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Perilous Power: Chastity as Political Power in William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and Margaret Cavendish's *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*

Kelsey Brooke Smith
Brigham Young University - Provo

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Perilous Power: Chastity as Political Strategy in William Shakespeare's

Measure for Measure and Margaret Cavendish's

Assaulted and Pursued Chastity

Kelsey Brooke Smith

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Brandie R. Siegfried, Chair
Kimberly Johnson
Bruce W. Young

Department of English
Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

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Kelsey Brooke Smith
Department of English, BYU
Master of Arts

William Shakespeare and Margaret Cavendish each published plays and poems focusing on the precarious implications and cultural enactments of female chastity in their time. Their lives and writing careers bookend a time when chastity's place in English politics, religion, and social life was perceived as crucial for women while also being challenged and radically redefined. This paper engages in period-specific definitions of virginity and chastity, and with modern scholarship on the same, to explore the historicity of chastity and how representations of self-enforced chastity create opportunities for female political power in certain fiction contexts. Through a comparison of the female protagonists of *Measure for Measure* and *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*—Isabella and Travellia—I argue that both characters are able to assert and gain practical forms of power within their respective systems of government, and not just in spiritual or economic spheres.

Keywords: William Shakespeare, Margaret Cavendish, chastity, political power, *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*, *Measure for Measure*

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Perilous Power: Chastity as Strategy in William Shakespeare's

Measure for Measure and Margaret Cavendish's

Assaulted and Pursued Chastity

In 1595, Walter Raleigh described his explorations of the New World in his treatise "The Discovery of Guiana." The rhetorical purpose of his text is fairly straightforward—Raleigh writes to win the favor of his Queen and to urge her to take advantage of the untouched and unspoiled wealth of Guiana: "Guiana is a country that hath yet her maidenhead, never sacked, turned, nor wrought; the face of the earth hath not been torn, nor the virtue and salt of the soil spent by manurance. . . . It has never been entered by any army of strength, and never conquered or possessed by any Christian prince" (1032). The graphic potential violence and the sense of urgency Raleigh uses to describe Guiana's "virgin land" are startling. Pristine beauty and unturned earth, while initially desirable, are only such if they will eventually be turned, spoiled, sacked, and wrought. What is most curious about this violent depiction of virgin potential, however, is that it is being written to a Virgin Queen, which in turn betrays a bizarre and troubling power complex. The Virgin Queen—whose reign arguably rested on her ability to use and gain power through her strategic figurations of virginity—is being encouraged to be the ravisher, to cement her power through fulfilling a metaphorical rape to gain literal political domination.

As Raleigh clearly implies, virginity's value lies in its *potential*—virginity is not valuable as a static state, but as a potential prize or commodity to eventually be gifted, claimed, or stolen. As the Virgin Queen, Elizabeth I relied heavily on virginal potential—using it not only as a means to delay a seemingly inevitable marriage, but also, as Helen Castor points out, as a way to

tap into both the bodily and spiritual aspects of virginal potential as political power (459).¹ Elizabeth I was as a “virgin queen,” who was “virtuous, pious, dutiful . . . as occasion demanded, but also worshipped by the devoted knights of her court, who were bound to her by their elaborately declared love, along with their loyalty” (459). Elizabeth’s portrayal as a pure, pious virgin *and* a virgin latent with potential sexuality allowed her to achieve a remarkably stable rule using female virginity and female chastity as her foundation. The significant overlap in virginity/virginal chastity and chastity/marital chastity was crucial to the success of Elizabeth’s chaste figurations of power. Virginal potential—which is highly unstable—powerfully informs the (more stable) marital chastity it culturally precedes. This is why, according to Margaret Ferguson, female virginity in “excess” can threaten male-dominated societies and/or can become a “menace to the ideal of ‘married chastity’” if its potentiality is not carefully couched in terms of eventual marriage (9). Thus, virginity is often conveyed as more active and virile in its potential power than marital chastity since virginity may either lead to marriage, or present a subversive alternative to marriage.²

William Shakespeare and Margaret Cavendish each published plays and poems focusing on the implications and cultural enactments of female virginity and chastity in their time. And it was during their time (and arguably in our time as well) that chastity in English politics, religion, and social life was perceived as crucial for women, while also being radically redefined.

¹ Karen Raber similarly argues that the chaste persona enacted by Elizabeth I not only makes “gender difference, chastity, and sexuality central to the imaginative construction of nationhood” (413), but leaves a legacy that informs the chaste, virginal “warrior women” characters Cavendish creates during the English Civil War.

² Margaret Ferguson helpfully elaborates on how virginity was considered a “subversive alternative” to marriage—it can disrupt the continuity of patriarchal rule and power. She states that “maidenly willfulness” can result in social “disorder,” citing Hermia (from Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*) and Queen Elizabeth I as examples. Ferguson argues that Hermia’s “maidenly willfulness” threatens both her “father’s and the king’s authority” because Hermia has the subversive potential to become an “overly militant” Amazon or a “barren nun”—both options which threaten the desires of the male authorities in the play (8). Similarly, Queen Elizabeth’s refusal to marry was read as subversive during her time. While her portrayals of virginity helped stabilize and secure her own reign, her choice not to produce an heir negated the possibility of a future Tudor monarch and threatened the continuation of the English monarchy as a whole.

Shakespeare was strongly influenced by the life and career of England's Virgin Queen. Several decades later, Cavendish wrote of chastity in a time of civil war and eventual restoration; her observations were partly a result of her time serving as a lady-in-waiting to the exiled Queen Henrietta Maria. Both authors build upon Elizabeth's precedent and explore how female virginity and chastity are viable strategic means for female political power. The following study examines to what extent Shakespeare and Cavendish imagine self-enforced chastity as creating political opportunities for their female protagonists in *Measure for Measure* (1604) and *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* (1656).

Chastity as Social, Political, and Spiritual Power

To understand the implications of female chastity in Cavendish's and Shakespeare's texts, an examination of the definitions and functions of chastity during the period is essential. During the early modern period female chastity was an indisputable social and economic asset—albeit for those women who could determine whether and whom they would marry. Kathleen Kelly and Marina Leslie posit that an early modern woman's chastity was considered “her greatest prize” as a “girl's virginity” secured “both patrilineage and property” in the period (20, 18). The nature of chastity, however, was not only limited to its social functionality. As England gradually transitioned from a Catholic to a Protestant nation, the spiritual significance of “the quality or state of being chaste” fluctuated in importance as well. As the Oxford English Dictionary makes clear, the definition of chastity changed from abstaining from *all* sexual intercourse to abstaining from “*unlawful* sexual intercourse” [emphasis added]. The “state of being chaste” could refer to ceremonial or stylistic purity which included modesty, moderation, restraint, and generally avoiding any excess or extravagance (“chastity, n.”). During the 1500s, chastity was often considered the “supreme virtue” (e.g. “chastity”: a woman's “greatest prize”). Kelly and Leslie

also argue that virginity, both in its absence and presence, was “central to the construction of female identity, both as subject and object” during the period (15). Although attitudes were shifting towards regarding marital, rather than virginal, chastity as the ideal,³ virginal chastity still held a significance and gravitas that marital chastity did not. Beyond sexual stipulations, chastity represented the “conformity of life and conduct with the principles of morality; voluntary observance of the recognized moral laws or standards of right conduct; abstention on moral grounds from any form of wrong-doing or vice” (“chastity, n.”).

