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“In Loving Virtue”: Staging the Virgin Body in Early Modern Drama

An Honors Paper for the Department of English

By Miranda Viederman

Bowdoin College, 2022

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INTRODUCTION

During the English Renaissance, virginity received revived cultural attention. Ideological changes in the European medical establishment, shifts in the structure of the national economy, the cultural repercussions of the Protestant Reformation, and numerous other contemporaneous social and political factors led to a renewal of attention to the female body as a site of a remarkable ethical and distinctly effectual capacity. Virginity was – as it has often been – a complex and controversial state in its significance for the body and in its cultural value. Although the value of the virgin state does not necessarily demand a permanent denunciation of the act of sexual intercourse, is invariably contingent upon the idealization of an "intact" state as a model of virtue; the body is viewed simultaneously as the physical substrate from which virtue and redemptive or divine power spring and as evidence of a correct exercise of sexual restraint.

The state of virginity veered between victim status and privilege. The virgin was both diseased and a source of spiritual, ethical, and political power. Representing embodied virtue, the virgin is vested with a particular ethical capacity – her virginity affects her, and it may affect others around her by extension. To construct virginity as a particularly divine state requires that its "loss" symbolize a spiritual change in the practice and being of the body in question, and a moral change by extension. In the lapsarian narrative central to the Book of Genesis, carnal knowledge, desire, and sexual curiosity are meant to corrupt paradise, and are the ruination of innocence and purity. But what of narratives of maintained virginity, or reclaimed virginity? Virginity certainly became a troublesome matter at the crux of the Reformation, which among many things sought to reframe requirements of celibacy in the Christian priesthood and to shift the location of the sacred from the Virgin Mary to the word of Christ. Despite the religious shift, however, Elizabeth I still claimed an eminent virginal status as the source of her political power

and one of her chief assets as head of state, accessing cultural traces of a magical virgin-power largely denied by Protestant belief (Kendrick 39). Virginity finds its way into literature in multiple and sometimes queer ways. I believe that the complex depictions that arise in the period prove that virginity is still powerfully, if not as overtly vocally, present in the Renaissance cultural consciousness in ways that it behooves us now to return to and re-read.

My focus on virginity and female autonomy analyzes a wide range of sources, from Renaissance medical anthologies to medieval hagiographic manuscripts, though my central focus is on early modern drama. I also draw on a range of secondary sources. Helen King has published a large body of research on greensickness and the Renaissance "disease of virgins," which was of great use during the writing of my first chapter. Kaara L. Peterson's work, especially her book *Popular Medicine, Hysterical Disease, and Social Controversy in Shakespeare's England* bridges the gap between King's focus on medical history and literary analysis by utilizing historical frameworks to examine period literary works such as Shakespeare's *King Lear.* Holly Crocker's *The Matter of Virtue* greatly influenced my frame for thinking and writing about embodiment in terms of the opportunities for ethical action available to women in the early modern period. Theodora Jankowski's *Pure Resistance* includes an excellent historical survey of Catholic and Protestant conceptions of the value of virginity, as well as an in-depth analysis of the place of the virgin in early modern drama through a contemporary queer theoretical lens that was especially crucial to my analysis of *Measure for Measure*.

The two central models of virginity of interest here, around which I will structure my research, are the transitory virgin and the permanent virgin. The former aims to preserve her virginity with the chief aim of eventually relinquishing it, most commonly to marriage. The latter

chooses a life of virginity as an intentional commitment, often in the aim of pursuing a monastic life. The objective of my research is to explore representations of the virgin body in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama with the hope of accessing new readings of the cultural perceptions of virginity that shaped the way it was represented onstage. Drama is a uniquely suitable medium as it is embodied in performance. It is written not solely to be read, but rather to be performed, and the characters mapped onto the bodies of the actors. The stage is a unique place where playwrights, actors, and audience members can all participate in accessing an imagined body. In placing the body onstage, the theater renders the abstract concept of virginity a legible character. It is not without irony that I am conducting scholarly research on drama and embodiment without the opportunity of interacting with these primary texts in the way the playwrights and actors may have intended. In the Renaissance period, these virginal women – a status which itself is not without a high degree of cultural performance – were portrayed by young men acting as women. This layers the complexity of their somatic representations of the unique qualities of female virginity.

The rest of my introduction will be devoted to the establishment of a theoretical framework for my analyses. To do so I will briefly examine the history of medical attitudes towards virginity, particularly as it relates to the womb and its gendered tendency to malfunction. I will also survey popular attitudes towards virgin bodies both as a site of danger and as a site of personal and political power, embodied in figures such as Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen – Elizabeth emphasized her virginity as the source of her unique political power despite shifts in religious discourses surrounding virginity. I will also take time to map out some key religious context with a focus on medieval Catholic hagiography and martyr-worship.

