though men were spreading it in the brothels that persisted in existing even after Henry’s edict.¹²

Prostitution and the syphilis threat continued to grow during the reigns of the next two monarchs, Edward VI and Mary, who were less concerned than Henry with restraining the brothels. As Gamini Salgado notes, under Edward VI, “the brothels were opened again, complete with whitewash and signs, and they continued more or less unmolested during the reign of Mary Tudor.”¹³ Burford records that Edward VI’s first Parliament “dutifully confirmed his father’s laws,” but did not energetically enforce them, while the second Parliament had a “more merciful approach toward sexual sins and sinners.”¹⁴ (However, in 1552, Edward donated the Bridewell, or the “Palace of Bridewell,” one of London’s grand houses used by Henry VIII to house Emperor Charles V, to the city as a workhouse, “in an attempt to abolish London’s vagrancy

¹⁰ Arnold, 48-49.
¹¹ Arnold, 50-51.
¹² Ibid., 52-53. Jokes about the pox almost inevitably accompanied the representation of stage prostitutes in sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century comedy, as in the second scene of Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure, where the rake Lucio blames the bawd Mistress Overdone for his ill health, claiming, “I have purchased as many diseases under her roof as come to … three thousand dolors [pains] a year” (ll. 44-48).
¹⁴ Burford, 130.
problems,” and the place became a prison which severely punished vagrants and prostitutes. Mary made up for what Arnold calls her “fanatical religious persecution” with lenience toward sexual sins (prostitution and homosexuality), and so even before Elizabeth I took the throne, according to Burford, unlicensed brothels were “creeping back into business, awaiting the assuredly better days to come” – better, at least, for the bawds and pimps that collected the money earned from the prostitute trade. 

Under Elizabeth, London further softened the laws against the prostitute population. But, more importantly, a revolution in public entertainment brought a greatly expanded clientele to the brothels. Public playhouses began to be built. The decades between 1567 and 1599 saw the arrival of over a dozen converted or new playing spaces, mostly in Southwark or Shoreditch, from Newington Butts, which opened in 1567, to Shakespeare’s Globe, which opened near the Bankside in 1599. E. J. Burford notes that toward the end of the sixteenth century, thousands of visitors a day were flocking to the Bankside neighborhood of Southwark and the northern liberty of Shoreditch for entertainment. In her exploration of the Southwarks of then and now, Sondra Hausner describes this region south of Thames as a “cultural institution” because of its accommodation of scandalous entertainment of all kinds, including the theaters, brothels, and bear baiting arenas. In the near vicinity of the Rose and (after 1599) Globe playhouses, brothels were attracting a large subgroup of the customers who frequented plays and other offerings.

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15 Arnold, 78. 
16 Burford, 131. 
17 Arnold, 58. 
18 Burford, 130. 
20 Burford, 141-142. 
Although, as Andrew Gurr notes, the playhouses were shut down sporadically during the last few decades of the sixteenth century because of the spreading plague, with orders that playhouses should not reopen until cases of plague victims decreased, “[t]he limits were not always very exactly enforced.” Therefore, neither the spread of syphilis nor the occasional orders to dismantle licensed brothels destroyed the industry of prostitution. Instead, prostitution thrived in the “seedy” areas of town that also housed the theaters.

Thus in the latter sixteenth century, bawds and pimps were also able to thrive, perhaps aided by the fact that, as Arnold notes, by Elizabeth’s reign syphilis was no longer spreading as rapidly as it had during the prior few decades. Brothels were still a “legal offense” despite their dispersal along the Thames River, and prostitutes faced moral judgments that came with the line of work during Elizabeth I’s reign, but the monetary cost of an offense of prostitution was relatively inexpensive (forty shillings, Salgado records). According to Salgado, the city officials were “double-faced” about prostitution in Southwark, and bribery was a way to ensure that authorities “turned a blind eye” to the brothels. Southwark was still consistently raided to round up criminals and whores alike, but bawds and pimps continued to run their businesses, despite the laws against “whoring” and the threat of Bridewell, whippings, or other forms of public shaming. Thus, various social conditions contributed to the pervasive presence of prostitutes both on and off the stage. The rich variety of contemporary terms meaning “whore” testifies to that presence.

Despite the obvious fact that prostitutes needed men to whom to sell their services, epithets and slurs – like the charge of pox – tended to be aimed at female prostitutes, not their

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22 Gurr, 78.
23 Arnold, 50.
24 Salgado, 41.
25 Ibid., 39, 41-42.
male customers. The working prostitute was subject to countless written and verbal attacks. Sixteenth-century moral pamphlets and homilies are full of comments on the horrors of “whoredom,” equated with any sin of fornication or adultery. Early modern moralists and preachers covered in detail the growing issue of such feminine lascivious behaviors in London, especially in the neighborhoods that housed brothels, like Southwark. Sermons and pamphlets warned men about harlots and whores, and some expressed concern about the loosening of prostitution laws, which allowed more women to tempt men to this vice. In an anonymous pamphlet titled “An Homelie of Whoredome and Unclenessse,” published circa 1547, the author addresses the wretched evil of whoredom, saying that this sin “is growen into suche an height that in a maner emong many it is compted no sin at al, but rather a pastyme, a dalliaunce, and a touche of youthe, not rebuked, but winked at, not punished, but laughed at.” At stake is the soul of the man – the “youthe” – not that of his female tempter, which, implicitly, is beyond redemption. The puritanical moralist Philip Stubbes also complains about ubiquitous whoring in England, writing in 1583 that the “horrible vice of Whoredome is there too much frequented” and those who participate are “prouoking of [God’s] judgements against them, the staine and blemish of their profession, the euill example of al the world, & finally, to their owne damnation for euer, except they repent.” Here “profession” seems to mean not the paid sex-work of the fallen women, but the male activity of whoremongering. Stubbes even goes as far as to say that the “the devuils themselues neuer sinned so horribly” as those who engage in whoredom, but, presumably, unlike the devils, whoremongers can repent. Both Stubbes and the

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26 See Burford, 140-146, for a complete list of brothels in London during the sixteenth and seventeenth century.
27 Alternatively titled “Against Whoredom, and Adultery.”
anonymous pamphleteer target male sinners in an effort to save their souls. The women who turn
to prostitution and thereby become whores are, by implication, not worth saving or impossible to
save. Henry Bullinger, in The Christian State of Matrimony, published in 1541, also describes
the dangers to the married man posed by “shameless harlots [going] forth in their own perdition,
vice, and abomination, yea [who] undertake to blaspheme wedlock and somewhat to excuse their
own mischief.” Prostitute women are the vice that Stubbes, Bullinger, and the anonymous
author warn against, implying, unrealistically, that these women have voluntarily abandoned
prospects of chaste marriage and chosen instead to live in whoredom. On the Jacobean stage,
Shakespeare in two plays would register the mainstream social world's ironic resistance to
prostitutes' attempts to leave "whoring" and achieve respectability through marriage. In Othello,
Cassio laughs off Iago's (possibly false) report that Cassio's lover Bianca "gives it out that
[Cassio] shall marry her," with the incredulous comment, "I marry her! What? a customer [trader
in love]!" (4.1.115-19). And in Measure for Measure, Lucio complains about being forced to
wed Kate Keepdown, a prostitute he's impregnated: "I beseech your Highness do not marry me
to a whore" (5.1.514-15).

Sex with prostitutes intersects with multiple carnal vices, according to Stubbes, who lists
"Whoredome" along with "Aldulterie, Incest, or Fornication" (3571-3572). For Stubbes, the
punishment acceptable for any of these sins would be for the sinner to be “cauterized, and seared
with a hotte Iron vpon the ckeeke, forehead, or some other parte of their bodie that might be
seene, to the end that the Adulterous children of Sathan, might be discerned from the honest and
chast Christians” (3579-3584). Marking the sinners as children of Satan would appear to be
Stubbes’ solution to make both prostitutes and those who engage with them easily avoidable. It is

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clear, though, that the sex worker is the main “unclene” one that these writers want men to avoid, as the anonymous author of the pamphlet exclaims: “How unseemly a thyng it is then, to cease to bee incorporated and one with Christe, and through whoredome, to be joyned and made all one with an whore!”

Men were warned clearly about the suffering that a whore could bring them. Bullinger speaks of the filth that surrounds a prostitute and proclaims, “Let no reasonable man therefore be snared still in whoredom by such harlots.”

That the sermonists and the pamphleteers warned so specifically about “whores” and “harlots,” and that their warnings were directed toward men, shows, again, the perceived worthlessness of a prostitute woman’s soul. Thus, Anne Haselkorn is correct when she states that prostitutes were “society’s scapegoats” and the attacks on them as the morally unsalvageable were “justified by rhetoric.”

It is thus ironic that, amid the timeless and conventional scapegoating of sex workers by moralists, examples of savvy, witty, and flourishing prostitutes abounded on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage. However, the abundance of witty stage whores was a logical result of the fact that early modern playwrights and players, as workers sharing a venue with prostitutes, were familiar with the ways in which prostitutes lived, worked, and spoke to each other. They were aware of them as human beings. Shakespeare, for instance, lived near brothels in the Bankside area, and Catharine Arnold contends that he could not have helped but overhear “many phrases and scenarios which provided a rich source of materials for his plays.”

While Arnold’s claim is speculative, it is overwhelmingly likely, and justified by the lively prostitute characters – *Henry IV*’s Doll Tearsheet, *The Comedy of Errors*’ Courtezan, *Othello*’s Bianca – that appear in

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31 Bond, 178.
32 Bullinger, 105.
34 Arnold, 75.
Shakespeare’s plays. In addition to owing thanks to “working women” for inspiring dozens of creative synonyms, playwrights of the period reasonably tended toward sympathy for the prostitutes’ precarious situation, beset as they were by the scorn of prelates, the danger of disease, and the economic and social hardship of bearing unlicensed children. After all, playwrights too were under constant moral surveillance, as Joseph Lenz points out.\textsuperscript{35} Puritanical pamphleteers inveighed in the same breath against prostitutes and playwrights. Both, according to these godly authors, had the dangerous power to “allure, to confuse the sense, and to seduce reason.”\textsuperscript{36} And as prostitutes were frequently con artists, as will be shown, both groups used performance as a way to inveigle their customers.

This dark performative power was the particular concern of enemies of the theater like the Puritan William Prynne, author of \textit{Histrio-mastix} (1633). In this lengthy book, one part of Prynne’s argument on the sinfulness of the theater and players specifically condemns men dressing like women. “For what higher streine of invirility can any Christian name, then for a man to put on a womans rayment, gesture, countenance, and behavior, to act a Whores, a Bawdes, or some other lewd, lascivious females part?,” Prynne asks.\textsuperscript{37} The proximity of the playhouses to brothels, the appearances of real prostitutes circulating among the audience, and the performing of female (including prostitute) roles by male actors, all provoked criticism from such Puritan moralists. The sin of whoredom was widely discussed by would-be reformers of all the public entertainments, who also focused on the “whores” who were not only represented in but also attended plays. Puritan denunciations of the playwrights and prostitutes show no sympathy for or even much distinction between the two groups. Playwrights and prostitutes were

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{35} Lenz, “Base Trade: Theater as Prostitution,” \textit{ELH} 60, no. 4 (1993): 833.
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 851.
  \item \textsuperscript{37} Prynne, \textit{Histrio-Mastix: The Player’s Scourge, Or, Actors Tragedie, Divided into Two Parts} (London, Printed by Edward Allde, Augustine Mathewes, Thomas Cotes and William Jones, 1633), 206.
\end{itemize}
subject to similar moral condemnation; Prynne, for instance, notes the playwright’s ability to “inflame the outrageous lusts of lewde spectators, who are oft-times ravished with … ribaldrous pleasing Ditties.”

In turn, playwrights often mocked such puritanical judgments in their plays, as when Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* Sir Toby Belch denounces the “puritan” Malvolio for thinking, “because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale” (2.3.139; 114-15), and when the hypocritical pastor Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, himself a carnal glutton, tries to “stop his ears” like Odysseus against the Smithfield prostitutes, “harlot[s] of the sea,” in Jonson’s 1616 *Bartholomew Fair* (3.2.44-45). The playwrights’ counterattacks showed the likeness they saw between their own social identity and that of all who offered “vice” entertainments, including prostitutes.

This perceived bond was very likely bolstered by the additional fact that both playwrights and prostitutes were subject, in large part, to the will of patrons and civic authorities who could threaten their places of business. As mentioned above, both brothels and playhouses could be closed down at the order of the monarch or the city government. Thus the two groups, whores and playwrights, were economically threatened and socially denigrated, since both provided suspicious pleasures to the community. It is no wonder, then, that so many playwrights seem sympathetic to the prostitute’s situation and were inclined to expand her into a witty and charismatic character on the stage.

One playwright that, countering the Puritan essayists, used prose work indirectly to celebrate the early modern London prostitute’s wit and skill at swindling, was Robert Greene. In his pamphlets on “cony-catchers” (cheaters at dice and purse-snatchers), Greene writes with a mix of condemnation and admiration about the criminal acts that abounded in end-of-the-century

38 Ibid., 262.
London. *A Notable Discovery of Cozenage*, printed in 1591, highlights the act of “cross-biting,” an example of “public profession of shameless cozenage, mixed with incestuous whoredoms,” wherein men use or partner with women to prey on other men whom Greene refers to as “simplers.”

Despite Greene’s rote language of moral condemnation – “shameless,” “incestuous” – his glee is evident. The cross-biting prostitute, or the female cony-catcher, is viewed by Greene as a true con-artist, not a victim of circumstance or mere “creature of sale.” She is, in fact, an actor. With evident contempt for the gullible but deserving victims, Greene describes the process that befalls the simplers when they come across the “painted face” of such a cross-biting woman:

> Then come they to these minions, and court them with many sweet words. Alas, their love needs no long suits, for they are forthwith entertained, and either they go to the tavern to seal up the match with a pottle of hippocras [wine], or straight she carries him to some bad place, where there picks his pocket, or else the cross-biters come swearing in, and so outface the dismayed companion…

The prostitute, or the bait woman, works with the male cross-biter to lure in unsuspecting victims, and thereby acts as a swindling partner. Paula Woods calls these cross-biting women “true professionals, dedicated to cozening any male who is gullible or lustful enough to succumb

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40 Ibid., 179.
to their charms.” Her professionalism could also earn her the respect of other, male cony-catchers.  

It makes sense that Greene, himself a man of the theater, shows appreciation for the clever acting of the female cony-catchers as they perform their tricks. His writings also show the prostitute as a free citizen of the London underworld, not a mere thing of vice. Like the witty staged female sex workers whom I will imminently discuss, Greene’s “whores” are presented in a way that celebrates their ability to prosper among the thieves, pickpockets, and criminals of the London underworld. Predictably, Greene’s intimate and published knowledge of the trickery found in base but colorful Liberties such as Shoreditch and Southwark earned him the disdain of moralistic fellow writers like Gabriel Harvey, who, writing in 1592 after Greene’s death, notes Greene’s “infamous resorting” to the areas known for prostitution. Harvey claims, too, that Greene kept a mistress, “a sorry ragged quean” who bore him an illegitimate son. The posthumous attack on Greene for living with a prostitute only provides more evidence that the lives of playwrights and prostitutes were not cleanly separated. Both “money creatures,” the playwright and the prostitute inhabited the same world. It is natural that they would both end up inhabiting the same stage.

Yet an equally powerful source for the sympathetically rendered stage prostitute was not practical, but literary. Greene’s cross-biting women, indirectly praised in his pamphlets, and the gamesome prostitutes who appear in the early modern plays which were his métier, owe many of their characteristics to the meretrix character of first-century Roman plays by Plautus and

43 Ibid., 209.
Terence, widely read by late Tudor playwrights. Plautus’ and Terence’s plays survived in imperfect editions until 1428, when Nicolas of Cusa’s discovery of new manuscripts of twelve plays led to several editions of both playwrights’ work being printed in Europe in the following decades. Translations appeared in German, Latin, and English. Richard Hardin describes how sixteenth-century readers, audiences, and playwrights thus began to appreciate the worth of these first-century playwrights’ work both as literature and as staged performances. Terence’s plays were often performed in Latin versions in university settings, such as at King’s Hall at Cambridge in 1510. The *meretrix* character appears in these Roman plays as cunning, honest, and often integral to the main character’s happy ending. Prostitute characters remained a prominent figure in comedies of the early modern period, argues Robert Miola, because Plautus’ and Terence’s contribution to the genre of dramatic comedy remained a powerful influence not just during the sixteenth but also in the seventeenth century. The witty businesswoman prostitute was one of the most imitated Roman comic elements.

Plautus’ Phronesium and Astaphium, from the first-century play *Trunculentus*, are examples of this cunning and savvy prostitute. These characters resemble the cony-catching women that Greene depicts in his pamphlets. For instance, Astaphium explains clearly that the courtesans take financial advantage of the men who visit them, for the men themselves “look on, while we are heaping up their property; indeed, of their own accord even do they themselves bring it to us” (*Trunculentus* 1.2). These women are aggressive and shameless, two traits D. Gilula contends a Roman *meretrix* needed to have in order successfully to resist the equally

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45 Hardin, 801-802.
46 Ibid., 790.
47 Miola, 2.
shameless men who tried to take advantage of them.\textsuperscript{48} Plautus’ Acroteleutium, from \textit{Miles Gloriosus}, who agrees to dress up as the wife of Peripectomenus to trick the evil Pyrgopolynices and reunite the lovers Philocomsaium and Pleusicles, is likewise bold and aggressive, as well as fundamentally virtuous, as she devotes herself to the righteous plot.

Gilula credits Terence as well as Plautus for creating such “good” prostitutes in ancient Roman comedies,\textsuperscript{49} though Terence’s prostitutes are less deliberately cunning in monetary matters and more compassionate toward the situations of other characters. As Gilula notes, a “good” \textit{meretrix} is one who is “altruistic, satisfied with as little as she is offered, puts the good of others before her own interests, and is capable of true love,” while the “bad” \textit{meretrix} is one who is selfish and incapable of emotions.\textsuperscript{50} An example of the former kind is the prostitute Thais from Terence’s \textit{Eunuchus (The Eunuch)}, who is driven by her love for her childhood companion, Pamphilia, as well as her lover, Phaedria. Thais recognizes the negative way others may perceive her and, after asking for help, she laments, “perhaps now [Phaedria] puts but little faith in me, and forms his estimate of me from the dispositions of other women” (\textit{Eunuchus}, 1.3.76). Thais is a second-generation courtesan and, because of this doubtful legacy, she appeals to the audience to understand her sincere love for Pamphilia and Phaedria. By the end of the play, Thais has stood up to the boastful Thraso and has secured the good fortune of Pamphilia, reuniting her with her brother Chremes.

Similar to Thais is Terence’s Bacchis from \textit{Hecyra; The Mother in Law}. In this play, the prostitute Bacchis’s old customer, Pamphilus, is faced with uncertainty when his new wife Philumena becomes pregnant by rape. Philumena’s family does not know the identity of the man

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 142.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 150.
who raped her, but they are terrified of exposing her secret, which strains the relationship between Philumena and her in-laws. Meanwhile, Pamphilus’ father Laches believes Bacchis is the cause of all his son’s marital problems because he thinks Pamphilus is still visiting her. However, after summoning and listening to Bacchis, Laches admits he has “found [her] quite different from what I had expected” (*Hecyra* 4.8.300). Laches’ preconceived notions about Bacchis because of her profession as a courtesan quickly dissolve when Bacchis proves herself useful in proving Pamphilus’ innocence. Bacchis proves Philumena was legally (!) raped by Pamphilus by showing a ring that had previously belonged to Philumena that Pamphilus had given her. Despite the somewhat appalling morality of this comic plot, the social forms are served; the families are relieved that Pamphilus is indeed the father of Philumena’s child. In a soliloquy, Bacchis admits. “I am overjoyed that this happiness has befallen him through my agency; although other courtesans would not have similar feelings” (*Hecyra* 5.3.297). Thais and Bacchis both attempt to do good for the sake of others. Terence’s moral courtesans, and both Plautus’ and Terence’s confident and intelligent *meretrix* characters, would influence the early modern playwrights in their own invention of clever prostitute characters.

Of course, Plautus and Terence’s prostitutes are not subject to as harsh a degree of moral judgment as the prostitutes of (say) Shakespeare, for prostitution was not associated with illegal sex or moral depravity in ancient Rome. It was an occupation that was determined by birth and licensing. Thais, for example, is, as noted, a second-generation courtesan who practices sex work as a legitimate profession.51 In Protestant England, sex workers could not hope for such moral indulgence. Still, despite the moral opprobrium that confronted the early modern prostitute, early modern playwrights treated them relatively generously in their comic works, showing some

51 Ibid., 149.
sympathy for characters tarred with the “whore” epithet, especially in comedies. Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* ends with Pandarus pleading with the audience in defense of the work of prostitutes and panderers, alluding to the difficulties these workers face off-stage: “O traitors and bawds, how earnestly are you set a-work, and how ill requited! Why should our endeavor be so loved and the performance so loathed?” (5.11.39-42). Pandarus’ call to the audience, including traitors and bawds, laments a social double standard that the ancient courtesan did not necessarily have to face. Terence’s Thais and Bacchis both recognize their difference from other women and the potential for their ostracism by jealous wives, yet operate with the confidence that their business is a valid occupation, and Terence’s *Hecyra* stages Bacchis acceptably entering a citizen’s home and interacting with him as a social equal. In contrast, early modern prostitutes were confined to the sketchy urban regions which housed their trade, where they were visited by furtive travelers from other parts of London. As discussed above, they faced moral judgment for their actions in the form of condemnatory sermons and pamphlets which implied they were selling their bodies for lust rather than, as was the case, economic survival. Nor did the comedies fully refrain from scapegoating the whores as pox-ridden and criminal. It is just that these comedies – unlike most of sermons and pamphlets – also suggested that prostitutes were human and funny.

In dramatizing “whores,” early modern comic playwrights imaginatively lightened the heaviness of the sex worker’s load, presenting prostitutes not as economic victims and outcasts, but, as suggested above, as successful wits and cozeners. The ravages of syphilis became an occasion for mocking jests made usually at the expense of the male client-sufferer. (See Lucio’s complaint noted in note 8, above, “I have purchased as many diseases under her roof as come to … three thousand dolors a year” [*Measure for Measure* 1.2.44-48].) Strong, youthful boys
played the prostitutes, furthering their representation as lively, vigorous characters. Some plays focus on the hardships of a prostitute’s life, but others, as Jean Howard argues, “used a supposed abject character, that of the prostitute, to figure the place of women in the changing landscape of the expanding, commercializing, and multinational city that London was becoming.”

Howard acknowledges that staged prostitutes represented glorified images of the whores who inhabited the urban underworld, but notes that these enhanced characters had a positive social effect. The stage “offered powerful and socially significant alternatives to normative prescriptions not only about prostitutes, but about women more generally.” The imagination of a playwright could turn the disparaged prostitute into a woman who demanded respect, a common bawd into a savvy businesswoman, or even a whore into a wife.

Thus the daily drudgery of the prostitute was imaginatively improved on the early modern stage. That prostitute characters appeared largely in comedies instances that genre’s concern with “ordinary people and their daily dilemmas,” as Anne Haselkorn argues. The comic playwrights rescued prostitutes from the margins and made them count as ordinary people and London citizens. Howard claims “whore plots,” which used the brothel as a central setting, could also expose problems of the city as a whole, such as “the quickening and expansion of the market economy” as well as “the novel position in which the city places women, complicating their social status.”

The ordinary citizens of London faced economic and social difficulties while living in the marginal areas of the city, and the use of a tavern, brothel, or inn in such a neighborhood as a fictive location, could illustrate these issues on stage. Brian Gibbons notes

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53 Ibid., 115.
54 Haselkorn, 2.
55 Howard, 120.
that writers of satire, in particular, incorporated knowledge of common social changes or conflicts as well as class conflicts into their plays in order to add a sense of topical relevance to their works.\textsuperscript{56} The “whore,” then, is one of the recurring elements of London city comedy, and her centrality as a member of the commonwealth on stage, and her wit toward the characters with whom she interacts, allowed playwrights to explore the stresses of an expanding city through humor.

To put this another way: the female prostitute character was an aspect of the daily life of early modern urban London; therefore, she is a recurring character in London city comedies. It follows that the prostitute’s wit and wordplay contribute to the overall comic energy on the stage. Playwrights not only showed a modicum of respect for prostitutes by casting them as citizens of the London they dramatized, they also gave prostitutes a strength that not all early modern female characters enjoyed: the ability to stand up to men who verbally attacked them. When words like “whore,” “strumpet,” “harlot,” and “quean” are hurled at a comic prostitute on the stage, she is quick to counter with banter that is amusing and just as insulting. In comedies set in London by William Shakespeare, Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker, and Ben Jonson, women who work as prostitutes, or women accused of being prostitutes, have a unique power to engage in verbal battle with misogynistic male characters.

We find such scenes in comic history. Shakespeare’s two parts of \textit{Henry IV} and \textit{Henry V} contain comic scenes which involve an Eastcheap tavern, a hostess turned bawd, and a prostitute. Prince Hal, Falstaff, and Poins meet at the Boar’s Head, owned and operated by Mistress Quickly and her husband (a man referred to but never seen in part one and deceased in part two). Anne Barton contends that Mistress Quickly is proud that Hal, “the madcap Prince of Wales, can

\textsuperscript{56} Gibbons, Brian, \textit{Jacobean City Comedy} (New York: Methuen, 1980), 4.
still pay her an informal visit, linking – in however unorthodox a way – the heart of the City with the Court at Westminster.”

The link established between the court and the common tavern is integral to the plot and character development of Hal, who vows to separate himself from the dark, lowly life of a thief at a tavern, no longer permitting the “base contagious clouds / To smother up his beauty from the world” (1.2.191-192). But despite the formal demands of Hal’s position as prince and his father’s frustration at his prodigality, the Eastcheap tavern is a central location in both Henry IV plays, and, most importantly, women are at the heart of the tavern. Rosemary Gaby argues that the place’s proprietor, Mistress Quickly – who will eventually make a living not only from ale sales but from the hire of “fourteen gentlewomen that live honestly by the prick of their needles,” comic code for workers in “a bawdy house” (Henry V 2.1.13-15) – adds “vital feminine color to the depiction of Prince Hal’s riotous life away from court,” even though her role is small in two of the three Henry plays.

Ironically, the relatively honest Mistress Quickly of Henry IV, part 1, and the early part of part 2 is less confident and powerful than she becomes after she joins forces with the prostitute Doll Tearsheet in the middle of Henry IV, part 2. When, in part one, Falstaff declares “this house is turned bawdy house” (3.3.98-99), Mistress Quickly ineptly denies the charge, saying “There’s neither faith, truth, nor womanhood in me else” (3.3.110-111), and leaving herself open to Falstaff’s winking implication that, in fact, there isn’t. Her comment on her own womanhood prompts Falstaff to discredit Mistress Quickly, calling her an “otter” because “She’s neither fish nor flesh; a man knows not where to have her” (3.3.127-128). Mistress Quickly’s counterattack again plays into Falstaff’s hands: “Thou art an unjust man in saying so. Thou or

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any man knows where to have me, thou knave, thou!” (3.3.192-3). Unwittingly, she perpetuates the joke against her. As Gaby observes, Mistress Quickly does not understand the “bawdy” nature of the jest and her “utter obliviousness to the sexual joke” undermines her comic power in the scene.⁵⁹

However, Gaby, as well as Kay Stanton, note the accumulating personal agency in Mistress Quickly between the first and second parts of *Henry IV*, as she goes from wife and tavern wench to bawd, with a new employee: the prostitute Doll Tearsheet. (Each critic notes that the tavern was not yet a bawdy house when Falstaff accuses it of being one.)⁶⁰ As Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin observe, by the second part of *Henry IV*, the tavern has become a place of lawlessness that coincides with Quickly’s new operations. Thieves and rogues still congregate there, but now the tavern has expanded into an alehouse with benefits: a brothel.⁶¹ The enhanced reputation of Mistress Quickly and her new friend, Doll, has spread, for before Doll comes on stage for the first time, Hal – the Prince of Wales! – speaks of her, calling her “pagan” and “some road,” two of the more original “whore” epithets in early modern drama (*2 Henry IV* 2.2.145; 157). Yet Hal’s demeaning terms are well met by the actual Doll, who, in a later scene, acquits herself admirably in violent argument with the “swaggerer” Pistol and with Falstaff as well. Doll is not just a doll. She resists Falstaff’s teasing jabs when, in a new tavern scene, he jokes about the sickness of prostitutes. Doll replies, “A pox damn you, you muddy rascal.” To Falstaff’s “We catch of you, Doll, we catch of you,” Doll snaps back that men also catch “our chains and our jewels” (2.4.37; 43-44; 45). Here, Doll both chastises Falstaff for

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⁵⁹ Ibid., 206.
general thievery and complains about prostitutes’ “johns”’ specific theft not only of prostitutes’ property, but of the original virginity of unfortunate maids brought into the business (“jewel” was a common metaphor for chastity, as when Shakespeare’s Miranda calls her chaste modesty “the jewel in my dower” [*The Tempest* 3.1.54]).

In the same scene, Doll subjects the “swaggerer” Pistol to a similar take-down before assisting in physically removing him from the tavern. When Pistol mentions buying Doll’s services, she rejects him: “Away, you cut-purse rascal! You filthy bung, away! By this wine, I’ll thrust my knife into your moldy chaps, an you play the saucy cuttle with me. Away, you bottle-ale rascal! You brisket-hilt stale juggler, you!” (2.4.122-125). She scoffs: “You a captain! You, slave, for what? For tearing a poor whore’s ruff in a bawdy house?” (2.4.138-139). Stanton notes that this line is “the only instance in Shakespeare’s canon of [“whore”] as spoken by a female character in her own chosen description of herself.” Doll’s unashamed use of the word “whore” to describe herself directs the epithet back to Pistol, chiding him for false valor, for abusing a prostitute while claiming the title of Captain. Doll’s valor quickens Mistress Quickly’s tongue as well: “For God’s sake, be quiet,” Quickly tells the men (2.4.176). Doll’s and Quickly’s continued feisty linguistic power is registered even when, in a late scene, both are arrested. The pregnant Doll calls the officious Beadle who comes to restrain her “nut-hook,” “damned triple-visaged rascal,” “paper-faced villain,” “blue-bottle rogue,” and “filthy famished correctioner.” Quickly joins in, calling him an “atomy” and a “starved bloodhound” (5.4.8;11;20-28). As Stanton argues, in the scenes involving Mistress Quickly and Doll Tearsheet, Shakespeare “pauses the dramatic action registering this crucial transition in England’s history to depict some aspects of the lives of these women who have had to involve themselves in prostitution,”

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62 Stanton, 27.
63 Ibid., 51.
presenting them as citizens fighting verbally for respect against male predators who include a “bloodhound” constable. As Duncan Salkeld notes, they are “laughable but they are also poignant.”

Thus, as a bawd, Mistress Quickly forms a relationship with Doll Tearsheet that empowers them both as women who can stand up to the verbal and physical abuses of men. Furthermore, Mistress Quickly and Doll’s services, as tavern wenches and sex workers, solidify them as part of the London economy. Despite Doll’s occupation, Mistress Quickly celebrates Doll’s virtuous temperament and willingness to work: “A good heart’s worth gold” (2 Henry IV 2.4.29-30).

Other Shakespearean bawds are similarly presented as originally good citizens depraved by the hazards of commerce. Pericles’ Bawd and Pander, though far more sinister than Quickly and Doll, are also citizens trying to make a living, like many in the playhouse audience. They suffer from being “too wenchless,” and “out of creatures” (4.2.5; 6); the Bawd hopes to make money from the virginal Marina, announcing, in the spirit of capitalism, “He that will give most shall have her first” (4.2.59-60). Thinking himself devoid of other options, Boult, sub-pander in this enterprise, is simply answering the demands of a market in which all must sell something, and not all can succeed. “What would you have me do?” he asks Marina. “Go to the wars … where a man may serve seven years for the loss of a leg, and not have money enough in the end to buy him a wooden one?” (4.6.170-73). Salgado contends that brothels continued to operate during the sixteenth century despite the moral and legal obstacles because “they answered a widely felt social need and because a lot of people in high places stood to make a lot of money

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64 Salkeld, Shakespeare Among the Courtesans: Prostitution, Literature, and Drama, 1500-1650 (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012), 120-121.
Shakespeare’s bawds realistically present prostitutes and their agents as cogs pressed into service by the financial machine. We see them once more as striving tradespeople in *Measure for Measure*. When premarital sex is outlawed in that play, the bawd, Mistress Overdone, laments “Why, here’s a change in the commonwealth! What shall become of me?” (1.2.100-101). As a part of the urban London economy, bawds and pimps stood to make – and lose – money like any other London worker or businessperson compelled by the vagaries of the marketplace.

Like Shakespeare in these plays, Ben Jonson depicts prostitutes as a natural part of the city, albeit the seedier part of it, the London underworld. However, instead of a tavern full of dissolute characters, Jonson’s *The Alchemist* features three main criminals, Subtle, Face, and the prostitute Dol Common. Jonathan Haynes argues that “Jonson thought carefully about how these criminals organized themselves, and how they were attached to society,” and while his rogues’ organization is not eternally successful in *The Alchemist*, neither is it defeated. Thus a prostitute operates alongside her criminal colleagues as a fit representative of what Haynes calls the “vast restless, generative metropolis” of London. Jonson’s prologue seems to justify such Londoners not only because they cause merriment, but because they are themselves merry: “Our scene is London, ’cause we would make known / No country’s mirth is better than our own.” The prologue goes on to classify prostitutes as one of a variety of “respectable” London citizen-imposters, no worse than a “squire”: “No clime breeds better matter for your whore, / Bawd, squire, imposter, many persons more” (5-8).

Jonson begins his play with Face and Subtle arguing passionately with each other about a scam they are engineering, while Dol attempts to quiet them. To direct the attention to their

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65 Salgado, 55.
schemes, Dol shouts “Will you have / The neighbors hear you? Will you betray all?” (1.1.7-8).

Subtle and Face, however, do not heed Dol’s warning and continue to argue, hurling insults back and forth. Finally, Dol turns to physical threats, as the stage directions read: “She catcheth out Face his sword; and breaks Subtle’s glass” (1.1.115). To stop the fighting, Dol commands, “Leave off your barking” or “I’ll cut your throats” (1.1.119;120). Dol’s threats do, indeed, draw the attention of the men. However, she must threaten them again, and even attack Subtle, according to the stage directions: “Seizes Subtle by the throat” (1.1.148). Thus, in the very first scene of the play, Dol asserts herself verbally and physically, exercising control over her male partners. Dol Common’s dual role as a partner in swindling as well as a prostitute gives her the opportunity to speak and act freely, to make threats and act on those threats, and to participate fully in the tricks of the trio.

Dol’s role in the swindling trio echoes the role of the cony-catching females of Robert Greene’s pamphlets. Haynes notes that The Alchemist has its similarities to the cony-catching literature of the early modern period, bringing Greene’s third-person account to immediate life because Jonson’s “dramatic realism specifies social situations and relations to a greater extent.” The realism of Jonson’s play comes from his creation of scenes “behind the scenes” of the tricks and swindles of the trio. As the play goes on, and the three put their con games into practice, Dol becomes even more valuable to their operation because of her acting skill, which matches that of the cony-catching women Greene documents. Haselkorn rightly describes Dol as “a most uncommon quean who is characterized as a woman of intelligence, ability, and inspiration.”

To fool the silly Sir Epicure Mammon, for instance, Dol is presented by Face and Subtle as a nobleman’s mad sister. Mammon wants to meet her, so Subtle coaches her: “Dol, my lord

67 Haynes, 29.
68 Haselkorn, 34.
Whats’hum’s sister, you must now / Bear yourself *statelich*” (2.4.6-7). Dol’s independence is evident in her quick dismissal of his concerns: “Oh, let me alone. / I’ll not forget my race. I warrant you” (2.4.7-8). Haselkorn celebrates Dol’s versatility: “Dol acts with absolute perfection the educated lady.”69 Haynes, similarly, notes that the trio’s “acting is their essential professional skill, underlying and universalizing the particular scams.”70 Not only is Dol’s acting worthy of praise, but so too is her commitment to her partnership with Subtle and Face. Passionate enough to break a glass and throttle a neck, and witty enough to play the invented role of a mad sister, Dol devotes herself to the ongoing deceptions with outstanding success. Because of her role as a prostitute, or a “doxy” according to Face, Dol has the liberty to be a cheating partner, to threaten the men she works with, and to deceive a rich man with her acting.

While Shakespeare’s Doll Tearsheet and Jonson’s Dol Common stick close to a base of operations, another sexually unconventional female character, Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker’s Moll Cutpurse of *The Roaring Girl*, exercises a tremendous amount of geographical liberty, maneuvering around the London streets, shops, and inns. Kelly Stage summarizes the character of Moll thus: “She flouts the idea of domestic enclosure, loiters in the streets, frequents badly reputed neighborhoods, and thwarts police actions. Her ability to navigate the city, suburbs, and in-between spaces of London demonstrates her urban competency, which no other character in the play matches.”71 While Moll is not a prostitute, her knowledge of the London streets, her ability to swordfight, and her choice to cross-dress prompt some of her play’s male characters to assume she is a kind of whore, as liberated sexually as she is in other respects. Her freedoms earn her disdain from the likes of Sir Alexander, who describes her as “a mermaid /

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69 Ibid, 35.
70 Haynes, 32.
“mermaid,” like Falstaff’s “neither fish nor flesh” insult to Mistress Quickly, suggests both a
dangerous siren and a sexually promiscuous woman.