In medieval texts leading up to the 1500s, chastity was often defined as a “quality of the spirit” while virginity was seen as “a physical technicality” (Kelly 3). However, on a more emblematic level, virginity also denoted a certain spiritual purity that was not necessarily indicative of a particular physical state (7). For instance, seventeenth-century cleric Jeremy Taylor maintained that, while “natural virginity of itself is not a state more acceptable to God,” it is “better than the married life” if the virgin uses her virginity to find “freedom from cares, [opportunities] to spend more time in spiritual employment . . . [and] as [a] victory over lusts” (91).⁴ Taylor proffers virginity as a state where spiritual freedom and employment can be accessed more easily, and his meticulous rules regarding virginal and marital chastity emphasize the spiritual over the physical state. Taylor defines chastity (both marital and virginal) as the “suppression of all desires irregular in the matter of sensual or carnal pleasure” (89-90). Giving subsequent strict mandates and definitions on what constitute “desires irregular,” Taylor insists that the ultimate goal of chastity is to keep both the body and the spirit in a state of purity, and that *spiritual* power is achieved as a result. While Taylor does not read female virginity as

³ An excellent literary example of this marital ideal is the character of “Britomart” in Spenser’s *The Fairie Queen*. Britomart’s virginal potentiality culminates in an idealistic companionate marriage.

⁴ To what extent Jeremy Taylor’s chaste rules were enacted in everyday life is questionable, yet *Holy Living* remains an excellent source for clarifying the virginal and chaste tropes as articulated in Protestantism during the mid-1600s.

socially subversive, his arguments that virginity is “a life of angels” and that virginity functions as *the* “great opportunity for the retirements of devotion” makes his portrayal of “honorable” and “pleasing” “chaste marriages” a little lackluster in comparison. His emphasis on the spiritual transcendence achievable through (and only through) virginity emphasizes the potency, “freedom,” and “opportunities” virginal chastity afforded (91). However, even as Taylor reinforces the special (spiritual) power of virginal potentiality, he simultaneously upholds the social necessity of marriage.

Similarly, as Richard Burt and John Archer argue in *Enclosure Acts*, by the 1600s the “conjugal ideal” of chastity was well established, but a fascination with virginity lingered on. Doctrinally, marital chastity was the desired end goal for virginal chastity, but “maidenly virginity maintained its status as a moral ideal” even as it was urged as “strictly a temporary state” (233). Using John Milton’s *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle* (1637) as a case study—a text that celebrates chastity—Burt and Archer analyze the character of the “Lady” who initially appears to “give voice to [Milton’s] belief in moderate marital sex” (230). Yet Burt and Archer point out that the Lady invokes her powers as a “virginal orator” against her magician kidnapper and “threatens her seducer with an apocalyptic power” that far exceeds his own. In this case, the Lady’s virginal powers “seem to give the Lady control even over the very authority [marital chastity] she is journeying to honor” (231). While the Lady is ultimately rescued from her predicament, her ability to call upon virginal power in her moment of need in some sense seems to eclipse her argument for marital chastity. Why marry when as a virgin you retain and have access to a power and freedom not available in marriage? As Burt and Archer note, “maidenly virginity” is the “very state that qualifies a woman for her subjection to the patriarchal law of marriage,” yet ironically “is the same condition, if maintained, that best permits” her to evade

patriarchal hold (237). Thus, while doctrinally marital and virginal chastity were morally equivalent, the potentiality of virginity gave virgins access to a political and economic power not available within marriage.

While many early modern women obviously chose for themselves to subscribe to the spiritual and cultural ideals of chastity, it is fair to state that one of the social reasons for encouraging and enforcing female chastity was to preserve patrilineal inheritance. However, Kathryn Schwarz argues that when virgins or chaste married women defend their chastity for the sake of the virtue itself it can often become socially disruptive to the patriarchy that enforces it:⁵ in such circumstances, paradoxically, “women pose a threat when they willingly conform to social conventions” (*What You Will* 2). Suddenly, the potentiality of virginity, chastity, and the power of feminine will becomes particularly poignant and powerful. Schwarz calls this a “deadly concentration” where “feminine subjects defend the standards by which they are defined” which results in “excis[ing] valueless men” (13). If female chastity—when enforced by males—is a way to control women and preserve male power, then placing female chastity under female control threatens not only patrilineage, but the possibility of lineage in general. Thus, women then “become integral to yet estranged within the systems that animate them as subjects” (6), and intentional enactment of their chastity may put them in opposition to the male dominated society they inhabit. In this light, it perhaps seems more plausible that self-defense of chastity can translate to female political power. Since female chastity was highly valued by men, female control of chastity created an opportunity for women to gain and assert their own economic, social, and political power in a male dominated society.

⁵ I hope to avoid unnecessary “analytic reductiveness” in my use of the term patriarchy. Obviously, I hope to suggest a more nuanced conversation wherein the choice of chastity is not merely an extension of male rule, but where female agentive chastity is able to exceed some of the intended restrictions of the society it inhabits. Consequently, when I refer to “patriarchy” in this paper, I am referring to the more destructive and controlling form of male rule that seeks to limit and control the choices and agency of women.

Yet Elizabeth I's use of virginal power is something of an exception in its success.⁶ Indeed, Elizabeth's ascent to power had been in many ways sheer luck since initially it was the result of her father's inability to produce healthy male heirs, the death of her half-brother Edward, the disposal of her cousin Jane Grey, and the early death of her elder half-sister Mary (who reigned for only five years) that finally left Elizabeth as the only viable Tudor heir to the English throne. While Elizabeth's ascent to power had been one of circumstance, her firm grasp of the scepter was not. Elizabeth was a political genius who created a complicated persona that relied, in part, on her supposed virginal and chaste attributes to maintain and legitimize her power. Elizabeth's legitimization of her power had much to do with recognizing and avoiding the sexual and marital precedents set by previous female rulers of England. Unlike her sister Mary, "Elizabeth's coronation ring was not jostling for room on her fingers with a plain gold wedding band such as the one Mary wore"; rather, while "Mary's marriage to her kingdom had been compromised by the troubling implications . . . that she was also wife to a [foreign] king, for Elizabeth, it was now clear, the union between monarch and realm would transcend metaphor to be both enduring and exclusive" (Castor 456-57). Elizabeth used her virginal potentiality not only to forever hint at and postpone marriage to a king, but to also claim virginal fulfillment in her "marital" commitment to England. Ultimately, Elizabeth's manipulation of chastity tropes allowed for access to the whole gamut of chaste power: virile virginity *and* marital stability. Quite literally, Elizabeth maintained her political power by aggressively capitalizing on the unique power of chastity that, as a protestant, she could only have access to *as a woman*.

⁶ When Elizabeth I took the English throne in 1559, she inherited from her sister Mary a public nostalgic for male rule. John Knox's ill-timed treatise, *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558), proclaimed that there was nothing so "repugnant to nature" or more contrary to God's "revealed will" than to "promote a woman to bear rule" (Knox). While this view was rather extreme, much of Elizabeth's rule, or rather the pageantry surrounding her rule, dealt with softening what was seen as the conflicting nature of her feminine gender and her masculine political role.