Determining virginity

Virginity is intimately tied to embodiment. In bodies with wombs, for instance, the hymen has served as a symbol for the elusive search for material virginity. In classical medicine, the term "hymen" itself referred to any membrane located in the body and was thus used frequently to refer to other anatomical entities. The concept of physical virginity, as recounted by Hanne Blank, predates the first recorded use of the term "hymen" to refer specifically to the notion of a vaginal membrane by well over thirteen hundred years (45-46). Soranus of Ephesus (c. 1st/2nd centuries CE), for instance, wrote in his tract on *Gynecology* that he could find no convincing evidence of the existence of a rumored imperforate membrane protecting the vaginal canals of virgins (Blank 46). Aline Rousselle suggested the possibility that a Roman belief in the presence of an imperforate hymen (one that could have prompted Soranus' rebuttal) may have resulted from the common practice of marrying girls very young – in some instances before menarche – and attributing the start of their menstrual cycle to the removal of a pre-existing uterine obstacle (Rousselle 33). While the classical hymen is still shrouded to a certain degree by uncertainty and confusion, the centuries that followed were littered with conflicting accounts claiming to explain physical virginity. Various medieval writers described the hymen as a "virginal seal" or "knot of virginity"; Helkiah Crooke (1576-1648) described the hymen as comprised of eight "caruncles" and resembling "the form of a cup of a little rose half blowne," whereas other writers refused to believe it existed at all (Blank 53). In 1546, the Flemish anatomist Vesalius (1514-1564) published his findings on the hymen, which, although he neglected to include diagrams, seem compatible with our modern understanding of the hymen as a membrane commonly perforated by one or multiple openings (Blank 50-52).

Despite this, the medieval and Renaissance periods saw a resurgence of popularity in the idea of the imperforate membrane. This avowed belief in the ability of the hymen to corroborate virginity points to a deep cultural anxiety about securely ascertaining virtue despite the *secreta mulierum*, or the perceived inherently secretive nature of womanhood. In 1613, for instance, Frances Howard famously filed to divorce the Earl of Essex on the grounds that the two had never consummated their marriage, rendering it null. The proceedings included both a pelvic examination administered by a panel of matrons and midwives and a series of character testimonies from Howard's inner circle. Howard's claim to virginity was eventually corroborated by both material and moral "evidence," and King James I granted her an annulment. The scandal provoked by this trial saw the publication of several lewd poems and was one source for Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's Jacobean play *The Changeling*.

First performed in 1622 nine years after the Essex trial, *The Changeling* centers on noblewoman Beatrice-Joanna's efforts to marry nobleman Alsemero rather than the lord Alonzo de Piracquo, to whom she has been betrothed by her father. Beatrice-Joanna employs the help of Deflores, who kills Alonzo in exchange for her virginity. To ensure his would-be wife's virtue, Alsemero administers a tonic that would only cause a reaction in virgins. Beatrice-Joanna, however, administered the tonic to her virgin maid to prepare to emulate the correct reaction. Beatrice-Joanna's physical performance of virginity is ultimately unable to protect her, and she dies. In *The Changeling*, Beatrice-Joanna is irrevocably stained by the loss of her virtue; although her appearance likely did not change, she and Alsemero speaks of her beauty as marred by her act of deception (5.3.29-36). Her virtue is embodied and exists in all aspects of her physical existence, so when she "loses" it, then, it follows that her lack *should* show – even if it

doesn't. The very notion that Beatrice-Joanna could have successfully performed virtue and married an unwitting Alsemero deeply troubled the men around her.

Beatrice-Joanna's virginity test is just one example of the many procedures employed in the aim of ascertaining virginity. Most cultures have their own methods of ascertaining virginity, which are generally based in long-standing cultural traditions and superstitions. They often manifest in an almost magical fashion, revealing the effective powers of the mere physical presence or absence of virtue. A unicorn manages to evade hunters just to lay his head in the lap of a virgin; the water at a Babylonian fountain runs red at the touch of an unchaste maiden; virgin goddesses of ancient Greek myth cross into the underworld and bring offerings to sacred beasts (Blank 79). Various medical tests were indeed devised to prove virginity as well, from Galen and Soranus's breast examinations to Helkiah Crooke's skull measurement method (Blank 80, 53). A group of uroscopists, referred to rather crudely in the Renaissance as "piss-prophets," believed that urinalysis and observation of patients while urinating could prove virginity, and that virgins would spontaneously urinate upon consuming various substances such as the petals of a lily, coal shavings, or lettuce (Blank 82). These represent attempts to locate virginity in recognizable signs or symptoms of virginity. In this way, virginity itself takes on some characteristics of an invisible disease, becoming a condition that demands diagnosis. This approach to virginity, strongly coded in terms of illness and pathology, is apparent in the phenomenon of greensickness, a virgin disease that received renewed attention in the Renaissance period.