Moll is also infuriating to Sir Alexander because of her tendency to cross-dress, which is
part of her acting, similar to that of Dol Common and the cony-catching women. Sir Alexander
criticizes her for not being maidenly, declaring she is “a thing / One knows not how to name”
because “‘tis woman more than man, / Man more than woman” (1.2.128-129; 130-131). Moll
Cutpurse’s character is based on a real and very popular woman, Mary Frith, who Arnold notes
“was fortunate to be … celebrated; other cases of women caught cross-dressing resulted in
whipping or a spell in Bridewell, the assumption being that they were whores.”72 Moll, though
popular with some, is subject to these same assumptions, for Sir Alexander consistently insults
her behavior, calling her a “varlet” and a “naughty pack” (1.2.135; 137). Since she does not dress
like a maid, he assumes she is a prostitute. Her unsavory reputation with Sir Alexander is due
also to the fact that she freely roams the city streets. As Stage notes, although “legitimate women
worked in open streets, markets, alleys, and fields, their presence could not negate the fact that
prostitutes and criminals also occupied such contested spaces.”73

Yet Dekker justifies all Moll’s aberrations. Moll acts “masculine” in a purposefully
virtuous way, to defend other women and herself. She dresses like a man and carries a sword to
combat the double standard that Stage indicates. Furthermore, Moll’s wide-ranging ways enable
her to acquire and exhibit verbal mastery of the languages of her city. While working the scamps
Omnes, Trapdoor, and Jack Dapper, for instance, Moll teaches them new vocabulary:

72 Arnold, 64.
73 Stage, 425.
MOLL. Sirrah, where’s your doxy? Halt not with me.

OMNES. Doxy? Moll, what’s that?

MOLL. His wench. (5.1.150-152)

Here – much like Shakespeare’s Prince Hal, who learns in the Boar’s Head Tavern to “drink with any tinker in his own language” (1 Henry IV 2.4.19) – Moll wields to her own advantage the anti-woman language used to denigrate prostitutes as tools. She uses this special lexicon to operate in London’s underworld. Thus, like Doll and Dol, she can engage in verbal as well as physical battles with men to defend herself and other women.

Fighting misogyny with her words and her sword, Moll distinctly explains what one particular male character has done wrong before dueling with him. When she calls on Laxton to duel her, she clearly states she will “teach thy base thoughts manners” because Laxton is “one of those / That thinks each woman thy fond flexible whore, / If she but cast a liberal eye upon thee” (3.1.71-73). Her power is not only physical but rhetorical. Moll charges Laxton for his prior misconduct in her presence. By both challenging him to fight her and by specifically identifying his crime, Moll thus takes command of the situation, despite Laxton’s hesitancy to “Draw upon a woman” (3.1.70). While she is able to hold Laxton’s attention with her sword, she can also express her feminine concerns for her sex: “How many of our sex, by such as thou / Have their good thoughts paid with a blasted name / That never deserved loosely?” (3.1.80-82). Moll is both able to enjoy the liberties of being perceived as a prostitute, a woman exercising liberties outside the pale of conventional womanhood, and to expose the injustice of those who constantly deride women for perceived sexual crimes. In Matthew Kendrick’s words, Moll recognizes that women
are “placed in an impossible situation by patriarchal ideology, since their every action is measured relative to what men perceive to be their natural lasciviousness.” In herself, she defies that metric. Not a prostitute herself, she is yet similar to the meretrices of Plautus and Terence in that she helps to secure another character’s happy ending, assisting Sebastian in marrying his true love, Mary, by first pretending to be his love interest to enrage Sir Alexander. Righting the wrongs of a situation in the service of another couple’s marital happiness evokes the action of Terence’s Bacchis in the first-century comedy Hecyra. Like Bacchis, whom Laches finds “quite different” from what he had expected, Moll earns an apology from the groom’s father-in-law: “In troth thou’rt a good wenche, I’m sorry now / The opinion was so hard I conceived of thee. / Some wrongs I’ve done thee” (5.2.227-229). A “whore” only by a skewed masculine perspective, this roaring girl is a strong addition to the strong, cunning, and witty prostitutes of Jonson and Shakespeare.

Other strong and witty female characters, familiar with the workings of London’s underworld and showing the strength verbally to resist the insults of misogynistic males, are found in Jonson’s Bartholomew Fair. Ursula the pig-woman, along with her prostitute friend Punk Alice, commands the sleazy portion of the London fair that is rife with temptation and crime. (Katharine Gillen notes that Ursula is likely a former prostitute who was “once consumed” by others, but now she runs her booth as a “creature of the fair.”) Justice Overdo, while observing her at her booth, notes she is a “punk, pinnace and bawd” (2.2.65-66), and when the gallant Winwife approaches her booth, he is insulted that they would think him a customer: “That these people should be so ignorant to think us chapmen for ’em! Do we look as if we

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would buy gingerbread? Or hobby-horses?” (a conventional epithet for whores; 2.5.10-12). Yet Ursula’s booth at the market is a hub for all kinds of activity in addition to bawdry, and Ursula, the pig woman, is in financial control. Bawd is just one of the roles she plays. Another, like Dekker’s Moll, is defender of women. When male visitors Quarlous and Winwife tease her, calling her “Mother o’ the Bawds” and “some walking sow or tallow,” she appears unbothered: “She drinks this while” (2.5.66; 69; s.d. 73). (As Keri Sanburn Behre notes, her “lack of shame” provides a powerful answer to the men’s sexism.76) But soon after, she gives far better than she gets with a string of insults hurled against the men. Like Mistress Quickly, Ursula’s position as a bawd, purveyor of not only pigs but punks, desired by men, seems to give her liberties to counter male attacks. Knockem has seen her triumph before, and encourages her with “Answer ‘em Urs, where’s thy Bartholomew wit, now?” when she is being verbally assaulted (2.5.89-90). Ursula shows this wit, countering Quarlous’ insults with “Do you sneer, you dog’s-head, you trendle tail! You look as you were begotten atop of a cart in harvest-time, when the whelp was hot and eager. Go, snuff after your brother’s bitch, Mistress Commodity, that’s the livery you wear, ‘twill be out at the elbows shortly,” she remarks, and has at the men with a scalding pan (2.5.109-113; s.d. 2.5.138). As Behre notes, “Ursula’s mastery of the market, verbal power, and refusal to accept the shamefulness projected onto her body elevate her beyond property— somewhere near equal to the status of a man.”77 Ursula’s power at the fair is clear in her ability to stand up to the men who attack her while still commanding respect from others.

Ursula’s magnetism is clear in the fact that her tent attracts women as well as men. Later in the play, Win Littlewit and Mistress Overdo find themselves drawn into the appearance of

77 Ibid., 138.
sexual crime by Ursula, whose agents draft them for sale as prostitutes. The scene betrays a
Smithfield reality wherein, as Jean Howard contends, some wives at the fair participated in a
“sexual free-for-all” wherein they defied “wifely codes of married chastity, blurring the line
between themselves and their explicitly entrepreneurial sisters, the open whores.”
Yet, Mistress Overdo’s free-for-all is short lived, for Punk Alice beats her, shouting “The poor common
whores can ha’ no traffic, for the privy rich ones; your caps and hoods of velvet, call away our
customers” (4.5.62-63). Alice’s physical violence against Mistress Overdo showcases Alice’s
ability not only to insult but also to attack her social betters. It also exposes what Howard has
exposed as the blurred line between wealthy London wives, who trade sex for a comfortable life,
and London prostitutes. This merging of prostitute and wife is satirized in Thomas Middleton’s A
Chaste Maid in Cheapside, wherein Sir Walter Whorehound buys the services of Mistress Allwit
from her, with her husband’s consent. Behre contends that Allwit chooses to see himself not as a
cuckold, but as a man who prepares his wife to be used by other men, as though there were a
significant difference. Of this comic phenomenon, Howard notes, “the commercial and the
sexual have become so intertwined that fathers and pimps, wives, whores, and bawds are not
easily separated.”
Such mercenary or “whorish” London wives, while comic, are moral reprobates. Their
character is called into question even while, paradoxically, actual stage prostitutes gain social
status from their likeness to them. (If housewives are whores, then whores can be like
housewives.) In some plays, however, prostitutes seem to enjoy a status that does not depend on
wives being brought down to their moral level. This is the stage courtesan whose fictive

78 Howard, 124.
79 Behre, 134.
80 Howard, 138.
residence lies outside of London, in Italy or elsewhere in the Mediterranean world. Rather than being confined to the tavern or marketplace, this Mediterranean courtesan, a more direct descendant of Plautus’ and Terence’s *meretrix*, exhibits a social freedom which allows her to roam freely in her world, even to be invited into other characters’ homes (without having to break in, like Dol Common).⁸¹ Such characters’ comparative dignity renders “whore” epithets incongruous when used against them.

Shakespeare’s “Courtezan,” from *The Comedy of Errors*, is one such prostitute character, who enjoys evident social freedom in her Mediterranean setting of Ephesus. Looking for her friend Antipholus of Ephesus, she encounters Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse and asks for the chain the other Antipholus promised her. The expected gift suggests a more serious relation between the pair than would obtain between a common prostitute and her “john.” Despite the fact that the puritanical Syracusans call her “Satan,” “Mistress Satan,” “Devil,” and “the Devil’s dam,” she stays focused on her business: “Your man and you are marvelous merry, sir. Will you go with me? We’ll mend our dinner here?” (4.3.47-50; 57-58). Antipholus of Syracuse continues to refuse and insult the Courtezan while she stays firm: standing on her dignity (while confusing him for Antipholus of Ephesus), she states, “I hope you do not mean to cheat me so” (4.3.79). Kay Stanton calls particular attention to the politeness of the Courtezan, which persists despite the men’s rude accusations of sorcery and witchcraft.⁸² The Courtezan is courteous, or at least cool, in comparison to such as the raucous Doll Tearsheet. Further, like a Terentian meretrix, she is confident in her ability to interact with the family of her male “client.” She decides she must “tell [Antipholus’] wife that, being lunatic / He rushed into my house and took perforce / My

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⁸¹ While Northern European rather than Mediterranean, Franceschina of John Marston’s *The Dutch Courtesan* is such a higher-status “creature of sale.” “Fie, whore! You may call her a courtesan,” asserts her lover, Freevill (1.2.97), defending her against the common epithets used to describe prostitutes.

⁸² Stanton, 58-59.
ring” because “forty ducats is too much to lose” (4.3.96-98; 99). And she does. A lady and a businesswoman, the Courtezan (who works for no bawd) is savvy enough to know how much she’s owed, and socially confident enough to move freely between her own house and those of respectable Ephesian citizens.

The Courtezan’s higher status is also signaled by her importance to the familial reconciliation plot. Stanton observes that she is a “woman who will later prove to be part of the means through which [Antipholus and Dromio] will understand their own and their brothers’ larger identities.” While she does not have the main role of righting the wrongs of the plot, like Terence’s Bacchis, still, she helps assemble the two sets of twins, Adriana, and Luciana, at the Abbess’s convent, where the final reconciliations take place.

Christopher Marlowe’s Bellamira, of The Jew of Malta, is a similar higher-status Mediterranean prostitute, though her comic effectiveness is limited by the tragic plotting of the villainous Barabas and others. Another self-governing businesswoman, Bellamira explains to the audience, “since this town was besieged, my gain grows cold,” and, “against my will I must be chaste” (3.1.1; 4). While these lines are reminiscent of the complaints of city whores and bawds like Shakespeare’s Mistress Overdone and the Pericles bawd, Bellamira, unlike these, is not confined to an underworld, but inhabits the main social world of the play. Her residence, in which she dines with Barabas’ servant Ithamore, is not relegated to the suburbs. Her sense of belonging to a larger community is registered in her public behavior. While the Maltese governor Ferneze disdains her attempts to speak against Barabas, exclaiming “Away with her! She is a courtesan,” Bellamira stands her ground using a different verbal tactic than the bellicose insults of a Doll Tearsheet: simple dignity. “Whate’er I am, yet, governor, hear me speak” (5.1.8-9).

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83 Stanton, 58.
Despite her few lines in the play, Bellamira asserts herself, is granted access to the governor, and exposes the crimes of Barabas. Duncan Salkeld contends that, despite her few lines, “Bellamira wields a notably disproportionate power in the last three acts of the play.”

The Courtezan and Bellamira each exhibit the freedoms to visit respectable households, act as citizens, and yet profit from their sexual liaisons without any relegation to a civic underworld, freedoms which go hand-in-hand with their influence over the plays’ plots. Even Shakespeare’s Othello’s Bianca, in the Mediterranean island of Cyprus, shows something of these powers. Able freely to enter the area where Othello and his army are stationed in order to see Cassio, she asserts a defined social relationship with him – one he does not exactly deny. Stanton contends that Bianca is not actually a prostitute, but a sexually liberated woman. No sex partner other than Cassio is mentioned, and she (like other courtesans) escapes the customary “pox” insult. Indeed, Bianca’s relationship with Cassio appears to be one of mutual attraction rather than of mere lust and business. Although Bianca’s sexual freedom and her ability to interact socially with Cassio prompt Iago to label her as “A huswife that by selling her desires / Buys herself bread and clothes” (4.9.96-97), playgoers note that Iago views all characters, especially women, with a jaundiced eye, suspecting them of illicit sexual activity. (Wives are “huswivs [hussies] in [their] beds,” he has earlier sneered [2.1.112].) When we view Bianca with an eye that is not Iago’s, she withstands the sexual insults, and appears as that rarity in early modern drama: an independent woman.

Thus the “whores,” “punks,” “harlots,” “strumpets,” “bawds,” “minxes,” and “courtesans” of the early modern theater world received a complex but fundamentally

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84 Salkeld, 113.
85 Stanton, 39-40.
sympathetic treatment on stage, in comedies and even, occasionally, in tragedies. Strong
prostitute characters were presented by playwrights as savvy businesswomen rather than lost
souls or sad denizens of the seedy alleyways of London. Playwrights gave prostitutes citizenship
in their plays, making them full participants of the London underworld or, when liberated by
exotic settings, free-ranging members of their Mediterranean towns. The witty prostitutes and
bawds of early modern comedies exhibit economic power and agency, despite the less fortunate
condition of the real prostitutes of the London liberties. These imagined prostitutes’ authority is
most evident in the colorful dialogue in which they challenge the verbal misogyny of their
(usually) masculine assailants, turning the tables on their accusers. They stand up to the men who
attempt to reduce them to a slanderous epithet, or a series of epithets. Thus they prevent their
own dehumanization.
2. Sexual Slurs in Marriage on the Early Modern Stage: Patterns of Degradation and Betrayal

In marriage in Renaissance drama, particularly between tragic couples, carnal slurs generally come from a husband who believes himself sexually wronged by his wife. Once a man believes himself cuckolded, whether or not he has solid proof, he begins a tragic decline which starts with the frequent use of sexual slurs, as well as other abusive language, and ends with the threatened or real destruction of the wife. Tragic stage couples’ decline occurs in a misogynistic world wherein men are dutifully supported by other men in their anti-female fantasies, while women lack vital resources to defend themselves because they are betrayed by other women. The apparent consequence is that unlike the witty and powerful female prostitute characters in comedy, tragic women lack power to defend themselves against male verbal and physical attacks.

Even innocent wives are denied a platform to defend themselves, for they are silenced by the suffocating presence of their husband’s male companions as well as by their husband’s own abusive language, and, eventually, his physical violence. Jealous accusations thrown at the wife are bolstered by other men, which provokes the husband to a frenzy of anger and hate. The tragic wife, then, is left with no chance to oppose the label of “whore” because her husband, with the aid of his male “friends,” has already decided her fate. The final victim of this tragic process is also the perpetrator: the husband, rendered solitary, guilty, and spiritually ruined. This pattern of the murderous victimization of the women and degradation of the jealous male character can be found in William Shakespeare’s Othello, John Ford’s ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore, and Elizabeth
Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam, the Faire Queen of Jewry*. In each of these plays, tarred with anti-female epithets like “whore,” “minx,” “strumpet,” or “quean,” the tragic wives are marked for death by the psychologically disintegrating men who use the terms.

Marriages depicted on the Renaissance stage were influenced by the Biblical ideals disseminated in literature, sermons, and art. Married couples in early modern England were the subject of numerous homilies and conduct books, which preached and outlined the proper duties of a husband and wife, and the plays of the period were performed in a social context where these ideas were promoted. The puritan William Whately, in his 1619 publication *A Bride Bush: or a Direction for Married Persons*, dictates that marriage is a “mutual bond of dutie” and, as such, “more is required of a man and woman after marriage than was before.” In Genesis, it is stated that with marriage “shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.” The expectations of a married couple were that they should be chaste and devoted to one another. Whately asserts that there are two main God-ordained duties for the pair, “Chastitie and due benevolence,” as well as love. Within *A Homily of the State of Matrimony*, set forth by the Anglican Church in 1623, the anonymous author also asserts that God commands that “man and woman should live lawfully in perpetual friendship, to bring forth fruit, and to avoid fornication.”

88 Genesis, 2:24 (KJV).
89 Whately, 2; 31-32.
However, while early modern pastors and other moralists were sure to note the common duties of love and devotion of both husbands and wives, the authors Whately, John Dod and Robert Cleaver, Henry Smith, and George Fox all stress the inferiority of the wife. Fox argues that the wife should not “usurp” the authority of the husband.91 Biblical references to a wife’s subjection to her husband are found in Ephesians, the source of many homiletic author’s claims: “Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.”92 Dod and Cleaver similarly state that a wife should “submit herself and be obedient” to her husband, “For as men should obey the laws of their cities, so women the manners of their husbands.”93 A wife should “acknowledge her inferiority” and “carry herself as an inferior.”94 Accordingly, within these sermons and homiletic literature, authors called husbands to assert control over their households in general, but especially over their wives. Left independent, wives will stray. Joseph Swetnam reminds listeners that women are made from the rib of man and a “rib is a crooked thing, good for nothing else, and women are crooked by nature.”95 Whately compares controlling a wife to mastering a mount: “Euen as he that is to ride a horse, must make his bridle fit for the mouth of the poore beast. . . In like case it fareth with women.”96 The moralist Juan Luis Vives, tutor to the young Princess Mary, speaks directly to the wives, saying, “By your chastity, modesty, and obedience, you can enjoy the pleasant companionship of your husband, and you will live happily together. On the other hand, by your

92 Ephesians 5:24 (KJV).
94 Whately, 189.
96 Whately, 130.
vices of mind and body, you will render him harsh and bitter and create torture and exasperation for yourself and for him that will not end.”  

97 Such counsel was based on St. Paul’s instruction in Ephesians to wives to “submit yourself unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.”

Still, despite the shared praise of feminine subjection of early modern homilists and conduct book authors, this ideal could not have perfectly matched the reality that early modern couples faced, as contemporary scholars have noted. Allyson Poska argues, for instance, that women earned authority in the Renaissance household because of “their economic contribution to the family, their household management, their ability to negotiate marriages for their children, their knowledge of family business,” or even because of their family’s connections.  

99 Indeed, the marriages of the early modern period, like marriages of today, depended on partnership, on the work of both husband and wife to maintain the household and livelihood of the family members. Dorothy Leigh’s 1629 work, The Mother’s Blessing, speaks to the importance of both parents properly educating children spiritually, and she describes a child finding a marriage partner as the problem appears from a parent’s perspective: “If my son marry an ungodly Wife, then all my comfort of him and his is gone, and it will bee a continuall grieve to me, to see him in a league and friendship amongst the wicked.”

100 Some male authors, too, recognized the dangerous influence of a wayward wife over her husband, and placed emphasis on the work a wife must do. Dod and Cleaver state that “it is not meant that the wife should not employ her knowledge and discretion which God hath given her in the help and for the good of her husband,” though

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98 Ephesians, 5:22 (KJV).
100 Leigh, The Mother’s Blessing (London: printed for Robert Allot, 1629) 50. See also Elizabeth Joselin’s The Mother’ Legacy to her Vnborn Childe, a 1624 conduct book written from the point of view of a mother.
“always as it must be with condition to submit herself unto him.” In Ephesians, the husband is called to show his wife a kind of love that suggests their shared identity: “So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself.” Fox reminds readers of this expectation in his work as well. Henry Smith asserts that a wife must support her husband as a “yokefellow” because “she should help her husband to bear his yoke, that is, his grief must be her grief.” Thus, along with calls for masculine control, the emphasis on marriage as a partnership can be found in early modern sermons and conduct books, even if women are still viewed – paradoxically – as inferior partners.

Problems in Renaissance tragedy occur when the marriage ideal stipulating women’s patient submission is upheld as an unwavering standard. In Christian marriage, as stated above, a wife is expected to be a yokefellow, to suffer as her husband suffers, but, as Mary Beth Rose points out, absolute expectations of her “patient” and “virtuous” suffering can lead to her victimization by an abusive spouse. Laura Gowing similarly argues that problems within staged tragic marriage occur “not only by the failure of male authority, but by [male authority’s] extremes.” Early modern authors preached the expectation that women be obedient and even silent, but the early modern playwrights offer the consequences of extravagant and unchecked husbandly insistence on this impossible ideal: the man’s obsession with his wife’s chastity, self-stoked by anti-female language, leading to violence, and even murder. Off the stage, early modern husbands rarely faced legal penalties for beating their wives, note B. J. and Mary Sokol;

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101 Dod and Cleaver, 81.
102 Ephesians 5:28 (KJV).
103 Fox, 2.
however, a man who used “excessive force and violence” in his household was shamed and regarded as one who could not govern his house peaceably and well.107 The early modern stage showcased the lamentable violence that could follow when a husband believes himself fooled, wronged, and usurped when his wife’s behavior is less than ideal, and he succumbs to a jealous passion which results in her excessive punishment. Gayle Greene argues that Othello’s plot, for instance, is “concerned with an ideal of womanly character and conduct” and that the “tragic vulnerability” that affects both man and woman in the play is due to the “ideals and illusions” as well as “conventional [idealistic] conceptions” that the couple bring to the relationship.108

Othello’s perfectionism is shown in his late reference to Proverbs’ famous claim that the value of a good wife is “above rubies”109: superior to precious, flawless gems. Over Desdemona’s lifeless body, he states “had she been true, / If heaven would make me such another world / Of one entire and perfect chrysolite, / I’d not have sold her for it” (5.2.148-151). The possibility that a wife could wander from the motionless ideal, could be an independent sexual being, even in thought, causes the tragic husband’s deep uneasiness, which is agitated by his male friends until it becomes a murderous rage.110

Mark Breitenburg reasonably contends that the doubt and suspicion of tragic male characters on the early modern stage comes from the unequal distribution of power between men

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107 Sokol, Shakespeare, Law, and Marriage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 131. See also Susan Dwyer Amussen, An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988): 104; 129-130, who discusses the importance of male and female reputation in solving domestic disputes and points out that neighbors and church members often intervened to ensure that couples’ conflicts did not become unreasonable or violent.


109 Proverbs 31:10 (KJV).

110 See Sharpe, “Domestic Homicide in Early Modern England,” The Historical Journal 24, no. 1 (1981): 29-48. While the early modern period was tolerant of domestic violence, murder of a spouse was consistently reported to and punished by authorities.
and women. Indeed, these doubts and suspicions are common across comic and tragic plays. Both comic and tragic husbands’ anxiety stems from their obsession with their wives’ sexuality and potential to cuckold them and, thus, elude their control. Still, while there are shared anxieties among husbands in both dramatic genres, only tragic men are encouraged by other men to perpetuate their anger, suspicion, and accusations of their wives. When confronting their own anxieties and anger toward the women, comic husbands are ultimately shut down by other male characters. For examples, the rage of Shakespeare’s Antipholus of Ephesus from *The Comedy of Errors*, sparked by his wife’s barring him from his house as she dines with his (as yet unrecognized) twin brother, is mitigated by his companion Balthazar: “Have patience, sir. . .

Herein you war against reputation, / And draw within the compass of suspect / The unviolated honor of your wife / . . . And doubt not, sir, but she will well excuse / Why at this time the doors are made against you” (3.1.147-155). Rather than encouraging violence, Balthazar begs his friend to show reason and, furthermore, defends Adriana’s chastity. As a result, instead of a scene of escalating verbal abuse and violence, we see one in which Antipholus’ anger is “dialed down” as the men leave to dine (perhaps somewhat vengefully, on Antipholus’ part) with the Courtezan. (Here the Terentian use of the Courtezan as marital peacemaker is indirectly evoked – although the Courtezan does cause some trouble later by bringing Adriana into the fray of her argument over the gift promised her by Adriana’s husband.) Later, too, when Antipholus of Ephesus calls his wife Adriana “Dissembling harlot,” Pinch the schoolmaster calls for men to tie him up, interpreting his anti-wife rage as madness (4.4.113). Similarly, when Jonson’s *Volpone*’s furious Corvino calls his wife “whore” simply because men can see her through a window, he is interrupted by Mosca, who calms him down with a scheme by which Corvino can (supposedly)

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get Volpone’s wealth (2.6.58). Of course, Mosca’s shocking suggestion – that Corvino prostitute Celia to Volpone – is not exactly supportive of the wife or her chastity, but it does have the effect of transforming Corvino’s jealous passion to mercenary greed, and thus quenching it. And – while Corvino’s jealousy is problematically assuaged by Mosca’s deceptive suggestion that he does control his wife – Celia is a “wench [he] may command” (2.6.58) – subsequent events prove otherwise, as, with the help of the virtuous though boring Bonario, Celia frustrates all Corvino’s controlling schemes. By the end of the play, too, Celia is freed from her jealous husband by court order, and Corvino, for “the wrongs done” to his wife, must return her dowry (5.7.144).

Shakespeare’s Adriana and Jonson’s Celia are each saved from their husband’s rage not only because of the interruptions of other male characters, but because these females exist in a genre which requires those interruptions to support feminine integrity rather than masculine fantasy. Therefore, the women are spared punishment even when some label them “harlot” and “whore.” Those epithets do not accumulate lethal force. Comic worlds are not free from anxieties about female sexuality, nor are they free from the verbal abuse and anti-female language of male characters. But comic women are simply not, finally, victims of their husbands’ or lovers’ obsessions, anti-female language, and abuse, because allies in the comic environment protect them from slander and destruction at their husband’s hands.

Even, or especially, in tragicomedies, or in comedies which include tragic scenes, we see this distinction between tragic and comic environments. Such plays at first, or at moments, provide a tragic environment, rife with male paranoia, only to overcome that environment with the tools of comedy. In Shakespeare’s Much Ado About Nothing and The Winter’s Tale, a prospective wife and a wife, respectively, undergo death-like experiences in the early and middle
parts of their plays because of their lover’s and husband’s suspicions and verbal abuse.

According to Professors Elizabeth Falter and Sarah Neville’s description of a 2020 streamed student production of Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* – supervised by them and directed by undergraduate Hannah Woods of Ohio State University – the cast correctly recognized that in the play, “scrutiny, reputation and paranoia are the norm” and are “profoundly gendered. The comedy abounds with cuckoldry jokes that signify male characters’ insecurity, and the main plot revolves around the way that the violent language of slander can have fatal repercussions, especially for the play’s women.”¹¹² Hero is accused of unchastity by her prospective groom Claudio, who calls her a “rotten orange” and is supported by his friends who say things like “Why, then, are you no maiden” (4.1.32; 92). Claudio and his friends’ public slander create a tragic scene within a comic play, and Hero falls into a swoon. However, she has the support of true friends Beatrice and Benedick, who know she has been “belied” (4.1.155) and engineer a plot (faking Hero’s death) to prompt Claudio’s shame. The aborted tragic action of this comedy does show the serious consequences of anti-female language and verbal abuse. Yet that language is robbed of its final destructive power because Claudio is finally made to express guilt and remorse when the constable Dogberry, comically, condemns Claudio’s trusted “friends”’ crimes: “they have spoken untruths; secondly, they are slanders; sixth and lastly they have belied a lady; thirdly, they have verified unjust things; and, to conclude, they are lying knaves” (5.1.226-229). Dogberry’s accusations spur the decadent Borachio to confess his slander and lament, “The lady is dead upon mine and my master’s false accusation” (5.1.251-252). Of course, the most significant defection from the boys’ club has been that of Benedick, who conspicuously chooses to side with the women on Hero’s behalf, ultimately challenging his former friend to a duel to

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defend her honor (a duel which young Claudio, faced with the older swordsman Benedick, would probably lose) (4.2.346-350; 5.1.138-165). Claudio is not supported in his misogynistic accusations by his most significant friend, and this, in addition to Dogberry’s intervention, saves him from ultimate villainy. Hero is also redeemed, despite the “fault” of her waiting woman Margaret’s accidental betrayal, because the advocacy of her innocence by Beatrice, Benedick, and Dogberry counterbalances Margaret’s unwitting mistake and Claudio’s other friends’ misogyny. Beatrice, especially, declares Hero’s honesty almost from the moment Claudio publicly libels her, declaring “Sweet Hero, she is wronged, she is slandered, she is undone” (4.1.326-327). In the last scene, Hero explains, “One Hero dies defiled, but I do live, / And surely as I live, I am a maid” (5.4.65-66). The tragic trajectory of the play is reversed, and a double wedding ensues.

Hermione from *The Winter’s Tale* is similarly accused of adultery and verbally abused by her husband, actions which result in tragic scenes in the first half of the comedy. After King Leontes witnesses his queen Hermione speaking privately with his friend Polixenes, he becomes suspicious that “his pond [is] fished by his next neighbor” (1.2.243). Leontes then requests help from his servant Camillo in murdering his supposed rival. Camillo, refusing to egg on his master in his suspicions, disavows the implied slander, arguing, “I cannot / Believe this crack to be in my dread mistress, / So sovereignly being honorable” (1.2.389-391). Thus the support of Hermione begins before Leontes even directly accuses her of adultery. Paulina, Hermione’s waiting woman, is also staunch in defending her innocence. She demands audience with Leontes, calling Hermione “Good queen, my lord, good queen, I say ‘good queen,’ / And would by combat make her good, so were I / A man, the worst about you” (2.3.72-75). Antigonus, Paulina’s husband, supports his wife in supporting Hermione, telling Leontes, “When [Paulina]
will take the rein I let her run, / But she’ll not stumble” (2.3.60-63). This universal support of Hermione leaves Leontes alone with his madness and, implicitly, strengthens the queen during the ordeal of her trial, where she skillfully defends herself: “You, my lord, best know, / Whom least will seem to do so, my past life / Hath been. . . continent. . . chaste. . . true” (3.2.32-35). Thus, Leontes’ repentance, when it occurs, comports with the attitude of the entire court, and is in keeping with the miraculous reconciliations and redemptions of the last two acts, which turn the play into a comedy.

Thus, though both Hero and Hermione experience tragic events, their ultimate fates are comic because they are supported by other characters and accordingly saved from the wrath of jealous men. So far from finding their fantasies echoed by others. Claudio and Leontes encounter in both the women and the men of their environments (in Claudio’s case, some of the men) belief in the chastity of the women accused. Likewise, Hermione and Hero enjoy the support of other women. Paulina and Beatrice refuse to be daunted and continue to argue for the innocence of their friends.

Women, especially wives, who are accused of whoredom in tragedies do not have such support from male or female characters. Rather, tragic wives charged by their husbands with sexual villainy, find themselves also betrayed by other characters. While the physical and mental husbandly abuses that Adriana, Celia, Hero, and Hermione suffer vary in severity, these female characters are alike in that they all possess a support system: other characters’ aid and their own eloquent speech, which work as tools to defuse their husbands’ rage. In contrast, in Shakespeare’s Othello, Ford’s ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore, and Cary’s The Tragedy of Mariam, the husband’s malevolent environment contributes to his undergoing a decline which begins with suspicion and anti-female language and ends with murderousness. The husband imagines himself
cuckolded and his male friends encourage violence and revenge, in a destructive homosocial dynamic. Meanwhile, the wife is left alone with no support from either sex.\textsuperscript{113} In fact, she is often conspicuously betrayed by the other women in the play, who fail at defending her innocence and even contribute to her doom. The companion women in these plays sometimes directly plot the destruction of fellow women. Two examples are Cary’s vicious Salome, who steers her brother to execute his wife because of her suspected promiscuousness, and the “damned bawd” Livia, a character in Thomas Middleton’s 	extit{Women Beware Women}, who carefully crafts lies to destroy others for fun (2.2.464). However, in the main, secondary female characters’ destructive action is a kind of inaction. They simply fail to help the tragic wife, watching her suffer the violent rage of her husband.

Othello’s decline from loving husband and hero to a nervous, murderous, supposed cuckold begins with the temptation to anti-female language presented by other males. It is completed by the servant Emilia’s enabling – until it’s too late – of the “fantasy” with which her husband Iago has infected Othello (“I nothing but to please his fantasy” \textit{[Othello} 3.3.343]).

Othello’s decline is steep, as his marriage is first presented as ideally companionate. According to David Bevington, \textit{Othello} initially features one of the happiest marriages in the Shakespearean canon.\textsuperscript{114} The audience is introduced to the couple through Othello’s story of earning Desdemona’s love, a tale which stresses Othello’s and Desdemona’s mutual construction of their union. Othello’s idealized masculine version of himself is dependent upon Desdemona’s admiration and approval: “She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them” (1.3.169-170). As both Bevington and Janet Adelman argue, the wooing story


Othello tells the Venetian court reveals him to be the glorified recipient of Desdemona’s love and acceptance because her “greedy ear” for his tales (1.3.151) has raised his confidence in his own heroism. The mutuality of their marriage, at this stage, is also suggested by Othello’s insistence that the Duke “let [Desdemona] speak of [him] before her father” to prove his story is true (1.3.118). This calling of Desdemona to support his account of the wooing shows Othello’s trust in his bride. For her part, Desdemona’s boldness in this court scene, her confidence in affirming her husband’s story, as Deats notes, provides an example of a woman who challenges the ideal of the submissive, quiet woman championed in early modern conduct books.

Desdemona both verbally expresses her obedience to her husband – telling her father, “so much duty as my mother showed / To you, preferring you before her father, / So much I challenge that I may profess / Due to the Moor my lord,” (1.3.188-191) – and resolutely defends her marriage publicly. Desdemona’s actions in this scene, as well as Othello’s assurance of her devotion to him, show a partnership marriage, in which the wife plays the role of a “junior partner.”

However, the seeds of a less-than-ideal inequality are present in this scene. Once their marriage is made official in the eyes of the Duke, Desdemona is referred to (by Othello) as the “purchase made” (2.3.9). This objectification of Desdemona suggests her inferiority in the marriage after all, despite her role as “half the wooer” in the relationship and her ability to defend herself in public (1.3.178). Desdemona’s status as possession rather than partner was first implied by her father, who in the prior act called her “jewel” (1.3.198) and imagined keeping her in “clogs,” or shackles (1.3.198; 201). Brabantio also underscored Desdemona’s proclaimed duty

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117 Ibid., 244, 246.
to her husband, warning Othello, “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. / She has deceived her father, and may thee” (1.3.295-296). Desdemona’s dangerousness, according to her father, comes from her ability to act independently of a male authority figure’s wishes. Othello’s eventual decline, from the husband confident in his wife’s partnership to her crazed, profane attacker, originates in the suspicion, nurtured from the seed here planted by Brabantio, that he cannot control his woman.

The fear sowed by Brabantio’s warning leads Othello ultimately to a sinister vision of his and Desdemona’s pairing, in which Desdemona not only participates in but controls the marriage, by controlling Othello. This state of affairs is suggested even by the sympathetic (to the marriage) Cassio, who calls Desdemona “our great captain’s captain” (2.1.76), a comment sarcastically reinforced by Iago: “Our general’s wife is now the general” (2.3.308-309). The trusted Iago’s sneering suggestions that Desdemona commands Othello, relayed to him directly in Iago’s dialogue with Othello in 3.3., spurs Othello’s rapid decline from loving husband to crazed murderer, from affectionate murmurer of “sweet” and “sweeting” (3.3.60; 2.3.247) to savage deliverer of the insult “whore.” Iago’s stoking of Othello’s distrust of his wife is well known. Less commented on is the way Othello’s language toward his wife changes because of Iago’s verbal influence. Iago implants suspicions in Othello by saying “I like not that” to describe Cassio’s “guiltylike” departure from a conversation with Desdemona, as Othello and Iago enter the stage (3.3.35; 40). Othello, becoming anxious at Iago’s vague suggestion, demands “If thou dost love me, / Show me thy thought,” to which Iago replies, “Utter my thoughts? Why say they are vile and false” (3.3.127-128; 149). Iago’s vile and false thoughts are soon known to Othello, though, as Iago warns him, “that cuckold lives in bliss / Who certain of his fate, loves not his wronger” (3.3.180-181). Using the word “cuckold” strategically, after calling attention to
the “guiltylike” Cassio, Iago turns Othello’s attention to Desdemona. Spurred by Iago’s words, Othello shows the falsehood of his claim that he is not jealous just because his wife is “fair, feeds well, loves company, / Is free of speech, sings, plays, and dances well,” if she is virtuous (3.3.198-199). Indeed, it is Desdemona’s very liveliness, one expression of which is her friendly persistence of argument on Cassio’s behalf, even in this very scene, that drives Othello – under Iago’s tutelage – into a jealous rage. Iago’s provoking, carefully crafted comments, such as his repetition in this scene of the warning that Brabantio gave – “She did deceive her father, marrying you” (3.3.220) – also prompt Othello to use his first anti-female epithet as he exclaims, “be sure thou prove my love a whore!” (3.3.375). Iago’s specific references to guilt, deception, and cuckoldry, lead Othello to use such epithets to describe his wife before the crafty Iago even accuses her, outright, of whoredom.

Othello’s readily aroused suspicions demonstrate the fragility of a husbandly self-esteem dependent on wifely fidelity that, as male-authored conduct books and sermons noted, needed constant policing to remain intact. Breitenburg, for instance, notes that “the [early modern] period was decidedly nervous about social disorder in general and, at least from the perspective of men, that threat was all too easily located in . . . [male-constructed] depictions of female sexuality as monstrous or destructive.”118 Women’s monstrousness inhered in their ability to elude masculine control, just as Brabantio’s warning implied. Before the end of 3.3., Othello complains, “Oh, curse of marriage, / That we can call these delicate creatures ours / And not their appetites” (3.3.284-286). David Bevington notes that, for women, the power to evade men’s mastery, to cuckold, is “the power to deprive them of their sense of self-assertion and male accomplishment,” which makes men appear ridiculous to other men.119 Othello fears he will be

118 Breitenburg, 21.
119 Bevington, 226.
“A fixed figure for the time of scorn / To point his slow and moving finger at” because of Desdemona’s alleged unfaithfulness (4.2.56-57).