Elizabeth's successful manipulation of female power resulted in what Bruce Young calls the "virtually universal admiration" for Queen Elizabeth that positively "affected attitudes about women's roles" during her reign (42). Burt and Archer note that even post-Elizabethan interest in the "power of virginity" was no longer isolated "to a single historical personage" and was expanded to include everyday women (234).⁷

The characters of Isabella in *Measure for Measure* and Travellia in *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* are also subject to circumstance, but unlike Elizabeth they must use chastity to gain power, rather than maintain it. And while both characters gain considerable political power and influence, whether this power is a result of conscious choice is debatable: these women are not *pursuing power*; they gain it inadvertently through adherence to social norms. Yet both of these women are actively *pursuing chastity*. In her treatise on beauty and justice Elaine Scarry points out the "continuity between the thing pursued and the pursuer's own attributes." Scarry argues that the pursuit of the virtuous (beauty or justice) results in two things: the "enhancement of the self" and outcomes that are "unself-interested" since virtuous pursuits necessarily benefit those who interact with the pursuer (87). Since one of the definitions of virtue *is* female chastity, the pursuit of chastity in the Renaissance sense is fairly comparable to the pursuit of virtue in Scarry's sense. Furthermore, during the seventeenth century the meaning and use of the word virtue was more closely associated with the active pursuit of power than its current definition as simply a "good or desirable" thing. The meaning of "virtue" included the (now obsolete) definitions of "valour, courage, and fortitude," "physical strength, force, or energy," and

⁷ Determining to what extent Elizabeth's "virginal power" played a part in the everyday lives of Renaissance women would necessitate a carefully crafted methodology of social analysis best left to social historians.

“flourishing state or condition.”⁸ Virtue was also described as a *power* that affected “the body in a beneficial manner” a power “inherent in a thing: a capacity for producing a certain effect; an *active* property or principle” [emphasis added] (“virtue, n.”). The idea of virtue being an *active* property hearkens back to even an earlier fourteenth century use of virtue as a verb meaning “to exert oneself *to* do something” [emphasis in the original] (“virtue, v.”). Thus, the possession of virtue as depicted during Shakespeare’s and Cavendish’s lifetimes far exceeded current definitions of virtue as simply a stagnant “good” state. If, then, the pursuit of chastity can be conflated with an active pursuit of powerful virtue—as I argue is the case with Isabella and Travellia—their aggressive pursuit of chastity should result in self-enhancing, recognizable forms of individual power that extend positive benefits to those with whom they come into contact. Although Isabella and Travellia make choices with no apparent motive to disrupt the social order (and in fact seemingly seek to enforce it), their pursuit of chastity and virtue matters, since it is that pursuit that enables, enhances, and informs the political power they achieve.

Potency and Merciful Power in *Measure for Measure*

In Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, chastity, or the lack thereof, is at the heart of all the political and social issues of the play. However, the tone and plot of the play shy away from presenting a clear sexual moral and instead include elements suggestive of parody: extremes of sexual abstinence, sexual indulgence, and the inability of the government to regulate sexual morality. Female chastity was not a new subject for Shakespeare, yet the tragicomic nature of *Measure for Measure* gives it the distinction of allowing an ambiguous, and thus possibly

⁸ An excellent example is found in Raleigh’s “The Discovery of Guiana” where virtue is indicative of Guiana’s “flourishing condition”: “Guiana is a country that hath yet her maidenhead . . . the face of the earth hath not been torn, nor the *virtue* and salt of the soil spent by manurance” [emphasis added] (1032).

hopeful, reading of power obtained through female chastity.⁹ *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Othello*, and *The Tempest* also deal with female chastity and proof of virginity as core themes on which the plots revolve. However, the female protagonists in those plays seem to gain little practical power through their faithful adherence to chastity.

Much Ado About Nothing and *Othello* are excellent foils for *Measure for Measure*. Both examine what could happen, and then what does happen, when women are believed not to be chaste. Hero's virginity is publicly denounced by her fiancé on her wedding day, and Leonato immediately jumps to the conclusion that "death is fairest cover for her shame that may be wished for" (4.1.113-14). Luckily for everyone, an assortment of men—the Friar, Benedick,¹⁰ and eventually Leonato—come to Hero's aid, note the "thousand innocent shames" that flush her face and, because they are men, are able to rectify the regrettable and startling allegations made against Hero by other men (4.1.158). Hero's chastity, though unblemished, is figuratively "stolen" and then "reclaimed" with little active decision or choice on her part. *Othello*, of course, takes the plot of *Much Ado About Nothing* to its tragic end. Desdemona flouts her father's will to marry Othello, yet this very assertion of will—"She has deceived her father, and may thee" (1.3.291-92)—allows Iago to manipulate Othello into murdering his wife based purely on adulterous rumors. Emilia, another strong-willed woman, is also murdered by her husband on the basis of enacting her own will in defense of Desdemona: "So, speaking as I think, alas, I die" (5.2.258).¹¹ None of this bodes well for chaste female protagonists. Similarly, *The Tempest*, a romance, advances chastity as being just as vital to a father's interests. Even as we acknowledge

⁹ I hope to show that *Measure for Measure*'s lack of either a tragic or comedic ending allows for a more nuanced reading of *what* Isabella's chastity achieves in the final act of the play.

¹⁰ Benedick *is* compelled to confront Claudio by a woman (Beatrice), but only after Beatrice makes it clear she cannot effectively intervene because she is a woman: see "O God that I were a man!" (4.1.303), and "I cannot be a man with wishing, therefore I will die a woman with grieving" (4.1.317-18).

¹¹ While Emilia's chastity is not in question, her character effectively illustrates one possible, if shocking consequence of female agency.

Prospero's genuine concerns for his daughter's well-being, Miranda's chastity is essential for Prospero's plans to regain his power and prestige. She is arguably a pawn in her father and Caliban's political power struggle (lucky for Prospero she's not raped, bad luck for Caliban), and her match with Ferdinand, approved and in a sense arranged by Prospero, hinges upon answering yes to Ferdinand's "prime request": "My prime request / Which I do last pronounce, is—O you wonder—If you be maid, or no?" (1.2.429-30). While Miranda does not use her chastity to gain political power, Prospero surely does. In these examples the significance of female chastity and virginity for male characters is made explicit. Female chastity is obviously a source of power, but the powers accrue mostly to men.

Is it possible for a female protagonist to use her chastity to gain power for herself when interpretations and accusations against her chastity seem so out of her control? I return to *Measure for Measure* where Isabella, the young, beautiful, and zealously chaste nun-in-training, is the classical, almost ludicrously perfect embodiment of female chastity and virginity. She is surrounded by rakes, pimps, prostitutes, and hypocrites who not only highlight her virtue, but also make her conviction to chastity somewhat ridiculous—if no one else believes that virtue has worth, then why does she? Yet Isabella is stalwart in her convictions and seemingly defends chastity not to satisfy family (certainly not her brother), or "uphold the patriarchy," but because she desires to be chaste. Through pursuit of her chastity Isabella finds the strength to resist and ultimately overturn the corrupt Angelo and to tentatively reestablish chastity as an essential part of Vienna's political rule. Isabella, like Elizabeth I, is thrust by circumstance into an arena where her virginal potentiality must be tested and effectively used. Since Angelo ultimately fails miserably (both personally and politically) at any sort of sexual reform, Isabella's purposeful

choice of chastity and her ability to maintain it are intriguing assertions of female power made possible by this political and spiritual vacuum.