<u>Diseased wombs</u>

The English Renaissance is generally thought to have spanned the 16th and early 17th centuries, beginning as early as the end of the reign of Henry VIII, and ending with the death of James I. It is a period characterized by dramatic shifts in the structure of the national monarchy and the religious establishment, instigated by Henry VIII's break with the Church of Rome in 1534 and the Protestant Reformation that resulted (Kendrick 33). It is widely accepted that Catholicism favored chastity and virginity as states of spiritual purity, and that Protestantism favored marriage and traditional familial roles as the chief aim of transitory virginity. The Renaissance also brought new – or at least recycled – attention to the womb as the locus of a tendency towards corruption and decay coded as a gender trouble particular to women. The maintenance of pre-marital virginity was a crucial component of the Christian marital economy. Young girls were thought to be prone to a dangerous virginal disease by which uterine blockages caused their putrefying menstrual blood to recirculate throughout their body, poisoning them and causing them to become dizzy, pale, and melancholic. Wombed bodies, in the early modern medical mind, were vessels for their inherent excess of fluids. Uterine blockages could trap these noxious humors in the womb, causing them to recirculate and exit through inappropriate outlets or poison the flesh from the inside. The main cure for the disease of virginity was to engage in sexual intercourse authorized by marriage.

Hysterica passio, alternatively called "suffocation" or "strangulation of the womb" or the "Mother-fits," was generally defined as a set of symptoms mimicking fits, suffocation, and even death, arising from the accumulation of toxic vapors and/or humors in the womb. Some doctors believed that the womb itself left the abdomen and travelled autonomously throughout the body. Accompanying the rise of early modern *hysterica passio* diagnoses was a popular medical lore in which ailing women were pronounced dead only to spontaneously revive hours, or even days,

later. This illness, which helped give rise to several other terms for the womb such as the "matrix" or "Mother," reflected deep-set cultural anxieties about the volatility of the female body that persisted for centuries in medical and literary traditions, as well as about embodiment, maternity, and the nature of feminine experience. The category of the *hysteric* pathologizes the very state of womanhood itself, obliquely and even overtly drawing upon fertility, motherhood, virginity, and menopause.

The frenzy of the womb, another diagnosis that appears in the early modern period, treated female sexual desire itself as a pathological disease requiring medical treatment. The growing field of pathology began to gain traction in the sixteenth century because of the slow methodological shift from theory to observation. The notion of a "pathology" treated disease as systematically tied to sets of observable symptomologies. In the case of medical accounts of the frenzy of the womb, female sexuality is garishly exaggerated, described as "a great and foul symptom of the womb" (Culpeper 115). This "sordid disease," left untreated, leads to madness. Once again, the womb is positioned as a site of excess, in this instance as the source of sexual expression deemed transgressive. The symptomatization of the embodied experience roots societally designated "female troubles" in the womb, tying behavior to body and ensuring that the womb becomes at least a locus of medical regulation, and even a locus of potential moral failure. In the virginal body, body and soul are entwined; the ethical capacity of the womb is in many senses volatile and in all senses distinctly powerful.

The notion of a distinctly womb-centric tendency towards physical degradation found expression in many Renaissance literary works. Alongside Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*, I will analyze William Shakespeare and John Fletcher's *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. First performed in 1634, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is a Jacobean adaptation of Chaucer's "The

Knight's Tale," from the *Canterbury Tales*, which itself was based on an original poem by Boccaccio. The illness suffered by the character of the Jailer's Daughter – who succumbs to madness after being abandoned by her unrequited love – has traits both of virgin disease and of the frenzy of the womb: it problematizes her sexual dissatisfaction, rendering it both overt and poisonous. Her body is victimized by the excessive nature of her desire. The cure for her disease, while it is often performed as comic relief, is disturbingly deceptive, and as it depends on her ignorance of the identity of her romantic and sexual partner, is unequivocally non-consensual. Her volatile virginity, then, results not only in physical endangerment, but in the threat of assault sanctioned by the men around her.

As demonstrated by the Jailer's Daughter's virginal disease, the womb was thought to have had a powerful capacity to severely endanger the body in its gendered potential to cause serious illness. Its potency is also in a clear sense harnessed towards positive ends in the medieval and Renaissance periods, as the virginal soul becomes a cultural idea and iconography tied to monastic practices, and even economic and political power. The structures of the patriarchal political economy traditionally limited the economic self-determination of women to their role in the domestic sphere. Pursuing a life of chastity and a spiritual commitment to virginity offered, for many individual women, if not a systemic alternative to participation in the marital economy – as monasticism was still a contested and even fringe practice, especially with the Protestant shift away from the ideology of spiritual virginity – then at least a personal alternative with the form of economic independence provided by cloistered living. Active and ongoing spiritual resistance to the normative sexual practices of the patriarchy was even in many instances – although with vocabularies vastly different to the feminist ones we utilize today – constructed as a potential form of queerness in relation to gender and sexual practice. Elizabeth I,

commonly known by the moniker "the Virgin Queen" was able to consciously draw upon these intersecting notions of virginity and channel them into a form of political power that bolstered her sovereignty.