Othello’s dependence on a homosocial community of spectators to approve his honor makes him susceptible to the “friend” who impugns that honor, through encouraging his suspicion of Desdemona with misogynistic language. Although Iago starts with just a suggestion of her unfaithfulness – “I like not that” – his vague implications eventually turn to deliberate taunts, meant to enrage Othello. The masculine identity Othello believes he embodies, as Stephen Greenblatt suggests, has been fashioned to please an audience, and Iago, knowing that “an identity that has been fashioned as a story can be unfashioned, refashioned, inscribed anew in a different narrative,” creates a new story.120 Exploiting the anxiety of his male “friend,” who he has made uneasy with his careful word choices, Iago fashions a tale about Cassio dreaming aloud about Desdemona, which provokes Othello into a frenzy: “I’ll tear her all to pieces” (3.3.446). As Iago continues to “abuse Othello’s ear” (1.3.396), he uses bestial references to provoke Othello’s anger further, describing Desdemona and Cassio as “prime as goats, as hot as monkeys” (3.3.419). Othello’s language toward his wife then begins to resemble Iago’s. He refers to his wife as a “lewd minx,” not only a mischievous animal, but an offensive and oversexed woman (3.4.491). Othello’s use of the word “whore,” after he is roused by Iago, is a critical moment that marks his degradation. Having said “whore,” he thinks “whore,” and his anger at his wife leads him to make a physical threat against her and, eventually, to fulfill that threat.

Iago’s support of Othello’s anti-female fantasies become more explicit as Othello’s speech degenerates, resulting in a vicious verbal cycle. Othello’s violent language unleashes

Iago’s sinister suggestions, which result in increasingly destructive visions on Othello’s part. Othello declares, “I will chop her into messes. Cuckold me?,” and Iago promotes this threat, saying, “Oh, ‘tis foul in her” (4.1.202-203). Iago then even suggests a specific form of violence, guiding Othello to the proper course of revenge against an unfaithful wife: “Strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated” (4.1.209-210). His murderous imagination thus inflamed, Othello engages a few lines later in a flight of vicious speech accompanied, for the first time, by physical violence. When, as he greets the visiting emissary, Lodovico, Desdemona appears and chooses this occasion once more to plead for Cassio to be forgiven. Othello strikes her, calling her “Devil” and repeating “Oh, devil, devil!” (4.1.246; 250). Here, he is reduced to mere repetition of insult. Lodovico comments on Othello’s change in manner after witnessing the scene – “this would not be believed in Venice” (4.1.248) – and Othello leaves the scene sounding like Iago: “Goats and monkeys” (4.1.271), he disjointedly fumes, naming two beasts strongly associated with lasciviousness. Later, Othello refers to his wife as a “subtle whore” as he readies himself to confront her (4.2.22). Here again, Iago’s ugly language seeps into Othello’s accusations. He compares Desdemona to “summer flies . . . in the shambles, / That quicken even with blowing,” suggesting she thrives and breeds on rotten meat and echoing Iago’s desire to “Plague [Brabantio] with flies” with the news of his daughter’s marriage (1.1.73). Othello also calls her a “weed” (4.2.68-69). When Desdemona begs to know what “innocent sin” has earned her these insults, Othello laments, “Was this fair paper, this most goodly book, / Made to write ‘whore’ upon?” (4.2.72-74). Once again, Othello speaks “whore,” and then sees “whore” when he looks at his wife. As Kay Stanton notes, these lines suggest Othello’s view that a wife is something a man may label as he sees fit\textsuperscript{121} -- may unwittingly deform through labeling. No

longer the “fair paper” that recorded the heroic stories of her husband-to-be, Desdemona is now compared to, and thus, to him, becomes, flies and weeds and “strumpet” and “whore” (4.2.83; 84; 89). Thus Othello’s decline, marked by anti-female language and insults clearly influenced by Iago’s ugly lexicon, involves his own verbal degradation of his wife.

While Othello’s rage is encouraged by Iago’s malicious speech, Desdemona is left with no supporters offering a countervailing defense. In fact, Desdemona’s only potential ally is a woman who betrays her. When questioned by Othello, the servant Emilia initially defends Desdemona’s innocence, stating “I durst, my lord, to wager she is honest, / Lay down my soul at stake” (4.2.13-14). However, even this private and brief statement of faith – so much milder, because closeted, than Paulina’s public defense of Hermione in *The Winter’s Tale* – is undercut by the fact that her fidelity to her husband Iago’s schemes have been, and continue throughout the play to be, the very cause of Desdemona’s tragedy. Finding and appropriating the dropped strawberry-spotted handkerchief that Othello gave Desdemona, Emilia uses wifeliness to defend her actions to the audience: “My wayward husband hath a hundred times / Wooed me to steal it” (3.3.308-309). Sarah Deats describes Emilia as “browbeaten” by her husband and “weary” and, indeed, even when she is giving him the handkerchief he needs for his scheme, Iago calls her “a foolish wife” (3.3.320). Yet, Emilia obeys him, surrendering the handkerchief to him, though she knows that Desdemona “so loves the token” (3.3.309). Emilia’s choice of wifely duty over honesty and sorority dooms Desdemona when Iago uses Desdemona’s loss of the handkerchief as “ocular proof” (3.3.375) of her infidelity, thus driving Othello into the murderous mindset expressed by his degraded language. Later, though Emilia knows what

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122 Deats, 248-249.
became of the handkerchief, she witnesses Othello demanding it and says nothing to protect Desdemona.

Her choice of husband over female friend is furthered by her unwitting contribution to Desdemona’s libeling. In the fourth act, after witnessing Othello’s verbally violent interview with Desdemona, Emilia tells Iago, “He called her whore” (4.2.129) She repeats the word two other times in this scene: “my lord hath so bewhored her” and “Hath she forsook so many noble matches/... To be called whore?” (4.2.121; 132-134). (Meanwhile, Desdemona cannot speak the word because it does “abhor” her [4.2.169].) Emilia is ostensibly defending Desdemona, but her dialogue, coupled with her consistent deference to her husband, contributes to the buildup of slanderous language in the play. The contrast is profound between Othello, and The Winter’s Tale, which recasts much of the earlier play’s action in tragicomic form. In the comically inclined The Winter’s Tale, Paulina’s defense of Hermione as “good queen” is made before the king and an audience of courtiers before Hermione’s trial. However, in Othello, Emilia’s “she was chaste” is spoken uselessly over Desdemona’s lifeless body (even as Emilia herself dies) (5.2.257). As Deats notes, Emilia does not openly speak up for her lady until it is, tragically, too late.\footnote{Ibid., 248.} Her betrayal of Desdemona demonstrates the fault of extreme wifely duty – the failure of the Christian ideal.

Thus Iago’s verbal influence leads to Othello’s decision to murder his dishonest wife, and Emilia’s lack of expressed support for Desdemona allows him to execute his plan. The homosocial aspects of Othello’s rage are made audible when, approaching his sleeping wife, he declares, “she must die, else she’ll betray more men” (5.2.6). He believes he can only contain her
sexual appetite by killing her. Once Desdemona wakes, the scene demonstrates a close pattern of misogynistic language and physical violence, where libelous words elicit harmful action. Once the epithet of “strumpet” is used, in Othello’s “Out strumpet! Weep’st thou for [Cassio] to my face?” (5.2.81), and then repeated with “Down, strumpet!” (5.2.83), Othello has moved himself to kill Desdemona. Just as, in an earlier scene, he smacked Desdemona after calling her “devil,” Othello’s blow is precipitated by the anti-female slur. Violence and the labeling of his wife as whore – a label supported by masculine agreement, and permitted to stand by lack of counter-argument – culminate in Desdemona’s destruction. Further, Desdemona’s own voice is here sealed, as Eamon Grennan notes, through strangulation, presenting her own effective alternative self-definition. After her death, and just prior to his own, Othello triumphantly seals her in his reductive, misleading, and destructive pronouncement on her life: “She turned to folly, and she was a whore” (5.2.136).

The tragic marital pattern – a man’s suspecting cuckoldry, using anti-female epithets, and, ultimately, destroying his wife, all with homosocial support – is seen also in John Ford’s ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore, first performed between 1629 and 1633. In ‘Tis Pity, as in Othello, masculine encouragement leads the infuriated, slur-using husband to plot revenge against the wife, although, rather than initiating the language of sexual suspicion, like Brabantio and Iago,  

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126 Multiple scholars, such as Lisa Hopkins and Raymond Powell, have noted the similarities between Othello and ‘Tis Pity, commenting on the ways in which Ford was influenced by Shakespeare’s portrayal of love, marriage, and distrust. However, they do not note the specific pattern of male degradation I suggest above. See Lisa Hopkins, “New Directions: Othello and His Brothers,” in Othello: A Critical Reader, ed. Robert C. Evans (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) 173-192; and Raymond Powell, “The Adaptation of a Shakespearean Genre: Othello and Ford’s ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore,” Renaissance Quarterly 18, no. 3 (1995): 582-592.
the servant Vasquez in this play fuels and directs his master Soranzo’s pre-existing anger and epithets so Soranzo may properly avenge his marred reputation after his wife is discovered pregnant (by another). In this play, as in Othello as well, while the husband is faithfully supported in his suspicion, the wife (Annabella) is betrayed – here more intentionally and directly – by her female confidant, who exposes her secrets. This convergence of anti-woman forces further enrages her husband, and ensures Annabella’s destruction.

Annabella and Soranzo’s relationship becomes fraught with blunt and insulting language on both sides, but Soranzo begins the play as a devoted and loving suitor before degrading into an angry wielder of misogynistic epithets. During Soranzo’s wooing of Annabella, he calls her “sweet” and tells her, “I know I have loved you long and loved you truly” (3.2.19; 30-31). Annabella is no honest Desdemona – she married Soranzo only to hide her pregnancy, from her incestuous relationship with her brother – but the possessive, objectifying language with which Soranzo describes her once they are wed (“most precious jewel” and “prize” [4.1.10]) promote sympathy for her, as it indicates his potential to follow Othello into jealous language and, finally, violent behavior. Soranzo’s true partnership is not with Annabella, but with his servant Vasquez, who saves him from the wrath of an ex-lover, Hippolita. Once Vasquez kills Hippolita, Soranzo ardently thanks Vasquez: “I know thee now a trusty servant, / And will never forget thee” (4.1.101-102). Soranzo’s early affection toward Annabella makes his eventual decline into a vicious slur-user (not to mention a suborner of murder) all the more dramatic. Furthermore, his blatant statement of trust in Vasquez initiates his habit of substituting homosocial trust for marital love.

On their wedding night, Soranzo, discovering his wife’s pregnancy, completes his decline from a wooer into a crazed, vicious man accusing his wife of whoredom. As he drags Annabella
onto the stage, he attacks her with multiple epithets in the scene’s first few lines: “Come strumpet, famous whore” and “Harlot, rare, notable harlot” (4.3.1; 4). No longer “my love” (4.1.102), Annabella is abused with insults and threatened with a sword. Like Othello’s, Soranzo’s rage is connected to his vision of his own tainted reputation. He exclaims, “Was there no man in Parma to be bawd / To your loose, cunning, whoredom else but I?” (4.3.6-7). His “Was there no [other] man” reveals his enmeshment in a homosocial net. His pain stems from his negative comparison of himself to luckier, non-cuckolded husbands. His wife is a whore, and he is infuriated by his new role as the shielder of her honor, even, implicitly, her bawd. Soranzo’s terms, “harlot” and “Excellent quean” (4.3.25), identify adultery with prostitution, as is typical on the early modern stage. For Soranzo, the adultery is indeed bad, but that her actions reflect on him and make him “the [feigned] dad to all that gallimaufry in [her] corrupted, bastard-bearing womb” is worse (4.3.12-14). When husbands told stories of adultery in early modern court cases, as Laura Gowing notes, they “testified not only to illicit sex, but to the whole spectrum of disturbances that were associated with it.” 127 That is, the husband complained not only of an unfaithful wife, but of a disrupted household, entailing, most importantly, damage to his own reputation and the destabilizing of his expectation of lawful progeny. Soranzo’s various synonyms for “whore” accordingly illustrate the publicness of Annabella’s wrongdoing. This publicity damages him128 and, thus, when she partially blames him for the situation, saying she would have told him all, but that his “over-loving lordship would have run / Mad” had she done so, he snarls another insult, “Whore of whores!” (4.3.16-17; 20). Like Othello’s, Soranzo’s

127 Gowing, 185.
128 Mark Breitenburg argues that in the early modern world, honor, for men, and chastity, for women, were defining social factors and that masculine honor was typically dependent on female chastity (97-98).
language is reduced to a passion-driven repetition of sexual insults, and Annabella earns more of them because of the potential she has to destroy his reputation.

As Soranzo begins to threaten physically to dismantle the source of his pain – “I’ll hew thy flesh to shreds” (4.3.58) (recall Othello’s “I’ll tear her all to pieces”) – he is interrupted by Vasquez, who, despite his apparent efforts to mitigate Soranzo’s rage, is performing the Iago-like function of stoking it, in a way that befits manly reputation. According to the stage directions, Vasquez, who “gets between ANNABELLA and SORANZO’s sword” (4.3.77), is only temporarily stopping his friend’s abuse, in the service of Soranzo’s standing among men. Vasquez reminds him of the futility of succumbing to anger and murdering Annabella now, in an aside: “Sir, in any case, smother your revenge. Leave the scenting out your wrongs to me. Be ruled, as you respect your honor, or you mar all” (4.3.99-100). Like Iago with Othello, Vasquez uses private moments with Soranzo to fuel his anger with violent language (“smother,” “revenge”), even while he counsels a deadly patience. While Annabella is on stage, he superficially opposes his mater’s threats. When Soranzo argues, “Such a damned whore / Deserves no pity,” Vasquez replies, “And would you be her executioner, and kill her in your rage too? Oh, ‘twere most unmanlike” (4.3.78-81). Here again, Vasquez urges only the postponement of Soranzo’s revenge, while reminding him of an “honor” that will ultimately demand violent retribution. Only when Annabella leaves the stage does Vasquez openly use words to goad Soranzo, asking, “What do you think of your heaven of happiness now, sir?,” to which Soranzo replies, “I carry hell around me. All my blood / Is fired in swift revenge” (4.3.147-150). Later, too, again in the absence of Annabella, Vasquez continues to fuel his friend’s cuckold rage and echoes Soranzo’s anti-female language: “Am I to be believed now? First marry a strumpet, that cast herself away upon you but to laugh at your horns, to feast on your disgrace, riot in your
vexations, cuckold you in your bride-bed, waste your estate upon panderers and bawds—” until Soranzo interrupts him with “No more, I say, no more” (5.2.1-5). Thus Soranzo is bolstered in his revenge by Vasquez, who both calls Annabella “strumpet” and, once again, brings up the importance of Soranzo’s honor and reputation. With Vasquez’s guidance, Soranzo is only stopped from rashly murdering Annabella on his wedding night so that, instead, he can plot slower and more complete revenge against his bride and her incestuous lover.

While Soranzo’s servant, using both homosocial and misogynistic language, supports his vengefulness against Annabella, Annabella enjoys no defense from allies. Her secrets are betrayed by her only female friend, Putana, whose name, ironically, means “whore.” Putana’s name immediately suggests her unreliability and unfaithfulness – common attributes of a “whore” – to her ward. From the beginning of Annabella’s sexual relationship with her brother, Putana becomes a confidante and advocate for incest, thus dooming Annabella from the start. When she learns of Annabella and Giovanni’s incest, Putana states, “I say still, if a young wench feel the fit upon her, let her take anybody; father or brother all is one” (2.1.44-45). As a tutoress, Putana leads Annabella down the garden path. As Lisa Hopkins argues, “what she teaches Annabella is nothing more than a radically debased view of human sexuality.” Putana, who initially encourages her subject’s taboo choice, is later the one who leads Vasquez to Giovanni by revealing the couple’s secrets to him. In an effort to further support Soranzo, Vasquez questions Putana about Annabella and she admits, “I know a little, Vasquez” (4.3.195). She then tells Vasquez of the incest, proudly stating, “I have known their dealings too long to belie them now” (4.3.120-121). Thus Putana betrays Annabella, giving Vasquez incriminating evidence to further incite Soranzo against Annabella.

Though Soranzo does not actually destroy Annabella himself, his locking her away in preparation for his revenge – at the behest of his ally, Vasquez, who tells him “Remember, sir, what you have to do. Be wise and resolute” (5.6.1) – facilitates her destruction. Soranzo’s sequestering of Annabella leaves her vulnerable to her jealous brother, Giovanni, who does the deed for him. Subsequently, seeing Annabella’s heart on a dagger, Soranzo shouts, “I shall burst with fury,” before somewhat illogically ordering Vasquez to “bring the strumpet forth” (5.6.52-53). Soranzo still refers to his wife by a sexual epithet, as an active whore, even after her death. Even the Cardinal, witnessing the deaths, passes more homosocial judgment on the dead Annabella, when he ends the play by repeating the slander: “Who could not say, ‘‘Tis pity she’s a whore’” (5.6.156). Even her corpse is a “whore,” again, the all-purpose term for a woman who deviates sexually (albeit rather radically, in Annabella’s case) from the wifely ideal.\footnote{Annabella’s sexual deviation from the wifely ideal – having a sexual relationship with her brother before marriage – is indeed more twisted than that of most early modern tragic wives.} Soranzo’s spiraling obsession, propelled by his own invective; Vasquez’s destructive “support” of his master’s investment in notions of masculine honor; and Annabella’s moral betrayal by her tutoress contribute to an incestuous union, a marriage destroyed, and multiple deaths. Soranzo himself ends up murdered, his own destruction, like Othello’s, part of the culmination of the tragic marital pattern.

We have seen that in both these plays, when tragic husbands experience a threat to their masculine identity by allegedly, or really, disobedient wives, they begin to insult their wives with anti-female epithets to protest loss of control of the woman. As the jealous husbands vocalize their anger through epithets and threats of violence, they are dutifully supported by their male friends, who guide the cuckolded husband to the proper form of revenge. The wives are left with
no friend or ally, only a deadly fate, once they are labeled “whore,” and are not given any social weapons to defend themselves against masculine rage.

Another tragic couple who exhibit this pattern are Mariam and Herod from Elizabeth Cary’s closet drama, *The Tragedy of Mariam, the Fair Queen of Jewry*, first published in 1613. The play, never staged during Cary’s lifetime, is described by Karen Britland as “valuable first-hand evidence of an early modern woman’s [the author’s] negotiation of the cultural mores that urged upon her chastity, silence, and obedience.”\(^\text{131}\) Although Cary’s play was inspired by Jewish historian Josephus’ “account of Herod the Great’s troubled marriage to the royal-blooded Jewish woman Mariam,”\(^\text{132}\) and the biblical story of Herod, “Slaughterer of Innocents,”\(^\text{133}\) Cary’s Mariam voices complaints about the expectations of women preached in early modern conduct books: female silence and submission to their husbands. The play accomplished this complaint through dramatizing the actions of an abusive, overbearing husband who is moved to violence when he suspects his wife of unfaithfulness. Barry Weller and Margaret Ferguson assert that Cary’s play is comparable to *Othello* because its “drama of jealousy” asks the “question of the appropriate female response to male tyranny.”\(^\text{134}\) Indeed, Cary’s Herod exhibits the same pattern of degradation as Othello and Soranzo, wherein the husband suspects unfaithfulness, uses anti-female language, and ultimately accomplishes or facilitates the murder of a wife who evades his moral control. Like these early modern husbands, Herod is destroyed by this process.

Cary’s play tells the story of Mariam, second wife of King Herod, who had murdered Mariam’s brother and grandfather in order to secure his right to the throne (6-11). The play


\(^{133}\) Ibid., 20. Weller and Ferguson cite The Gospel of Matthew (2:1) as Cary’s source for the biblical tyrant, Herod.

\(^{134}\) Ibid., 42.
begins with Mariam alone, lamenting and conflicted, for Herod is now thought dead after traveling to Rome. Because of her husband’s prior violence against her family and because of his jealousy, Mariam admits that she has often wished to be free of Herod. However, Mariam is a chaste wife who has always been loyal to her husband, so the rumors of his death are troubling. Her mother, Alexandra, scolds her for loving a man who has betrayed their family and could, at any moment, if still alive, leave Mariam to return to his first wife, Doris. For her part, Salome, Herod’s sister, reproaches Mariam because she believes she plotted Herod’s death. Salome also begins to plot to rid herself of Mariam. As Salome continues to scheme for her own gain, Mariam receives news of Herod’s return from Sohemus, a counsellor to Herod and a friend to herself, but decides that she will no longer share a bed with Herod because she can no longer do so with integrity, given his crimes against her family. When the couple is reunited, a poisoned cup is delivered to Herod by a butler hired by Salome. Herod’s discovery of the poison, along with Mariam’s aloofness, sends Herod into a jealous rage against his wife. Herod imprisons her and, with the support of Salome, orders Mariam’s execution.

Mariam’s complicated response to the surprise reappearance of her husband, along with a Chorus’s recitation of the proper duties of a wife, triggers Herod’s decline, resulting in his downward spiral from a man excited to reunite with his wife to a jealous, angry murderer in just two scenes. Mariam, while still thinking her husband dead, expresses her dilemma: “When Herod lived, that now is done to death, / Oft have I wished that I from him were free, / Oft have I wished that he might lose his breath.” But she also experiences a loyal wife’s sadness: “Then why grieves Mariam Herod’s death to hear?” (1.1.15-17; 38). In her mourning, Mariam recalls “Herod’s jealousy” which “Had power even constancy itself to change” and his “barring [her] from liberty” (1.1.24-25;26). Her husband’s violent emotions and cruel restrictions could have
driven her to be unfaithful to try to escape him, but Mariam is a devoted wife. She states, “yet too chaste a scholar was my heart / To learn to love another than my lord” (1.1.27-28). Thus Mariam begins the play declaring her chastity. This is an opportunity few tragic wives receive. Her statement of personal virtue, however, does not alter the tragic pattern, as she is subsequently tormented by other women and afflicted with her jealous husband’s return.

Mariam differs from Desdemona and Annabella in that she can recognize the danger constituted by other women. The play begins, as Jeanne Addison Roberts describes it, “within a world of women” where no men speak for several scenes, but, despite the potential for female allegiance, Mariam guards herself against the verbal attacks of other females. As her mother, Alexandra, approaches, Mariam coaches herself to stop weeping over Herod’s death: “tears, fly back, and hide you in your banks: / You must not be to Alexandra seen” (1.1.76-77). Justifying Mariam’s distrust, Alexandra immediately gives a long speech chastising her daughter for her fidelity to a man who murdered her brother and grandfather. Alexandra coarsely brings up Herod’s ex-wife, Doris, another potentially spiteful female: “Who knows if [Herod] – inconstant, wavering lord – / His love to Doris had renewed again, / And, that he might his bed to her afford, / Perchance he wished that Mariam might be slain” (1.2.49-52) Alexandra fails to commiserate with her unfortunate daughter in her grief, and then torments her by attempting to provoke jealousy, (Mary Beth Rose correctly classifies Alexandra’s “cruel taunt” as an attempt to “underscore Mariam’s unstable position.”) After bearing the abuse of her mother, Mariam is attacked by Herod’s sister, Salome, who, as noted, accuses Mariam of “plotting,” saying,

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“Mariam hopes to have another king: / Her eyes do sparkle joy for Herod’s death” (1.3.1; 3-4).
Because of Alexandra’s and Salome’s open hostility to Mariam, she is able correctly to identify them as antagonists, and to note that Salome is a “base woman” (1.3.17). The result is that Mariam’s isolation is clear to her as well as to the audience from the outset. Unlike Desdemona and Annabella, she does not have even a false sense of feminine support. Mariam is aware of and dramatizes her solitude.

The solitude is accentuated by the play’s masculine choral voice. For not only is Mariam undermined and attacked by other female characters in the play, she is also scolded by the Chorus, a typical convention in closet drama, who are analogous to the protagonist’s male allies in Othello and ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore. According to Barry Weller and Margaret Ferguson, the Chorus is “an anonymous group of elders putatively representing the collective wisdom of the community,” making the Chorus another affliction Mariam must bear: the patriarchal Jewish community is against her, just as are her female companions Alexandra and Salome. Like Iago or Vasquez, the Chorus describes Mariam’s mistakes as a wife. In their first speech, the Chorus notes her hypocrisy in that “Mariam wishes she from her lord were free, / For expectation of variety,” and “She grieves, because her lord so soon did die,” yet, “Were Herod now perchance to live again, / She could again as much be grieved at that” (1.6.143-144; 146; 149-150). Mariam’s inconsistency is criticized by the Chorus, which later warns against the shortsightedness of her wish for freedom from Herod’s “rage and scorn” (1.1.19), stating, “They [the women] think not of the peril that ensu’th / If this [news of Herod’s death] prove contrary to the truth” (2.4.145-146). Herod does return, alive, and the Chorus then expresses their disdain for

137 Britland, xi.
138 Weller and Ferguson, 35. See also Michael Ingham, “‘Admit me Chorus to this history’: Shakespeare’s M.C.s and Chorus Commentators – How Medieval, How Early Modern?” Neophilologus, 103, no. 2 (2019): 255-271. Ingham argues that an Elizabethan Chorus, like a Greek one, represented the community viewpoint.
Mariam’s actions in his absence. Her wish to be free from Herod’s tyrannical rule over her, though it renders her sympathetic to Cary’s readership, is not the typical desire of a devoted wife, as the Chorus notes. As the conflicted Mariam does not know how exactly to react to the news of Herod’s alleged death, but cannot help but think of freedom, the Chorus can only summarize and restate her wrongdoings.

Thus Mariam is surrounded by the suffocating presence of unsupportive female characters and an omniscient, judgmental, and homosocially supportive Chorus, who argues the vices of women, before her husband even appears on the stage for the first time. Her isolation is thus pitiable when, faced with the news that Herod is still alive, she decides explicitly to forswear her husband: “I will not to his love be reconciled; / With solemn vows I have forsworn his bed.” (3.3.15-16). The one character to care for Mariam’s wellbeing is Sohemus, who identifies the danger of Mariam’s exercising sexual independence from her husband (choosing celibacy): she will be “by herself undone” (3.3.30). Her trust that her pure motives will protect her – “Mine innocence is hope enough for me” (3.3.62) – is a delusion marked by the Chorus, who, less sympathetically and more confusingly than Sohemus, explains the danger of an independently thinking wife: “she usurps upon another’s right / That seeks to be by public language graced, / And though her thoughts reflect with purest light, / Her mind, if not peculiar [devoted to her one husband], is not chaste” (3.3.121-124).139

When Herod enters the scene, Mariam’s assertion of independence combines with Salome’s maliciousness to initiate Herod’s jealousy – a jealousy which will culminate in the anti-women epithets characteristic of the early modern tragic husband. When the butler, hired by

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139 Mariam’s private declaration of independence from the patriarchy of her household echoes the rebellion of Cordelia in *King Lear*, according to Elisa Oh. Mariam’s vow of silence, like Cordelia’s decision to “Love, and be silent,” in the face of her father’s demand that she speak (1.1.68), leaves her exposed to masculine rage and threats of violence.
Salome, brings the poisoned drink he falsely claims the “queen desired” to be delivered to him (4.4.2), Herod launches a fury of insults at his wife. His “dear” becomes “painted devil” and “white enchantress,” as he accuses Mariam of having betrayed him with Sohemus (4.4.17-18).

Mariam’s assertion of independent desire (or desire for independence), combined with a suspicious drink, frustrate husbandly expectations. They stoke Herod’s fury at her presumed lack of faith. Like Othello, who laments that the beauty of a woman’s form could shield unwholesome “appetites” (3.3.269-270), Herod’s epithets contrast Mariam’s lovely outside with her allegedly evil inside. His remarks on Mariam’s deceitful appearance parallel Othello’s description of Desdemona as “fair devil” (3.3.479) and “fair paper” despoiled by the written word “whore”: “A beauteous body hides a loathsome soul,” “Hell itself lies hid, / Beneath thy heavenly show.” She is a “false creature” (Mariam 4.4.20; 45-46; 69). His complaint about Mariam’s hypocrisy, her painted outside compared to her devilish inside, complements the Chorus’ low expectations for Mariam: “And sad must be their looks, their honour sour” (1.6.153). In other words, women’s solemnly chaste outsides hide their lascivious insides. Women should be what they seem. To deviate from this rule is to exercise an unacceptable presumptuousness, even though, paradoxically, deviation from the rule is the very hallmark of the female.

The most deadly stage of the tragic marital pattern for Herod and Mariam is not long in arriving. Herod’s jealous anger drives him to threaten Mariam’s life, stating, “for impurity shall Mariam die,” and (again echoing Othello) “Thou shalt not live, fair fiend, to cozen more” (4.4.34; 55). Ironically, it is Mariam’s silence – normally a desired wifely attribute – in the face of Herod’s threats, that maddens him further. As Christina Luckyj notes, while silence was expected of a wife, silence in the face of an accusation could also be construed by a husband to
be a confession of guilt.\textsuperscript{140} Thus, here, also, the performance of an ideal wifely behavior has tragic results.

Masculine jealousy, fueled and marked by anti-female epithets, homosocial choral support, and feminine betrayal, all work together to doom Mariam. She is ultimately imprisoned while Herod makes his final brutal decisions with the help of Salome. Working to destroy Mariam, Salome reiterates the insults against her first stated by Herod, reminding him, “She speaks a beauteous language, but within / Her heart is false as powder” (4.7.73-74). The lines recall Othello’s summary judgment of Desdemona, “She was false as water” (5.2.134). Mariam, however, lacks even a deathbed advocate like Desdemona’s Emilia. In prison, she is visited only by Doris, Herod’s vindictive ex-wife, who exclaims, “Your soul is black and spotted, full of sin; / You in adult’ry lived nine year together, / And heaven will never let adult’ry in” (4.8.52-54). Later, the Chorus will also offer its critical opinion on what Mariam should have done while in jail: “Had Mariam scorned to leave a due unpaid / She would to Herod then have paid her love, / And not have been by sullen passion swayed” (4.8.135-137). “Passion,” ironically, here describes Mariam’s desire for celibacy; her repugnance for the man who killed members of her family and corralled her in marriage. Suspected of adultery by her husband, attacked verbally by other women, and misjudged by the Chorus, Mariam is left isolated and, finally, self-critical. At the end, she accuses herself. She recognizes that her choice no longer to rest content in her marriage has sealed her death warrant: “Had not myself against myself conspired, / No plot, no adversary from without, / Could Herod’s love from Mariam have retired” (4.8.9-11). Divided from any kind of protection, and even from her own good opinion, Mariam disintegrates. Her

\textsuperscript{140} Luckyj, 'A Moving Rhetoricke': Gender and Silence in Early Modern England (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 71.
final fragmentation is seen in the manner of her execution: decapitation. Whereas Othello and Soranzo fantasized about chopping their wives into pieces, Herod achieves this grisly aim.

Mariam dies a victim of her husband’s moral surrender to jealousy, marked by the standard masculine weapon against female independence, anti-woman sexual invective. Herod’s own ruined state completes the tragic marital pattern. When a messenger comes with news that Mariam has been forever silenced – “Her body is divided from her head” (5.1.90) – Herod bewails his decision. Like Othello, Herod has followed the self-destructive track of willfully entertained suspicion stoked by others, recourse to anti-woman epithets, and self-diminishing physical violence against his wife – even though, in his case (as, in a way, in Soranzo’s), the violence is performed by deputy. Now, also like Othello, he perceives that his discarding of his wife, envisioned in woman-objectifying terms as a lost gem, amounts to self-loss. He pivots from cursing to praising Mariam, calling her “jewel,” and damning himself: “Herod’s wretched self hath Herod crossed” (5.1.119; 132). Bleakly, Jennifer Heller points out that Herod is only ready to believe in Mariam’s purity once she is dead, which suggests that he is only ready to believe her when she can no longer argue. As in Othello’s case, only when his wife is silenced can Herod see that the error of his ways were directly connected to the error of his words. Herod exclaims, “My word, though not my sword, made Mariam bleed” (5.1.189).

Thus Shakespeare’s Othello, Ford’s ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore, and Cary’s The Tragedy of Mariam all dramatize the destruction of a married couple via words. A heterosocial community ostensibly supportive of the husband actually contributes to the severance of the marital bond, through encouraging the replacement of affectionate expressions by misogynistic slurs. The inflammatory language, which both expresses and stokes jealousy, culminates in physical

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violence and the pathetic isolation – and, in two cases, the death – of its perpetrator, the jealous husband. Ironically, this tragic process owes much to the ideals which govern the represented husband’s and even the wife’s expectations of marriage, ideals expressed in early modern sermons and conduct books which preached extreme feminine chastity, obedience, and silence for wives, and, for husbands, masculine control.
3. Innocent and Guilty “Whores”: A Universal Insult

In Renaissance literature, anti-woman epithets like “whore” can be all-encompassing misogynistic descriptions of any sort of female wrongdoer, or women perceived as such. In some tragic stage-marriages, sexual slurs are used against women who practice any kind of deception. The use of such negative epithets against women really or apparently guilty of any crime reinforces men’s suspicions and, in a circular fashion, validates the epithets, particularly for the men. Chapter Two revealed how a jealous male character’s language to his wife becomes offensive as soon as he believes he has been sexually betrayed by her, that his abusive language reflects his anger at this perceived loss of control, and that his thinking, darkened by the insults he himself has voiced, is stoked by male supporters until anger becomes murder. In this chapter, I will show how sexual slurs are also widely used against female perpetrators in a way that imaginatively converts every feminine misstep into a sexual offense. Not only wives suspected of adultery are accused of whoredom. Female characters who facilitate others’ adulterous relationships, who commit or collaborate in murder, or who appear in any other way dishonest or devious can earn the same misogynistic epithets. Yet, in these plays, abusive language and violent behavior toward female “criminals” is not flatly condoned by the playwrights. Indeed, the destructive effects even of justified masculine suspicion on the male character (as well as on the
woman’s life) are vividly dramatized. Thus these plays do not suggest that a woman’s partial responsibility for men’s obsessive and destructive behavior justifies her mistreatment. Instead, the plays underscore women’s status as independent actors through disclosing their participation in tragic situations. Like the plays earlier discussed, these plays show that feminine independence tends to threaten and madden men.

Early modern playwrights portrayed both innocent and guilty women accused of whoredom on stage, and both kinds of women are labeled with the same negative epithets. A tragic husband can lose control of himself after he expresses the view that he has lost control of his wife – or the discovery that he has married a woman capable of acting as an independent being – which prompts him to begin using “whore” and synonymous terms to describe and insult his wife. Yet, when women have indeed betrayed their husbands, they bear some guilt for the masculine anxiety that expresses itself in abusive language. Three early modern tragedies, the anonymous *The Tragedy of Master Arden of Faversham*, Thomas Middleton’s *The Changeling*, and John Webster’s *The White Devil*, each approach sexual slurs differently. Their female protagonists, Alice Arden, Beatrice-Joanna, and Vittoria Corombona, respectively, are assaulted with misogynistic terms by their husbands and other men in response to their devious actions. However, in depicting their female protagonists, the playwrights vary. Some reiterate the common stereotypes found in the popular pamphlets that painted all women as actual, potential, or future whores. Others challenged these stereotypes. Some alternately reproduced and criticized the stereotypes. Alice Arden fully conforms to the popular character of a murderess: an adulterous woman who conspires with others to murder her husband but then repents after the deed is done. *The Changeling* shows a stereotypical “whore/murderess” in the character of Beatrice, but juxtaposes Beatrice with a more realistic, lively, yet chaste woman in the play’s
comic subplot. Finally, *The White Devil* challenges anti-woman sexual language by having Vittoria actively resist the label of “whore,” yet ultimately shows her succumbing to that characterization, suggesting the persistent power of sexual slurs. Early modern playwrights, then, present a spectrum of female criminals, ranging from stereotypical to morally ambiguous heroines. Yet the playwrights all dramatize the punishment of guilty women, whatever degree of guilt they are shown to bear. All are murdered by men, and thus are made bloody instructive examples of the danger of transgressions against patriarchs, brothers, and husbands.

As suggested above, the stereotypical early modern female criminal or “whore” was not just the subject of early modern drama. Moral pamphleteers and conduct book authors warned men of the dangers of deceptive women, describing them using the ubiquitous anti-female sexual epithets. The warnings which appeared in such early modern publications often referred to women with degrading terms even when the “deceptive” behavior was mundane. The Bible, too, warned men to be wary of women, instructing them not to be fooled by appearance and speech. Proverbs cautions, “For the lips of a strange woman drop as an honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil: But her end is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword.”\(^\text{142}\) In his 1613 work, *The Excellency of Good Women*, Barnabie Rych echoes the Biblical warning by declaring, “O beware therefore of the subtleties of a Harlot, beware of her hypocrizie, beware of her dissimulation, beware of her when she once beginneth to counterfeit holiness.”\(^\text{143}\) The woman who dissimulates is a danger to men. Thomas Bedon, in his 1564 *The Book of Matrimony*, advises that a woman must refrain from all “light gestures,” for “the whoredom of a

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\(^{142}\) Proverbs 5:3-4 (KJV).

woman may be known by the pride of her eyes and eye lids.”\textsuperscript{144} For Stephen Gosson, almost any kind of overabundance of expressive feminine behavior could indicate whorishness if it was not checked or regulated. “I set not this downe too condemne the giftes of versifying, dauncing, or singyng, so they bee used with meane, and excercised in due tyme’’’” (my emphasis).\textsuperscript{145} Shakespeare’s Othello voices a similar concern, saying he will not be jealous because Desdemona “is fair, feeds well, loves company, / Is free of speech, sings, plays and dances well” \textit{as long as} she is virtuous: “where virtue is, these [actions] are more virtuous” (\textit{Othello} 3.3.197-200). The implication is that these actions are intrinsically suspicious, since you can’t really know “where virtue is” – or if it is – in a woman. Even in a comedy, Shakespeare suggests that unrestricted merriment signifies licentiousness. In \textit{The Merry Wives of Windsor}, Falstaff justifies his adulterous intentions in a letter to Mistress Page that argues, “You are merry, so am I,” and Mistress Page defends herself by saying she wasn’t laughing \textit{too} hard: “I was then frugal with my mirth” (2.1.7; 27). Whoredom, then, could be inferred from an “immodest” gesture or even from “too much” merriment. The early modern woman did not need to commit actual adultery or another crime to earn sexualized insults.

When English Renaissance women did act in radically unruly ways, committing adultery, murder, or both, some male pamphleteers were quick to pass judgment by creating accounts of their crimes that emphasized the sexual nature of their motives. Susan Straub describes Elizabethan and Jacobean murder pamphlets as rapidly produced for a general audience, and asserts that, because of their wide distribution, these pamphlets “clearly reflect the period’s


contradictory attitudes, particularly toward women.”