The key plot problem is the impending execution of Claudio, Isabella's brother. Claudio's crime of impregnating his fiancée results in Angelo's invoking the death penalty. Initially Angelo's reputation for puritanical adherence to strict morality makes the awakening of a "drowsy and neglected" law to punish one of Vienna's least licentious offenders believable (1.2.147). Yet the revelation of Angelo's true character and the veritable parade of characters that are guilty of much more serious sexual crimes make Juliet and Claudio's sexual deviance a minor offense at best. Lucio (an incorrigible rake) describes Claudio's sexual misconduct and conviction as akin to "foolishly [losing] at a game of tick-tack" (1.2.167). And even while both Juliet and Claudio acknowledge their behavior is outside sanctioned marital chastity, Claudio maintains that his sexual access to Juliet is based "upon a true contract" of betrothal, and the delay of their marriage was out of his control (Juliet is dependent on her friends for her dowry) (1.2.123-24). Thus, rather than serve as the ultimate example of sexual impropriety, Juliet and Claudio's transgression instead evokes a good deal of pity. It is, then, slightly problematic to argue whether Isabella's chastity is enacted as successful strategy when it is enacted within a play that can be read as a moral parody. However, Barbara Baines notes that the very premise of the play—the Duke asking Angelo to impose strict laws of chastity upon Vienna—immediately "[aligns] chastity and power" and that chastity acts as "the definitive virtue precisely because it is a site and mode of secular Power" (284). Additionally, Schwarz argues that because *Measure for Measure* retains no "hierarchal constancy" (258), Isabella—a seemingly powerless nun—is given space to use her "chaste will to reshape" Vienna's sexuality (167).

Isabella is introduced in *Measure for Measure* as Claudio's sister; his best hope for convincing Angelo to spare his life. Claudio praises her "youth" and her "prone and speechless dialect," telling Lucio that Isabella's rhetorical abilities are unparalleled: "when she will play with reason and discourse / And well she can persuade" (1.2.160-63). Additionally, Isabella's adherence to chastity is immediately emphasized: when discussing her impending vows of celibacy, she wishes her vows would call for even "stricter restraint" (1.4.4). Similarly, Isabella's commitment to her virtue and personal principles is as unparalleled as her rhetoric and is what ultimately compels her to fight against Angelo's hypocritical political rule.

In her appeal for Claudio's life, Isabella clearly states that she abhors fornication (2.2.29) and admits that even the very act of pleading for Claudio's life is an internal battle. She reconciles her intervention through her belief in the Christian doctrines of forgiveness and mercy, asking Angelo to separate the sin from the sinner—"let it be [the sin's] fault / And not my brother" (2.2.35-36). It is during this appeal to Angelo that Isabella expresses her most clearly articulated desire for power: "I would to heaven I had your potency/ And you were Isabel! Should it then be thus? / No, I would tell what 'twere to be a judge/ And what a prisoner" (2.2.69-72). Isabella's voiced desire for Angelo's "potency" demonstrates her will to wield the power Angelo possesses as de facto ruler of Vienna. Additionally, Isabella's desire for the reversal of their respective positions relative to power, as well as her desire for Angelo's potency (or rather potentiality), reveals the type of authority Isabella desires: Isabella wants merciful power to free Claudio and condemn, or perhaps just chastise, Angelo for his own lack of mercy. At this point, however, Isabella is a soon-to-be-nun, the sister of a convict, and a woman, and as such has no authority to rule Angelo (she arguably already has the potency and moral ability to rule capably and justly were she given proper authority). However, it is Isabella's logical,

passionate, and merciful argument that suddenly breeds “sense and desire” in Angelo (2.2.145). Ironically it is Isabella’s chaste virtue that makes her sexually desirable to Angelo, and leads him to imagine “her foully for those things / that make her good” (2.3.178-79).

Suddenly Isabella is given power; not the merciful power she desires, but an undesired sexual power. Her brother Claudio will be set free if Isabella sleeps with Angelo willingly. Yet for Isabella “more than [her] brother is [her] chastity” (2.4.185), and despite her brother’s pleas—“might there not be charity in sin / To save this brother’s life?” (2.4.63-64)—she maintains that keeping her chastity and losing a brother is “the cheaper way” (2.4.106). Her virginal potentiality (in that Angelo desires it and is willing to barter for it) is what gives her, presumably, the “power” to save her brother’s physical life, yet Isabella’s steadfast preservation and pursuit of her virtue is what allows her to access the merciful power she initially desires.

On this reading, Isabella’s ascent to merciful power is meant to depict the empowerment available through enacting chastity. In contrast, Mario Digangi argues that *all* the female bodies in the play are read and controlled by the male characters, and that the four female characters are an “explicit allusion to the Renaissance marital paradigm” of virgin, wife, and whore (590-91). Digangi argues that women’s power and prestige within society lie in the ability to fit into one of these three categories, all of which are dependent on male affirmation (with Lucio’s added addendum that “punks” are neither “maid, widow, [nor] wife”) (5.1.177-78). The social enforcement of these exclusionary categories is supported in the final reveal of *Measure for Measure* when the Duke questions Mariana about her sexual encounter with Angelo:

Duke: What are you married?

Mariana: No, my lord.

Duke: Are you a maid?

Mariana: No, my lord.

Duke: A widow, then?

Mariana: Neither, my lord.

Duke: Why, you are nothing then: neither maid, widow, nor wife! (5.1.170-76)

While this questioning is staged and planned, it nonetheless highlights the Duke's role and control over the fates of Mariana, Isabella, and Juliet. It is the Duke who first offers a solution to Isabella, and it is the Duke who ultimately legitimizes Isabella's claim that Angelo is a liar. Similarly, it is the Duke who saves Claudio and then marries him to Juliet (arguably changing her from a punk to a wife), the Duke who marries Angelo to Mariana (making her a wife), and the Duke who proposes to Isabella, enforcing the idea that the category of "maid" should be a temporary one. Similarly reinforcing female powerlessness, Angelo calls Mariana and Isabella "poor informal women [who] are not more/But instruments of some more mightier member" (5.1.232-34) and refuses to recognize their complaints against him, while also asserting that their complaints are invalid without the aid of a "mightier member"—simultaneously disregarding their status as women and explicitly implying the inherent superiority of men both physically and socially.

At the same time that *Measure for Measure*'s women are being defined into neat categories, *Measure for Measure* itself arguably portrays marital chastity as a farce. Digangi reminds us that Mistress Elbow—who, it is implied, has been unfaithful to the inept and comically unaware Mister Elbow—is the only legal wife of the play, ultimately making a mockery of "marital chastity" (592). Schwarz agrees, stating that *Measure for Measure* portrays married chastity as a "comic prize" (*What You Will* 157). If then, marriage is a "comic prize," this play might not be about the importance of chastity, or marriage, but as Schwarz argues,

about the inability of “political authority” to “generate social integrity” (179). This is especially evident as Vienna’s “political authority,” as represented by Angelo, lacks not only social, but moral integrity. Yet even as integrity is mocked, it is arguably Isabella’s integrity that brings about a successful enforcement of social integrity. When the Duke gives Isabella the choice to decide Angelo’s fate, she does achieve the “potency” and merciful power she desired in the second act: “I would to heaven I had your potency” (2.2.69). So even while the ends Isabella brings about seem ambiguous—Mariana and Angelo wed, Angelo was evil only in “intent” (5.1.444)—the ending corresponds with Isabella’s stated beliefs of mercy, power, and justice. Isabella is given Angelo’s political “potency” by the Duke. Her unwavering devotion to chastity even amidst a society that considers chastity ludicrous brings her the political gain *she* desired.