Some pamphlets concocted fictional accounts of adulteresses-turned-murderesses’ convictions and executions. In the narrative accounts of murder cases, the characterizations of the evil women were paradoxical: monster yet innocent victim, weak yet capable of murder, sympathetic yet despicable. According to Frances Dolan, the crafted fictions about female criminals circulating in the early modern period were an “attempt to restore the order threatened by wifely insubordination,” warning women about the potential legal punishment of murder – burning at the stake – but also warning men to be wary of female transgressions.

Negative sexual epithets were also used by murder pamphlets’ authors in an attempt to demean the convicted unruly women, and terms like “strumpet” or “adulteress” – which suggest licentiousness is the root of all female crime – often appear right after the author writes compassionately about a woman. Contradictory attitudes like Straub and Dolan describe appear in pamphlets such as Henry Goodcole’s *The Adultresses Funerall Day*, published in 1635. Goodcole immediately passes sexualized judgment on Alice Clark, a convicted murderess, by titling his pamphlet so as to emphasize her adultery, not the murder for which she is being put to death. Furthermore, Goodcole adds the negative epithet “strumpet” to an imagined murder scene. The poisoned husband gasps to his wife, “Nay, thou Strumpet and murderess, I will receive no help at all, but I am resolved to die and leave the world be it for no other cause but to have thee burnt at a stake for my death.” Yet, right before the “strumpet” epithet, Goodcole has described Alice as a “wretched creature,” beaten and abused by her husband, “weary of so
wretched a life,” and therefore tempted by the devil to murder her husband.\textsuperscript{150} Goodcole’s pamphlet includes the confessions of Alice Clark, but her words exist within a narrative crafted by him, the male author, in which she is both “strumpet” and “wretched creature,” a stereotype of a sexualized female criminal even while she attempts to explain her motives.

Other murderess accounts are similar to Goodcole’s in that compassionate comments are swiftly followed by lurid details of the murder, imagined dialogue and situations surrounding the act, the confession of the murderess, and, most importantly, sexualized language and emphasis on the punishments the murderess received: burning at the stake and spiritual degradation.\textsuperscript{151} The murder of a husband in early modern England was classified as petty treason, or the murder of one’s lord.\textsuperscript{152} Dolan therefore argues that accounts of murdered husbands “explore the most extreme, visible, threatening scenarios of [feminine] resistance,” warning men of the possibility of the worst feminine deviance.\textsuperscript{153} Such warnings drown out the initial compassion shown by the authors for the guilty women. For instance, the anonymous author of a 1608 pamphlet titled \textit{The Arraignment and Burning of Margaret Ferne-seede for the Murther of her Late Husband Anthony Ferne-seede} introduces Margaret as a pitiable and “wretched woman,” but then describes her in derogatory terms, associating her act of murder with “all the looseness and lewdness of life, which either unlawfull lust, or abominable prostitution could violently cast upon her with the greatest infamie,” and saying she exhibited “publique. . . unchastitie.”\textsuperscript{154} Such warnings against murderous, lustful women, presented to both male and female readers by male

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\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 132-133.
\textsuperscript{151} See, for instance, the anonymous ballad \textit{The Vnnatural VVife}, Printed at London: For M. T[ru]ndle widdow, 1628, which features the repeated call of a woman on the stake calling “oh murther, / most inhumane, / To spill my husband’s blood.”
\textsuperscript{152} Dolan, 22.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 26, 31.
\textsuperscript{154} \textit{The Araignement & Burning of Margaret Ferne-Seede for the Murther of Her Late Husband Anthony Ferne-Seede}, 1608. London: Printed [by E. Allde] for Henry Gosson, and are to be solde at the signe of the sunne in Pater-noster-rowe, 1-2.
\end{verbatim}
pamphleteers, construct the murderess as fully motivated by her uncontrollable sexuality. Although the authors do show small amounts of sympathy for the murderesses, they then effectively retract that sympathy, overwhelmingly identifying feminine violence against men as ineradicably, fundamentally, and perversely sexual by way of including sexual epithets and otherwise insulting language. Thus male pamphleteers wrote about murderesses, extreme examples of female unruliness, as a way to warn all men to keep an eye on even the common unruliness that sprang from women’s sexual nature.

Murderous adulteresses were commonly described in pamphlets, ballads, and other publications during the early modern period because, as Betty Travitsky and Susan Straub argue, male authors were fascinated with women who had “broken out of the bounds held for a society with a rigidly ordered hierarchy.” However, the Renaissance playwrights found models for deviant and even murderous women in works dating as far back as Euripides’ Medea, circa 431 BC, and Aeschylus’ Agamemnon, circa 458 BC. Agamemnon dramatizes the Greek king’s return home to his wife, Clytemnestra, who is described as having a “manlike spirit” in the opening lines of the play, foreshadowing her deviant actions and disconnecting her from desired wifely submissiveness (11). (A frequent paradox in anti-woman literature is the contradictory claim that it is women’s evil nature to be unruly, but, at the same time, unruly women are unnaturally masculine.) Although A. F. Garvie argues that Clytemnestra initially feigns the traditional role of the “waiting wife,” announcing that being at home without her husband has caused her “crushing pain” only as part of her pretense of innocence (l. 854), her complaint is actually

powerful because of her compelling description of the hardship soldiers’ wives faced. She has suffered through “so many crossed reports” of her husband’s fate that they’ve caused her suicidal anguish (855; 867-869). Eventually Clytemnestra, however, shows her true murderous and lustful intentions: to enact revenge against her husband for the sacrifice of their daughter and to maintain an adulterous relationship with her lover Aegisthus. Cassandra, Agamemnon’s captured concubine, correctly prophesizes the death of Agamemnon and describes Clytemnestra in terms which stress her female animality and deceptiveness: “He knows not what the tongue of a hateful bitch / That talked so long and smilingly like Ate / In secret, will devise him to his hurt!” (1225-1227). Clytemnestra herself sexualizes her crime, telling the audience she feels “A nuptial dainty-dish of new delight” at the prospect of murdering the king (1445). Yet, her moral ambiguity continues, as despite her self-presentation as a sexualized criminal, Clytemnestra again arouses some sympathy in the audience when she articulates her justification of the murder: she “by the perfect vengeance of [her] child” has “slain this man” (1430-1432). Furthermore, after the murder she credibly places the blame on her husband in a sympathetic speech, asking whether he “did not . . . in his own house place / The root of a crafty, foul disgrace” by sacrificing their daughter in exchange for fair sailing winds to Troy (1519-1520). A mixture of sympathy and condemnation is thus found in the complicated presentation of Clytemnestra, a monstrous mankiller who justifies her murderous behavior by clearly documenting her husband’s criminal paternal unnaturalness and her own miserable experience as a long-abandoned wife.

Euripides’ Medea is also paradoxically portrayed as both sympathetic and overwhelmingly wicked. Because Medea is distressed about her husband’s decision to cast her off and remarry, Medea’s Nurse opens the play lamenting that Medea “may think of some dreadful thing / For her heart is violent”\(^{159}\) (Medea ll. 37-38). Medea is indeed enraged that her husband, Jason, has “turned out so wholly vile,” and thus hopes to get revenge: “If I can find the means or devise any scheme / To pay my husband back for what he has done to me. . .” (229; 260-261). Medea assures herself that women are “the cleverest of contrivers” (409). She eventually murders her husband’s mistress and even her own children to make Jason suffer, and is rightly called “monster, murderess of children” by her husband (1047). Her actions, rooted in sexual jealousy, make her “A monster, not a woman” (1342). She chooses sexual vengeance over maternal instinct. Still, Medea is persuasive and sympathetic when she confronts her husband about his crimes, clearly stating that she has saved his life only for him to betray her: “you forsook me, took another bride to bed, / Though you had children” (489-490). Medea’s speech is designed to elicit sympathy from the audience, as she gives a detailed description of the ways she has been wronged and her impending sad future after Jason remarries: “I am cast out of the land and go into exile, / Quite without friends and all alone with my children, / That will be a fine shame for the new-wedding groom, / For his children to wander as beggars and she who saved him” (512-515). By the end of the play, Medea is not punished, but actually saved and literally supported by the sun-god Helios, who appears on his dragon-drawn chariot both to rescue her and to present her children’s corpses to Jason (s.d. 1316). Once again, a murderess is presented paradoxically: condemned because of her acts of murder, then rendered sympathetic in a speech

\(^{159}\) All quotes from The Medea are from Rex Warner’s translation, Euripides I, ed. by David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955).
which stresses her husband’s abuse, and finally redeemed by a god whose blessing validates her complaints.

Classical examples of the murderous woman thus predict the pattern found in early modern murderess pamphlets, whereby the victim/perpetrator is both sympathetic and wicked. And when we come to early modern playwrights, we find a similar paradox, particularly in tragedies. The tragic playwrights often challenge the stereotypes that would root the female criminal’s actions in sexual guilt, while elsewhere they reinforce the stereotype, representing any kind of deviance from masculine direction as a form of sexual betrayal.

As I argued in my second chapter, even female stage characters who don’t commit adultery frequently receive the insulting label of “whore.” Yet, while characters like Mariam, Queen of Jewry’s Mariam and Othello’s Desdemona are innocent of major crimes, they display the seeds of a frightening independence which provokes their husbands’ sexual jealousy and murderous actions. Early modern tragic playwrights show an awareness of a feminine mental autonomy which makes women uncontrollable by and, thus, apparently dangerous to men. Mariam’s decision to be “more foe than friend,” and therefore show her husband that her happiness does not depend on him, is what dooms her (Mariam 1.1.61). Even more perilous is her act of confronting her husband about his crimes against her family, as when she scolds him: “had you wished the wretched Mariam glad / Or had your love to her been truly tied – / Nay, had you not desired to make her sad – / My brother nor my grandsire had not died” (4.3.27-30). Mariam does not commit adultery, but she does defy her husband. Because Herod cannot understand this honest wife who exhibits thoughts and emotions that are different from his own,
he reads Mariam as unfaithful. Again, overt deviance from masculine direction is understood by male characters as sexual betrayal.

Yet wives who are suspected cannot win, because suppressing their independent knowledge or will is also interpreted as implicit or potential sexual betrayal, as we see in the case of Desdemona. Like Mariam, Desdemona confesses only in an aside that she has a private self: “I am not merry, but I do beguile / The thing I am by seeming otherwise” (*Othello* 2.1.124-125). Later, Desdemona inadvertently stokes Othello’s jealousy when she lies to him when questioned about the whereabouts of his lost gift, the strawberry-spotted handkerchief. First saying anxiously, “It is not lost; but what an if it were?,” she then more definitely asserts the untruth he suspects: “I say it is not lost” (3.4.85; 87).

To the possessive husband, women are not to be trusted if they confess to independent judgment, *or* if they hide private knowledge or views. Small instances of deviation or escape from male-authored plans or surveillance contribute to Herod’s and Othello’s increasingly paranoiac utterances. The fundamental innocence of these “whores,” whose husbands’ suspicions are prompted not by profound marital betrayal but simply by wives’ forthright speech or trivial dishonesty, is rewarded by their creators (the playwrights) in the manner of their deaths. Rather than being stabbed and left to die on stage, like, for example, Middleton’s corrupt and lusty Beatrice-Joanna – whose trespasses I will later discuss – Desdemona retains an intact body (“Yet I’ll not shed her blood,” Othello says [5.2.3]), and Mariam is executed off stage, her corpse never shown. Yet the doubting husbands’ pain and on-stage collapse match those of husbands with wives who are genuinely sexually guilty. For male characters, the “whore” epithet, and other synonymous terms, carries an inescapable destructive power, whatever crime motivates its use.
When we turn back from stage portrayals of these relatively innocent “whores” to those of women guilty of serious crimes, we find variations on the murderesses of the popular pamphlets. While most early modern playwrights complicate the stereotypical adulteress/murderess character, the anonymous The Tragedy of Master Arden of Faversham, first printed in 1592 (its early performance history is unknown), captures and conforms to the simplest version of the sexualized female criminal stereotype. The play tells the story of one Thomas Arden, who was allegedly murdered by the design of his wife, Alice. The tragedy was drawn from a brief story in the Breviat Chronicle in 1551, which described how “a gentilman was by the consent of his wife mourthered.” The news of this murder spread quickly, as did the news that Alice was committing adultery with a man named Mosby, and the details inspired multiple pamphlets and broadsides, as well as the play, which depicts Alice as a plotting, ruthless woman who hates her husband and wishes to exchange him for another man. As in the murder pamphlets of the period, the play passes judgment on Alice not only as a murderess but as a woman depraved by her sexuality. The subtitle of the play reads, “… wherein is shewed the great malice and discimulation of a wicked woman, the unsatiable desire of filtie lust and the shamefull end of all murderers.” Alice’s wickedness is thus directly connected to her “fithie” lust for another man. Although she plans the murder of her husband along with Mosby – first buying poison, then hiring men to stab him in his home when the poison fails – it is only she, the lustful woman, who receives blame and verbal abuse from the other characters. Carol Mejia-LaPerle notes that the play “elides” Mosby’s role in the murder and simplifies Arden’s understanding of

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161 Ibid., xxxvii-xxxviii.
his wife’s maliciousness. Arden’s shame as well as his inability to improve his wife are also shown, as he explains to a friend, “she is rooted in her wickedness, / Perverse and stubborn, not to be reclaimed; / Good counsel is to her as rain to weeds” (4.9-11). Juli Parker contends that Arden shares some of the blame for his fate because he is an unsuccessful head of household who does not properly react to his wife’s affair. However, as Parker also points out, the playwright’s endorsement of the popular stereotype of the female criminal as uncontrollable and sexual is paramount. Alice’s character demonstrates the twinned traits of maliciousness and lasciviousness that can be seen in the convicted murderesses depicted in pamphlets. (Of course, as in those depictions of female criminals, Alice’s words also exist in a male-authored account.) She admits in a short soliloquy that Mosby is the one she wants and, “Whether it be or no, he shall be mine / In spite of him, of Hymen, and of rites” (1.103-104). Forswearing her marriage vows, Alice is clear about her carnal motives. As Mejia-LaPerle argues, as Alice sees it, “Her love takes precedence over the empty words of love exchanged in the marriage ceremony.” The audience may feel some sympathy for Alice when, like the wretched women of the murder pamphlets, she complains that Mosby is the cause of her moral downfall: “Have I for this given thee so many favours, / Incurred my husband’s hate, and – out alas! -- / Made shipwreck of mine honour for thy sake?” (1.187-89). However, her pathos is overwhelmed by the play’s clear dramatization of her instigating role in the adulterous relationship and the murder. Even her lover Mosby laments, “A woman’s love is as the lightning flame / Which even in bursting forth consumes itself” (1.207-208). She incurs her downfall, and that of others. Her complaints about

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164 Mejia-LaPerle, 183.
her victimization are only part of a whorish performance, designed to ensure the continuing satisfaction of her illicit desire. Biblical warnings against smooth-tongued women recur throughout the play. When Mosby considers abandoning Alice, but is persuaded by her to stay, he exclaims, “Ah, how you women can insinuate / And clear a trespass with your sweet-set tongue” (8.146-47), repeating Proverbs’ injunction to beware a woman who speaks sweetly but hides her true intentions. The play’s dialogue stresses the female criminal’s manipulativeness and inextinguishable lust.

Alice, then, is among the worst of the stereotypical female criminals in that her crime of murder is deeply sexualized, meaning her desire for Mosby, rather than pre-existing marital misery, is shown as the murder’s main cause. Accordingly, she is peppered in the dialogue with sexual slurs. During one of her schemes to murder her husband Arden – attempting to lure him into a crowd so hired men may stab him – Alice walks arm in arm with Mosby. Seeing her, the suspicious Arden, enraged, calls her “Injurious strumpet” (13.78), noting both her cruelty and unfaithfulness to him and her uncontrollable sexuality. The brazen Alice continues to exercise the harlot-like skills of which even Mosby accused her, using her “sweet-set tongue” to remove suspicion from herself, accusing Arden of being a “jealous harebrain man,” and saying she is a “Poor wench abused by [his] misgovernment” (13.89; 113). As Julie Schutzman argues, Alice “flagrantly deploys the public fact of her adultery against her husband and deflects social censure onto him,” in an attempt to “evade and redirect” the judgment of other characters.165 Even Alice recognizes herself as “an odious strumpet” (8.72; 75), sexualizing her own crime even before she is called “strumpet” by any other character. She is the double, deceptive harlot of masculine nightmares.

Of course, like the pamphlet murderesses, the “Alice” constructed by the anonymous playwright cannot escape general social condemnation, or ultimate punishment. Despite her ability to manipulate other characters’ opinions while she is planning Arden’s murder, after Arden is stabbed in his home – by her as well as the hired murderers -- Alice’s behavior becomes more notably chaotic. Her mask of virtue slips, and she earns sexual slurs from others who observe her. She cannot sustain the disguise. In the aftermath of the crime, Alice thus changes from a savvy manipulator to a crazed Lady Macbeth, exclaiming in a front of a neighbor, in the house where Arden was killed, “But with my nails I’ll scrape away the blood” (14.256). Alice’s physicality in this scene, her action of clawing at the bloody floor, bestializes her crime through her gestures. She is behaving like an animal, and doing so heedless of who watches. Inevitably, like any pamphlet murderess, she becomes the recipient of public language which both accuses her of violence and sexualizes her crime. Arden’s friend says to Alice, “It is his blood, which, strumpet, thou hast shed” (14.404, my emphasis), and Alice herself presents her crime as a miscarriage of sexual love when, repenting, she tells the corpse of her husband, “In heaven I love thee though on earth I did not” (16.11). Just as in the popular pamphlet caricatures of murderesses, Alice’s crime is bound up with her female carnal nature: her whore’s blood, which refused to submit to marital regulation, and expresses itself not only in adultery but in violence.

Thomas Middleton’s The Changeling, first performed in 1622, exists in an interesting dialogue with the whore-strumpet of the popular Jacobean imagination. The play contains both a tragic and a comic heroine: a main-plot wife, who, like Alice Arden, fulfills the worst fears of the paranoiac masculine imagination, and a subplot wife who challenges and repudiates irrational masculine suspicion.
The play’s protagonist, Beatrice-Joanna, is a more complicated character than Alice, yet still resembles the stereotypical woman against whom pamphleteers warned: one who engages in subterfuge, betraying men in the service of her own desires. Like the standard feminine transgressor in the murder pamphlets, she is presented as fundamentally a sexual criminal. Beatrice is an obvious threat to the male characters in the play because she orders the murder of her betrothed so she may marry the man to whom she is attracted. Her crime is sexual in a couple of ways: she pays for the suborned murder with her virginity and, later, contributes to the compromising of her (willing) maid’s sexual honor, feigning virginity by way of a bed trick. As a woman who acts boldly on her carnal desires, Beatrice manipulates others in an effort not only to satisfy her lust but to maintain a pure, virtuous semblance. Frances Dolan accurately identifies Beatrice as a “powerful agent” because of her ability to successfully plan and execute a plot to change her marriage plans so she may, with (temporary) impunity, achieve the object of her passion, Alsemero. Indeed, Beatrice involves herself in a premeditated murder while pretending to be a virginal woman. Beatrice’s double character, her fabrication of her virginity by way of a bed trick, ultimately earns her the label of “whore” from both her ultimately undeceived husband, Alsemero, and DeFlores, with whom she has sex to repay him for killing her unwanted fiancé. Beatrice’s murderous and adulterous actions thus align her, like Alice Arden, with the stereotypical murderess depicted in pamphlets.

Within the very first scenes of the play, we see Beatrice engaged in the conventional activity of the female criminal: plotting murder to satisfy her own lust. Her schemes are revealed in asides and soliloquy. Upon first seeing Alsemero, she laments that she is already promised to

Alonzo de Piracquo, to whom she is due to be married in just a few days: “This [Alsemero] was the man was meant me – that he should come / So near his time, and miss it!” But she does not complain long, revealing in an aside that she feels a “giddy turning” within herself, a trick that will help her to “change her saint” or her lover (1.1.81-82; 148-149). Later, she muses in soliloquy that she must find “Some speedy way” to rid herself of Alonzo (2.1.23-24). Beatrice’s desire to maintain a virtuous and pure “persona,” as Jennifer Panek argues, motivates her plot to murder Alonzo using her servant DeFlores: if Alonzo is murdered, removed from her life, she will be free to marry Alsemero without attracting scandalized attention by rejecting Alonzo publicly.¹⁶⁸ Beatrice’s careful planning to maintain her pure public character shows the audience her doubleness. She asks her father to delay her wedding to Alonzo de Piracquo saying she cannot so soon part with “the dear companion of [her] soul, / Virginity” (1.1.186-187), even though, ironically, lust is driving her to get Piracquo out of the way so she can marry Alsemero. As her plot develops and she recruits DeFlores to murder Alonzo, she reasons, again in an aside, “I shall rid / Myself of two inveterate loathings at one time: Piracquo and his [DeFlores’] dog-face” (2.2.145-146). Thus, from her first appearances on stage, Beatrice exhibits the conniving traits of passionate female murderesses. She is not chaotically evil, like, for example, Middleton’s Women Beware Women’s Livia, a conspiring widow who randomly cultivates an incestuous relationship between her brother and niece merely for fun, and is described as “cunning at the game” (a play on the sexually insulting “cunny”) (2.2.294). However, like Livia, Beatrice is a callous manipulator. She orders a murder so she may sleep with the man she desires, and, like the malicious widow, sets “deadly snares” (Women Beware Women 5.1.252).

She is a more complex version of Alice of Arden – a more elaborate staged example of – again – the popular-pamphlet murderess.  

Beatrice’s lust and scheming actions therefore justify the sexual epithets with which she is targeted throughout in the play. The first sexual slur she receives comes from the servant DeFlores, who, after murdering Alonzo for her, equates her crime of premeditated murder to whoredom. Beatrice’s “conviction” by DeFlores, as Gregory Schnitzpahn contends, “indicate[s] a dramatic shift in her conception of the murder.”  

No longer merely ancillary to the act, Beatrice has become “A woman dipped in blood,” “the deed’s creature,” a “fair murd’ress,” and a “whore” (3.3. 126; 137; 141; 142). Beatrice only feebly attempts to argue with DeFlores, stating that it is cruel he should try to “make [Alonzo’s] death the murderer of [her] honor,” but she succumbs when DeFlores demands sexual payment for his work and threatens to destroy her reputation of virtuous lady: “If I enjoy thee not, thou ne’er enjoy’st: / I’ll blast the hopes and joys of marriage, / I’ll confess all” (3.3.122; 147-149). Her criminal actions thus maintain a sexual character. He successfully bewhores her by threatening her with the loss of future sexual pleasure if she will not submit to him. Frances Dolan argues that the still virginal Beatrice is doomed to be a whore. She must pay DeFlores with her body, because revelation of her role in the murder will ruin her marriage options. This, however, is just another way of saying that her determination to consummate her love for Alsemero drives her to an even more complicated sexual bargain with DeFlores. “Murder, I see, is followed by more sins” (3.3.163), she correctly  

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169 It is worth noting that Shakespeare successfully created a female character who acts murderously without lustful motivation (and who does not earn any sexualized insults). Lady Macbeth in fact calls upon spirits to “unsex” her so as to fill her with “direst cruelty” (1.5.17-18; 48; 50). Her murderousness is either masculine or inhuman; it’s not tied to her libido. She’s a Clytemnestra devoid of Clytemnestra’s sexual pleasure in killing.  


observes. DeFlores’ insistent connection of murder and whoredom is mirrored in Beatrice’s own explicit self-recognition.

Compounding the sex-murder motive, Middleton has Beatrice first use sex to cover up her sexually motivated crime, and then suborn a further murder – her maid Diaphanta’s – to cover up that crime. Desperate to appear a virgin on her wedding night, to perpetuate her deception, Beatrice resolutely explores Alsemero’s closet full of fake-virgin tests. Referring to the male fear that all women are actual or incipient whores, Middleton not only crafts a scene which shows a male character’s desire to catch sexually deviant women, but also shows how easy it is for Beatrice to outwit the tests. Beatrice has “A trick” (4.1.54) come to her as she sees Diaphanta enter the stage: use a virginal woman to discover the intricacies of the “virgin test,” and foil it. Diaphanta expresses confusion at Beatrice’s motives – “Your thoughts are so unwilling to be known, madam” (4.1.64) – but, with her complicity, Beatrice is finally successful both in learning how to fake the symptoms of the virgin test and in recruiting Diaphanta for her bed trick, by which she passes off her maid, who is a virgin, as herself on her wedding night. The paradox is that Beatrice’s defense of her “virgin” image, her representation of herself as chaste, springs from her commitment to her own sexual pleasure – her future pleasure with Alsemero (as she hopes), and, the play implies, even her present “pleasure and continuance” with DeFlores, whom she now professes to love (5.1.50, 76). “I’m put now to my cunning,” Beatrice mutters, which, when we hear the word-play, registers as, “I’m put now to my cunny.” Alsemero’s virgin test only tests his wife’s wit, not her actual sexual history, as Dolan fittingly argues. In the scenes involving the virgin test, the audience sees more scheming, a woman triumphing over a male character’s attempts to expose her sexual deviance, and – in the bed-trick, wherein the

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virgin Diaphanta assumes Beatrice’s wedding night role – a woman commandeering another’s virginity for her own ultimate sexual purposes. Middleton’s feminine criminal is more behaviorally complex than the average pamphlet murderess, yet the audacity of both is rooted in uncontrollable sexuality.

Following the popular pattern of the convicted female criminal, Beatrice embraces the sexual epithet “whore” to the point that she uses it naturally to describe her fellow schemer, Diaphanta: “This strumpet serves her own ends, ’tis apparent now, / Devours the pleasure with a greedy appetite” / This whore forgets herself” (5.1.2-3, 24). She punishes Diaphanta’s happy “whorishness” by employing DeFlores to burn her to death. Having ordered a murder, arranged a bed trick, falsified a virgin test, and collaborated in a second murder, Beatrice stands revealed as the sexual criminal DeFlores described in the earlier scene. “You are a whore” with a “cunning face” – a “cunny” face – Alsemero tells her, when her crimes are ultimately discovered (5.3.33, 48) – and no one, not even Beatrice, disagrees. Indeed, when Beatrice’s criminal actions are finally discovered by her husband, he proves much more upset by her sexual crimes than by her involvement in murder. Thus the play ends with the repeated reminder that her crimes are fundamentally those of a “whore.” “Neither your smiles nor tears / Shall move or flatter me from my belief / You are a whore,” he asserts (5.3.31-33). Beatrice finally confesses her sins, saying her “honour fell” with DeFlores, and dies in front of several characters, exclaiming, “’Tis time to die when ’tis a shame to live” (5.3.158; 178). Hers is a messy public death. She falls, stabbed by her lover, in the presence of witnesses, rather than in private, destroyed or silenced by an overbearing husband. Thus she offers the on-stage audience a spectacle of castigation, like the burning of an adulterous murderess (or one so convicted) offered its viewers. Beatrice’s final lines also offer a curative blood-letting as she warns her father of the tainted blood – corrupted
by her sexualized crimes – within her: “I am that of your blood was taken from you / For your better health” (5.3.149-151). Her final punishment echoes the warning tone of the pamphleteers’ accounts of murderesses. The transgressive, sexualized female murderer who has defied patriarchal authority must be shown in ruin.

Yet the play contains another antidote to Beatrice’s sin. Interestingly, Middleton proves himself capable not only of presenting but of challenging the stereotype of the murderous “whorish” woman, by including in his tragedy the lively but chaste Isabella, who undermines the notion that all women are either whores or potential whores (or dead whores). *The Changeling*’s comic subplot, set in a madhouse run by the aged doctor Alibius, includes direct and critical references to male anxiety regarding the possible independence of women. Despite Isabella’s devotion to her husband, old Alibius sees her as potentially unruly to the point that he decides to lock her up among the insane. In masculine solidarity, Alibius’ servant Lollio agrees with his master’s decision, stating, “I know’t, you must look out, ’tis every man’s cause” (1.2.35). The affable Isabella does not directly fight against her husband’s wishes. When Lollio tells her she is imprisoned because Alibius is worried she will be “taken in by another man’s corn,” she replies, “’Tis very well, and he’ll prove very wise” (3.2.9-10; 11). Although her tone may well be sarcastic, her words demonstrate a willingness to obey and a levelheadedness about her situation. She blames her confinement on men’s irrational urges – their jealousy and their lust – explaining, using phallic imagery, “The needle’s point will to the fixed north, / Such drawing Arctics women’s beauties are” (3.2.208-209). Although her husband’s anxiety ironically puts her in a situation where her chastity is threatened by gallants pretending to be madmen, Isabella meets this challenge by actively defending her honor. Dressing up as a madwoman to physically quell the advances of the fake madmen, and scare them off, she explains, “I put on this habit of a
frantic, / With love as full of fury, to beguile / The nimble eye of watchful jealousy” (4.3.118-120). Her antic role-play, showing her active, lively imagination, frustrates her predatory suitors, while her words mock her husband’s irrational fears of wifely betrayal. Isabella thus keeps faith with her husband not by staying quiet and quelling her own independent judgment, but by using her wits and acting wild and crazy.

Ultimately, Isabella is even able successfully to challenge her husband regarding his unreasonable jealousy. *The Changeling’s* final act finds Isabella free from the confines of the madhouse, accompanying Alibius as a partner to the palace of Beatrice-Joanna’s father, where, rather uncomically, she witnesses Beatrice’s death. However, Isabella comically capitalizes on the bloody spectacle by looking to her husband and demanding he change, because he “deserve[s] best [his] transformation” from the “jealous coxcomb” that he is (5.3.209; 210). *That one’s* guilty, but not all women are, she implies. Isabella’s words to Alibius, combined with the spectacle of Beatrice’s confession of whoredom and her bloody death, does inspire Alibius to improve, in the direction of wisdom and, presumably, a loosening of the marital reins. He says, “I see all apparent wife, and will change now / Into a better husband” (5.3.212-213).

As Isabella is not only chaste, but witty and independent, she is able to challenge the “whore” stereotype and cure the masculine paranoia that sees women in terms of this stereotype. In contrast to Beatrice, she never earns negative epithets, overcoming masculine suspicion with a lively ingenuity that serves rather than undermines her marriage vows. Isabella’s character first challenges that of the sexualized female criminal with its presentation of a complex female who is chaste, independently minded, and funny. Her character is then literally contrasted with Beatrice’s in the final scene, wherein Isabella uses Beatrice’s example, by contrast with herself, to justify her husband’s need for change. She is a co-creator in her marriage, able to resist her
husband’s attempts to cast her as “whore,” and, finally, to cure his diseased perspective on wives.

A darker view of women’s power, as well as the power of sexualized insults, is presented by the playwright John Webster. Vittoria Corombona from Webster’s *The White Devil*, first performed in 1612, is, like *The Changeling*’s Beatrice, a female character whose crimes are fundamentally sexualized. However, here the playwright challenges the stereotype of the female criminal by presenting Vittoria as a sympathetic victim of male oppression as well as a crafty adulteress. Webster’s ambiguous attitude toward Vittoria can be seen in two contrasting scenes: one wherein Vittoria stands up to and repudiates men’s sexual insults, and one where she is ultimately spectacularly punished for her transgressions after succumbing to (acting in accordance with) the “whore-murderess” label. Like Middleton’s Beatrice, Vittoria is called “whore” by both male and female accusers not only because of her sexual immorality, but because she is suspected of murdering her husband to gratify that sexuality, which, again, shows the all-encompassing nature of the sexual insult. She is first called “strumpet” by the brother-in-law of Bracciano, her married lover, while her own husband is still alive, in a libel that alludes exclusively to her suspected adultery. However, Webster also shows how easily male characters can sexualize all feminine crime in a court scene wherein Vittoria is subjected to sexualized epithets and public humiliation on very little evidence. The verbal abuse that Vittoria earns for a murder she did not commit makes her, at least momentarily, sympathetic to the play’s audience, and her resolute defense against reductive sexual epithets makes her admirable. However, her actions after she is later accused of whoredom by Bracciano – the very man with whom she has “whored” – show her falling victim to the power of the label. *The White Devil*, then, successively
challenges the sexualized stereotype of female criminals (real or suspected), then demonstrates the power of social opprobrium to transform its female victim into a genuine criminal “whore.”

Vittoria begins the play as a woman assaulted with sexualized insults. She is Duke Bracciano’s “strumpet,” according to Francisco, Bracciano’s brother-in-law and enemy (2.1.58). Vittoria is also at risk of being publicly disgraced, as one character points out early in the play: “[Bracciano] by close panderism seeks to prostitute / The honour of Vittoria Corombona” (1.1.41-42). Bracciano himself refers to Vittoria as “a whore of mine” when confronted by his brothers-in-law, as a way of simply bragging that she is his mistress (2.1.60). Bracciano’s wife knows of the affair and is outraged enough to use language of sexual insult also, exclaiming, “Are all these ruins of my former beauty / Laid out for a whore’s triumph?” (2.1.240-241). Vittoria’s sexual crimes are thus given the most debased possible name by other characters, including her own lover.

Therefore, after her husband is killed in a vaulting accident and is thought to have been murdered, Vittoria is, of course, the first to be apprehended. Already considered, by Bracciano’s enemies Monticelso and Francisco, a woman guilty of “black lust” (3.1.7), it is axiomatic that she must be guilty of violence in the service of her carnal appetite. Thus when Vittoria is charged with whoredom publicly in court, the accusation carries with it the charge of murder. Her insufferable interrogator, Cardinal Monticelso, uses a metaphor which associates her alleged crime with the standard feminine “vice” of face-painting: “I shall be plainer with you, and paint out / Your follies in more natural red and white / Than that upon your cheek” (3.2.52-54).

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173 See Anne Haselkorn, “Sin and the Politics of Penitence: Three Jacobean Adulteresses,” in The Renaissance Englishwoman in Print, ed. Anne Haselkorn and Betty Travitsky (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), 123. Haselkorn points out that Vittoria is juxtaposed with Isabella, the play’s chaste female character, which accentuates her depravity for the audience.
Vittoria’s “deceptive show is like the whore’s use of cosmetics,” to quote Christina Luckyj.\(^{174}\)

Her attractive feminine appearance argues her inward corruption. As Monticelso notes, “You see, my lords, what goodly fruit she seems” (3.2.64). The cardinal is implying that, like so many devious women, Vittoria distracts the men around her by commanding their approving gaze while committing sexual crimes. Thus is exposed, not genuine female vice, but continuous masculine disappointment in the false promises of beauty. Like Goneril in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, Vittoria, as interpreted by hostile men, is “a fiend” whom “A woman’s shape doth shield” (*King Lear* 4.2.81-82). Monticelso sees monstrosity in a woman who deviates from the virtue her beauty should imply. The “white devil” or “beautiful monster” conceit, ubiquitous in Renaissance drama, suggests that men find in feminine beauty an immediate suggestion of probable inward vice and incipient sexual treachery. Yet it is only male characters, like Monticelso, who make this particular connection. The “monster” is finally men’s anxious sexual distrust, stimulated by masculine sexual desire.

Therefore Webster, through Vittoria, reflects the “whore” insult back on the accuser. When she is finally plainly called “whore” in front of the court, she challenges the epithet: “Ha? ‘Whore’? What’s that?” (3.2.78). Disclaiming association with the term, she forces Monticelso to bind himself ever more tightly to it, as he launches into a lengthy string of metaphors expressive of masculine frustration at disappointed sexual hopes. “Shall I expound ‘whore’ to you? Sure, I shall . . . They are first / Sweetmeats which rot the eater; in a man’s nostril / Poisoned perfumes. . . They are those flattering bells have all one tune / At weddings and at funerals. . . She’s like the guilty, counterfeited coin / Which, whosoe’er first stamps it, brings in trouble / All that receive

it” (3.2.79ff). Vittoria’s threat, like that of the counterfeit coin, is that her appearance remains dangerously attractive despite her alleged inward corruption. And, of course, she is a danger in that her whorishness – her sexual nature – leads inevitably to other sins. It is, indeed, the initiating condition for a host of evils. Monticelso continues: “You know what whore is: next the devil, Adult’ry / Enters the devil, Murder” (3.2.109-110). In dramatizing Vittoria’s utter indifference to these charges – “This character ’scapes me,” she says – this scene establishes criminal whorishness as a creature generated by the masculine mind. (When it is later established that Vittoria’s brother Flamineo, not Vittoria, murdered her husband, that point is emphasized by the plot itself.) Vittoria is here a beauteous blank on whom outraged men project their frightened fantasies of “murderess-whore,” and whose independence is confirmed when she properly deflects the fantasy back on its authors.

Terrify babes, my lord, with painted devils;
I am past such needless palsy. For your names
Of “whore” and “murd’ress,” they proceed from you
As if a man should spit against the wind,
The filth returns in’s face (3.2.146-150)

Vittoria further deflects the “whore” insult by pointing out men’s complicity in women’s “whoredom.” “Condemn you me for that the Duke did love me?,” she asks the court. “So may you blame some fair and crystal river / For that some melancholic, distracted man / Hath drowned himself in’t” (3.2.202-205). In short, Vittoria does not crumble at the sound of “whore” like Beatrice-Joanna, who cries, “It blasts a beauty to deformity” (The Changeling 5.3.34), nor is
she driven apoplectic by the term, like (say) John Marston’s heroine in *Insatiate Countess* (1613), who wails, “I am call’d Insatiate Countess, lust’s paramour, / A glorious devil, and the noble whore! / I am sick, vex’d, and tormented. O revenge!” (4.2.3-5). Vittoria is unchanged by the insult. In this scene, the word only has power to madden the men who use it.

Yet Vittoria’s freedom doesn’t last. As the play progresses, she begins to express the guilt with which she was charged in the male-dominated court, thus proving the corrosive power of the “whore” epithet. When, after her inconclusive trial, during a lovers’ quarrel, the jealous Bracciano exclaims, “Where’s this whore?,” calling her “changeable stuff” (4.2.43; 47), Vittoria begins to echo his language. After Bracciano calls her an accomplished adulteress, a “stately and advanced whore,” and reminds her “all the world speaks ill of thee” (4.2.74; 100), Vittoria for the first time in the play calls herself “thy whore” (4.2.142). Indeed, “whore” is what men have made her (“What have I gained by thee but infamy?” [4.2.105].) Vittoria’s passionate loss of control in this scene contrasts markedly with her cool self-possession, her resistance to male-authored epithets, back in the courtroom. (She even throws herself on the bed, an act of erotic despair, while speaking [s.d. 4.2.125].)

Ultimately, Vittoria starts to exhibit characteristics that closely resemble the stereotypical female criminal and echo the very warning that Monticelso gave in court, and that Beatrice-Joanna bemoans: deviant behavior leads to more sins (*The White Devil* 3.2.109-110; *The Changeling* 3.3.163). She duplicitously agrees to a murder-suicide pact with her brother Flamineo, but shoots Flamineo instead of herself, after which she and her waiting woman “run to him and tread upon him,” in a spectacular display of heartless violence (s.d. 5.6.116). She is thus justly punished when Flamineo rises (he’d loaded the pistol with blanks) and participates with several other men in her assassination. The complexity of Vittoria’s hybrid character is shown in
this final scene. Vittoria must be shown punished on stage for her murderousness and sexual profligacy, but she is allowed to mock her murderers for their silly efforts to become “men” by killing women: “‘Twas a manly blow, / The next thou giv’st murder some suckling infant, / And then thou wilt be famous” (5.6.230-232). Vittoria resembles the “whores” of murder pamphlets, and also Alice Arden and Beatrice-Joanna, when she expires repenting: “Oh, my greatest sin lay in my blood. / Now my blood pays for it” (5.6.238-239). Like Beatrice-Joanna, Vittoria dies in a public blood-letting at the hands of male justicers who condemn her actions. Yet her taunting of the men echoes in the audience’s ears, like her bold self-defense in court.

Webster thus displays a complicated attitude toward his deviant female character, showing her alternately as a monstrous participant in a murderous/adulterous and finally a fraticidal relationship, whose whorish destiny lies in her “blood,” and as a powerful spokeswoman against male slander: an exposé of “whorishness” as a product of male fantasy. Vittoria’s conflicted acceptance and non-acceptance of her role as sexual criminal is similar to that of the “witch,” Elizabeth Sawyer, from Rowley, Dekker, and Ford’s 1621 tragedy The Witch of Edmonton, who, after being called “witch” and getting attacked by the town, makes a pact with the devil and declares, “‘Tis all one, / To be a witch as to be counted one” (2.1.116-117). She’s driven to the role of witch, as Vittoria is driven to the role of whore. Vittoria’s early challenge of the power of abusive sexual epithets is admirable, but her eventual submission to the “whore” label and her accelerated criminal actions show Webster’s ambiguous and complicated attitude toward the sexualized female murderer. As an extreme example of the unruly wife, she is both a sympathetic victim of men’s controlling tendencies, and a frightening example of the murder and mayhem that can result when a woman becomes what she is called.
Arden of Faversham, The Changeling, and The White Devil all testify to the fact that on the early modern stage, all woman’s crimes, whether real or imagined, are generally sexualized as men interpret them as impinging on masculine liberty, rights, authority, and fundamental identity. These plays’ male authors give voice to the masculine paranoid fantasy that all women are either present or potential whores. The playwrights justify, even as they dramatize, male anxieties in the face of feminine mystery, a secretiveness which finally issues in extreme feminine rebellion. Yet these plays also show varying degrees of sympathy toward the female rebels. Female characters sometimes fulfill the worst stereotypes of the sexualized murderess found in crude murder pamphlets of the period, but often, their behavior transcends and complicates those stereotypes, demonstrating how feminine desire conflicts with social expectations of feminine “purity,” or how libelous invective may spur a woman to become “that name” of whore.
A male character in a Renaissance play need not be a husband or lover to display fury at or humiliation by a woman's real or suspected lasciviousness. Occasionally, a female character’s libidinous behavior becomes the concern of her sons and other male family members. That is, children can be deemed “bastards” because of their mothers’ illicit or simply unconventional sexual behavior, and brothers or fathers can express shame and even murderous rage when a sister or daughter is, or is presumed, unchaste. Suspicions of a female character’s whoredom or bawdry affect male characters in direct ways, such as when husbands believe themselves cuckolded, or in indirect ways, when the apparently uncontrolled sexuality of mothers, sisters, and daughters damages other male family members’ reputations. In Shakespeare, the frequent absence of a mother, a potentially mollifying figure, makes the masculine assault more stark. In at least one non-Shakespearean play, however, male anger is focused on a mother who tries to prostitute her daughter for social gain.

The apparent damage a female relative’s untrammeled sexuality does to a husband’s or other relative’s reputation is defined other men, who apply pejorative terms to the “tainted” man, or sometimes by the male “victim” when he applies such terms to himself. Words like “bastard” or “whoreson,” or even a general term like “dishonored,” when derived from a female relative’s shameful actions, construct the taint. In other words, it is not only the female characters’ (allegedly) unchaste actions that blot the male characters’ sense of honor, it is the fact that other
men impart to the allegedly wronged man these terms of diminishment and stain. The male victim is perceived as having been acted upon rather than acting. It is his apparent passivity, a lapse in active masculinity, which prompts his neighbors’ scorn. The victim’s proper manly identity can therefore only be restored by aggressive punishment of the female culprit. Still, paradoxically, though the man is expected to control the female relative – the wife, sister, daughter, or occasionally the mother – he laments, and events confirm, that women simply cannot be controlled. As Othello complains, “O curse of marriage, / That we can call these delicate creatures ours / And not their appetites!” (3.3.309-311). Male characters are thus caught in impossible situations whereby their homosocial status depends on the faithfulness of beings whose fidelity they cannot command. Despite their women’s fundamental unmanageability, male family members, their proper governors, remain subject to homosocial scorn. Even in some comic plays, men deride them. For example, in Much Ado About Nothing, when Hero is publicly declared unchaste, Don John tells her he is “sorry for thy much misgovernment,” referring to the mistakes made by her father (4.1.104).

Tragedy, or potential tragedy, arises when the frustrated “governor” lashes out in a violent attempt to resecure his status as patriarch. In the example just given, Leonato initially responds to Don John’s insult with a verbal assault against Hero (4.1.104ff). The threat of being defined by a woman’s errancy precipitates such frantic attempts to reassert dominance, through actions ranging from vituperative outbursts to murder. My previous chapters have explored the ways some staged husbands express jealous rage at their wives’ potential to be independent beings. Once such husbands experience a loss of control, deciding, even upon flimsy evidence, that they have been cuckolded, they react with accusations of whoredom and finally destroy the

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175 Again, see Sedgwick, Between Men English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 1-5.
women whom they can only control through removing them from the earth/stage. When the “unruly” woman is a mother, sister, or daughter, the male relatives also employ these tactics to regain dominance and thus protect their threatened reputations. A brother or father on the early modern stage attempts to take charge of a sister’s or daughter’s sexuality because, as dialogue makes explicit, his own honor, and that of his family, is linked to female chastity. Thus, though not every sexually independent daughter or sister character is destroyed for the sake of a male relative’s reputation, many of them are slandered with epithets synonymous with “whore.”

Like the allegedly cuckolded husbands, male relatives experience the woman’s taint as a personal rejection. In his influential 1538 work, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, Juan Luis Vives describes the masculine shame and hurt that lead to some young women being severely punished by their families for romantic rebelliousness. He declares that it “is not to be marveled at that such things are done by parents and close friends and that feelings of affection are suddenly changed into the most violent hatred,” because these women “have shown hatred for their parents [and] brothers” by losing their virginity out of wedlock. Vives’ handbook thus comes close to condoning violence toward “unruly” women. In comedies, playwrights were likely to mock Vives’ strict view on the policing of women, as when Shakespeare’s Rosalind lightheartedly jokes about a wife’s inevitable tendency both to stray and cover her tracks:

Orlando might “meet [his] wife’s wit going to [his] neighbor’s bed” and hear her claim she came there to look for her husband (*As You Like It* 4.1.177-178). Still, even “tolerant” playwrights dramatized sexual disagreements between fathers and daughters which resulted in a range of violent ends. Shakespeare’s staged fathers cannot “divorce their egos” from their daughters’ actions, according to Ursula Potter, and thus their daughters are “an extension of their self-

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image.” Similarily, Diane Dreher argues that early modern fathers and daughters clash on stage because fathers are “threatened by their daughters’ growing independence and their own waning power,” which causes them to panic and turn tyrant. Tom McFaul interestingly compares the father fearing a loss of his honor to a female character fearing the loss of her virginity, because authority is as integral to the father's identity as chastity is to the woman’s. Many plays of Shakespeare as well as of his contemporaries dramatize this painful family dynamic, in which the sexual behavior of the daughter deeply affects the paternal sense of self.

In some cases, the daughter recognizes the apparent connection between her behavior and her father’s honor. Speaking to her father, Thomas Middleton’s fallen Beatrice-Joanna in The Changeling describes herself (bleeding to death in the play’s last scene) as “that of your blood [which] was taken from you / For your better health.” (5.3.150-151). Beatrice has blotted her father’s name with her premarital sex (and, secondarily, involvement in murder), and confesses as much. King Lear’s virtuous Cordelia feels compelled to define herself to her father by listing crimes she has not committed: “It is no vicious blot, murder, or foulness, / No unchaste action or dishonored step / That hath deprived me of your grace and favor” (1.1.262-264, my emphasis). Cordelia’s term “unchaste action” suggests that any crime against the father could be construed as not just disrespectful, but whorish. Daughters like Beatrice-Joanna and Cordelia recognize that their own sexual honor correlates with their father’s personal honor.

Thus, on the early modern stage, daughters – often by their own account – are as much a defining factor of their fathers’ social substance as the fathers’ monetary wealth. It follows that

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177 See also Ursula Potter’s description of Shakespeare’s approval of feminine independence, in The Unruly Womb in Early Modern English Drama (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2019), 109.
178 Ibid., 111. Diane Dreher asserts that conflict in plays about fathers and daughters originates when old patriarchal order is blatantly denied in favor of a new, feminine order. See Dreher, Domination and Defiance: Fathers and Daughters in Shakespeare (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), 5-6.
they are often locked away in an effort to keep them chaste. In his satirical comedy *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, Francis Beaumont includes the common character of the frustrated father, an unnamed Merchant who secures his daughter in the house to keep her “From gadding out againe with boyes and unthrits” (4.3.3). Shakespeare’s Brabantio in *Othello* tells his eloped daughter, “For your sake, jewel, / I am glad at soul I have no other child, / For thy escape would teach me tyranny,” expressing his regret at never having locked Desdemona up like the jewel he deems her to have been (1.3.225-227). Middleton’s Yellowhammer, in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, calls his daughter “mystical baggage” and “disobedient strumpet” as he compares her to the wealth he owns: “In the meantime, I will lock up this baggage / as carefully as my gold” (3.1.43-44). The common comparisons between daughters and material wealth show that a daughter’s chastity is as much of a socially valuable commodity as one’s gold and jewels.

In some cases, “escaped” or defiant daughters are presented or described as having dealt their fathers an incurable wound. Shakespeare gives us perhaps the greatest number of such fathers. *Othello*’s Brabantio is at play’s end reported dead because the marriage was “mortal to him” (*Othello* 1.3.333-334; 5.2.245). King Lear expresses a similar agony when faced with defiant daughters: “How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is / To have a thankless child” (*King Lear* 1.4.302-303). His daughters do not “deceive” him in a sexual manner – Goneril and Regan betray Lear by denying him power and authority in their households – but Lear connects this disobedience to sexuality anyway. He curses Goneril with a barren womb, tells Regan her disobedience would make her mother’s tomb be “Sepulch’ring an adulteress,” calls both daughters “unnatural hags,” and ultimately compares women’s genitals to “the sulphurous pit”.

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180 See also Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, wherein Capulet calls Juliet “young baggage” when she does not agree to marry the man he chooses (3.5.166).
(King Lear 1.4.291-293; 2.4.148; 2.4.39; 4.6.143). In Lear’s case, if his daughters are unchaste monsters, that explains why they have betrayed him.

Some stage fathers go beyond verbally attacking their daughters to protect their own image, and resort to physical violence, or threaten to do so, much like the jealous husbands discussed in previous chapters. In Much Ado About Nothing, Leonato declares to his swooning, slandered daughter, “Myself would, on the rearward of reproaches, / Strike at thy life,” saying that Hero’s death would be better than the public shame she (or, rather, he) has endured, if only he could kill her himself (Much Ado 4.1.134-135). What Leonato leaves hypothetical, Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus takes seriously, acting violently toward anyone who sexually dishonors him, including male children who are involved in daughters’ schemes. Titus kills his son, Mitius, for helping Lavinia elope with her husband (Titus 1.1.350-354). That Titus would murder a son to protect what he construes as his daughter’s honor shows the crucial connection of a daughter’s chastity to familial honor, here linked to that family’s civic obedience, since Rome’s new emperor has wanted to marry Lavinia. Her shame is compounded when she is raped by barbarians, at which point Titus kills her, agreeing with the reasoning that “the girl should not survive her shame, / And by her presence still renew / the father’s sorrows” (5.3.41-42).

Interestingly, while the classical setting of Titus Andronicus allows for both barbarian violence (Lavinia’s rapists are un-Christianized Goths) and the stricter, pre-Christian doctrine of paterfamilias, wherein the father had absolute control over the lives of his wife and children, we see a religious shift when the classical Titus, in a Christian manner, champions his daughter’s chastity as an extension of his own body, following Corinthians 6:18: “Every sin that a man

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doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body.”

This implicit Christianization of the pagan situation – a meaning available, if not to Titus, to his Elizabethan audience – leads to violence because of the father’s desire to sustain, through his daughter, his own honor, which has already been damaged by her elopement. The classical context gives Titus the authority to enforce that desire.

A female character’s potential sexual independence is not only maddening to her father, but to her brothers, who, linking their own public identities to the actions of their sisters, typically react with even more aggression than do fathers to their sisters’ lapses. For instance, in Beaumont and Fletcher’s 1619 *The Maid’s Tragedy*, Melantius shows initial delight in learning that his sister Evadne will be married to the knight Amintor, a decision made by the King to honor Melantius’ military achievements (1.1.136-140). Melantius attaches his personal worth to his sister’s premarital chastity. He now has (in a manner of speaking) a familial sexual obligation to Amintor. However, Evadne’s revelation to Amintor that she was raped by the King causes Amintor to curse the futility of defining reputation through women – such reputations are inevitably fragile – in lines that foreshadow the coming violence of his brother-in-law Melantius toward Melantius’ sister: “Oh, we vain men, / That trust out all our reputation / To rest upon the weak and yielding hand / Of feeble woman!” (2.1.262-266). Amintor, the “cuckolded” and very sad husband, does not engage in verbal or physical violence against his wife. Instead, the self-deputized brother, Melantius, accuses Evadne of whoredom while saying *his* reputation has been tainted. He tells her it is “an infamy below the sin of coward” to be her brother, and wishfully declares, “I am as far from being part of thee / As thou art from thy virtue” (4.1.60; 61-62). Melantius threatens Evadne with his sword, forcing *her* to take revenge on the King for the

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182 KJV, 1 Corinthians 6:18.
family "honour [he] hast murder’d," and, once more, names his own shame before that of anyone else, including the husband: “…in this great ruin / Thy brother and thy noble husband [are] broken” (4.1.87; 159-160). Worried more about his own reputation than his sister’s body, Melantius turns his sister’s trauma into his own, fueled by his desire to preserve his homosocial status.183

Two other brothers, John Webster’s Ferdinand in *The Duchess of Malfi* and John Ford’s Giovanni in *‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore*, also interweave their honor with the actions of their sister’s bodies. Their violence against women stems from an incestuous desire to maintain family bloodlines. Ferdinand warns his widowed sister not to be “cunning” (cunny-ing), waving their father’s (phallic) poniard at her to insinuate both familial honor and potential violence (1.2.220-241). Later, Ferdinand learns that his sister has had children and, because he believes she is still unmarried, he calls her “strumpet” while their other brother worries that their “royal blood” is tainted (2.5.4; 22). She has turned their shared blood into “whore’s blood” (2.5.49). He curses his sister’s body specifically: “Damn her! That body of hers, / While that my blood ran pure in’t, was more worth / Than that which thou wouldst comfort, call’d a soul” (4.1.120-121, my emphasis). Ferdinand’s incestuous possessiveness and aristocratic family pride are evident when he angrily fantasizes aloud that she might be shaming them with some “strong-thigh’d bargeman,” a menial lover (2.5.42). He has some monetary motive to desire her celibacy – he admits he would have earned an inheritance from the Duchess’s sustained widowhood (4.2.270-278) – but his threats culminating in murder of his sister and her children suggest his real concern is preserving his

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183 The warning implicit in the famous admonitions to chastity of another brother, Laertes’ to Ophelia, are also linked to violent reclamation of family honor, though less explicitly so. Laertes’ attack on Hamlet at Ophelia’s graveside (5.1) suggests a suspicion that Hamlet’s unwholesome sexual attentions were in some way to blame for the marring of her wits and her eventual suicide. This may be part of Hamlet’s meaning when, prior to his final fight with Laertes, he refers to things “I have done / That might your . . . honor . . . / Roughly awake” (5.2.244-46).
family honor by having his sister’s body, and his blood that runs within it, to do with as he wishes.

Ferdinand’s incestuous, sexually controlling behavior is paralleled by that of John Ford’s Giovanni, hero of the 1633 ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore, who not only imagines his sister engaging in sex, but engages in sex with his sister. Giovanni too wants to keep his sister’s body to himself, and tries to justify that desire by claiming that he and his sibling are biologically made for each other. “[S]ay one womb / (Curse to my joys!) gave us both life and birth: / Are we not therefore to each other bound . . . by the links / Of blood?” (1.1.28-32). While Giovanni violates a brother’s obligation to defend his sister’s chastity, by taking her virginity himself, he paradoxically wishes to keep her chaste. It’s as though he thinks sex with a brother does not count, because it is essentially sex with oneself, not violation by another. Giovanni believes marriage to anyone else would ruin her (2.5.41). When Annabella is inevitably wed to another, Giovanni thus decides he must destroy her to protect her honor as well as his own. He tells her his violence is done “To save thy fame, and kill thee in a kiss. / Thus die, and die by me,” because “honour doth love command” (5.5.84-86). Only when he is “saving” his sister from ruin does Giovanni clumsily reclaim, in his mind, the proper role of a brother. Thus, as a self-proclaimed protector of his family’s honor, both Giovanni, like Ferdinand, goes to outrageous extremes to keep his sister away from any man except himself.

Thomas Middleton’s Vindice in The Revenger’s Tragedy, 1607, offers another example of a brother who conflates his sister’s chastity with his own honor, with the interesting involvement of the mother (usually absent from these tragic situations). During his attempt to avenge his master Lussurioso’s father’s rape and murder of his beloved, the disguised Vindice, serving the ducal household, is given the job of convincing his sister Castiza (meaning “Chaste”)
to be Lussurioso’s mistress. Vindice is horrified at the idea of prostituting his sister, but, to test her, invests all his energy in the task of proxy seduction. When Castiza rejects (and hits) her disguised brother, Vindice rejoices: “Most constant sister, / In this thou has right honourable shown” (2.1.47-48). Yet the preservation of Vindice’s own honorable revenge plot, which demands he “prove” himself to Lussurioso to remain intimate, demands a further test, so he decides to get his mother to talk to Castiza: “And yet, for the salvation of my oath, / As my resolve in that point, I will lay / Hard siege unto my mother” (2.1.52-54, my emphasis). Vindice here entrenches himself further in the paradoxical situation whereby his oath to avenge his mistress’ shame requires him to fake a homosocial tie to Lussurioso, which scheme requires not his family’s honor but its potential dishonor. He states, “Now I must blister my soul, be forsworn / Or shame the woman that received me first” (2.2.36-37). That shame is achieved when his mother readily agrees to prostitute Castiza. Vindice has attempted this proxy seduction for a tragic reason. Though painfully aware of the honor dependent on chaste female relatives, the potential honor gained from revenge for a prior sexual insult to his mistress—a revenge which his service to Lussurioso will eventually make possible—is of greater value to him. Only later in the play, when Vindice’s revenge is nearly complete, does he decide to chastise his mother, initially refusing to use any epithets: “O thou for whom no name is bad enough!” (4.3.1). He then calls his mother “bawd” and warns that by his mother’s acquiescence, his sister would be “Duke’s great concubine! / A drab of state, a cloth o’ silver slut” (4.3.11; 71-72). Vindice’s chiding works, because Gratiana admits her faults to a shocked Castiza, whose commitment to chastity was never in doubt.

Interestingly, Castiza’s character has been darkened in modern performance, highlighting the dilemma incurred by her brother Vindice’s obsession with both maintaining his women’s
chastity and pursuing the means to punish its violation. In a Red Bull Theater 2006 adaptation of the play, director Jesse Berger showed Castiza as willingly becoming the prostitute Vindice feared she potentially was. In his director’s notes, Berger asserted that Vindice’s actions needed consequences, that his home life should not be separate from his revenge. In the original script, as well as in Berger’s, Castiza bemoans that a female relative has “no other child’s-part but her honor” and thus she must uphold it, and yet versions such as Berger’s have her do exactly the opposite (2.1.3). A more powerful Castiza appears in Alex Cox’s 2002 film adaptation of the play, wherein she refuses to be pimped, and instead becomes an active participant in her brother’s revenge scheme. Castiza’s potential to be a feminine figure that escapes masculine control, is connected to Vindice’s approval of her. Unlike other brothers, he does not threaten his sister with violence or epithets – after all, she’s passed the chastity test – he only verbally attacks his mother. In the original play, Castiza sustains the family honor because of her own sense of virtue, and, due to her refusal to be prostituted, Vindice is driven to inventive extremes to sustain the court position necessary to his final enactment of revenge. However, because of Castiza’s virtue, he manages both to preserve his family honor and repair (through avenging) the honor lost through Lussurioso’s father’s violation of his own mistress.

We encounter something radically different from outraged fathers or vengeful brothers when we confront characters who have inherited their mothers’ shame: namely, illegitimate sons. Bastards on the early modern stage react to what we might call “trickledown whoredom” – the

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185 Ibid., 12. Berger’s director’s notes also, he mentions that he wanted Castiza to have a liberty of action that was unaffected by her brother’s sense of honor, so she ultimately takes control of her own body and leaves the house to make money through sex.
alleged whoredom that affects them because of a female relative’s actions – much less violently than do fathers and brothers. Instead of angrily inveighing against female sexual independence, bastards tend to glory in their nature and become champions of their sexually free mothers. Male bastard characters resent their legitimate rivals, indeed, whether they are rivals for love, land, or wealth. However, that stage bastards do not condemn their mother’s sexuality, but rather focus their attention on other men, is a condition vital to their characters, and sets them apart from other males. For a bastard on the Renaissance stage, controlling the woman who damaged his reputation is impossible and illogical, because her lascivious actions are past, and because he owes his being to her impropriety. Furthermore, the bastard’s mother is often not a character in the play, so the bastard must anyway shift his focus away from her. Thus, while playwrights in general make the bastard ultimately pay for his mother’s (and his own accumulating) sin, dramatizing his wickedness and ultimate death, they often also show the bastard’s strengths. Allison Findlay correctly asserts that the bastard on stage becomes a forceful “other,” a man inherently connected to female sexuality and thus different from other men.\textsuperscript{186} The bastard male character makes his bastardy part of his very identity, embracing the mischievousness by which he was conceived.

Off the stage, illegitimate births were quite common in early modern England due to the necessarily delayed marriages or aborted betrothals of poorer couples, as well as to the pregnancies of prostitutes, most of whom could not hope to wed. Adrian Wilson contends that illegitimate births made up roughly ten percent of all English births in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and argues that the breaking of engagements due to families’ financial problems made bastardy mostly an economic problem, or, more accurately, a social difficulty

stemming from financial hardship. Keith Wilson notes that between 1580 and 1620, the illegitimacy rate of the early modern period peaked due to the “instability and insecurity” of courtships dependent on dowries that could not always be delivered as promised. Such a situation appears in Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure, wherein Claudio explains that Juliet is “fast [his] wife, / Save that [they] do the denunciation lack,” because they wait “for propagation of a dower” (1.2.145-146; 147). Prostitutes’ pregnancies also occurred despite sex workers’ and their bawds’ efforts to prevent pregnancies, or to terminate them, sometimes with the help of in-house midwives. (Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure’s Kate Keepdown, due to give birth, is a stage example.)

Despite the frequency of illegitimate births, bastardy was roundly disdained by the English Church. Both Adrian Wilson and Keith Wrightson note that a pregnant bride was socially acceptable, but the birth of a bastard was not. Bastardy is clearly defined in the Bible as a sin and a stain. Deuteronomy 23:2 says, “A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord; even to his tenth generation shall he not enter into the congregation of the Lord.” That the Bible specifically tells not only the bastard but his future generations that they may not “enter the congregation” reveals that bastardy is a hereditary issue. Bastards are tainted and continue to taint others. Biblical bastards, too, such as Jephthah the Gileadite, the “son of a harlot,” received no inheritance from his father’s estate because his brothers recognized that he was the son of a “strange woman.” This idea – that the bastard could be tainted by a “strange”

190 Wilson, 21-22; Wrightson, 85-86.
191 Deuteronomy 23:2 (KJV).
woman – illustrates the gendered stigma of bastard bearers. It was the bastard and his bearer, not the father, who were the primary targets of shame and punishment in the early modern period. Frequently an unwed mother was forced to perform a penance, a “public confession, in church and/or in the marketplace, clad in a white sheet and holding a wand in her hand.” In most cases, this public display could be avoided by the father by his denying paternity or fleeing, thus shifting the problem of bastard children to the women who bore them, and thence, of course, to the children themselves. The ostracization of women who birthed bastards, and the easy separation of fathers from their legitimate children, fueled the stigma of a bastard male, who was effectively the mother’s son.

Not only the Bible-based preaching of English pastors but the writings of early modern moralists contributed to the negative stigma of bastardy. In his 1594 work, Triall of Bastardie, William Clerke defines bastards as mistakes occurring outside natural, lawful marriages:

“Natural, of thee natural begetting; legitimate, of their parentes lawfull conjunction, approved by the lawes: this is the issue of the body lawfully begotten, other issue has thou none but Bastards.” Clerke’s use of “natural” as a synonym for “lawful” is unconventional, since “natural” was a common synonym for “bastard.” In other works that discuss bastardy at length, “natural” is associated with bastards, and negatively opposed to “lawful,” as we see, for example, in Sir John Fortescue’s 1599 posthumously translated work, which links the lack of “lawfull and chast copulation of married couples” who produce bastard children to “the first sinne” of Adam

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193 See Wilson, 22. Both parents of an illegitimate child were breaking civil law, according to such ordinances as the Act of 1576, which could charge those parents to be whipped. See also Wilson, 24-25. In 1597 and 1601, the Poor Law was established and revised, decreeing the importance of finding the fathers of bastards. Both the Church and state could avoid paying for the child, and the mother could avoid expensive fees if they identified the bastard child’s father. However, identifying the father was not easy and, thus, many men still escaped the payment and stigma.
194 Ibid., 21.
and Eve. These kinds of writings discuss and condemn bastardy more plainly and in more
detail than the Bible, specifically noting the bastard’s illicit conception and birth.

Some writers were not so blatantly negative or prejudiced toward bastards, and chose
instead to express a more benign curiosity about the bastard and his or her nature as it differed
from legitimate natures. John Donne, for instance, muses “Why have Bastards best Fortune?”
Donne asserts that because society will not accept the bastard, he has “better means than others
to be wicked” – and presumably, a more understandable motive. Less virtue is expected of him.
However, the degree of sympathy Donne here shows towards the bastard comes at the expense of
their mothers, who have not only lapsed morally in conceiving them, but bequeathed them their
craftiness. “As Nature (which is lawes paterne) having denied women constancy to one, hath
provided with cunning to allure many, and so Bastards de jure should have better wits and
experience.”

Donne’s view on bastardy is close to the opinions expressed by bastards
themselves on the early modern stage. Bastard characters are indeed more artful and devious
than their legitimate counterparts, though they suffer from stigmas produced by bastardy, and,
impelled by natural sneakiness, set in motion events that ultimately injure them.

While playwrights often created bastard-character portrayals which honored the bastards’
complexity, they also expressed ambivalence for these illegitimates through having other
characters use “whoreson” as a general curse. That word primarily describes undesirable,
usually male, others. Jonson’s Dol Common from The Alchemist insults one of her fellow con-
artists by saying, “Who shall take your word? / A whoreson, upstart, apocryphal captain, / Whom

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by Thomas Wright and Bonham Norton, 1599), 96-97.
197 Donne, Euenilia: or, Certain Paradoxes and Problems, ed. R. E. Bennet (New York: Facsimile Text Society by
Columbia University Press, 1936), 58, 57.
198 The Oxford English Dictionary defines “whoreson” as “The son of a whore, a bastard son. Now more commonly
used as a general term of abuse or contempt for a man.” This usage dates back as far back as 1330.
not a puritan in Blackfriars will trust?” (1.1.126-128). Similarly, “whoreson” appears in lists of insults used by King Lear’s Kent against the slimy servant Oswald, whom he calls, “Thou whoreson zed, thou unnecessary letter” (2.2.65). We again hear the nondescript slur used casually, as an adjective, in Jonson’s Epicoene – “you whoreson lobster” (5.3.177) – and in Shakespeare’s The Tempest, against the Boatswain: “Hang cur, hang, you whoreson, insolent noisemaker!” (1.1.44-45). This adjectival use of “whoreson” as a general insult is also found repeatedly in the two parts of Shakespeare’s Henry IV, wherein Prince Hal insults Falstaff: “you whoreson round man,” “thou whoreson, obscene, greased tallow-catch” (1Henry IV 2.4.133; 218-219). Other uses of “whoreson” on the stage are to curse something inanimate that is awful or inconvenient, such as the “whoreson cold” that is caught in the second part of Henry IV (3.2.180), or the “whoreson court-case,” the lack of authority, that will cause all to revolt in John Ford’s The Broken Heart (2.2.118). Ironically, in the rare case when “whoreson” is used on the stage to actually denote a bastard – e.g., Gloucester in King Lear stating that the “whoreson must be acknowledged,” as he introduces a son whose mother “had indeed, sir, a son for her cradle ere she had a husband for her bed” (1.1.24; 14-16) – the word’s literalness mitigates its negativity. Still, a sense of taint remains.

Thus, when bastard characters display righteous qualities – as when the Bastard in Shakespeare’s King John behaves as a valiant and loyal English subject – a moral ambiguity results. The ambiguity of the stage bastard is complicated further (as in the King John example) when he has an impressive father. The occasional royal or even mythic bastard character may demonstrate great virtue despite his illegitimacy. In these cases, the splendor of the father seems to outweigh or even negate the immorality of the mother. The virtuous royal dramatic bastard dates back to Euripedes’ The Bacchae (405 BC), wherein the special status of royal bastards
begins with the quasi-divinity of Zeus’s children, born of divine rape. In *The Bacchae*, Dionysus states that he will defend his mother Semele because her lover was, after all, Zeus. “My mother sinned, said they” (34), but “I must speak clear / To save my mother’s fame, and crown me here / As true God, born by Semele to Zeus” (51-53). Half-god, half-human, the bastard Dionysus wants his divine heritage respected. His early modern stage descendant was the illegitimate son of a man with great power, an occasional character. William Rowley’s *The Birth of Merlin* features such a one, a mythical bastard, in Merlin, born to a devil and a mortal woman. Though the devil cannot be said to be good, his supernaturalness seems to have been the source of wizardly power that, in Merlin, is somehow capable of being turned to good. Thus Merlin eventually rejects his satanic sire while simultaneously accepting his own bastardy, saying his father “did beget [his own] scourge” (5.1.75) by conceiving him. Merlin separates himself from the stigma of illegitimacy by performing a heroic act: banishing his devil-father and assisting King Arthur in defeating the Saxon armies and achieving the English crown. Like Dionysus, Merlin recognizes his power, demands respect for it, and implements it boldly. As Allison Findlay argues, Merlin’s story illustrates good emerging from evil, and this, in turn, saves his mother from the shame of birthing a fatherless bastard (though her natural sexual nature is evident in her name, Joan Go-to’t).

Shakespeare’s Bastard in *King John* inhabits a special category because he is an English royal bastard, the illegitimate son of the great Richard Lionheart. Like Dionysus and Merlin, Philip the Bastard becomes a mythic figure who is able to transcend the stigma of illegitimacy because of his connection with a father who is in some sense great. The Bastard’s sensitivity to and esteem for “greatness” can be seen in his speeches, such as when he rallies King John: “Be

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199 Findlay, 178-179.
great in act, as you have been in thought … So shall inferior eyes, / That borrow their behaviors from the great, / Grow great by your example” (5.1.45-52). Allison Findlay contends that his “identity as the bastard of an idealized Richard I allows him to legitimize the illegitimate” by becoming “a personification of kingly qualities.”²⁰⁰ The Bastard recognizes the value of his connection to Richard I and even comforts his mother, Lady Faulconbridge, when she admits to her son that King Richard Coeur de Lion was his father: “your fault was not your folly,” he tells her (1.1.262). The Bastard further demonstrates his eloquence and kingly qualities when he claims King John’s “royalty doth speak” in him – seeming to share that royal voice with the sovereign – and chastises those rebels who are “ripping up the womb / Of your dear mother England” (5.2.129; 152-153). This transcending of the bastard label also occurs in Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale, with Perdita, a rare case of a female accused of bastardy despite her hidden legitimacy.²⁰¹ Her jealous real father applies a “forced baseness” to Perdita because he is convinced that his wife Hermione has been unfaithful to him (2.3.99). Banished, Perdita is raised as a found orphan, a supposed bastard child. Yet she proves superior to stigma, as her community in act 4 celebrates her as Flora, Queen of the Festival, and she is observed to be something greater than her rural companions: “Nothing she does or seems / But smacks of something greater than herself, / Too noble for this place” (4.4.186-188), says the admiring King Polixenes. Her own sense of social entitlement resounds in her speech, as when she gracefully defies Polixenes’ (eventual) insults, saying, “The selfsame sun that shines upon his court / Hides not his visage from our cottage but / Looks on alike” (4.4.522-524). Derived from powerful or

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 206.
²⁰¹ See Neill, “‘In Everything Illegitimate’: Imagining the Bastard in Renaissance Drama,” in The Yearbook of English Studies 23, (1993): 275. Neill states that in early modern England “at least fifty per cent of illegitimate children must have been female,” however, “legal bastardy being so much a category of disinheritance,” it was much more common to see a male bastard depicted on stage.
even mythical fathers (though, in Perdita’s case, the relation is shrouded), Philip the Bastard and Perdita, one an illegitimate child and one a legitimate one falsely accused of bastardy, exhibit an eloquence and authority representative of their fathers’ status.

Shakespeare’s Caliban is another quasi-mythic bastard, though one who, though magical and eloquent in speech, lacks social power, and, more importantly, lacks the necessary social understanding of the label “bastard” necessary for him to feel the word’s sting. Caliban is the son of the “damned witch” Sycorax and is called a “freckled whelp, hag-born” by Prospero (1.2.316). Caliban cannot fend off Prospero’s physical control of him, but he is unaffected by Prospero’s use of epithets. Still, Caliban, the “demi-devil, / For he’s a bastard one,” ignores Prospero’s verbal abuse while complaining only of his physical abuse (5.1.327-328). Despite his being a “mooncalf” and a “hagseed,” words that other playwrights use to illustrate his illegitimacy (2.2.141; 1.2.440), Caliban is in a rare bastard category in that he does not acknowledge his own illegitimate status, even while he suffers its stigma at the hands of the dominant and legitimate (though exiled) duke, Prospero (who reminds us of European social standards with a bad joke about his own child’s legitimacy: “Thy mother was a piece of virtue, and / She said thou wast my daughter” [1.2.70-71]). Prospero emphasizes Caliban’s inherent evil through illegitimacy-insults, allowing him no dignity until Prospero’s own final adoption of him grants him paternalistic legitimacy: “This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine” (5.1.330-331). Prospero’s disdain and ridicule of Caliban’s bastardy, typical of male characters on the early modern stage, comport with his view of Caliban as well as Sycorax as obstacles to his legitimate rule. Yet Caliban, seeing things otherwise, becomes his late mother’s champion in his attempt to

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202 See also Ben Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), wherein Ursula, the pig-woman, has a young servant called Mooncalf, referred to as “[her] Mooncalf” (3.2.100). Mooncalf’s relation to Ursula is not clear, but his name suggests that he could be Ursula’s illegitimate child. Shakespeare uses “mooncalf” to describe Caliban in 1611, and the historical proximity of the two plays suggests that Mooncalf’s name is synonymous with bastardy.
dethrone Prospero through the drunken Stephano. Caliban describes his mother Sycorax as a powerful island ruler whose legacy he hopes to inherit as Prospero’s successful rival: “This island’s mine by Sycorax my mother” (1.2.396). He defiantly aligns himself with maternal power. Like Rowley’s Merlin and Shakespeare’s Philip the Bastard, Caliban redeems (or attempts to redeem) his mother through exulting in his own natural power and authority.

Even when a bastard is a tragic character, he still bears some of this paradoxical stamp of virtue, becoming his mother’s champion in that he does not view her illicit sexuality as a taint, but a generative action, and one that, further, makes him more intrinsically talented than his legitimate rivals. In a bastard’s version of defending the family honor, then, the mother is the figure to be redeemed. His championing of her is necessary to his defense of his own identity. Thus instead of condemning female whorishness, the tragic bastard defies the labels that other men assign him – most notable, “bastard” or “whoreson” – by reveling in his nature as an illegitimate son. While Shakespeare’s Falstaff declares that the “son of the female is the shadow of the male” (2 Henry IV, 3.2.129-130), bastard characters, defiantly the sons of women, are only worse than their legitimate brothers in that they are denied inheritance, and thus put in the same category as widows who were similarly scanted in favor of male heirs. Still, despite their material misfortune, these bastard characters do not hate women’s illicit sexuality. In fact, they hate legitimacy, which is the opposite of their own identity. Thomas Middleton’s Spurio in The Revenger’s Tragedy and Shakespeare’s Edmund are two such tragic “naturals” who do not curse their mothers for their “tainted” identity, but instead celebrate an identity born out of lustiness. They weaponize both sex and illegitimacy against the legitimate men who have wronged them. Spurio and Edmund are slandered by lawfully born characters, but their individualistic

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203 Also see Neill, 280. Caliban also becomes the rival of another legitimate man, according to Neill, who argues that Caliban’s attempted rape of Miranda makes him the “degenerate double” of her aristocratic lover Ferdinand (280).
motivation to outwit and defeat their legitimate rivals shows their natural energy. Spurio is fueled by spite, while Edmund shows delight at his own lusty bastard’s mettle. The tragic bastard, less conventionally virtuous than the mythic bastards on stage, shares with them the view that trickledown whoredom is no threat to but a vital constituent of identity. It makes him stronger, and, in fact, less unnatural, than the lawfully born.