The unanswered marriage proposal of the Duke, however, is tantalizingly ambiguous. If *Measure for Measure* indeed posits that marital chastity is a farce, then Isabella’s marriage to the Duke will certainly be an end to her power. Although Isabella’s maybe-marriage is troubling considering her devotion to virginity, one can also interpret that by marrying the Duke, Isabella will have further access to political power. After all, it was the Duke who gave Angelo political “potency” in the first place, and who then offers this potency to Isabella through a marriage proposal. But because Isabella gives no answer to this proposal, there is the possibility that Isabella will retain her cherished virginal chastity. While her lack of answer can be, and has been read, as Isabella “losing her voice,” there is also gesturing to an ending where women are not merely bodies read by men. This ambiguity, however, is hardly a definitive statement about the viability of chastity as a political strategy.

Cavendish and Shakespeare: Analytical Justification

While *Measure for Measure* gestures towards chastity as a *possible* political strategy more so than other Shakespeare plays, Margaret Cavendish takes this strategy a few steps further in *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*. Although Cavendish wrote *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* a little over fifty years after *Measure for Measure*'s first performance, Cavendish was a great admirer of Shakespeare, frequently citing him as a literary inspiration. In fact, Cavendish wrote what most scholars consider the first "sustained evaluation" of Shakespeare where she passionately defends him in her *Sociable Letters* (Romack and Fitzmaurice 2). Cavendish expresses admiration for Shakespeare's ability to "transform" into "the persons he hath Described" and vouches for the authenticity of his portrayals of female characters: "one would think he had been Metamorphosed from a Man to a Woman, for who could Describe Cleopatra better than he hath done, and many other Females of his own Creating" (*Sociable Letters* 130).

In addition to Cavendish's own evaluation of Shakespeare, the editors of *Cavendish and Shakespeare, Interconnections*, justify critical comparison between the two authors by noting how Cavendish incorporates Shakespearean themes and influences into her own writing. Numerous scholars have found similarities in how Shakespeare and Cavendish treat themes of sexuality. Most importantly for this paper, however, is the call to situate women's writing within the context of their male predecessors and contemporaries:

Women's writing is typically studied and published in isolation from their male contemporaries. This narrow approach to women writers necessarily fails to capture women's negotiation of the predominantly masculinist cultural ethos of the periods. . . . The placement of Margaret Cavendish next to Shakespeare is

intended as a corrective to the predominant parochialism of scholarship on women writers. (Romack and Fitzmaurice 6)

In reading Cavendish against Shakespeare, it is apparent that Cavendish expands on Shakespeare's treatment of female chastity and responds personally and literarily to the patriarchy presented by some of Shakespeare's plays. Cavendish lauds Shakespeare's ability to accurately portray female characters and then expands the enactment of female will and chastity within her own fictional works by creating female protagonists who are *more* vocal and *more* successful and intentional in their political endeavors.

Cavendish and Chastity: Negotiating Real and Fictional Ideals

Although it would be critically foolhardy to spend time ascribing authorial intent to Shakespeare, Cavendish is a different case. In her fairly unique situation as a published early modern woman writer, Cavendish spent considerable effort defining, justifying, and publishing her own authorial efforts in order to counteract presumed and real prejudice against women writers. Consequently an examination of her non-fictional work is imperative when analyzing her fictional works. Although Deborah Boyle argues that much of Cavendish's non-fiction points out "that society offers women no reasonable hopes of attaining honor and fame," Cavendish intriguingly suspends this belief in her fiction and creates spaces where women *do* achieve honorable fame through chastity (281).¹²

¹² In her article "Fame, Virtue, and Government," Deborah Boyle argues that Cavendish generally supports a peaceful, aristocratic government in which ethical citizens pursue "honorable fame through virtue" (272). In regards to women's roles within this realm and how women may obtain "honorable fame," Cavendish seems torn. Boyle argues that Cavendish felt women could influence policy *behind* the scenes, but that they "receive no public recognition for their role as advisors" (276). As to actually obtaining honorable fame (public recognition), Cavendish suggests that women can be motivated by the desire to pursue the virtue of chastity just as men pursue "masculine virtues," but that for females this pursuit is often *not* rewarded with honor and fame (277). While it is difficult to argue that Cavendish is directly proffering that chastity is viable strategy for power and fame in her own life, she does good work portraying it as the theoretical ideal.

While Elizabeth I is perhaps the most notable example of virginity as political power, Charles I and Henrietta Maria also proffered their (marital) chastity as a political ideal. Leslie notes that it was this ideal that Cavendish most admired: “it was the chaste, companionate marriage, rather than an austere, unyielding virginity that governed the themes of court masque and poetry prior to the Civil War” (180). Karen Raber agrees, noting that “chastity in the prewar years was . . . aligned with political sobriety and power” and that “women’s domestic enclosure [was] synonymous with political stability” (419). Literature that was published before, during, and following the Civil War contain myriad female protagonists whose chastity was metaphorically representative of the political body. As female chastity was still intimately associated with political rule, the outbreak of the English Civil War was also unsurprisingly described in terms of chastity.¹³

Cavendish served as lady-in-waiting to Queen Henrietta for the first years of the English Civil War (1642-60). A committed royalist (but with skeptical reservations), she accompanied the Queen during her exile in France and experienced the loss of personal property and the alienating effects of political fragmentation.¹⁴ Lisa Sarasohn notes that the experiences of both Cavendish and her husband during the Civil War most likely resulted in “feeling[s] of marginalization from the state” (807). When Cavendish returned to England after the Restoration, she felt that her resulting social position—both she and her husband William Cavendish were socially estranged from the court of Charles II—left much to be desired. As Sarasohn points out,

¹³ Karen Raber argues that the closet dramas of Thomas Killigrew and Cavendish portray militant women whose stances and active defense of chastity metaphorically represent England during the Civil War. She argues that Thomas Killigrew’s play *Clorinda and Cecilia* (1664) “invites English men and women to think about their country’s sufferings by metaphorizing civil war as an assault on a chaste, whole, unified female body” (422) and Cavendish’s dramas—*Loves Adventures*, *Bell in Campo*, *Youths in Glory*, and *Deaths Banquet* (1662)—“[make] the case for women’s functional participation in government and politics” (429).

¹⁴ Further disappointments of the Civil War included the execution of Cavendish’s youngest brother in 1649, the confiscation of Cavendish’s family’s estate, and Cavendish’s failed attempt to petition income from her husband’s confiscated estates in 1651.

although Cavendish publicly accepted her social “retirement,” her subsequent rhetoric and publications demonstrate that “she never really abandoned notoriety and the search for fame” (815).

The fragmentation of political power and its metaphorical associations with female virtue and the English Civil War created space for female chastity to emerge as a source of power in Cavendish’s fiction. Since the political body, popularly construed metaphorically as a female body, was already under siege during civil war, Cavendish’s female protagonists find themselves *compelled* for the sake of a broader culture and society to defend their virtue against outside threats. Cavendish then allows her protagonists to *gain* power through their compelled defense of virtue before eventually restoring balance, peace, or a stable political state. Raber notes that “chastity, or the lack of it, [was] an integral part of traditional formulations of the warrior woman’s mythology” and that the Civil War made chaste passivity “a handicap, not a virtue” (421-22). Consequently, Cavendish shifted from the emphasis “of Caroline dramatic tradition from besieged chastity to militant engagement with the enemy” while also embracing pre-war virginity. The English Civil War then gave, or rather necessitated, chaste women to actively defend their virtue and allowed them the “opportunity to reject or revise women’s roles” (428). Cavendish not only witnessed the performance of these ideals in the English court, but created *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* as a fictional space for her heroine to gain power through the militant defense of her own chastity.¹⁵

Cavendish first began publishing her poems, novellas, and orations in 1653, sometimes couching scenes within the setting of civil war. She expresses opinions on war, peace, courage, honor, and gender roles all while making exhaustive rhetorical efforts to create a reputable public

¹⁵ *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* is an important precedent to Cavendish’s better-known work *The Description of A New World, Called The Blazing-World* (1666) wherein another female protagonist acquires significant political power and authority.

persona as female writer. Cavendish's peripheral involvement in the war seems to inform the chaste tropes she cites in *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*. These tropes not only reflect Cavendish's personal experiences, but proffer war and its resulting chaos as an opportunity for women to use their virginal chastity to achieve political power and then "restore" political order by embracing, or returning, to marital chastity.