Middleton’s Spurio is a mingled example. He embraces his bastard identity, the deviant sexuality from which he was produced, in order to seek revenge against his father, who he believes socially tainted him. The spite that Spurio feels for his father leaves him ultimately stuck between reveling in his illegitimate identity and resenting it. Spurio explicitly curses the Duke, not his sexually erring mother, who is not even identified. Spurio’s first soliloquy marks the Duke as the one who has morally ruined him: “Duke, thou didst do me wrong and by thy act / Adultery is my nature” (1.2.177-178). It is not the mother who earns Spurio’s ire, although he does mention he was “begot / After some gluttonous dinner” wherein “ladies’ cheeks were painted red with wine.” Instead, it was the “base male bawds” who allowed “The sin of feasts, drunken adultery” (2.1.179-180; 187; 189). That Spurio expresses clear disgust with his father’s actions while never directly mentioning his mother shows a much less bitter reaction than those of legitimate male relatives toward their family’s wayward women. Spurio does not glory in his mother’s sexuality, but he does not condemn her either. Instead, he seeks revenge on the Duke by sleeping with the Duchess: “Duke, on thy brow I’ll draw my bastardy.” It is his nature to use sexuality against others, “[f]or indeed a bastard by nature should make cuckolds, / Because he is the son of a cuckold-maker” (1.2.201-203). Spurio’s willingness to use adultery against his father shows a lack of conventional virtue, which lack is tied to his illegitimate birth.
Not trying to stop whoredom, but to extend it, Spurio exploits the power of illicit sexuality that gave him being.

Still, while Spurio embraces his role as a cuckold-maker, his anger at the social consequences of his bastardy is stoked by the Duchess, who weaponizes its stigma to woo him. She uses conventional negative attitudes towards bastards to prime Spurio for a revenge against the Duke, of which she wishes to be part. Michael Neill contends that Spurio’s statement that adultery is his nature not only justifies his revenge against his father, but “concentrates… a whole history of cultural stigmatization… [of] the inevitable moral taint.” The Duchess capitalizes on the exact stain that Neill identifies and that Spurio discusses in his soliloquy. She laments, perhaps sarcastically, to Spurio: “Oh what a grief ’tis, that a man should live / But once i’th’ world, and then to live a bastard” (1.2.158-159). This very patriarchal, mainstream view of bastardy is expressed by the Duchess not to empathize with Spurio for his tainted identity, but to spur him to violence. The result is that Spurio’s anger, thus stoked, keeps him from fully embracing his bastardy. The Duchess embraces the negativity of bastardy, blaming the origin of bastards in a way Spurio never does, denigrating the womb – “The curse o’the womb, the thief of Nature” – as well as mourning the bastard who is “Half-damned in the conception” (1.2.160; 162). Spurio is influenced by his stepmother’s depiction of bastardy because he is already stuck between loving and resenting his own identity. He ends by embracing mischief, calling the Duchess a means to be a “hot backed devil,” deploying sex to attack his father (1.2.164).

Spurio’s own divided perception of himself prevents him from exulting in the naturalness of his bastardy. In general, as Allison Findlay notes, the bastard “gains a sovereignty of self not

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shared by the legitimate world which is obsessed with acquisition and self-preservation.”

Spurio’s only partial self-confidence wars with his self-disgust. Thus, when he learns that his brother Lussurioso intends to use the maiden Castiza as a whore, Spurio is delighted by his legitimate brother’s disgraceful actions but must also bring up his own contamination, stating, “I’ll disinherit you in as short time / As I was when I was begot in haste, / I’ll damn you at your pleasure” (2.2.126-128). Spurio’s every consideration is colored by his self-identification as a damned “bastard.” His self-identified taint separates him from the court, his illegitimate family, of which he is and is not a member. Even when expressing a general hatred for all, Spurio cannot leave out his tarnished self-image: “And if a bastard’s wish might stand in force, / Would all the court were turned into a corse” (1.2.35-36). That Spurio disdains his legitimate rivals shows that he does partly embrace his difference. However, his inability fully to accept his alien identity and progress from anger at his father for making him a bastard, to anger at unjust social ideas about bastardy, keep him a perpetual halfway whoreson, neither fully proud nor fully ashamed of himself.

Shakespeare’s Edmund, the bastard in *King Lear*, exhibits a more unalloyed bastard pride. Edmund does not accept the idea that he is less than any “legitimate” other. In fact, he is more. In his first soliloquy, Edmund questions why anyone would view him as inferior just because of the “plague of custom” which labels him a bastard. Edmund focuses on the language used against him by others, rather than generating these terms himself: “Why ‘bastard’? Wherefore ‘base’… Why brand they us / With ‘base,’ with ‘baseness,’ ‘bastardy,’ ‘base,’ ‘base’” (1.2.3; 6; 9-10, my emphasis). His questioning of these terms coincides with his declaration that his “dimensions are as well compact, / [His] mind as generous and [his] shape as true / As honest

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205 Findlay, 48.
madam’s issue” (1.2.7-9). Claude Summer correctly contends that Edmund’s role as an evil villain is rooted in the stigma that impedes him – not in his own self-doubt – and Allison Findlay reiterates this point, stating that “legitimate society (personified by Edgar) is the ultimate source of the evil bastard.” Indeed, through most of King Lear, Edmund does not denigrate himself, he only derides others’ beliefs by repeating scornfully the language used against him. Edmund aspires to overcome the stigma – “Edmund the base / Shall top th’ legitimate” (1.2.21-22) – rather than stay defined by it.

Edmund plans to use his vital nature to prove himself inventive and worthy, not, like Spurio, to create cuckolds. Echoing John Donne’s assertion that bastards have best fortune, Edmund asserts that he is superior to legitimate rivals because his conception occurred in pure sport. Bastards “in the lusty stealth of nature, take / More composition and fierce quality / Than doth within a dull, tale, tired bed / Go to th’ creating a whole tribe of fops / Got ‘tween asleep and wake” (1.2.11-16). His declaration that his conception makes him more interesting, more natural, more fierce than “legitimate” men shows an acceptance for his bastardy that echoes the Bastard of King John, who says he is “as well begot” as others, and that he thanks the sexually erring woman who conceived him: “Fair fall the bones that took the pains for me” (King John 1.1.77-78). Despite this recognition and pride in his own bastardy, though, Edmund also completely (though unsympathetically) understands the aforementioned “plague of custom” which defines him as less than his legitimate brother, Edgar, who is to inherit Gloucester’s land. Although their “father’s love is to the bastard Edmund / As to th’ legitimate,” the estate will go to Edgar (1.2.18-19), whom Gloucester describes as a son “by order of law” (1.1.19).  

206 Summers, “‘Stand up for Bastards!’: Shakespeare’s Edmund and Love’s Failure,” College Literature 4, no. 3 (1977): 227; Findlay, 71.
207 See Janet Adelman, Suffocating Mothers (New York: Routledge, 1992), who asserts Gloucester’s categorization of his sons excludes Edmund from the patriarchal order of his which other, legitimate, son is a part (105).
However, being outside a system which would guarantee him legal inheritance, Edmund is in a position to benefit himself by his own ingenuity, just as John Donne mused. He does not have to worry about his own status getting worse. As he says, he can only rise: “The younger rises when the old doth fall” (3.3.25) – the old implicitly including his elder, legitimate brother.

Of course, his evil is evident in the use to which he puts his natural talents. He plots against his brother’s life and leaves his father to be brutally tortured, so he can “rise.” Yet since Edmund’s behavior is typical of the Machiavellian hero (e.g., Shakespeare’s Richard III and Iago), and since legitimate characters in the play are at least as evil as he, it is impossible to attribute his vice to his bastardy. His play’s resistance to such a moral formula parallels Edmund’s own refusal to perceive bastardy as a taint. Edgar reduces the woman who birthed Edmund to a “dark and vicious place,” illustrating the feminine evil that Edgar sees inherited by brother (5.3.206), but these kinds of insults do not daunt Edmund. His cunning causes “legitimate” people to do his work and, more importantly, shows their own illegitimate wickedness. Accordingly, bastard insults are not exclusive to Edmund in this play. They are also applied to other characters who do evil things. Legitimate daughter Goneril is called by her father “[d]egenerate bastard” (2.4.148), and Lear proposes that Regan’s mother’s tomb would be “Sepluch’ring an adulteress” if she betrayed Lear (as she does) (1.4.263). These legitimate female “bastards” are the ones who shout, “Pluck out his eyes” and, “Hang him instantly” in the scene where Gloucester is tortured (3.7.5-6). The daughters, metaphorical bastards, are directly brutal, while Edmund, the actual “whoreson,” works in a more genteel manner, setting others’ evil in motion by his cunning. Thus accusations of bastardy are widely significant in this play,
not only helping to define and motivate the illegitimate Edmund, but illuminating serious moral failings in legitimate children.\footnote{208}

Nevertheless, at the end of the play, an altered Edmund voices the conventional view that actual bastards are especially prone to evil. When Edgar defeats Edmund in a duel, and stands on his rights as legitimate heir – “I am no less in blood than thou art, Edmund; / If more, the more th’ hast wronged me” (5.3.201-202) – Edmund seems to agree. Dying, he says, “Some good I mean to do / Despite of mine own nature” (5.3.291-292). In other words, his final virtuous attempt to save Lear and Cordelia is made \textit{regardless of} his bastardy – in repudiation of what he now implies is his natural evil. Ironically, Edmund’s final drive to do good comes not only as he is dying, but after he has lost the last parent whose existence marks him as illegitimate. However, his punishment as a tragic bastard has been established by his defeat at the hands of Edgar, and he dies dismissed as “but a trifle” by the other men (5.3.359). He is left lying on the stage side by side with the figuratively illegitimate dead sisters, Regan and Goneril, but with his congenital villainy emphasized. As is often the case, Shakespeare has it both ways.

Our recognition of the category of metaphorical Shakespearean bastards leads us to Hamlet. This tragic bastard is one because he himself fears he is affected by trickledown whoredom. Technical bastardy does not initially define Hamlet because he is introduced as a legitimate prince. However, like so many other lawfully born males, Hamlet is consumed with the threat of a female family member’s illicit sexual activity upending his own identity. When he

\footnote{208 We see this phenomenon also in John Webster’s Romelio, in \textit{The Devil’s Law-Case}, whose villainy stems not, as he imagines, from illegitimacy, but from personal choice. When his mother (falsely) claims he is illegitimate, Romelio is horrified that others might “think the baselier” of him, because he links bastardy with lowliness (4.2.315). Yet Romelio, like Goneril and Regan, exhibits qualities as disgraceful as any bastard character, including a bad faith which leads him to father a bastard himself (3.3.31-41). Actual bastards’ evil is often matched by the evil of those legitimate characters who receive bastard insults. Perhaps this is why Shakespeare’s scurrilous Thersites in \textit{Troilus and Cressida} exclaims, “I love bastards” (5.8.8): because they become scapegoats for general human vice.}
becomes a revenger for his dead father, Hamlet becomes a sort of hybrid bastard, both the son of a dead king whose wife was an apparent adulteress, and the stepson of an illegitimate usurping king. This leaves him in a confusing domestic and political position. As Michael Neill contends, “play[ing] the bastard,” Hamlet “at once mimes the illegitimacy of the heir-apparent role in which Claudius has cast him, and mocks the powerlessness that seems to compromise the ‘truth’ of his legitimate inheritance.” Hamlet thus finds himself shadowed by illegitimacy.

In this he is, in some respects, like Shakespeare’s Prince Hal in *Henry IV Part 1*, whose father wishes “that it could be proved / That some night-tripping fairy had exchanged” his son for a more desirable heir, Hotspur (1.1.86-87). The shadowy (though playful) possibility of Hal’s illegitimacy is also raised when Falstaff teases him, playing the role of Hal’s father in the tavern and exclaiming, in character, “That thou art my son I have partly thy mother’s word, partly my own opinion, but chiefly a villainous trick of thine eye . . . that doth warrant me” (2.4.415-419). Just as Prince Hal eventually redeems himself in the eyes of his father by saving his life (5.4.48), Hamlet will prove himself his own father’s son by killing his father’s rival Claudius. But until that point, he fixates on his own legitimacy, as in his hypersensitive reaction to Claudius’ terming him “son” – “A little more than kin and less than kind” – a line which refers to the unnaturalness of the relationship between himself and Claudius (1.2.66-67). Like other males, Hamlet understands that men can be tainted by their birth through circumstances beyond their control; that is, women’s prior actions: “So oft it chances in particular men / That for some vicious mole of nature in them, / As in their birth (wherein they are not guilty, / Since nature cannot choose his origin) . . .” (1.4.26-29). He seems concerned that he might actually be

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Claudius’ son and not his father’s. He must then remake himself as the legitimate king’s son, reclaiming an identity that his mother has damaged.

Thus his quest is to rehabilitate an identity made unsound not just because of the murder of his father, but because of the remarriage of his mother. As in the families of unchaste women discussed above, a female relative’s unregulated sexuality poses a threat to a male family member’s identity as he perceives it, and Hamlet fixates on the identity taint that his mother has caused him. Claudius identifies Hamlet’s uncertainty, or “Hamlet’s transformation,” which has “put him / So much from th’ understanding of himself,” and Gertrude suggests her “o’er hasty marriage” has caused it (2.2.5; 9-10; 60). Hamlet is sure that the “incestuous sheets” in which his mother and uncle sleep are his concern, and this conviction is reinforced by the Ghost describing Gertrude as only a “seeming virtuous queen” (1.2.162; 1.5.53). Hamlet defaults to the social scorn that Middleton’s Duchess and Edgar express about bastards – they are defined by the dark and vicious place that the father willingly visits – and this fuels his anger at women. He expresses his wrath through sexualized anti-female epithets: “I, the son of a dear father murdered, / Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell, / Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words / And fall a-cursing like a very drab” (2.2.612-615). Here, Hamlet’s obsession with his mother’s vice goes beyond the fear of his own bastardy. He identifies himself as the soiled woman, or whore, diseased and transformed by Gertrude’s sexual vice.

Hamlet is in an unusual category of tragic “bastards” because his mother is a character in the play. Her presence enables him to challenge her for causing his possibly real, possibly metaphorical illegitimacy, in a way that echoes the accusations of whoredom delivered by jealous stage husbands. In the closet scene, he expresses his disgust, right in front of her, that she could be “whored” right in front of him (5.2.72). Thus, as Andrew Barnaby argues, Hamlet
“sustain[s] his father’s memory by acting as his father’s surrogate,” subsuming his own identity in his dead father’s. Other bastards become their mothers’ champions, reveling in the lasciviousness that created them and allows them to be mischievous, not cursing their mother’s sexual freedom. In other words, they show a pleased acknowledgment that their indirect, crafty selves are related to their bastardy. Hamlet enjoys his own ability to be devious and misleading, but, in contrast to these characters, he must finally repudiate these “bastard” characteristics through direct confrontation and direct action. Doing so, and claiming his rightful identity as his father’s son – “This is I, / Hamlet, the Dane” (5.1.27071) -- he also reclaims Gertrude as his father’s wife. He does not become her champion until after he directly confronts her and demands her return to chastity. Like Othello, who claims, “Heaven stops the nose” at Desdemona’s alleged adultery (Othello 4.2.88), Hamlet demands his mother’s departure from the sordid act that makes “Heaven’s face . . . glow”: her marriage to Claudius (Hamlet 3.4.60). The accusation of whoredom that echoes the lines of Shakespeare’s most famous supposed cuckold signals the start of Hamlet’s transformation into his mother’s ally. Reclaiming his mother, Hamlet also confronts and repudiates his own bastard identity, exchanging it for a legitimate identity as Old Hamlet’s heir.

Thus, as Michael Neill argues, Hamlet “makes revenge a matter of legitimization – of proving himself Old Hamlet’s ‘true’ and ‘natural’ son.” Legitimization through avenging a father’s death is plainly described in act four by Hamlet’s foil Laertes, who is enraged at the news of his father’s death and claims his own illegitimacy if he does not avenge Polonius’ slaying: “That drop of blood that’s calm proclaims me bastard, / Cries ‘cuckold’ to my father, brands the harlot… Of my true mother” (4.5.130-134). Like Laertes, Hamlet in act five formally

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recognizes that to be a genuine son, he too must avenge: “For by the image of my cause I see /
The portraiture of his” (5.2.87-88). A crucial difference between Hamlet and Laertes is Hamlet’s need to eliminate or transform an impediment – the cheating mother – and restore her to legitimacy. Still, the end of the play leaves his legitimacy in doubt. When he finally completes his revenge, he instructs the damned and dying Claudius to “Follow my mother” (5.2.356; 359), as though an unredeemed Gertrude is going to hell. Perhaps the taint that mars both mother and bastard cannot truly be eradicated, and must either be embraced or endured as a continuing stain.

Indeed, staged bastards, whether literal, metaphorical, or both, cannot take preventative measures against illicit female sexuality, for that prior sexuality has caused them and is part of their being. Bastard sons are in a unique and rare category of male characters who, given the choice either to hate themselves or revel in the deviousness that created them, often choose the latter, setting themselves, like Edmund, proudly against the “legitimate.” Because of bastards’ power to do so, the very idea of bastardy bothers legitimate men, leading them to use “whoreson” as a general curse, to question the ability of fathers to manage the females of their households, and to connect their own patriarchal worth inextricably to female chastity.
5. The Exotic Erotic: “Whores” from Beyond

As discussed in my previous chapters, early modern female stage characters slandered with the epithet “whore” tend to be presented in Western European locales and Christian contexts, the settings of their plays being, for example, Venice, London, Parma, or some other European city. The chastity of the wife, daughter, sister, and mother characters who dwell in England or (say) Northern Italy is held to strict moral standards. The exotic “whore,” the woman placed by the author in a pagan or otherwise exotic culture, occupies a special place on the stage because she is not limited by these standards. Unlike the heroine defined within a familial context, the exotic woman is not obligated to remain sexually pure; not charged with upholding her own and her family’s honor. Not only is she generally rootless and unindebted to male authority figures, her strange environment allows her a certain freedom of sexual expression. Thus exotic female characters – who are generally pagan (sometimes African) and occasionally divine or semi-divine – coveted by men for their sexuality and beauty, seem initially to defy the rules that bind domestic female characters in a Christian culture. However, in tragic contexts, their freedom is illusory, or short-lived. When the exotic women characters displease men, their lush sexuality, once the source of their attraction, becomes a mark of corruption, as male characters begin to hold them not just to the rules that should govern the behavior of a matron in the Ancient world, but by an even stricter, anachronistic early modern Biblical standard; indeed, the standard by which an Elizabethan or Jacobean householder might judge his own wife or other
female family members. Liberated exotic women characters are thus ambivalently presented on
the Renaissance tragic stage: intermittently or successively celebrated and harshly judged.

In her strength, the exotic female character is much like the comic prostitute. Both kinds
of women exist outside a domestic institution which defines females as daughters, sisters, wives,
or widows. They govern their own spheres, which makes them less vulnerable to the verbal
abuse of jealous males. As discussed in my first chapter, the promiscuity of comic “whores,”
meaning actual prostitutes, elicits audience laughter as the women verbally triumph over men
who first solicit and then try vainly to punish them. Part of these stage prostitutes’ power derives
from the fact that they occupy an almost entirely licentious world. Ben Jonson’s Ursula, Joan
Trash, and Punk Alice in *Bartholomew Fair* thrive in the fairgrounds. Their carnival liveliness
cannot be quenched by those who disapprove of them. Joan Trash stands up to a male fair-
denizen’s invective, prizing herself above the fair’s other whores (“hobby-horses”) as she
defends her business: “Mar my market, thou too-proud pedlar! Do thy worst, I defy thee, I, and
thy stable of hobby-horses” (2.2.12-13). Shakespeare’s Doll Tearsheet and Mistress Quickly
work in the Boar’s Head Tavern, a place, governed by Quickly, where debauchery can occur
freely (or for cash), and a setting which is the opposite of the rigid, male-dominated court of
Henry IV. There Doll defends her space against the swaggering Pistol when he insults her,
exclaiming “For God’s sake, thrust him down the stairs: I cannot endure such a fustian rascal”
(2.4.181-182), and seeing him successfully evicted. While these prostitutes are presented as
existing in the same town as the men who seek them out, it’s clear that men have traveled to get
to their colorful locations, which are havens for mischief. They are visitors to these feminine
realms where, as Mistress Quickly says (with a double entendre), “a dozen or fourteen
gentlewomen … live honestly by the prick of their needles” (*Henry V* 2.1.33-34). When men meet these women outside of the familiar, comfortable, patriarchal domestic worlds they govern, they find “whores” who only laugh at their verbal abuse. To a degree, the comic whore exists in her own right.

Even more than Doll Tearsheet and Joan Trash, who thrive in their London underworlds, a *meretrix*, like Terence’s Bacchis (from *Hecyra*) and, at least partially, Shakespeare’s Courtezan from *The Comedy of Errors*, is free to roam the streets, pay social calls, and occupy a legitimate social place. Furthermore, the meretrix, like the comic London prostitute, is not disempowered by sexualized epithets. Shakespeare’s Courtezan’s base of operations suggests her wildness, or untameability: the Ephesian men leave their domestic or business settings to go to “the Tiger” for dinner with her (3.1.156-157). Likewise, Bellamira from Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* exists in an early modern Catholic country but is associated with the sexual wildness of pagan culture, present in the Moorishness of her lover, the servant Ithamore, and in the Turkish forces of Calymath, which threaten the contested city. Bellamira is sexually liberated, free enough for a liaison with Ithamore, whom she tells, “I have no husband, sweet, I’ll marry you” (4.2.90). Before her tragic end – which is accompanied by the triumph of Christian Malta, with its sexually restrictive norms, over the barbarian threat at play’s end – Bellamira’s sexuality is powerful and even “masculine,” indeed part of the city’s commercial economy, as she uses it to gain not love, but wealth. *Meretrices* like Bellamira may occupy a house or brothel, but their position in a classical or *faux* classical setting – e.g., ancient Ephesus, or Turk-threatened Malta, not London – allows them to flourish. Their occupation is not taboo, but a legitimate profession in such a location.212 Thus the *meretrix*’s freedoms, though analogous to those of the prostitute of

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London city comedy, go even further. Unshackled by, or on loose terms with, Christian rules, which purport to govern female behavior in the London “overworld,” the liberty of the meretrix exceeds even that of Joan Trash.

This liberty is associated with the “Liberty,” or location in which such women were free to operate. In early modern plays (as in reality), the professional sex worker and the meretrix are geographically as well as morally separated from the matron, the wife and/or mother character who remains in the domestic space (despite the fact that the Mediterranean Courtezan, unlike the English prostitute, might visit that space). This makes all prostitute characters semi-exotic. To be a professional “whore” was to repudiate domestic roles. Anise Strong contends that the “whore label” in early Western culture “conceptually represented a transgression of social boundaries both in terms of class and gender, especially through concern over women’s abandonment of traditional family ties.”

Wives belonged in the home. The prostitute is thus a wild being – different, alien, alluring, and foreign – because of her lack of husband, child, and domestic obligations. Thus on stage the whore or meretrix, a complex sexual and economic entity, “lack[s] any owner” – husband, father, or brother. Her exoticism stems fundamentally from her freedom from men’s civic and domestic authority.

This authority, however inflected by Christianity when presented on sixteenth-and seventeenth-century stages, is rooted in a patriarchal morality that is also found in ancient tragedy (a paradox, in that Greek or pagan myth also celebrated sexual fertility deities, such as Aphrodite). The stark differences between a matron and a “whore,” the qualities that make a woman exotic, can be seen in tragic plays by Seneca and Euripides, particularly when we focus on the distinction the playwrights make between ordinary women and Helen of Troy. Seneca’s

214 Ibid., 9.
_Troades_ (circa 54 AD) dramatizes the kind of matronly identity that Anise Strong analyzes in early Western European culture. As Hecuba begins the play weeping for the destruction of Troy, she rallies the other wives to embrace their virtuous feminine strength in their time of mourning. The women let down their hair and bare their breasts as they are captured by the Greeks as slaves: “let down your dresses, hitch up the fabric, / let your bodies be naked to the belly. / What wedding can you wait for, that you bother to cover your breasts, / such self-respecting slaves?” (1.90-93). Hecuba instructs the women to beat their breasts to “[o]utdo the way [they] used to weep,” and to represent Troy (1.99). Such a display makes the wives visible as mourning wives and mothers. These characters find strength in their filial womanhood, exposing their feminine features – unbound, long hair and bare breasts – to grieve the collective loss of their families. Furthermore, because Hecuba and her chorus of wives and mothers are loyal to Troy, their display of their sexual nature is not immodest but patriotic. Most importantly, these women self-identify as a stark contrast to Helen, whom Andromache calls “an abomination, an infection, a pollution” to both Troy and Greece because of the blood that has been spilled over her sexual betrayal of Menelaus (4.892-893). The problem is that Helen’s beauty was not controllable by one man (or nation). She is not a prostitute, but because she is not a devoted wife like Andromache or Hecuba, she is tragically bewhored.

Helen is also judged harshly in Euripides’ 412 BC play _Helen_, for not fitting into the matronly category of women. In Euripides’ version of Helen, she herself is miserable because of what her beauty has caused: “My entire life, / Every wretched event, has been unnatural, / For which I blame my beauty as much as Hera” (274-277). The illegitimate daughter of Zeus, Helen compares the wrath of Zeus’ wife to her own looks, citing both as destructive. Her beauty, as well as her parentage, made her at first a demi-goddess, but, eventually, a whore. Thus her
desirability is, paradoxically, the “doom and death of [her] despair” and a “blasting curse” (315-317). Helen’s tarnished reputation makes her a tragic version of the *meretrix*. She is initially desired, but, having responded to extramarital desire, becomes a fallen matron, inherits the curse of a nation, and is tragically abhorred (or “whored”). When, in Euripides’ play, she is spotted by Teucer, a Trojan who fought in the war, he calls her an “abomination” (80).

When the character of Helen moved from the ancient to the early modern stage, playwrights such as Christopher Marlowe pushed her further into the category of “whore,” as conceived in early modern terms. Language in three of Marlowe’s plays connects Helen to whoredom. In the history play *Edward II*, Marlowe’s Lancaster refers to Helen to insult the king’s favorite, Gaveston, who is “like the Greekish strumpet” because of the war and bloodshed he has caused (9.15). Similarly, in *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, Dido curses Helen as a “ticing [enticing] strumpet” when Dido hears the story of the fall of Troy (2.1.300). In *Doctor Faustus*, while no direct epithets are used against Helen, her evil provenance is obvious: she is conjured up by the demon Mephistophilis as a “paramour” for Faustus (5.1.83). This version of Helen is offered as an illusory alternative to the “hot whore” wife that Faustus asks for and dismisses, yet both Helen and the hot whore are summoned from Hell (2.1.146). Other early modern playwrights also invoke Helen either as a fallen character, a name of insult, or both. In Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, Diomedes dismisses Helen as “whore” and “bitter to her country” (4.1.72; 74). Helen’s “crimes” in this play make Troilus question why the Trojans would even keep her (2.2.86). In Beaumont and Fletcher’s *The Maid’s Tragedy*, Aspatia classifies Helen as a homewrecker, telling her ladies they should be as sad as Oenone (Paris’ wife) when Paris brought home Helen (2.2.30-31). *Romeo and Juliet*’s dialogue also likens Helen to other “whores” when Mercutio jeeringly groups her among a list of mythic “harlots”
These examples show that on the early modern stage, Helen’s character became a byword for promiscuity, in an even lower and more sneering register than in ancient theater, to the point where her very name was a common slur.

Thus, Helen encapsulates what I will show to be the destiny of the tragic exotic “whore”: a woman who exists outside the nominal Christian cultural context of the early modern playwright and his audience, and whose beauty and allure seem to free her from the moral constraints of that culture, but whose very desirability and sexual freedom ultimately cause her to be judged negatively, in familiar early modern terms, as the evil temptress of the Biblical Proverbs; a fallen woman, or whore.

I have stated that exotic women are initially free from the constraints of early modern European sexual norms in that their sexuality is celebrated by men, but that this exotic sexuality becomes a dubious trait once the exotic woman displeases the male protagonist. The link between evil and uncontrolled female sexuality, which appears on the early modern stage in references to Helen, is, as suggested above, reinforced by the Bible, as where Proverbs warns against the “strange woman” because “None that go unto her return again, neither take they hold of the paths of life.” Proverbs further warns men not to let their “heart[s] decline in their ways, go not astray in her paths,” for “many strong men have been slain by her.” Proverbs informs the Western binary, suggested by Anise Strong, of women as either whore or matron. The strange woman is also distinguished from the unmarried yet virtuous virgin or widow. Corinthians 1 says, “The unmarried woman careth for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in

216 Proverbs 7:25-26 (KJV).
spirit: but she that is married careth for the things of the world, how she may please her husband.”\textsuperscript{217} When a woman is not chaste and therefore devoted to the Lord or to her (single) husband, then she is a strange woman, one whose sexuality, as we recall, is damnable and damning.

The exotic whore of early modern tragedy is ultimately relegated to this “strange woman” category. Her eroticism is likely to be pardoned by male characters who regard it from a distance. The exciting expectation of an available and seductive woman excuses her lasciviousness, which is the same phenomenon that occurs with comic prostitutes. However, the pardoning of sexualized exotic female characters comes to an abrupt end when that female character betrays or otherwise displeases male characters.

As I have suggested in this and an earlier chapter, the initial pardoning of female sexuality is partly determined by genre. A light-hearted comic insult does not carry the same weight as tragic sexual slander (and a comedy which features a sex-and-fertility goddess will provide a double excuse for this female character’s loose sexual behavior, as she is pardoned both by her pagan divinity and by her forgiving genre). Tragic exotic-whore plays complicate the comic-tragic binary by which city prostitutes are, at worst, temporarily jailed (or married to Lucio\textsuperscript{218}), while wives who “whore” are slain. The tragic plays featuring exotic whores introduce us to a new binary, by which the pagan or fertility goddess’ nonexclusive sexuality is initially celebrated, while the domestic woman is bound to a single man – yet, by play’s end, the exotic character’s freedom disappears, as she is overtaken by the expectations governing her domestic corollary. An examination of Shakespeare’s Titania in \textit{A Midsummer Night’s Dream} (c. 1595-}

\textsuperscript{217} 1 Corinthians 7:34 (KJV).
\textsuperscript{218} See \textit{Measure for Measure}, wherein Lucio complains of being married to Kate Keepdown: “I beseech your Highness do not marry me to a whore” (5.1.514-515).
1596) and Tamora in *Titus Andronicus* (c. 1588-1593), and Marlowe’s Dido and Venus in *Dido, Queen of Carthage* (1594) shows the playwrights’ representation of a pagan sexuality that is not, at least initially, licentious, but culturally sanctioned or even divine, but is strongly inflected—and sometimes punished—by genre.

Shakespeare’s Titania, the Fairy Queen in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, is an exotic female by virtue of her status as a fairy and her location in the wild woods outside of Athens. Ronald Hutton describes the early modern view of fairyland as “an embodiment of hedonism,” whose inhabitants’ song, dance, and overall good-natured trickery characterize the fairies’ power as a positive force, rather than a demonic one. The pursuit of pleasure that the fairies’ kingdom encourages creates a space that is the opposite of Athens, wherein the strict patriarchal laws governing marriage threaten the maiden Hermia with the choice either “to die the death or to abjure / For ever the society of man” (1.1.65-66). The woods offer an escape from that harsh environment, where young lovers can freely roam and fairies “wander everywhere” (2.1.6). This world is not devoid of hierarchical structure, for the King and Queen of fairies, Oberon and Titania, clearly have dominion over the other fairies and Puck. However, the sexually charged energy released in the woods differentiates it from the city. Jason Gleckman contends that English fairies (here fancifully transported to the classical world) “represent the uncontrollable power of the erotic,” and in such an environment of jesting and physical freedom, “eroticism cannot be restricted; it precedes, provokes, and subverts the social institutions, such as marriage, that mean to contain it.”

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Titania, the queen of the loosely controlled fairyland, is thus an exotic ruler whose race and location grant her sexual independence. Although when we meet Titania, she is called “proud” and “rash wanton” by Oberon, his words smack of teasing rather than aggression (2.1.60; 63). Despite her loose sexual history, Oberon does not call his elf-woman “whore,” nor does he attack her verbally. In fact, each side equally accuses the other of mischief, Titania taunting Oberon about his love for Hippolyta and Oberon mocking her about Theseus (2.1.68-80). This exchange is lighthearted, and jealousy is used as a driving force for banter rather than a maddening death sentence, as in Othello. Further, when Oberon decides to rein in Titania, he does so not to install her in a circumscribed domestic sphere, but only to compel her to release a young boy for his own (possibly erotic) purposes: “I do but beg a little changeling boy / To be my henchman” (2.1.120-121). In addition, the means by which he wrecks his will is not by suppressing but by exaggerating her sexual nature, by installing her in a comic-erotic situation. When she refuses to give Oberon the changeling boy, Oberon plots to “torment” her by stoking her extramarital passions (2.1.147). Unlike the jealous stage husband, Oberon uses Titania’s sexuality to prank her for a laugh (and also to further his own sexual play). With the help of a love potion, Oberon plots to make her fall for any “lion, bear, wolf, or bull” or “meddling monkey, or . . . busy ape” (2.1.180-181). Oberon, again, does not slander his “wife,” nor does he attack her.221 His playful jealousy becomes the fuel for amusing antics rather than murder because the fairies inhabit a world free from the limiting ethos of Athens, which, to an extent, mirrors (though it exaggerates) the patriarchal world of the early modern audience.

221 See Gleckman for a different approach to Oberon. Gleckman argues that Oberon becomes a patriarchal master of a female consort because he “allows [Titania’s] sexual impulses wide range in straying from him, but he also takes care to control every element of her experience” even though he does demonstrate power over her by both likening her to animals and acting as a patriarchal regulator (28).
In sum, as an exotic queen, Titania’s sexuality is expected and accepted. Thus a sexual trick to manage her sexuality is suitable for her. Furthermore, her genre, as well as her fairy race and mythical setting, saves her from the wrath of a jealous husband. Neither the comic wife accused of profligacy nor the comic prostitute falls victim to murderous masculine rage. Instead, comedy allows for reconciliation, and the control Oberon exerts over Titania is accordingly humorous rather than terrifying. William C. Carroll argues that though the environment of the woods, in “universal and ungoverned flux,” is indeed frightening, comedy allows for positive transformation within it as well as a final equilibrium of order.222 Any discordant sexualities return to a socially acceptable norm with a return to Athens and the consecrations of multiple marriages. But the fairy monarchs outside this sphere enjoy a positive ending as well. Oberon reverses the effects of the love potion on Titania, takes his consort’s hand, and declares “thou and I are new in amity,” as they dance (4.1.86). Titania, the exotic queen, is spared judgment, or any degrading sexual epithets, and her controlled encounter with Bottom results in new union with Oberon. The erotically charged, exotic fairyland of the woods has granted sexual exploration. “Pagan” comedy supports the socially unacceptable, as long as its fantasized inhabitants remain outside Athens, and the mortal characters return home.

Another pagan queen, Tamora of Titus Andronicus, also exemplifies the correspondence between exotic origin and sexual license, even though Tamora, unlike the fairies, cannot be saved by her genre. Tamora’s wild sexuality, evident in her passionate relationship with the Moor Aaron, is expected, given her barbarian origin, but highly problematic to characters who try to integrate her into Roman domestic culture. Ruthlessly, she resists the expectations for a chaste woman exemplified in Lavinia, Titus’ daughter, who marries the noble Bassianus. Sandra

Logan describes Tamora as an “external enemy,” one “opposed to Lavinia, [who is] symbolic of Rome’s ideal potential.” As an outsider brought to Rome, Tamora is a force dangerous to Rome’s defender Titus and his family. Her affiliation with the Goths already distinguishes her in terms of race and origin, but she additionally registers her wildness by stationing herself in the woods near the “swallowing womb” of a pit (2.3.240). Lauren Rogener contends that if “Rome is associated with patriarchy and patrilineage,” then “the forest outside its walls constitutes a martial-maternal challenge by Goth and female cultures,” which is suggested by Tamora’s proximity to the pit. Like Titania, Tamora occupies a place physically outside of the city and uses that space to engage in sexual hijinks. However, Tamora’s tragic genre necessitates her irreconcilable conflict with the controlling patriarchal culture which Titania comically evades, and dictates that her forest setting will not be a safe space for sexual expression.

Tamora’s uncontrolled sexuality, as well as the unrestrained sexual behavior of her sons, brings about her undoing, although, rather than being targeted by her imperial husband, she is marked for death by Rome’s defender Titus, who condemns her and her sons’ vicious actions. Her migration from the category of erotic barbarian queen to whorish wife (as she has married the Roman emperor without having forsaken her “infidel” Moorish lover) is begun by Lavinia and Bassianus, who, discovering her in the woods, scold her. Lavinia accuses Tamora of having “a goodly gift of horning” (2.3.67). Kay Stanton argues that Lavinia participates in a kind of “slut shaming” wherein she promotes the idea that Goths are floozies and Roman women are chaste and virtuous. Tamora later tells her sons the young Romans called her “foul adulteress”

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and “[l]ascivious Goth” (2.3.109-110). (Rogener contends that the latter insult labels both the woman and her tribe as not just sexually wild, but debased, and Sandra Logan asserts that Tamora is distinguished from Roman characters “by her explicitly sexual intractability, portrayed as a deeply rooted moral disorder that also marks her sons.”) Lavinia continues to contrast herself with Tamora, saying she has “no womanhood” and calling her “beastly creature” who is the “blot and enemy to our general name” (2.3.182-183, my emphasis). Lavinia uses “our” not only to refer to their shared womanhood, but to further distinguish Tamora from the Romans, the civilized group to which Lavinia belongs. Thus Tamora’s sexuality, linked to her race, generates insults when that sexuality is expressed in an act of infidelity to the Roman emperor/husband.