Cavendish's autobiography demonstrates an earnest desire to present herself as a chaste, honorable woman. She takes great pains to describe her marriage to William Cavendish as motivated not by "Amorous Love" since she had previously "dread[ed] Marriage." Rather, she was compelled to marry only because William had "Merit" and her Love was "honest and honourable" (*A True Relation* 47). Deploying both situational and dramatic irony, she chastises females for "jostl[ing] for the Preheminence of words" and claims that women cannot advance themselves through words or writing, but only through an "honest Heart, a noble Soul," and a "chast Life" which in turn will advance "them to an honorable renown" (52). She concludes her autobiography by declaring that she is "Chast" both by "Nature and Education" (61), and offers her virtue as her ultimate qualification.

An examination of Cavendish's oeuvre demonstrates how Cavendish sought to navigate and express her desire for female power and honor within (and to) a male-dominated society. *The World's Olio*, written when Cavendish was twenty-five (1648), includes Cavendish's first authorial apology. As a relatively inexperienced member of the English court and as the much younger wife of an educated, experienced nobleman, Cavendish spends much of her preface justifying, or rather apologizing for being of the "Effeminate Sex" (136). Writing to a male audience, she suggests that *most* men are wiser than women—"It cannot be expected I should write so wisely and wittily as Men" (136)—but that that "some [women] are far wiser than some

men” (141). Much of Cavendish’s rhetoric seems to negotiate these rhetorical lines: when overtly addressing men she acknowledges that women are rightly governed by and inferior to men, yet she tellingly hints that exceptional women may have merit above some of the more slovenly and effeminate males. Similarly, at times Cavendish seems determined to uphold and reinforce the subordination of women to male authority and swings between blaming women and/or blaming Nature for what she describes as the “inherent” female weakness that makes male governance necessary: “And thus we may see by the weakness of [female] Actions . . . hath made Women to be governed by Men, giving [men] Strength to rule, and Power to use their Authority” (141).

Cavendish’s “Orations of Divers Sorts, Accommodated to Divers Places”—a rhetorical exercise to express disparate viewpoints—also seems to firmly favor male rule over females. Cavendish is overtly critical of what she deems female nature; her orations for war laud war as a way for men to discard “effeminate” traits (though she favors peace over war generally) (130). In *Oration against the Liberty of Women*, the orator declares that too much liberty is a danger to the morality of both genders. The solution Cavendish offers for “too much [female] liberty in her *Oration for the Liberty of Women*,” is for men to give women enough liberty so women feel “loved, accompanied, assisted, and protected” (247). *Female Orations* (which rehearses arguments both for and against female power and freedom) seems to conclude that women have more “reason to murmur against Nature than against men” for it is nature “who hath made men more ingenious, witty, and wise than women” and that any bid for female power should involve women “imitat[ing] men” so their “power will increase by [masculine] actions” (249).

On the submission of women to men in marriage, however, Cavendish is ambivalent. In her *Sociable Letters*, Cavendish unhelpfully advises her sister that “there being nothing in Life [she] Approve[s] so well of, as a Married Life . . . but the Safest Way is to Live a Single Life, for

all Wives, if they be not Slaves, yet they are servants. . . . [T]he Best is to be Mistress of your self, which in a Single Life you are” (216). Cavendish also notes that married women cannot even take comfort and happiness in their children since their sons will “continue the line of Succession” of their husbands, and their daughters will “be accounted but as Moveable Goods” or pawns to secure strategic marriages (101). In “The Convent of Pleasure,” however, Cavendish proffers a critique of marriage and concludes the play with a seemingly companionate marriage. Lady Happy—a virtuous, wealthy, and beautiful young virgin—decides to create a convent where there is “no occasion for Men” (104) because a “Marry’d life [would] have more crosses and sorrows than pleasure, freedom, or happiness” (98). Yet the play ends with Lady Happy’s consent to marriage, for “in a Married life [she’ll] better agree” and true Love” results in “one Body and Soul, or Heav’nly Spirit” (132).¹⁶ Thus, Cavendish fluctuates between reluctantly acknowledging marriage as social inevitability and suggesting that certain marriages, in certain circumstances, are very much desirable. Cavendish also wrote ardently of her own husband, William, and both publicly and privately professed her affection for him. While much of this affection seems real, Cavendish was also savvy enough to realize that her professional reputation depended on the status William brought her, and that if she wished to publish within a male dominated society (and she did) she needed to conform to social conventions and uphold a socially acceptable standard of marital chastity.

Analyzing the rhetoric of Cavendish’s various female characters is imperative in recognizing the social complexities that she navigated. Cavendish repeatedly voices doubts about the ability of marriage to offer happiness to women, but nonetheless cedes to the popularity of marriage as a literary trope and ends most of her fiction with the prospect of such unions.

¹⁶ While Lady Happy does eventually consent to marry, she marries a man who spends a good amount of time dressed as a woman and working mightily to please Lady Happy.

However, Cavendish goes to great lengths to portray these fictional marriages as companionate and to emphasize that the female protagonists (as in her own real-life courtship) choose not an “Amorous love” but a love of honor and virtue. Consequently, while Cavendish uses traditional tropes, she also complicates them, often in purposeful contrast to social expectations. This contrast is especially evident in Cavendish’s depictions of nature and her female protagonist in *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*.

Pursuing Chastity in *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*

Assaulted and Pursued Chastity is a powerful portrayal of female will set against an equally powerful and potent female nature. Elizabeth Scott-Baumann writes that traditionally “seventeenth-century science often depicted nature as a female to be pursued and even attacked” and that Cavendish (in addition to her direct discourse with scientific theories of the period) complicates this depiction through imitation coupled with stark originality (48). In fact, *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* imitates the Renaissance trope of a “pursued and attacked” female, but conversely creates a powerful female nature who in turn equips the assaulted protagonist with precisely the abilities to resist assault. Cavendish’s novella begins by introducing the protagonist as a Lady “enriched by nature with virtue, wit and beauty” and within the first few pages this enriching nature is described as a “great and powerful goddess, transforming all things out of one shape into another” (48-49).¹⁷ The “virtue,” wit,” and “beauty” endowed by a sentient, female nature—which “hath made nothing vainly” (49)—are what ultimately allow the Lady to complicate and then contradict the traditional trope of an assaulted female. Furthermore, as the Lady continues to resist assault she begins to study “the works of Nature to imitate her . . . therein” (55). Ultimately, the Lady’s escape from assault is directly

¹⁷ This description of a powerful, female nature is given by the bawd as she tries to persuade Travellia to use her beauty to seduce men. However, while Travellia rejects the bawd’s manipulative purposes and does *not* use her beauty for seduction, she does not reject the bawd’s arguments on female nature (Cavendish 50).

attributed the gifts given to her by nature and by her ability to imitate the powerful figure of female nature; this imitation does not reinforce her objectivity, but affirms her role as subject. Ultimately, Cavendish refutes through imitation the contemporary scientific depictions of nature, undermines the “existing poetics of gender,” and makes nature a creative and transformative feminine force, rather than an assaulted one (Scott-Baumann 50).