Tamora enters the “whore” category not only because of her sexual betrayal of Rome, but also because of her tragic genre. Her representation as a sexually wild, evil woman occurs most clearly in a speech given by her lover, Aaron. When their illegitimate child is endangered, Aaron admits to the horrible sins he, Tamora, and her sons committed (engineering and committing the murder of Bassianus and rape and mutilation of Lavinia), specifically mentioning that he received “twenty kisses” for facilitating these deeds for Tamora (5.1.122). Here, Tamora is identified as a woman who repays murder and betrayal with erotic love. Tamora’s untamed sexuality, whose literal proof is her and Aaron’s black child, ultimately brings about her punishment at the hands of Rome’s defender, Titus. She is thrown “forth to beasts and birds to prey,” returning her to the wild as a final casting out (5.3.200).

Though their differing genres dictate radically disparate fates for their heroines, both the comic Titania’s and the tragic Tamora’s plays refer in their dialogue to a third exotic queen, Dido of Carthage, in references which strengthen both plays’ association with mythic pagan

226 Rogener, 133.
227 Logan, 175.
eroticism. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Hermia swears “by that fire which burned the Carthage queen / When the false Trojan under sail was seen” that she will meet Lysander “in the wood, a league without the town,” the wild place in which Titania resides (1.1.169-74, 165). She invokes Dido in an invitation to her lover to escape the harshness of Athens’ marriage laws. As noted, the woods house unrestrained sexual expression (although, unlike Titania, Hermia does manage to maintain her chastity once there). Tamora, too, mentions Dido in *Titus* when she ventures outside Rome to meet Aaron, similarly invoking Dido’s sexuality both to emphasize her own passion for her lover and their separation from the strict city. Noticing an approaching storm, Tamora asserts, “after conflict such as was supposed / The wand’ring prince and Dido once enjoyed / When with a happy storm they were surprised / And curtained with a counsel-keeping cave, / We may, each wreathed in the other’s arms, / Our pastimes done, possess a golden slumber” (2.3.21-26). Dido is a fit character to be invoked in support of exotic sexuality, as a queen of Africa whose mythic history places her at the mercy of the goddess of erotic love, Venus. Yet she, like Tamora, is made a victim of the early modern tragic genre.

This happens in Christopher Marlowe’s 1594 play, *Dido Queen of Carthage*. Initially this play emphasizes the divine quality of Dido’s sexuality, manipulated as it is by Venus. Females, divine and human, control the action: Marlowe’s queen exists outside normative patriarchal domestic structures; she rules over Carthage, in North Africa, and her royal position gives her access to boats and supplies that Venus wishes to commandeer for the sake of her son, Aeneas. Dido is hailed by all as a “mighty queen,” and her authority as a single ruling female is unquestioned (2.1.75). Therefore Venus instructs her son to go to Carthage, where “Dido will receive [him] with her smiles” (1.1.234). Once Aeneas arrives in Carthage, Venus sees an opportunity to use Cupid’s arrow to control its queen. Disguising Cupid as Aeneas’ son, whom
Dido has already embraced, Venus tells Cupid to “touch [Dido’s] white breast with this arrowhead / That she may dote upon Aeneas’ love,” so she may “repair his broken ships, / Victual his soldiers, give him wealthy gifts,” and prepare him to venture to Italy (2.1.325-329). Dido has already shared her wealth and assets with Aeneas and his men, having fed him, clothed him, and allowed him to “sit in Dido’s place” as they feasted (2.1.91). Yet, Venus secures Dido’s further aid by inflaming her erotic passion.

However, the tragic transformation of Dido’s divinely licensed passions to a kind of trivial whorishness is predicted even before she succumbs to Cupid’s arrow, in a conversation in which she and Aeneas express their condemnation of uncontrolled female sexuality through their discussion of Helen of Troy. After learning of Troy’s sad fate through Aeneas’ account, Dido condemns “she that caused this war,” cursing the escaped Helen: “O, had that ticing [enticing] strumpet ne’er been born!” (2.1.292; 300). In this curse, Dido separates herself from Helen by uttering a rare female-against-female sexual slur, showcasing her disdain as though she were one of the virtuous Trojan wives of Euripides’ _Trojan Women_. However, “Helen” becomes tragically associated with Dido herself later on, after she and Aeneas have consummated their love under Venus’ auspices. Dido then laments that her reputation has been tarnished: “And all the world calls me a second Helen, / For being entangled by a stranger’s looks” (5.1.143-144). To be a second Helen is to be a whore, and while no other characters slander Dido with this particular epithet, Dido falls victim to self-blame, turning against herself the common judgment with which she earlier criticized Helen. Thus Marlowe’s Dido internalizes the moral ethos of her audience, judging herself not as a sexually liberated exotic queen, divinely impelled by Aphrodite, but as a slut. Ironically, by thus employing Dido for her son’s benefit, Venus has constricted Dido’s view of her own sexuality.
Still, despite its human tragic victim, the play champions the exotic sexuality of another queen, or, rather a goddess: Venus herself. Because she is both is both pagan and divine, Venus is an exotic figure, one free from moral limits. Possessing Dido, Venus temporarily imparts to a human her own bold, outright, and unapologetic sexuality. We see Dido acting this uninhibited part in her pursuit of Aeneas, where she is, as Iarbas the scorned suitor describes her, “ungentle” (3.3.10). Sara Munson Deats asserts that a reversal of traditional gender roles occurs when Dido is pierced by the arrow: that Dido takes on the role of a (male) lover rather than a coy mistress, and is “dynamic and dominant” in wooing Aeneas. She is both “the captive of ‘female’ passion, and the ‘masculine’ instigator of the action.” Indeed, when Dido approaches Aeneas outside of the cave, she calls on him to “quench these flames,” and thus initiates the action between them (3.4.22). Once Aeneas and Venus abandon her, Dido “bewhores” herself, but when Venus acts through her, the play offers another perspective on her character. Her instigation of a sexual relationship, through a boldness lent to her by Venus, fits her role as a leader, queen of (to Marlowe’s audience) an exotic realm. Her exotic location, unorthodox political authority, and experience of divine manipulation combine to inspire her sexual freedom, and to identify her, briefly, with Venus herself, the divine protagonist.

Despite Venus’ role in manipulating Dido and Aeneas’ relationship, Venus is never slandered, attacked, or even really blamed. When Aeneas comes to realize that his divine mother “beguiled the Queen,” he is not angry, but obedient, and follows his duty to leave Carthage, as “Jupiter commands” (5.1.42; 82). All – including sex – is in the hands of the gods. Even Dido vindicates Aphrodite in her angry implication that Aeneas cannot possibly be her son: his “mother was no Goddess”; he is “sprung from Scythian” barbarians, and “Tigers of Hyrcania

gave [him] suck” (5.1.155-159). That is, Dido sees Venus as above the way that Aeneas has
acted. Still, Marlowe has represented Venus as a divinely licensed version of the sexual
manipulators of Renaissance tragedy (e.g., Richard III with Lady Anne, or Beatrice-Joanna,
exploiting Diaphanta’s sexual passion to preserve her reputation via a bed-trick). Free of their
mortality and their Christian context, she is free of their depravity. It is finally Venus, divine
sexual force, who is celebrated in this play, while her mortal victim, Dido, tragically enters the
ethical category of forsaken strumpet. Having internalized the slurs, the sexual judgment, and the
violence that attends both, Dido punishes herself, like any dejected early modern female sexual
sinner. After Aeneas leaves, Dido throws herself into the pit of Aeneas’ burning belongings:
“Now, Dido, with these relics burn thyself, / And make Aeneas famous through the world / For
perjury and slaughter of a queen” (5.1.292-294). Now a second Helen, Dido must destroy herself
for her sexual folly, while Venus triumphs as an erotic goddess.

Titania, Venus, and – until tragic censure catches up to them – Tamora and Dido, are
sexually free because they are, to their authors and audiences, exotic others. Their outlandish
provenance allows them to embrace their sexuality, at least initially, and engage with multiple
partners if desired. They enjoy a time or an eternity of liberty from sexual slander. Each of these
females occupies a domain to which men must travel, and rule a space that appears exotic to
classical characters who are bound within their respective cities. Titania’s fairy race keeps her
outside the city, in the woods. Tamora and Dido, hailing from or enthroned in foreign realms,
further exoticize themselves by stationing themselves in the woods or a cave to engage in sexual
meetings. Venus, frightened hero of Dido’s story, is a goddess of love and fertility, and thus her
erotic freedom, like Titania’s, stems from her unbounded divinity, which enables her to exert her
power everywhere. Pagan provenance and the liberation granted by a special location give these female characters license for sexual expression, as is the case, to a more circumscribed degree, with comic prostitutes. In a comedy like *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the exotic female may be promiscuous and undamned (and, as noted, it helps if she’s divine). Yet in the tragedies, the human females ultimately fall prey to mundane and insular moral judgments. Eventual victims of their own sexual freedom, they prompt jealous outrage or adopt self-condemnatory patriarchal judgments, and are finally tarred by the anti-female slurs that characterize “whores” in the ordinary world of their audience, or of the civil cultures which both desire and condemn them.

Thus Helen is bewhored, Tamora is brutally punished, and Dido commits suicide, internalizing the scorn for Helen seen on both the ancient and the early modern stage. Thus two distinct types of characters, the comic and the tragic exotic “whore,” are subjected to two distinct dramatic fates.

One famous character, however, manages to combine tragic grandeur with comic authority to escape what might be called “dwindling into a whore.” This, of course, is Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, who uses her exotic, erotic, and semi-divine power to escape prudish masculine prosecution as well as Western bewhorement. Thus, alone among exotic whores, Cleopatra determines her own destiny. She is, as, Kay Stanton argues, the *regina meretrix*, the prostitute queen.  

Cleopatra exists from the outset in a pagan domain where sexual liberation is geographically granted. Unusually for a tragedy, the play contains light-hearted, comic scenes, like 1.2, wherein — as in, for example, *Love’s Labor’s Lost* 4.1 — the dialogue consists largely of bawdy humor, at which Cleopatra herself excels (“I would I had thy inches,” she tells Antony

Egypt is a place of erotic revelry, especially when viewed through Roman eyes. Antony travels to partake in his “Egyptian dish,” as his follower Enobarbus lasciviously remarks (2.6.156), and his actions there are classified as lewd by other Romans. Caesar, for instance, thinks Antony’s leisurely travels are wasteful: In Egypt “he fishes, drinks, and wastes / The lamps of night in revel” (1.4.4-5). Caesar hopes the shame of wasting time and concern for his active military honor will “quickly / Drive [Antony back] to Rome” (1.4.84). Even Cleopatra teases Antony about his attachment to her and to Egypt rather than Rome. She jovially comments, “Thou blushest, Antony, and that blood of thine / Is Caesar’s homager”; “thy cheek pays shame, / When shrill-tongued Fulvia scolds” (1.1.34-36). Egypt is pleasure, Rome dull duty. Antony himself admits that his wife, “Fulvia, / To have [him] out of Egypt, made wars [in Rome]” (2.2.113-114); the warring wife back home further marks Egypt as a place of pleasure over which Cleopatra reigns. “I’ th’ East [Antony’s] pleasure lies,” as that region gives Cleopatra sexual freedom and Antony liberation from his domestic and patriotic duties (2.4.46).

Clearly Cleopatra’s Eastern location and her role as a semi-divine queen – she dresses as the goddess Isis, and is compared by Enobarbus to Venus (3.6.17, 2.2.200) – give her an erotic freedom that is unavailable to the Roman women in the play, namely the above-mentioned Fulvia and Octavia. Her glamour is famously celebrated by Enobarbus, who recounts that when Antony first saw her, she and her crew of “mermaids” were floating down the river in a golden boat, with Cleopatra, dressed in “cloth-of-gold,” making the winds “love-sick” with perfume (2.2.245; 236; 230). Cleopatra is goddess-like, unmarried, and sexually liberated, a fact made plain by references to her previous relationship with Julius Caesar: “She made great Caesar lay

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230 Multiple scholars have noted the comic, bawdy humor within Antony and Cleopatra. For instance, see Barbara Vincent, “Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra and the Rise of Comedy,” English Literary Renaissance 12, no. 1 (1982), 54. She argues that the opposing comedy and tragedy of the play can also represent the opposing Egypt and Rome, respectively.
his sword to bed; / He ploughed her, and she cropped” (2.3.268-269). Her prior relationship with Julius Caesar is just one of the reasons Romans scoff at her, calling her lustful “gypsy” and “whore” (1.1.10; 3.6.77). She, however, suggests that she is transcendentally exciting when compared with the married Fulvia and the “dull” Octavia (5.2.65). Cleopatra regards her competition as inferior, flippantly asking Antony while he prepares to leave Egypt, “What, says the married woman you may go?” (1.3.25). The irony in Cleopatra’s statement is, of course, that Fulvia holds no real power over her husband, who is irresistibly drawn back to Egypt. There, Cleopatra charismatically dominates both men and women in her court, while in Rome, women like Fulvia and Octavia are bound to obey patriarchal figures. Fulvia may take to the battlefield with Antony’s brother, “jointing their force ’gainst Caesar” (1.2.97), proving herself an honorable, patriotic matron like Hecuba in Seneca’s Troades, but she never exerts any erotic sway over her husband.

Antony’s attraction to Cleopatra is rooted in her divine, pagan, mythic beauty as well as the erotic excitement that comes with her love – the very qualities that make the prudish Caesar label her as whore. But Cleopatra is not a loose woman, construed in either Roman or early modern domestic terms. She is Isis the Fertility Goddess clothed in gold, an African woman, and a queen. Antony even refers to her as a “fairy,” demonstrating her magical power over him and, interestingly, connecting her to Titania (4.8.14). In his liaison with Cleopatra, Antony not only leaves Rome, he leaves moral domesticity, or his traditional marriage, first with Fulvia, and then, after she dies, with Octavia. With Cleopatra, rather than marrying, Antony is able to engage in erotic play, which creates a shift of gender roles that further express liberation from standard domestic roles. Cleopatra fondly recalls a time of great laughter when she and Antony switched gender-specific accessories: “I drunk him to his bed, / Then put my tires and mantles on him,
whilst / I wore his sword Philippan” (2.5.25-27). Here Cleopatra assumes a militant eroticism by which she triumphs over (through outdrinking) the weaker Antony.\(^{231}\)

However, this mixing of gendered attributes and behaviors is despicable to the Romans. Thus Antony’s Roman side prompts him, when in Rome, to urge Caesar not to believe the tales of his effeminization: “Read not my blemishes in the world’s report, / I have not kept my square, but that to come / Shall all be done by th’ rule” (2.3.7-9). The “rule[s]” of Roman society are exactly what sparks Romans to denigrate Cleopatra. She is a threat to Roman men. In her independent authority, she differs dangerously from Octavia, who is nothing more than a pawn in Caesar’s and Antony’s war, offered up to restore peace: “Let her live / To join our kingdoms and our hearts” (2.2.181-182). Cleopatra’s lack of a king, her solitary feminine sway over Egypt, prompts Roman men to try to reduce her power by denigrating her as “gypsy” or “Egyptian dish.” However, for Cleopatra, a liberated sexuality grants her unique strategies for her rule. As Keith Linley argues, Cleopatra is “not a warrior queen; the sex war is her arena and she knows that men can be tamed and subjugated by bed games.”\(^{232}\) Similarly, Christina León Alfar observes that Cleopatra is not “inept at matters political,” and that her strategy includes “the use of her body as a sexual instrument, as the prize of conquest” to protect her country.\(^{233}\) Roman women like Octavia have their bodies used as barter between men while Cleopatra, exotic and independent, recognizes and resists the threat of becoming “hoist[ed] up” as a war prize (5.2.65). Cleopatra simultaneously protects her body and her land by fighting Caesar.

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\(^{231}\) Anne Barton, *Essays: Mainly Shakespearean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 120. According to Barton, this moment signals a divine phase in which the couple nearly fulfills the “wholeness” of Aristophanes’ story of original male and female joined bodies found in Plato’s *Symposium*.


\(^{233}\) Alfar, *Fantasies of Female Evil* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 151.
As noted, a divine aura also accrues to Cleopatra by her association with pagan gods. Enobarbus twice makes direct comparisons between Cleopatra and gods or goddesses. He claims that Cleopatra “makes a shower of rain as well as Jove,” and describes her appearance as “[o]’erpicturing … Venus” (1.2.167; 2.2.237). Late in the play, Caesar complains of Cleopatra masquerading in “th’ habiliments of the goddess Isis” while addressing her people, showing her “infinite variety” by merging her queenship with divinity (3.6.18; 2.3.277). Caesar’s war threatens her status as powerful erotic quasi-fertility goddess, but her unvarying location in Egypt saves her from Roman punishment, including the “Roman” wrath of a jealous Antony. Cleopatra’s ultimately failed naval support of Antony at Actium justifies Enobarbus’ concerns that Antony’s “ships are not well manned” (3.7.45), and Antony’s Roman soldiers are disgruntled by his alliance with Cleopatra, lamenting, “our leader’s led, / And we are women’s men” (3.7.86-87). (Their critique echoes Iago’s sarcastic remark that the “general’s wife is now the general” [Othello 2.3.308-309].) However, while Cleopatra fails in the Roman-dominated world of war, loss in battle only makes her erotic power all the more clear. Her control over Antony is made plain when one of Antony’s men reports that Antony’s ship fled after Cleopatra’s in her retreat at Actium: “Antony… like a doting mallard, / Leaving the fight in height, flies after her.” Antony himself expresses anger at Cleopatra in the subsequent scene, accusing her of leading him astray, “O, wither has thou led me, Egypt?,” implicitly agreeing with his soldier’s judgment, “I never saw an action of such shame” (3.11.53; 3.10.26). However, Antony’s defeat on the playing field of war underscores Cleopatra’s dominance on the field of eros. After his initial outburst, demanding a kiss, Antony forgives her and calls for wine (3.11.75-82). His quick forgiveness is fueled by erotic passion, and culminates in celebration of his union with his queen outside the petty concerns of territorial conflict.
This scene prefigures Cleopatra’s ultimate paradoxical victory over “Rome,” which takes the form of a triumph over the possessive Roman masculine mindset, first of Antony, and finally of Caesar himself. With regard to Antony, the battle is hard-fought, and occupies much of acts three and four. When, after his just-recounted reconciliation with Cleopatra, Antony sees Caesar’s messenger, Thidias, kiss Cleopatra’s hand, he turns angry once more, has Thidias whipped, and turns on Cleopatra with derogatory language, saying she was “half blasted” when he met her and has been a “boggler [shifty liar] ever” (3.13.133; 139). Later, Antony loses command of his ships and again accuses Cleopatra of betrayal: “This foul Egyptian hath betrayed me, / My fleet hath yielded to the foe” (4.12.12-13). For Antony, political and sexual betrayal become one, as he is hurt by his lover and embarrassed on the battlefield. Cleopatra, and therefore Egypt, are, temporarily, no longer pleasurable to him, and he reverts to a rigid Roman mindset, analogous to that shared by the jealous husbands of the early modern tragic stage. Cleopatra becomes both a “false soul of Egypt” and, more drastically, a “[t]riple-turned whore,” the phrase that begins Antony’s jealous raging (4.12.27; 12). Now Antony verbally attacks her with insults similar to those used by the other Romans:

Vanish, or I shall give thee thy deserving,

And blemish Caesar’s triumph. Let him take thee

And hoist thee up to the shouting plebeians!

Follow his chariot, like the greatest spot

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234 Plutarch describes Antony as “crying out that Cleopatra had betrayed him to the enemies he had made for her sake,” in *Plutarch’s Lives*, trans. Arthur Hugh Clough (Project Gutenberg, 1996), 927. Shakespeare’s lines turn the “crying out” into a collection of slurs.

235 See Mary Sidney Herbert’s *The Tragedy of Antonie, Doone into English by the Countess of Pembroke* (London: By P. Short for William Ponsonby, 1595: Antonius blames the failure of his fleet on Cleopatra’s “fraud” (27).
Antony here likens Cleopatra to the strange woman Proverbs warned against, she who is dangerously outlandish, and must be subjugated. This perspective on the queen is that of Rome, which is identified with martial values and (however unrealistically) marital discipline, and is the antithesis of Egypt and of Cleopatra herself. In his rant, Antony reduces Cleopatra to Caesar’s war prize: powerless, paraded as an exotic trophy, and attacked for her “monster-like” sexuality. The virtuous Roman matron, in the person of Octavia, is imagined as vanquishing the moral threat Cleopatra represents. This “Roman” Antony calls Roman womanhood into imaginative service against the Cleopatra who, in Christina León Alfar’s words, “threatens to subvert masculinist . . . systems of power.” Here Antony is temporarily an Othello, using slurs and violent language – like “[t]he witch shall die” (4.12.53) – against his lover. He is the duped husband, as he both threatens Cleopatra and envisions her death as a solution to current and future sexual and political betrayal: “[B]etter ‘twere / Thou fell’st into my fury, for one death / Might have prevented many” (4.12.44-47). Resistant to all assimilation to Roman conventions of female behavior, Cleopatra will only be safe when dead.

Yet Cleopatra eludes this “Roman” characterization, as she has throughout the play, because she commands herself. An African queen – one stronger than Dido, maddened by Venus – she not only maintains her independent power, but proves consistently able to recall Antony to

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236 Alfar, 149.
his “Egyptian” perspective. (‘Have you done yet?’, she responds to one of his “Roman” jealous 
outbursts [3.13.186].) Cleopatra is granted a luxury that few wives are granted on the early 
modern stage: the ability to escape the domestic space that she occupies with her husband.
Securing herself – like a goddess – in her temple, she makes herself safe even while Antony 
continues to accuse her of sexual profligacy to her waiting women (“the Queen, / Whose heart I 
thought I had, for she had mine— / Which whilst it was mine had annexed unto ‘t / A million 
more” [4.14.19-22]). Though, like Othello, Antony vows, “She . . . shall die the death” (4.14.32), 
her erotic gamesmanship prevents him from fulfilling this threat. To see how he reacts, she sends 
false word that she has died already, and his anguish restores his love for her. Believing her 
gone, he no longer sees her as a witch or a monster, but as his beloved, whose loss makes his 
own life unendurable.

Thus Antony decides to commit suicide himself and, while he soliloquizes, he restores 
Cleopatra to a divine, mythic status. Preparing to die, instead of calling Cleopatra “whore,” 
Antony claims that surviving her is “such dishonor that the gods / Detest [his] baseness,” and 
now calls her “my queen” (4.14.67-68; 60). He is now unlike Othello, who only mourns 
Desdemona once he discovers her “chastity” was “cold,” or pure, and envisions meeting her in a 
Christian afterlife, on Judgment Day, when her pristine innocence will hurl him, her killer, to 
hell (Othello 5.2.273-75). In contrast, Antony looks forward to joining Cleopatra in an erotic 
afterlife in which even Dido’s sexual relationship with Aeneas – who abandoned her for Rome – 
will be restored (though in less glorious manner than Antony and Cleopatra): “Where souls do 
couch on flowers, we’ll hand in hand… Dido and her Aeneas shall want troops, / And all the 
haunt be ours” (4.14.61-64).
Thus the allure of Cleopatra, the exotic, erotically free woman with the power to repel sexual slurs, ultimately redeems Antony’s jealous imagination. Antony’s botched suicide allows him time to learn that Cleopatra is alive, and he is brought to her for a final goodbye wherein their relationship is restored. Here, Antony’s violent language is gone, replaced by respectful and affectionate terms: he calls her “Egypt,” and asks for kisses (4.15-22; 24-25).

Cleopatra’s power in this scene is as evident in her own language as in her lover’s rehabilitated terms of address. Despite her perilous political situation after Caesar’s victory, she asserts control over her fate, declaring that she will trust her “resolution and [her] hands” rather than Rome to keep her safe (4.15.57). Though bound for death, Cleopatra here shows some features of the comic prostitute, determined and able, like Doll Tearsheet, to repel intruders in her domain – as, through artful suicide, she ultimately will. Subsuming and transforming rather than bowing before Roman rules, she states that she and her women shall “do’t after the high Roman fashion / and make death proud to take us” (4.15.101-102). Thus, Cleopatra’s death scene is refashioned as an apotheosis. She frustrates Caesar’s plan to “lead [her] ….  in triumph” by staging her own final spectacle, for the benefit of the theater audience. She resists what Katherine Eggert rightly calls her “debased” Roman representation, which would reduce “her seductiveness to a caricature of whoredom.”237 Rather than “see / Some squeaking Cleopatra boy [her] greatness / I’ th’ posture of a whore” (5.2.266-268), Cleopatra will direct her own final moments, and exit as a goddess.

Her choice of the phallic Egyptian asp over the Roman sword makes Cleopatra’s suicide an act of powerfully exotic eroticism. As Carol Cook writes, “the ultimate gesture by which a Roman proves his manhood, his commitment to the abstract over the bodily, becomes for her an

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affirmation of feminine pleasure." Transcending the physical limits of the “squeaking boy” who plays her, Cleopatra imagines, once more, a sexual afterlife with Antony. She exclaims, “Husband, I come,” a punning reference to sexual climax (5.2.342). Death is “a lover’s pinch, / Which hurts and is desired” (5.2.350-351). Eroticized suicide leaves her beautiful and still powerful in death. So compelling is Cleopatra’s victory, her apotheosis in death, that it even momentarily moves the arch-Roman Caesar to assume the Egyptian erotic perspective on the lovers. Seeing her inert form, he imagines that she is only sleeping, and could “catch another Antony / In her strong toil of grace” (5.2.415-417).

Although Cleopatra escapes the limiting category of stage “whore,” her example illuminates a further way that the early modern masculine imagination strove to subjugate the exotic sexual woman. Such a woman was a character, but also a metaphor. Cleopatra, for example, not only inhabits but somehow represents Egypt. (As Christina Alfar notes, “The land is Cleopatra and Cleopatra is the land.”) The wondrousness associated with a sexually ripe female was used by some early modern poets to describe new, wild lands awaiting conquest. For example, Shakespeare’s The Rape of Lucrece describes Lucrece’s breasts as “a pair of maiden worlds unconquered” (that is, not yet conquered) (408), and in John Donne’s “To His Mistress Going to Bed,” the speaker calls his lover’s body “my America! My new-found land” and “My Empire” (ll. 27-29). In a lower comic register, in Shakespeare’s The Comedy of Errors.

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240 Alfar, 138.
Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse mock a kitchen wench as “spherical, like a globe,” finding “America, the Indies” in her nose (3.2.125; 145). The female body is like an exotic land, and, conversely, exotic lands are like female bodies.

In my next chapter, I will show that the metaphor of the sexually available woman, when interpreted as “whore,” informed early modern dramatic discourse in a variety of additional ways, often with no direct reference to any particular female. In these conversations, almost always conducted among men, “whore” becomes a concept or abstraction, available to represent a host of negative forces and experiences. Thus not only women, but life in general – or at least, life’s pain – is “bewhored” on the early modern stage.
6. The “strumpet wind”: Mistress Fortune and the Feminine Universe

On the early modern stage, accusations of whoredom are often applied to abstract forces and inanimate objects. These often casual and automatic locutions express a masculine will to control fate, fortune, and nature just as some male characters attempt to rule female characters. When tragic men blame their misfortunes on a hostile universe which they picture as female and whorish, they reveal deeply misogynistic attitudes that often secondarily harm female characters in their plays.

But misogyny does not hold sway across all plays. Different dramatic genres each give rise to a specific way of addressing Fortune. History plays and historical tragedies tend to reinforce medieval images of callous Dame Fortune turning her Wheel in a political context, whereby kings are raised to greatness only to fall. In other tragedies, the “whore” Fortune is blamed for a wider variety of ills she metes out to men. In domestic revenge tragedies where accusations of whoredom are made against an allegedly unchaste wife, and she ends up murdered, the male character is momentarily fulfilled through the destruction of the female, but that savage joy proves fleeting as he continues to curse Fortune. While Fortune, unlike a wife, cannot be destroyed, these continuing curses reinforce the male character’s presentation of himself as forever beleaguered by and at war with a malevolent feminine force. Comedy, however, differently contextualizes misogynistic railings against what the melancholy Jaques calls “our mistress the world” (As You Like It 3.2.278). Hope for reconciliation with the “feminine” universe exists even for “unfortunate” characters in Shakespearean comedies,
including the tragicomic romances. In these plays, even when male figures initially curse Fortune as a whore, time permits them to turn a new leaf, confessing personal failings and demonstrating patience and penitence, whereupon Fortune becomes friendly – or, more precisely, male protagonists are then able to describe Fortune as a friend. Said another way, in tragedy, men persistently invest abstract forces with threatening “feminine” qualities – fickleness, deception, and promiscuity – and thus remain bitter opponents of a universe they perceive in totalizing misogynistic terms, while in comedy, though male characters never stop gendering neutral abstractions like luck and fortune, most are led ultimately to accept Fortune as a lady rather than a whore.

In a previous chapter, I discussed the early modern adjectival use of “whoreson” as a general complaint against something annoying or inconvenient, like the “whoreson” cold a man catches in the second part of Henry IV (3.2.180). A quick description of something inconvenient to a man’s progress or goals, “whoreson” becomes a way for male characters verbally to diminish something that dared defy them. If it’s bad, it came from a bad woman. However, the word “whore” (as opposed to “whoreson,” derived from a whore), used as or within a curse, specifically imbues an object or abstract force with “feminine” qualities of inconsistency or promiscuity. For instance, Shakespeare’s Timon in Timon of Athens defames the gold he digs up as “Thou common whore of mankind.” Financially ruined through his own borrowing and lavish spending, and now digging only to find food, Timon universalizes whore-money’s evil, rebuking the gold for “put[ting] odds / Among the rout of nations” (4.3.47-48). Timon, who lost his own (or actually his creditors’) money to his “friends,” now views gold as something fickle that, like a strumpet, can leave one man for another, even though he was the one who gave it away. He
displays the sort of “excellent foppery” mocked by King Lear’s Edmund, who observes that “when we are sick in fortune – often the surfeits of our own behavior – we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars, as if we were villains on necessity . . . and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting-on” (1.2.117-26) – a cosmic screwing.

Sometimes the chief negative attribute of which a tragic character complains is a whorish thing’s deceptiveness, as in Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi. There, the jaundiced courtier Bosola claims that an untrustworthy man is like “the sick man’s urine, which some call / The physician’s whore because she cozens him” (1.2.149-150). The verb “cozen” carries an anti-woman taint: recall Robert Greene’s 1591 A Notable Discovery of Cozenage, wherein the goal of cony-catching or “cozening” was to fool a man out of his money using a woman as bait.241 Thus in Duchess, outrageously, the misogynistic and satirical Bosola imaginatively turns a man’s urine into a false woman who similarly tricks a (male) doctor. In other cases, the curse of “whore” identifies an ineffable entity as something tainted and ruined. Thomas Dekker’s The Honest Whore includes one character’s observation that a soul untouched by lust becomes “God’s fair bride,” while a soul that “leaves chastity’s white shore” becomes “the devil’s whore” – presumably, even if it’s a man’s soul (4.1.193-195). These instances illustrate a widespread masculine instinct to gender anything dishonest or corrosive as female.

As noted above, some male characters curse and insult the entire malicious universe by verbally attacking Fortune, the grand “whore.” In the generality of these references, Fortune is something like corrupted Nature, who is also traditionally feminized (recall Lear’s bastard Edmund’s “Nature, thou art my goddess” [1.2.1]). Accordingly, when men are inconvenienced

241 See Greene, A Notable Discovery of Cozenage in Cony-Catchers and Bawdy Baskets, ed. Gamini Salgado (Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc., 1972), 178-180. Greene describes women in particular as the bait that leads men to a secluded place where they can be robbed by the “whore’s” male partners.
not by a trifling object, but by the very world around them, they personify elements of the natural world to bind these elements imaginatively to cruel female fate. Sometimes the very gendering of a force as female makes it unchaste or deceptive without the word “whore” even needing to be used, such as when Bosola in The Duchess of Malfi personifies Lust: “She’s oft found witty, but is never wise” (2.3.79). Lust is also personified as female in Christopher Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, wherein she is the only sin so gendered. Faustus addresses her as “Mistress Minx” during the parade of the Seven Deadly Sins (2.3.154). In Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice, the feminine “strumpet wind” causes merchant ships to be delayed and go off course (2.6.17). (Othello also negatively feminizes the breeze when he accuses Desdemona of being like the “bawdy wind” that “kiss[es] all it meets” [4.2.80].) According to Jane Hwang Degenhardt, for early modern capitalists, “fortune encapsulated the role of luck and chance in guiding [economic] ventures”. Blaming a feminized Fortune is strategic. It enables men not only to express misogynistic anger, but to channel that anger away from themselves, their choices and mistakes, and, ultimately, their impotence – their inability fully to control their lives. Putatively feminine maddening attributes, like fickleness and ungovernable behavior, rather than the speculator’s own ambition, aggression, or pride, become the targets of scorn.

The whorish Fortune of the early modern stage evolved from several sources. Original among these were the Fates of Greek mythology (paralleled by the Norns of Norse and Anglo-Saxon myth). The early modern stage also inherited the medieval Christian adaptation of the Roman goddess Fortuna, found in pictorial art and referred to often in literature. The degeneration of these classical goddesses into a “whore” in some ways parallels the reduction of Helen to a byword for lechery on the Renaissance stage, a phenomenon discussed in my last

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The Fates, though divine, contain the seeds of the eventual whore Dame Fortune, though, unlike their descendant, whom tragic men perceive as their deliberate foe, the Fates are indifferent to (not sneering at) men’s sufferings. The Fates, or Destiny, are majestic, and their wills unchanging, while the later Fortune becomes the scapegoat for men’s willful choices or for simple bad luck because of her apparent fickleness. Still, because they wreck men’s lives, the Fates are the precursors to the slandered Fortune of the Renaissance stage.

The Three Fates, or the Moirai – goddesses who exercise dominion over men’s souls and are indifferent to their happiness – were often alluded to in Homeric poetry, Greek tragedy, and philosophy. In Plato’s *Republic* (375 BC), the Fates are “daughters of Necessity… their robes are white and their heads garlanded” (X.617c). The three sisters each have a specific job in regard to human life and destiny. The new soul is led to Lachesis, who “guide[s] it through life and fulfil[s] its choice,” then Clotho is seen “ratifying beneath her hand and whirling spindle the lot it ha[s] chosen,” then Atropos “spins, so making the threads of its destiny irreversible” (Plato X.620e). Each sister has the job of preparing or destroying the life thread of every human soul. Clotho spins the thread, Lachesis measures it, and, finally, Atropos snips it. Robert Graves describes Atropos as the fate who is “most terrible,” she “who cannot be turned, or avoided.”

In his *Theogony*, c. 730-700 BC, Hesiod describes the Fates as “merciless, / Avenging Fates… who give mortals at birth both evil and good to have” (217-220). William Chase Greene observes that forces that affect life but cannot be physically seen, and “in themselves have little or no moral quality,” are only given such morals and emotion when “viewed as either a happy

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244 Ibid., 48.
divine dispensation or as a challenge to man’s endurance.” The latter term describes the Fates. Ancient tragic characters’ references to the Fates’ anger are expressions of their own immediate sufferings, and are ultimately subsumed by the recognition that these powers operate in a sphere beyond human emotion. Thus in *Oedipus Rex* the agonized protagonist calls himself “Oedipus, whom the gods hate,” while in *Oedipus at Colonus* an older Oedipus humbly recognizes that the Fates are “mysteries, not to be explained.”

Just as Helen, though a bane to her husband, was half-divine, and thus somehow higher than the bawdy joke she became on the Renaissance stage, so the Fates are lofty, servants of Zeus, executors of necessity, not driven by a concern either for human joy or human suffering. Thus, even when Greek characters on the stage rail against their predestined fates, they revere Fate’s powers. To them, Destiny is not fickle, but a mysterious and changeless fact. As Greene says, ancient tragedy entails “divine power surrounding… mortals,” and the mortals are brought to acknowledge its justice. Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* (c. 458 BC) features views on Fate that illustrate Greene’s point. The Chorus describes Fate as something right though dangerous: “Fate now hones its instruments of pain / on new whetstones to use once more / as Justice shall ordain” (1534-1536). Later, Clytemnestra’s lover Aegisthus describes the “Furies’ web” that can trap a man (1581). Similarly, Sophocles’ *Antigone* has a Chorus that describes Fate as something majestic that cannot be avoided or escaped. Fate is “strange and powerful; / Wealth cannot protect us, / Nor can war, high city towers, / Or storm-beaten black ships” (952-955).

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248 Ibid., 8.
Even when characters curse fate, they acknowledge its involvement in the will of the gods. As Oedipus says, “Let fate continue down its chosen path” (*Oedipus Rex* 1178; 1458).\(^{250}\)

It was Roman and medieval writers who, substituting Fortune for the Fates, drained them of dignity, reinterpreting their fundamental indifference to men’s happiness as fickleness, hostility, and sexual profligacy. Most famous is the Fates’ re-envisioning as the morally questionable Dame Fortune in Boethius’ *De Consolatione Philosophiae* (c. 524 AD), but, as Jerold Frakes shows, Boethius’ view of Fortune derives from a large selection of general sources in Roman philosophy and literature.\(^ {251}\) According to Howard Patch, depictions of Fortuna in such Roman texts were themselves “flippant” in that they did not present her as worthy of worship, but used her as a deliberately fictive explanation for men’s feeling “that life shows no signs of fairness,” and to answer their need for some justification of their ill luck.\(^ {252}\) Boethius, jailed for alleged treason and writing from prison, further debased the cruel Roman Fortuna, turning her into a whorish entity. He reveres his angelic female visitor, Philosophy, but derides despicable female Fortune, who has played him false. In the first book of his work, Boethius recounts that Fortune once smiled on him, but then “she turned away / that faithless face of hers” (1.I.18-19).\(^ {253}\) The damage she has done him is realized in sexual terms: she is unfaithful. She is “slippery,” one who “plays her random / games with us” (i.e., with men) (1.V.26-27).\(^ {254}\) Fortune is “a monster.” She “toys with those for whom she intends catastrophe, showing her friendly face and lifting them up before dashing them down when they are least prepared” (2.I.10-13). To

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\(^{254}\) Patch argues that “the distinction between Fortune and Fates is more difficult to settle” during the Middle Ages, as metaphors get mixed and their roles in the lives of men become conflated (78). But Fortune is the one slandered, as we see in Boethius.
Boethius, the famous Wheel of Fortune is not just a randomly operating machine leading accidentally to good or bad luck, but a trick, an alluring adventure that ultimately ends men in ruin. Fortune is a harlot who, appearing lovely, lures men into a false sense of security. Worse even than frail Eve, she resembles the “strange woman” of Proverbs, whose mouth is “smoother than oil: but her end is bitter as wormwood.” Slippery and changing, she is only “constant to her inconstancy” (2.1.41).

The personification of Fortune as a woman with the intent to wrong men was thus shaped by Boethius, who reimagined her “from simply meaning ‘the one who brings our destiny,’” to “signify the one who performs that in a capricious way,” according to Howard Patch, who calls Fortune “a lively and ubiquitous figure, a shapeshifter who could not be put down.” Such a characterization appears in Geoffrey Chaucer’s works. *Troilus and Criseyde* (1385) features Fortune as a cruel mistress. When forced to part from his real mistress, Criseyde, Troilus declares, “Fortune is my fo,” and chides her “cruel wheel” (1.837-839). Later in Chaucer’s poem, he describes her as ruthless and sadistic: she “seemeth trewest,” but “wol bygyle” and “whan a wight is from hir wheel y-throwe, / Than laugheth she” (4.3; 6-7). Once again, Fortune is a beguiling force, raising men temporarily only to ruin them eventually. Marilyn Corrie asserts that Chaucer believed in the notion that “it is other forces” – malicious, non-masculine ones – “that determine what we [men] do and what happens to us.” (This view is mocked by St. Augustine, who in *The City of God* [c. 426 AD] asks: “Is it perhaps the case that when [Fortune] is bad she is not a goddess, but is suddenly changed into a malignant

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255 Proverbs 5:3-4 (KJV).
256 Patch, 10, 33.
258 Corrie, “‘God may well fordo desteny’: Dealing with Fate, Destiny, and Fortune in Sir Thomas Malory’s ‘Le Morte D’Arthur’ and Other Late Medieval Writing,” *Studies in Philology* 110, no. 4 (2013), 692.
demon?” In Chaucer’s “The Monk’s Tale,” Fortune and her Wheel are a hostile mechanism that man cannot control, and can only complain about. The Tale begins with the statement, “For when Fortune makes up her mind to fly, / Her course no man is able to withhold.” The “fickle wheel” continues to turn: “Fortune guides her wheel and turns it / And brings us all from happiness to mourning” (391-392). Like the Fates, Fortune afflicts lives. The significant difference between her and the Fates is that Fortune is thoroughly defamed for her doings.

During the early modern period, defamed Fortune migrated to the stage, taking on unique forms within the genres of history plays, comedies, tragedies, and romances. Renaissance playwrights followed Boethius’ description of Fortune: a blindfolded woman who, despite this visual suggestion of her impartiality, maliciously turns her Wheel, taking cruel pleasure in her very randomness as she temporarily favors some and cast others aside. Leo Salingar contends that Renaissance drama “guided” (presumably into the future) Boethius’ conception of the Wheel of Fortune, developing Fortune as a character who play-acts and deceives. As Fortune developed into this new character, she became a target for gendered epithets expressing masculine rage. Her capricious image is seen in a favored text of early modern playwrights, Niccolo Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (1532). Machiavelli’s guide to achieving courtly success comes with a severe description of Fortune as a woman who needs to be physically forced into compliance: “because fortune is a woman and if she is to be submissive it is necessary to beat and coerce her” (81). Machiavelli advises that Fortune favors the man who is bold and young because he will “command her with greater audacity” (81). Not just a woman who acts unpredictably, Fortune is for Machiavelli an erring female who needs to be controlled by virile

and ambitious men – in effect, who wants to be raped. Thus Fortune becomes a punishable scapegoat. Nevertheless, she retains her maddening power. As Thomas Flanagan notes, Machiavelli “promises only that we can increase our chances against Fortune, not than we can eliminate her effects entirely.”

(Here the male critic seems to identify with the beleaguered male “we,” railing – like Shakespeare’s Jaques – against “our mistress, the world.”)

Shakespeare’s two history tetralogies, set in England’s late medieval period, specifically subscribe to the negative Boethian and, ultimately, Machiavellian idea of Fortune with her misanthropy and her fickleness. Helen Cooper notes that Shakespeare’s historical plays are full of images of men’s falls from Fortune’s turning Wheel. The kings in the *Henriad* and the three parts of *Henry VI* speak about Fortune in a way that reveals they are aware of the dangerous turning of that Wheel, even while riding on it. Raymond Chapman contends that a man on Fortune’s Wheel is successively “rising, ruling, falling, and cast off,” and each king, or aspiring king, experiences Fortune’s sequential phases. Within their plays, Fortune appears as a “huswife,” a woman whose most significant action is wronging the men whom she initially favored. Thus the fortunes of men’s wars are repeatedly cast, in disdainful terms, as the callous work of a slutty female.

*Richard II* follows the medieval Wheel of Fortune motif of men rising and falling while also giving Fortune the potential not just to turn her Wheel, but to give illicit birth to new misfortunes. Isabella, Richard’s queen, sees Fortune as a harbinger of the future she controls. Fortune may give birth to something horrible: Isabella states, “methinks / Some unborn sorrow,

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ripe in fortune’s womb, / Is coming towards me” (2.2.9-11). Here, Fortune can physically create an event through her womb rather than just through her Wheel. Colleen Rosenfeld contends that this metaphor of Fortune’s womb versus Fortune’s Wheel illustrates not only a difference between feminine and masculine experience (as envisioned by Shakespeare), but between something that will happen and something that may happen, or “between the necessary future of a history that had to happen and the contingency of a future that could have gone otherwise.”

After all, infants in early modern Europe were often stillborn. Richard is heading for a fall, but what shape that fall will take is yet to be seen, and is perhaps undecided. The sorrow is only fully birthed when the Wheel – like the well-buckets Richard imagines in his deposition scene--dictates Richard II’s fall and Henry Bolingbroke’s rise. Isabella’s initial fear that something terrible will be born from Fortune is completed by Richard’s own later suggestions that he is being dropped by the Wheel. In act 3, scene 3, Richard accedes to Bolingbroke, physically descending from his high perch on the castle battlements, saying, “Down, down I come. . . Down court! Down king!” (3.3.178; 182). He invokes the image again later, during the deposition scene, when he rails at his enemies: “Conveyers are you all, / That rise thus nimbly by a true king’s fall” (4.1.317-318). The imagery of Fortune as sexual profligate is subtle but evident in the reference to men’s “rising” and in “Conveyers,” which can mean “bawds.”

Fortune gets painted in a similarly negative way in Shakespeare’s Henry V, where she is bluntly slandered as a promiscuous woman. Pistol, a member of Henry V’s army and a former drinking pal of the king, curses Fortune for causing Bardolph, another of Hal’s former cronies, to be sentenced to death for thievery. “[C]ruel Fate and giddy Fortune’s furious fickle wheel” have

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266 See Chapman, 4-5.
caused Bardolph’s fall (3.6.26-27). Captain Fluellen offers a defense of sorts, saying, “Fortune is painted blind.” I.e., she does not play favorites. Yet Fluellen then agrees that she behaves like a floozy: “she is turning and inconstant, and mutability and variation” (3.6.29-31; 33-34). Pistol then asserts that Fortune’s animosity is personal: “Fortune is Bardolph’s foe and frowns on him” (3.6.39).267 Echoing Chaucer’s Troilus, Pistol describes Fortune as hostile, choosing to damn someone, and able to see through her blindfold to pick out the unfortunate man. Pistol and Fluellen are aligned, however, on one point: Fortune can turn at any time against any man. This view is evident in Pistol’s later question, “Doth Fortune play the huswife [whore] with me now?” (5.1.84). Pistol’s frustration with Fortune casts her as a hussy: a woman who wronged him, who has led him astray, and whose business is to turn without warning from one man to another. Fortune has promiscuously turned her malevolence from Bardolph to him. Her targets vary, but she’s consistently a man-hater.

As in Shakespeare’s history plays, some male characters in tragedies view Fortune as actively working against them even (as Lear’s Edmund jests) when they are confronting the natural consequences of their own decisions. Such a paradox is apparent in John Webster’s The White Devil, wherein Lodovico, a disgraced count brought down by his own murderous lechery, declares, “Fortune is a right whore” when he is banished, despite his follower Antonelli’s reminder that he is “justly doomed” for “ruin[ing] the noblest earldom” (1.1.4; 13-15). According to Lodovico, it’s Fortune’s fault, for only favoring him with power and wealth for a short time before turning on him and becoming whorish. Similarly, in Shakespeare’s Macbeth, Duncan’s captain describes Macbeth’s near defeat by the “merciless Macdonwald” in terms

267 A similar complaint is seen in Mary Sidney Herbert’s closet drama The Tragedy of Antonie, Doome into English by the Countess of Pembroke (London: By P. Short for William Ponsonby, 1595). In this play Antonius declares, “Fortune engulfs me in extreme distress: / She turns from me her smiling countenance, / Casting on me mishap vpon mishap” (29).
which reiterate Henry VI’s application of whorish treachery to masculine power struggles. He asserts that “Fortune, on [Macdonwald’s] damned quarrel smiling, / Showed like a rebel’s whore,” until Macbeth, following Machiavelli’s advice, subdued Fortune to his own desires by winning the day (Macbeth 1.2.11; 16-17). George Chapman’s poverty-stricken Bussy, from Bussy D’Ambois, delivers an opening monologue similarly suggesting that “Fortune, not Reason, rules the state of things,” specifically noting the unfairness and irrational nature of the universe. “Man is a torch borne in the winde,” which can easily be extinguished by a hostile outside force, namely the blowing of feminine Fortune (Bussy 1.1.1; 18). Some men even attribute mistakes in the making to “fate,” making a pre-emptive jab at Fortune. Such is the case in Thomas Heywood’s A Woman Killed with Kindness, when Wendoll decides to engage in an adulterous relationship with his friend’s wife, and claims, “Such is my fate; to this suit I was born / To wear rich pleasure’s crown or Fortune’s scorn” (2.3.115-116). Wendoll seems here to divide Fortune into two. Fate requires him to sin to escape Fortune’s mockery; not only is Fortune a whore, aligned with “fate” to give him a pleasurable chance, she will – since she’s on the side of sexual vice – scorn him if he doesn’t take illicit advantage of his opportunity. Other associations between Fortune and promiscuity, which, more familiarly, associate men’s bad luck with that vice, appear even in Shakespeare’s problem comedies, as when the Clown in All’s Well That Ends Well blames life’s difficulties on “sluttish” Fortune (All’s Well 5.2.7), or when merchants’ misadventure is ascribed to the “strumpet wind” in The Merchant of Venice, as noted before. In tragedy, however, Fortune’s malice triumphs, and ultimately brings protagonists to misogynistic despair.

The despair is misogynistic in practical terms, in that it issues in harm to actual women in these plays. In tragedy, we find male protagonists whose animosity toward Dame Fortune is
registered not only in their abstract complaints, but in their hostile treatment of real female characters. Shakespeare’s Hamlet’s complaint against “outrageous Fortune” corresponds to the generalized misogyny of his “Frailty, thy name is woman!” (3.1.66; 1.2.150), and leads naturally to his violent repudiation of Ophelia in act three. In tragedies, bitter jests about Fortune are preceded or followed by savage condemnation or verbal abuse of female characters. In act 2, Hamlet jokes with his friends about “the secret parts of Fortune,” and comments, “O, most true! She is a strumpet” (2.2.250-254). These jests are connected to Hamlet’s angrier declaration, in private, that Gertrude is a “pernicious woman,” and his direct attacks on Ophelia for false “painting” and on Gertrude for living in “an enseamed bed, / Stewed in corruption” (1.5.112; 3.1.154; 3.4.104-105). Again, the strumpet Fortune appears as a double of the women whom Hamlet does not trust because of their ability to act as independent sexual beings. We find this doubled anger against malicious Fortune and lusty women in Webster’s The White Devil, as well. As mentioned earlier, this play begins with Lodovico declaring Fortune to be a whore. His anger at her issues directly in his revenge plot against Vittoria, whereby Isabella, his paramour, is murdered. For Lodovico, Vittoria, the “damnable whore,” becomes villainous Fortune (3.3.106), just as Gertrude and Ophelia become the abstract strumpet of “secret parts” that Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern have mocked.

Occasionally, the female characters seen on the stage are explicitly described in terms that stress they are Fortune’s mirror in the eyes of tragic men (thus bearing out Philippa Berry’s argument that some female characters seem to embody hostile Fortune). This happens in tragedy when Dame Fortune and her apparent physical avatars receive identical insults, most interestingly involving the word “turn.” Othello says that the allegedly faithless Desdemona can

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“turn and turn, and yet go on / And turn again,” like Fortune’s Wheel (Othello 4.1.261-262). Likewise, Shakespeare’s Antony calls Cleopatra a “triple-turned whore” (Antony and Cleopatra 4.12.12). Thomas Middleton’s devious Beatrice-Joanna says that a “giddy turning” happens inside her when she first considers the possibility of murdering her betrothed. She also wonders if she could use DeFlores to “serve [her] turn,” a sexual turn of phrase (Changeling 1.1.149, 2.2.69). John Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi features Julia, the Cardinal’s mistress, who is accused by her lover of having “giddy and wild turnings” within her (Duchess 2.4.12). Even within a comedy, Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice, “turn” has a sexual double meaning. When Nerissa, presented with Portia’s idea that they should pretend to be a lawyer and his clerk, asks “Why, shall we turn to men?,” Portia responds to the possibly bawdiness of the word: “Fie, what a question’s this / If thou wert near a lewd interpreter!” (Merchant 3.4.78-80). Thus the very action of Fortune, the turning of a wheel, is viewed as a whorish, overtly sexual motion. This connection to Fortune’s turns is shown too in Shakespeare’s use of the word “rolling” and “rolls.” His sonnet 20 identifies the unfaithful woman’s “rolling” eye (5), and, likewise, Henry V’s Fluellen states that Fortune’s foot is on a “spherical stone which rolls and rolls, and rolls” (3.6.35-36). Such parallels between the ways men view a supposedly licentious woman, and the image of a personified Fortune, whorish in her metaphorical turning and rolling, result in a more dangerous stage space for female characters. Women like Desdemona, whose “wretched fortune” it is to bear her husband’s wrath (Othello 4.2.135), are frequently the physical victims of men’s belief that disembodied Fortune has “played the huswife” with them.

Actual female characters are also disdained in some Wheel of Fortune tragedies, despite women’s scarcity in these plays, which mostly feature political striving amongst almost

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269 The entry for “turn” in the OED offers a section on phrases including the word. To “serve a turn,” a phrase that dates from the 1570s, can mean to satisfy a person’s sexual needs.
exclusively male characters. The Wheel of Fortune tragedy is a genre that fully depends on its protagonists’ initial trust in, then repudiation of, a hostile female universe which first invites his ambitious climbing and then, turning “whore,” drops him from the heights. As in the examples given above, the protagonist’s disappointment is sometimes registered in his harsh words for human female characters who, from his perspective, embody faithless Fortune. This is seen, for example, in Macbeth, when Macbeth first relies on the promises of the Weird Sisters – demonic versions of the Fates or Norns – and then, in the play’s fifth act, inveighs against these “[f]ilthy hags” and “juggling fiends” who led him to believe he could master Fortune and be a successful king (Macbeth 4.1.130; 5.8.23). Macbeth, as he defeats the traitor Macdonwald, is seen “[d]isdaining Fortune,” taking control of destiny and dethroning Macdonwald himself, but this forceful approach to Fortune’s wheel is not sustainable (Macbeth 1.2.19). Such an aggressive manner with Fortune is often punished, as in the first part of Christopher Marlowe’s Tamburlaine. Tamburlaine declares he will “hold the Fates bound fast in iron chains” as he “turn[s] Fortune’s wheel about” with his own hands (Tamburlaine Part 1, 1.2.174-175). Like Macbeth, Tamburlaine acts so as to determine his own destiny and facilitate his ambitious rise, and accompanies that action with misogynistic and violent metaphors concerning the Fates and Fortune. Tamburlaine’s violent anti-Fortune rhetoric finds physical form in his punishment of women – the wife of Bajazeth, whom he confines in a cage until she bashes her brains out, and the virgins whom he hangs as an act of war (5.1.318-320; 120). Tamburlaine’s violence against real women is similar to Macbeth’s murder of Lady Macduff. Actual female characters become the victims and scapegoats of ambitious protagonists’ war with abstract Fortune.
Some Wheel of Fortune tragedies directly personify – that is, physically incarnate – Fortune as a threatening female character. In Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, Queen Margaret, the widow of Henry VI, becomes a prophetess, an embodiment of the Fortune that Richard seeks to control. As Margaret curses the York household, and Richard specifically, as the “slanderer of [his] heavy mother’s womb,” Richard blindly dismisses her as a “withered hag,” echoing Macbeth’s scoffing view of the Weird Sisters (1.3.242; 225). Though Richard abuses Margaret, he publicly claims alignment with the fate he does not know she represents. By accepting the crown, he will “buckle Fortune on [his] back / To bear her burden” (3.7.230-231). Buckingham, unlike the cynical Richard, takes Margaret’s curses seriously, as he fears her prediction “falls heavy” on him, ensuring his death. Later, appearing as a ghost, Buckingham sees Richard’s fall too: “Richard falls in the height of all his pride” (5.1.25; 5.3.188). Margaret has been the bearer of Richard’s destiny, as the Weird Sisters were of Macbeth’s. Richard’s continuous slanderings of the various women in the play – not only Margaret but Queen Elizabeth and her unseen rival, Mistress Shore – as “witch[es],” “harlot[s],” and “strumpet[s]” (3.4.69-72) comport with the sense the play generates that the revenge taken on Richard by the universe is a feminine one.

Similarly linked defamations of both the women seen on stage, and unseen Fortune, can be found in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. A play laden with Wheel of Fortune references (e.g., Kent’s “Fortune, . . . turn thy wheel,” and Edgar’s reference to himself as “[t]he lowest and most dejected thing of fortune” [2.3.173, 4.1.3]), *Lear* is also a play in which major characters, reduced from happiness to misery, attribute their wretchedness to the sexual sins of actual women. Wandering on the heath, cursing his daughters, Lear calls women’s sexual organs “the fiends,” “the sulphurous pit,” the implicit source of evil (4.6.126-28). Echoing these terms, Edgar

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270 See Berry, 105-107.
blames not Edmund but Edmund’s dead mother’s allegedly licentious body, tempter of their father’s lust, for their father’s misfortunes: “That dark and vicious place where thee he got / Cost him his eyes” (5.3.173-74). Similarly, King Lear’s Fool equates the daughters’ thrusting-out-of-doors of their father with Fortune’s fickleness: “Fortune, that arrant whore, / Ne’er turns the key to th’ poor” (2.4.58-59). These connections between Fortune and the daughters, made even by “good” characters like the Fool, reinforce the idea of Fortune as a woman who sexually wrongs men. Similar assertions of Fortune’s unfairness as licentious infidelity appear in Ben Jonson’s tragic history play, Sejanus His Fall. There the Roman Sejanus’s followers, in service to his ambitious goals, make an offering to an altar of Fortune, revering her as “Great Mother Fortune” (5.5.178). Yet when the statue of Fortune physically turns her face away from Sejanus, he calls her “giglot,” or lascivious woman. Here Fortune’s treachery corresponds to the villainy of the lustful and adulterous Livia, who has earlier conspired with Sejanus in a poisoning plot against her husband, Drusus – though in this case the protagonist, Sejanus, is not the woman’s pawn, but the one who, in seeking to use her as his own tool, is revealed as Fortune’s plaything. Just as Drusus was Livia’s victim, and Livia Sejanus’, Sejanus is now “giglot” Fortune’s. Political misfortune runs parallel to, and is experienced, as sexual treachery (5.5.206).²⁷¹

A special use of the Fortune/Whore trope occurs in plays which feature female characters as tragic heroines. When a woman plays a central role in a play, she too may use the abstract image of Fortune to illustrate her frustrations, but call upon Fortune in a way that suggests there exists either a kinship or a rivalry between herself and that entity, who is another female. (Recall...

²⁷¹ “Giglot” or “giglet” is a rather rare curse against an excessively sexual woman. It also appears in Shakespeare’s Cymbeline, as discussed, when the Queen curses the “giglet Fortune” (3.1.34), and in Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure, when the chaos of the court scene causes Escalus to demand all “giglets” in lascivious Vienna be taken to prison (5.1.390).
Queen Isabella’s relatively sympathetic reference to Fortune as an expectant mother, in Richard II.) In cases where what might be called a gynosocial bond exists between women and the abstract but gendered force of Fortune, female characters do not curse Fortune so much as consciously seek to embody, or, at worst, occasionally tease her. In Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, Juliet uses men’s common complaints against Fortune to do this last. Separated from her lover, Romeo, who has described himself as “Fortune’s fool,” Juliet curiously inverts men’s disdain for Fortune's fickleness to hopeful praising of that quality: “O Fortune, Fortune, all men call thee fickle… Be fickle Fortune / For then I hope thou wilt not keep him long” (Romeo and Juliet 3.1.142; 3.5.60-63). Juliet’s playful call to Fortune depicts fickleness as a positive trait, for it may send Romeo back to her. Linda Woodbridge asserts that female tragic heroes crave romance, love, and sexual satisfaction; that is, their male lovers are their whole world, their desire, and what (or whom) they are working for. Fortune, then, can become an ally and a model for tragic heroines, who might also turn the wheel and get what they want. Such is the case in John Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi, wherein the Duchess initially laughingly performs as Fortune to her new husband Antonio in the play’s first act. She covers her eyes so that “[he can] lead [his] Fortune by the hand / Unto [their] marriage bed” (Duchess 1.2.401-402). Equating blind Fortune with happy marital intimacy, the Duchess clearly regards Fortune as a friend and model. Still, later, when circumstances threaten her and Antonio’s union, the Duchess expresses her alienation from Fortune, complaining of the crowding of Fortune’s Wheel, which makes it spin faster toward her ruin: “When Fortune’s wheel is overcharged with princes, / The weight makes it move swift” (Duchess 3.5.95-96). Fortune, once the subject of a flirtatious joke,

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272 I am adapting this word from Sedgwick’s word “homosocial.” See, again, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Between Men English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) 1-5.

becomes impotent in that she now “seems only to have her eyesight / To behold [the Duchess’s] tragedy” (*Duchess* 4.2.35-36). Still, though Fortune is no longer her ally, the Duchess does not describe her as an active betrayer, but simply an onlooker of distress caused by an excess of princes (the Duchess’s nasty brothers) on her Wheel. Fortune does not hate her, though she cannot save her. Indeed, Fortune is a fellow victim of the cruel males in the play, who weigh Fortune down.

Other early modern female characters have similarly complicated friendships with Fortune, though some describe that tie in more scornful language than the Duchess uses, at times angrily lamenting that Fortune – again, a fellow victim – has been perverted or “turned” by sinful men. In Shakespeare’s *King John*, because John has been appointed heir to the throne by Richard Lionheart, against the rights of John’s older brother’s heir, their nephew Arthur, Arthur’s mother, Constance, first blames John, not Fortune, for Fortune’s betrayal. Fortune may be licentious, but not of her own primary volition. It is John who has debased her. “Fortune, O! / She is corrupted, changed, and won from thee,” she tells Arthur. “Sh’ adulterates hourly with thine uncle John” (*King John* 3.1.54-56). Extending the ruined-woman image to countries, Constance complains that the now “strumpet Fortune” has turned France to a secondary “bawd” by gaining supporters there for the “usurping John” (*King John* 3.1.60-61). Her rage against sluttish Fortune may echo that of the disappointed male, but, unlike the standard masculine complaint, Constance’s rant retains Fortune’s corrupter as her primary target. If Fortune is a whore, King John is her main bawd, or pimp.\(^{274}\)

In comedy, women’s complaints against Fortune are gentler. In Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, Rosalind and Celia “mock the good housewife Fortune” because “her benefits are

\(^{274}\) In more modern terms, he is also indeed Fortune’s “John,” a term for a prostitute’s male customer.
mightily misplaced, and the bountiful blind woman doth most mistake in her gifts to women” (1.2.31-36). The choice of “housewife” removes the sting and pejorative sexual meaning of “huswife” or “hussy” (recall Pistol’s “Does Fortune play the huswife with me now?”). Fortune is bountiful, and only a little negligent of her rivals, earthly women.

A sharper rivalry between Fortune and physical female characters is described by Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, who directly opposes Fortune, whom she pictures as a jealous bitch who is vying with her for Antony. Cleopatra curses and defies Fortune, claiming she herself will rise so high after Antony’s death that “the false huswife Fortune [will] break her wheel, / Provoked by [Cleopatra’s] offense” (Antony and Cleopatra 4.15.51-52). She, the true wife, will rejoin her spouse – “Husband, I come!” – and replace false Fortune (5.2.342).

Helen Cooper contends that, by the time Shakespeare’s company staged Henry V, with its Fortune-hating Pistol, in 1599, Fortune’s Wheel had become a cliché. The image was “ripe for mockery,” and “repetitiveness had dulled the effect.”275 I would argue that the trope’s very familiarity disclosed and reinforced the general sexist attitudes of the period – attitudes which, like the Fortune trope itself, showed no signs of flagging, though they were ready for revision. I have discussed how, in early seventeenth-century tragedy, male characters’ overall misogyny was expressed and stoked by the metaphor of faithless Fortune. I have also indicated that in comedies and romances, Fortune was presented more favorably. The “housewife/huswife” comment appears not only in history and tragedy, but, as noted, in Shakespeare’s As You Like It, produced in 1599, just after Henry V. As is typical in Shakespearean comedy, however, this play’s female characters correct the misogynistic perspectives of other plays’ frustrated males.

275 Cooper, 154.
As discussed above, in *As You Like It*’s first act, Celia and Rosalind, speaking far more respectfully of Fortune than their male counterparts, “mock the good housewife Fortune” because “her benefits are mightily misplaced, and the bountiful blind woman doth most mistake in her gifts to women” (1.2.31-36). Celia and Rosalind’s complaint is something like Pistol’s in *Henry V*: Fortune’s favors are inequitable. However, conspicuously absent from their criticisms is the bitter, sexualized disappointment of male characters whose fortunes have turned sour.

Later in *As You Like It*, Rosalind’s lover, Orlando, more directly repudiates the slandered and feminized image of what Hamlet, within the year, would call “outrageous Fortune” (*Hamlet* 3.1.66). When the melancholy and misogynistic Jaques – who thinks Orlando’s “worst fault… is to be in love” – invites Orlando to “rail against our mistress, the world,” Orlando declines, saying he will not project his discontent outward by finding fault with anyone but himself (*As You Like It* 3.2.285; 282). Thus comedy offers an alternative to jaundiced characters’ tragic habit of gendering the whole universe female and blaming “her” for general misfortunes.

But the grandest redemption for Fortune, and for the men who verbally abuse her, is found in Shakespeare’s romances. Within such a tragicomic, romantic setting, men are redeemed through their eventual abandonment of misogynistic attitudes or tendencies. This redemption is dependent on the passage of time. *Pericles*, for instance, demonstrates what happens when a man who is spun down Fortune’s wheel over the course of two decades yet resists misogynistic – or any – hatred of the world. The prologue of this play’s second act describes Fortune giving Pericles a second chance at happiness: “Fortune, tired of doing bad, / Threw him ashore to give him glad” (2.37-38). Fortune herself is, or gets, nicer in this play. According to Jane Hwang Degenhardt, she becomes not just “a force of adversity but also one of opportunity” to
Pericles. Given an opportunity to win a wife and presented with rusty armor given him by the sea – that same tricky element that, with the wind, threatened Merchant’s merchants – Pericles shows his gratitude to Fortune. “Thanks, Fortune, yet, that after all thy crosses / Thou givest me somewhat to repair myself” (2.1.126-127). Degenhardt rightfully argues that Pericles does not oppose Fortune and the changes she imposes, but “rides them out,” making patience his best quality, one that contributes directly to his success and “eucatastrophe,” or happy ending. In the romances, Fortune favors such characters, and such characters speak favorably of Fortune. Even when crossed, they do not curse her. Like that of Rosalind and Celia, their language of complaint is mild. Marina, Pericles’ daughter, calls Fortune simply “ungentle” when she is kidnapped by pirates (!) (4.6.99), and, like her father, she shows no bitterness, but stamina and patience. As Degenhardt says, patience with Fortune allows Dame Fortune to “unmake and remake” identities and families: to renew life. Pericles’ patience is manifested in (for instance) his acceptance of the goddess Diana’s instructions to him, when he exclaims, “I will obey thee” (5.1.284). Thus Gower, the Chorus, ends the play with an epilogue that applauds the virtue that has been seen to overcome the worst moods of Fortune. “In Pericles, his queen, and daughter seen, / Although assailed with fortune fierce and keen, / Virtue preserved from fell destruction’s blast, / Led on by heaven, and crowned with joy at last” (5.4.3-6). Pericles is reunited with his daughter and wife because he is patient, and accepts the various hardships his fortune imposes.

In Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale and Cymbeline, the male protagonists undergo an even more dramatic submission to (mis)fortune, proving themselves able to overcome savage jealousy regarding their wives and, therefore, their misogynistic distrust of a hostile “female”

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276 Degenhardt, 108.
277 Ibid., 115-116.
278 Ibid., 116.
universe. Leontes, initially unjustly suspicious of his wife Hermione, consigns her “bastard”
daughter to apparent death and, trying Hermione in a kangaroo court when she is yet weak from
childbirth, apparently causes her death. However, the passage of time – again, a key feature of
the romance, which lets months and years elapse between acts – gives him the opportunity to
repent and receive both wife and daughter Perdita back at Fortune’s hands. Years after
Hermione’s and Perdita’s seeming deaths, one of Leontes’ courtiers says he has redeemed all his
faults, and encourages him to “Do as the heavens have done: forget your evil; / With them
forgive yourself” (5.1.5-6). Such a positive and welcoming view of now heavenly Fortune is
expressed by Perdita and her lover Florizel when they fly from danger to freedom in act four.
Counting on Fortune’s benevolence, Perdita addresses her as “Lady Fortune,” and Florizel calls,
“Fortune, speed us” (4.4.59; 790). Grace Tiffany asserts that *The Winter’s Tale* rewrites
*Othello*’s jealous husband plot by “replac[ing] control by hamartia [tragic error] with control by
grace, which works through time to foster shame and to redeem the protagonists’ crimes.”

The jealous husband, the male who wrongly complains he is cursed by a woman, can be mollified
and made penitent by time’s passage, which leads to his eventual acceptance of Fortune, now
recast as Providence.

*Cymbeline* similarly features a lover whose initial scorn and violent language turn to
penitence due to his submission to fortune in time. When Posthumus learns that the schemer
Iachimo has gained access to his wife Imogen’s bedroom, he rages against her, accusing her of
“lying…flattering…deceiving” and having “lust and rank thoughts.” He declares that women
“even to vice/ … are not constant,” and thus echoes the tragic jealous stage husbands who
describe their wives as being as slippery as Fortune, turning and rolling (2.5.24-25; 30-31). This

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rage inspires Posthumus to order Imogen’s murder, an act from which the righteous servant Pisanio recoils. Yet after the passage of months, Posthumus repents of his anger, to the point where he counsels jealous husbands in the audience to avoid his mad behavior: “You married ones, / If each of you should take this course, how many / Must murder wives much better than themselves / For wrying but a little!” (5.1.2-5). Perhaps, in framing Posthumus’ apology even for erring wives – a husbandly generosity that is rare in Shakespeare – Shakespeare was influenced by John Marston's 1603 tragicomedy The Malcontent, which features a similar marital reconciliation born of a mature husband’s ability to see even an erring wife as something more than a “whore.” In The Malcontent, Duke Pietro first calls his adulterous wife Aurelia a “close drab” who has made him a “notorious cuckold,” adding that his “lady's shame is [his]” (1.3.84-85; 2.3.60). But Time, combined with his wife’s penitence, allows Pietro to forgive her. In act five, Aurelia apologizes as the couple dances, and Pietro takes her hand (5.4.77). The trials and disappointments endured by both, met with patience and humility, make possible a renewal of their marriage.

Shakespeare, unlike Marston, keeps his heroine sexually innocent, so that, when Imogen’s innocence is revealed, her husband’s self-castigation may be more extreme. Posthumus calls himself “most credulous fool, / Egregious murderer, thief,” and “villainlike,” and Imogen the contrasting “temple / Of virtue” (5.5.247-248; 255; 257-258). The repentance and humility that Posthumus learns is juxtaposed with the recklessness of Imogen’s stepmother, the Queen, whose evil ambition is shown by her cursing of the “giglet Fortune” when her schemes fail (3.1.34). Angry cursing of Fortune is a mark of ill will; patient trust in her ultimate benevolence a sign of virtue. As Pisanio observes, “Fortune brings in some boats that are not steered” (4.3.54). According to Robert Turner, in Cymbeline, the possibility of recovery “rests in hope for
a benign universe where ultimate forces of good expose slander.” Eventually, Posthumus and Imogen are granted a happy ending, as providential Dame Fortune more than compensates for the flaws of the earthly woman (now dead) who has plotted to destroy the king’s heirs: that “wicked Queen, / Whom heavens in justice both on her and hers / Have laid more heavy hand” (5.5.563-565). While the figure of the murderous Queen owes something to the dangerous homicidal wives of early modern crime pamphlets, discussed in my third chapter, it should be noted that the Queen’s crimes are not sexual. She does not plot against a husband to facilitate a lustful engagement with a lover. Indeed, as noted, in Cymbeline, female lapses in chastity are excused, in Posthumus’ warning to the audience not to blame their wives for “wrying but a little.” Although as it turns out, Imogen has not lapsed in marital fidelity, Posthumus’ learned expression of tolerance, nursed by time and issuing in his own penitence and reunion with her, reveals not only that frisky wives are not whores, but that the universe isn’t a whore either. The trials and disappointments posed by both, when met with patience, may give way to love and joy.

The Tempest similarly features a redemption plot that depends on patience in time and an acceptance of Fortune as Providence. The play justifies Leo Salingar’s argument that Shakespeare’s tragicomedies, or romances, dramatize the Wheel completing a circle “beyond any character’s control,” which includes a break in the social order and then a recovery. At the outset of The Tempest, Prospero has already lived through his break in the social order: the loss of his dukedom and his exile to the magic island “twelve year since” (1.2.53). Thus, his redemption, has already begun. Time has schooled him in fortitude. The effect of this healing instruction is evident in his initial statement, “bountiful Fortune, / now my dear lady, hath mine

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enemies / Brought to this shore” (1.2.213-215). Fortune is on Prospero’s side on the island, even if she appeared to be against him in Milan. Part of Prospero’s education at the hands of Fortune is seen in his alliance with her: his ability to avail himself of the opportunities she provides. He can, for example, dangle his daughter before the Neapolitan prince Ferdinand, an alliance with whom – after she luckily falls in love – assists Prospero’s reconciliation with his erstwhile foe, King Alonso. Ferdinand’s assertion that Miranda is his “by immortal Providence” illustrates Prospero’s plan as well as his similarly now-benign relationship with Fortune (5.1.225). Providence/Chance/Fortune has brought these young people together, and their union seals the wider reunions which will bring them all back to Italy.

Prospero’s patience is manifested in his rewriting of tragic trajectories. He does not kill his enemies, but guides and schools them toward penitence – “heart’s sorrow” – and a “clear life ensuing” (3.3.100-01). Robert Miola contends that unlike the Shakespearean tragic hero, Prospero recognizes his need to “release himself from anger and revenge.”\(^{282}\) His ability to reflect on his actions – “I, thus neglecting worldly ends” (1.2.109) – and pity the effects that he has on others – “shall not myself / … be kindlier moved?” (5.1.29; 31) – strengthens his relationship with Fortune. His enemies are indeed “at [his] mercy” (4.1.292), but he accepts Ariel’s counsel that, beholding their suffering, he allow his “affections” to “become tender” (5.1.25). Prospero will outdo Ariel in compassion – be “kindlier moved than thou art” -- because he is “one of their kind” (5.1.26-31 my emphasis). Acknowledging himself an imperfect human, he exhibits the humility that is necessary to compassion, and to doing good. “The rarer action is / In virtue than in vengeance,” he concludes (5.1.35-36). Alliance with the “dear lady” Fortune, here associated with time, humility, and compassion, facilitates the play’s comic outcome.

Thus Fortune in early modern drama, as presented by Shakespeare and others, varies according to the genre in which her power appears, and, sometimes, the gender of the characters who curse or invoke her. In history plays and tragedies, male characters personify her as a malevolent female responsible for all their disappointments. She is a diminishment of the classical Fates, by way of Boethius’s interpretation of Roman Fortuna, from majestic neutral powers to a fickle and misogynistic whore. This Renaissance tragic version of Fortune becomes the scapegoat for men’s rash choices and bad luck. In tragedies, the masculine anger directed at Fortune is also frequently mirrored in rage directed at physical women, whom the tragic protagonists abuse. Yet Fortune has other faces. Female characters in all early modern dramatic genres express a sense of, at best, alliance, or, at worse, rivalrous sisterhood with Dame Fortune, and for the most part resist vilifying her with the sexual epithet “whore.” Sometimes male characters – like Orlando – speak generously of Fortune as well, while the melancholy ones who “rail against our mistress, the world” are isolated fools. Finally, in Shakespeare’s romances, we see male characters who, through time and fortitude, arrive at an alliance with Dame Fortune. Here Fortune recovers some of the ancient dignity of the Fates. Respect for and acceptance of her ways is crucial to a male character’s redemption. His patience and penitence are the revelatory catalysts for Fortune’s benevolence. In these plays, Fortune’s rehabilitation is akin to the redemption of Nature, which is no longer aligned with bastardy and corruption, but has become, as in the first days, “great creating Nature” (The Winter’s Tale 4.4.105). For Leontes and Posthumus, patience with and humility toward a “feminine” universe results in communion and reconciliation with real women, just as patience toward real women results in patience with
Fortune. In these tragicomedies, Fortune is revealed, not as a bitch or a whore, but as a lady, or indeed something greater: a mask of Providence.
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