However, this powerful refutation of the traditional Renaissance blazon begins with a rather demure preface. Cavendish once again straddles the line between social propriety and radical thought, claiming that she is writing the novella to warn women against the dangers of traveling abroad: she will “show young women the danger of travelling without their parents, husbands, or particular friends to guard them.” Cavendish also warns that mere chastity is not a sufficient guard since “heaven never helps but those that could not avoid the danger” (47). According to Cavendish, women must actively avoid all that endangers virtue and chastity, such as travelling or wandering alone. Yet even as Cavendish admonishes women to take precautions, her narrative tale provides a more complex negotiation with chastity since the primary protagonist is able not only to retain both her virginity and her chastity, but achieve substantial political power in doing so. While Cavendish seemingly sets up her novella as a “warning” to young women against travelling alone—a warning that seems sincere—from the very first sentence Cavendish’s female protagonist travels, well, *alone*.

As the beautiful, virginal protagonist is returning to her kingdom after a prolonged civil war (traveling, one should note by *necessity*, not by choice) she is shipwrecked in the didactically named “Kingdom of Sensuality.” The protagonist (later self-named Miseria, and then Travellia) is as devoted to chastity as Isabella. She recognizes the imminent threat to her chastity and virginity—as one is wont to do in the Kingdom of Sensuality—and resolves that she

would rather “save her honour and die” than give up her virginity (51). When the Prince of Sensuality declares he will rape her, she tells him “I will build a temple of fame upon your grave, where all young virgins shall come and offer at my shrine” and then proceeds to shoot him at point blank range (53). The novella carries on in this vein as Travellia actively and repeatedly resists the advances of the Prince (who somehow survives Travellia’s attack with both body and lust intact). After a failed suicide attempt in an effort to resist the Prince, Travellia disguises herself as a man and leaves the Kingdom of Sensuality. She is then captured by pirates, declared to be the God of strange purple humanoids, and ultimately becomes liege lord to the Queen of Amity. When the Queen of Amity is taken prisoner by the neighboring King of Amour, Travellia goes to war and trounces the army of the King of Amour, an army that happens to be led by the Prince of Sensuality (94). Travellia, the superior general, soundly defeats the Prince’s troops and rescues the Queen.

Once Travellia feels she no longer needs to disguise herself as a man (the Prince is no longer a threat) she announces to the Kingdom of Amity that “necessity did enforce [her] to conceal her sex” and to “protect [her] honour” and then calls upon all women of the kingdom “to show [their] will; and to die in the defence of honour. . . to live with noble fame; therefore neither camp, nor court, nor city, nor country, nor danger, nor habit, nor any worldly felicity must separate the love of chastity, and [the female] sex” (115). Travellia not only credits her defense of chastity for her achievement of honorable fame, but encourages other women to do the same. This call to collective, unified action is significant in that it lauds chastity as a way for *all* women to achieve “noble fame,” and offers self-enforced chastity as the key to honorable female empowerment.

In the final resolution of the novella Cavendish deliberately expands on Petrarchan conceits in order to emphasize that the power gained by her female protagonists will be retained despite their respective marriages. The Petrarchan conceit typically depicted an idealized lady whose power was limited to inspiring infatuation in the male poet/author, or, according to Schwarz, a conceit wherein “a lady rules a lover who is nonetheless in charge of everything else” (Schwarz, “Chastity” 281). While Cavendish maintains the basic Petrarchan situation—the lady inspiring affection in her male suitor—the power her female protagonists gain is much more substantial. After the climactic battle between the Kingdoms of Amour and Amity—wherein Travellia defeats the army of Amour, loses to the Prince in a duel, and the Prince is then taken captive by the army of Amity—peace negotiations are held between Travellia and Amour’s ambassadors to negotiate the release of the Queen of Amity. The King’s ambassadors’ poetic statement that the King is in fact the thrall of the Queen—“For our Master is her Captive, and her Thrall, / Both to command him, and his Kingdom all” (105)—is exposed as both an untrue and undesirable state for the Queen. Obviously, the King’s thrall-like state is merely metaphorical, and the Queen retains no power as a literal captive. Only after the Queen is released and the King of Amour lays his crown at her feet and begs the Queen of Amity to “lead [him] as [her] slave” are the Queen and her citizens assured of her actual power (106). The Queen of Amity then becomes the literal ruler of *both* kingdoms and her new husband.

Similarly, though perhaps not as dramatically, Travellia’s political power is also assured despite her (troubling) marriage to the Prince. When the Prince reveals that his wife has died, Travellia willingly and happily accepts his marriage proposal. When the Queen subsequently proclaims the Prince the Viceroy of the Kingdom of Amity, the people protest and *demand* that Travellia be given the Vice regency instead. Consequently, the Prince cedes to Travellia asking

that “she should also govern him.” Yet she answers “that he should govern her, and she [will] govern the kingdom” (wherein they are both governed by the Queen of Amity) (116). While Schwarz argues that this particular complication of the Petrarchan conceit “[leaves] the question of power confused at best,” it nonetheless seems to secure the political power and influence that Travellia has gained in the Kingdom of Amity. Her acquiescence, or request, that the Prince rule her person in marriage seems more of an attempt by Cavendish to depict Travellia’s marriage as an equal partnership wherein both spouses have equitable sources of influence and power. Most importantly, however, the idealized women—the Queen and Travellia—are not limited or pinioned as mere objects of infatuated males. In short, their pursuers are persuaded to give these women a sphere of actual political power, rather than limiting female influence to the realm of the overwrought male sexual psyche.

Additionally, while marriage to her would-be-rapist is dubious at best, Cavendish seems to posit that Travellia’s marriage is “ideal” for the period—she has an acquiescing husband and is a loving wife who will be “ruled” by her husband as long as she gets to rule the kingdom. Additionally, when applying the philosophy of continuity between the pursued and pursuer, it seems that through the pursuit of Travellia—who in turn is pursuing chastity—the Prince embraces chastity as well. Thus, Travellia as chaste object (the object of pursuit for the Prince) is subsumed by Travellia as chaste subject. Arguably, it is through Travellia’s active, persistent pursuit of chastity that she is able to escape objectification and emerge as subject both in the novella and in the Prince’s transformed perspective.

Ultimately, Travellia becomes empowered *through* her quest to stay chaste, and threats to chastity are not blamed on her, but on the lustful Prince. Travellia’s weakness then is not her own passions, but her physical vulnerability in the face of the unrestrained passions of the Prince.

In Travellia's rejection of the Prince's unchaste passions she masters her own passions (and influences the Prince to master his), becomes master of her own destiny, and eventually achieves lasting political authority and power. Nancy Weitz argues that Cavendish's approach to chastity differs from other women writers of her time who "generally adopt a more spiritual approach to the virtue" (157) as opposed to Travellia's more pragmatic enactment. However, while Travellia's dedication to virtue is pragmatic it is also extrinsically motivated: "but I am so true a votress to Chastity," she insists, "that I will never forsake her order, but will carry her habit to my grave" (Cavendish 77). Similarly, she refuses to sleep with the Prince when he is still married because it would be "a sin to *God*," "dishonor to [her] family," "infamy to [the female] sex," and an overall "breach in virtue" [emphasis added] (59).

Apart from both its pragmatic and spiritual associations with chastity, what makes *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* especially pertinent to the question of chastity's political uses, however, is the vacuum Cavendish creates for an "exceptional" woman. Baines's comment about *Measure for Measure* also seems to hold true for *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*: chastity acts as the "the definitive virtue precisely because it is a site and mode of secular Power" (284). Additionally the vacuum that arises from the chaos of civil war allows for the defiance of traditional peace-time tropes of masculine rule and female submission. While Cavendish abhorred war,¹⁸ she also viewed civil war as an opportunistic possibility for female potential. In her own life Cavendish witnessed the actions of publicly chaste Queen Henrietta Maria who not only acted as court "arbiter" but directly intervened in various conflicts, "trading on her feminine virtues to influence her husband [King Charles]" (Raber 419, 420). Additionally, the army of Cavendish's husband was heavily influenced and supported by Henrietta Maria, who encouraged

¹⁸ In *Sociable Letters* Cavendish declares that "a Civil War doth not only Abolish Laws, Dissolve Government, and Destroy the Plenty of a Kingdom, but it doth Unknit the Knot of Friendship, and Dissolve Natural Affections" (128).

the Duke of Newcastle to make his own judgments rather than “[accede] to [Charles I’s] request that Newcastle keep Cromwell engaged at Oxford” (424).

While the English Civil War did not enhance Cavendish’s political power, the civil war she creates in *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* (based on her lived experience) is paradoxically what sets in motion the potentiality of chastity and virginity in the narrative. According to Aristotle, reality is made up of both the potential and the actual. A state or thing’s potential is fully present in that reality, and as Cavendish would have it, war’s disruptions move the potential reality considerably closer to the actual reality. The very suggestion that chastity *can* result in political power (especially during times of chaos) places more emphasis and importance on the place of chastity in society and the role of *real* women. During wartime, women’s social roles are more flexible and Cavendish asserts that actively pursuing chastity during such times opens up new avenues of power to women; the question that remains is how to retain such gains in times of peace.

While Cavendish maintains her conservative, socially motivated viewpoints, as well as her desire for restoration to prewar, marital ideals, Travellia retains the power she achieved. Raber puts it this way: “in her representations of war, Cavendish offers a radical revision of women’s roles; [yet] in her imagination of a peacetime world, she remains . . . conservative” (430). While Raber is not suggesting that Cavendish wanted women to return to subservient roles after the English Civil War (or any war), Cavendish does capitalize on the chaos created by civil war as a possible way for women to assert power in ways they cannot during peacetime. This prevailing conservatism is perhaps why Cavendish overarchingly supports the Caroline marital ideal, but subscribes to more radical, subversive virginal tropes to get at that ideal. What, then, can be concluded about the place of chastity in *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*? Based on

Cavendish's own writing it seems far-fetched to maintain that Cavendish viewed permanent, non-marital chastity as a viable means for pursuing honorable fame in real life. Yet Travellia's successes suggest otherwise, or perhaps demonstrate Cavendish's preferred reality: where virginity can be used to secure power before culminating in marriage, where exceptional women rule alongside men in marriage, and where female chastity is political strategy not just political metaphor.

Power in the Pursuit

Building upon Queen Elizabeth's precedent, both Shakespeare and Cavendish proffer fictional versions of female virginity and chastity that prove viable strategic means for their female protagonists. While monarchs like Elizabeth I and Henrietta Maria capitalized on the political implications of chastity *after* their respective ascents to power, Cavendish and (to an extent) Shakespeare showcase how the pursuit of chastity can also facilitate political ascension. In the fictional spaces of *Measure for Measure* and *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*, the political and economic importance allotted to female chastity in the period is expanded to provide female characters a fictional ideal wherein they can assert their own chastity to achieve political power.

If we read Cavendish's *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* as an exploration of themes in *Measure for Measure*, the fact that Cavendish allows Travellia to achieve a considerable amount of political power seems a theoretical extension of the potentiality of Isabella's virginity and chastity. Through the accomplishments of both Isabella and Travellia, both authors seem to argue that placing all female sexual will under a patriarchal umbrella grossly oversimplifies the strategic power of chastity. While Shakespeare gestures at the potentiality of female chastity through Isabella, Cavendish allows Travellia to go further in using chastity and virginity as a strategy to gain significant recognition and power.

Then to what extent does Isabella and Travellia's self-enforced chastity give them political or social gain, and is chastity actually a viable political strategy in the early modern period? The historical precedent of female rulers relying on chaste enactments was foundational for the imagined settings of *Measure for Measure* and *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*. Yet the chaste victories achieved by Isabella and Travellia are unequivocally fictional. While historically chaste figures such as Elizabeth I and Henrietta Maria were able to capitalize and use chaste rhetoric to their advantage, their rules did not result in tangible ways for early modern women to use chastity to gain power. Instead, however, their examples paved the way for Shakespeare and Cavendish to imagine a potent chaste ideal. Rather than simply affirm the reality of powerful women using chastity, both authors present an idealistic expansion of that reality—where women who pursue and protect their chastity are accordingly rewarded with honor, fame, and power.

While these texts present ideals, not realities, they nonetheless raise important questions: if virginity, and/or chastity—which are powerful primarily for their potential—must first be threatened to be potent, is chastity a power only accessible when under duress? Can women use chastity for power within a male dominated society only when those males are self-motivated to protect, enforce, and control that chastity? Both Isabella and Travellia are thrust into circumstances that force them to protect their virginity, and while it was their active protection and chaste self-interest that led to their political conquests, would they have been able to access their chastity if it were not desired by a lustful Angelo or Prince of Sensuality?

The potency of chastity seems to lie primarily in restraint, yet each of these women fostered chastity prior to their threatened circumstances. For Isabella and Travellia, chastity is not a passive trait, but one that is ardently pursued. Consequently, when their chastity is threatened, it is their existing, active pursuit which allows them to withstand those threats. In

their pursuit of virtue, chastity is not a state, but an act. Isabella and Travellia are strong, powerful female characters because their dedication to and enactment of chastity is indicative of their ability to actively gain power through their virtuous pursuit of chastity. Perhaps this is why chastity is such a strong indicator of female will: it indicates personal commitment to virtue. For both Isabella and Travellia, the cultivation of personal chastity makes climbing the political ladder a possibility *when* circumstances present themselves: a corrupt leader needs to be exposed, an army needs a general, or a Queen needs rescuing. This ascension to power is made possible because their chastity is not enforced or even enacted as a response to patriarchy, but self-projected and pursued for reasons that far exceed that patriarchy. The idea of chastity as spiritual power, or at least more secularly, as a belief in self-worth and self-enhancement creates benevolently opportunistic and powerful female characters. Perhaps self-enforced chastity instills or augments the importance of individual will and creates a space for agency to be enacted more fully. Gaining political power may have been incidental for Travellia and Isabella, but their directed pursuit of chastity allowed them to seize and retain political power when it was presented. Ultimately, while Isabella's and Travellia's ascension to power is obviously not representative of early modern realities, both Shakespeare's and Cavendish's creations of chaste ideals demonstrate that self-enforced female chastity was a powerful indicator of female will. The final implication is tantalizing: perhaps self-enforced female chastity has the potency and the potential to further social integrity, female power, and gender equality.

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