Virginity and power

In the earliest centuries of Christianity before its spread throughout Rome with the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century, male practitioners of chastity and sexual asceticism were sanctified, embodying strength, bravery, piety, and restraint. Chastity was expected of all women as a prerequisite for marriage; while it had not yet received the same religious approval or attention as male chastity, it was already understood to be a greater undertaking for women as they were "considered to have the primary sexual urge," (Kendrick 10). Rousselle cites a quote from a letter written by philosopher Porphyry (235-305 CE) encouraging his wife Marcella to pursue chastity: "Do not consider yourself as a woman. I am not attached to you as a woman. Flee all that is effeminate in the soul as if you had taken on a man's body. It is when the soul is virginal and when the intellect is still a virgin that they produce the finest offspring," (qtd. in Rousselle 187). Viewed as a chiefly masculine attribute, Porphyry's version of chastity requires an intentional spiritual and bodily process by which the female "virgin" renounces femininity in favor of masculine embodiment. While it adheres to the conventional binary gender model, privileges masculinity over femininity, and positions heterosexual reproduction of "the finest offspring" as imperative, this form of chastity may have potential as a mechanism for gender fluidity and even sex change by permitting a genderqueer "virginal soul." It is worth reiterating that this philosophical model of chastity is directly addressed not to a young maiden but to the author's own wife. Porphyry's insistence on the

virginal soul and intellect asserts that virginity is not an inherent or default state predicated on the absence of sexual intercourse, but a cultural status to be claimed. Many other writers have affirmed similar philosophies, arguing that mere sexual integrity is insufficient without spiritual piety, and that virginity can be restored by Christ through spiritual absolution (Kendrick 21).

Roman Catholic virginity

Virginity was an especially sanctified spiritual state in the Roman Catholic tradition, based on writings by theologians such as Ambrose of Milan (339-397 CE) and St Augustine (354-430 CE). Chastity, from the Roman *castitas*, represents faultlessness and innocence. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) listed *castitas* as an aspect of the cardinal virtue of temperance, solidifying the relationship between sexual purity with the civic and moral duties of medieval Christianity. St Jerome asserted the primacy of sexual asceticism to the proper performance of chastity, but most Roman and Latin Christian scholars held a more moderate view that chastity was possible within the bounds of marriage as well, ranking conjugal chastity, marital chastity, and virginity in order. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians explains that "the unmarried woman and the virgin thinketh on the things of the Lord: that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she that is married thinketh on the things of the world: how she may please her husband" (Vulgate Bible 7:34). Augustine's view was perhaps more like Jerome's than this – for Augustine, the only freedom from the original sin could be found in complete abstinence. He strongly influenced the requirement of celibacy in the Roman Catholic priesthood, positioning sexual continence as one of the ultimate pieties. Because virginity was so prized by Roman Catholicism, Jankowski argues that it reconfigured the sex/gender system to include the theological orientation of virgin/non-virgin; I will extend this to include clerical/laic as well (4).

Sexual activity did not preclude entrance to many European monastic orders, and intentional removal from secular marriage became, in theory, a sexual alternative to normative patriarchal relationships.

Although Christ has canonically been imagined as a masculine deity, the primary sanctification of this heterosexual union seems not to be in its gender dynamic but by the relationship between the divine and his mortal charge (Salih 28). The monastic virgin identity is constructed simultaneously as spiritual praxis and physical integrity (Salih 38). Especially within the monastic context, physical performance of piety and virginity are deeply intertwined. Mind and body are at once individuated from one another and intimately connected in this physical performance. The body is disciplined by spiritual practice and willful restraint, creating a regimen of internal control exerted over the external presentation of piety. But, to correctly emulate an example of embodied virtue is not necessarily to adhere to it in the private space of one's mind. Virginity is then fashioned as a commitment to an ongoing practice of discipline and piety which depends on dual internal and external processes of self-control and self-presentation.

Salih also points out the unity inherent to the monastic structure, insisting that virginity is an identity formed and upheld in relation to community. Monastic virgins are united by their shared practices of devotion, and later by their marital sharing of Christ. Virginity, in this way, becomes a union, a sharing of flesh and status (Salih 126). As a performance, a lived identity, and a spiritual choice, monastic virginity can only reach complete fruition in death. Virgin martyrs were extremely popular in medieval Europe, producing numerous cults of virgins. Many women saints – such as St Margaret, St Juliana, and St Katherine – had devoted cult followings (Salih 44). In their hagiographic narratives, a common narrative is clear: a beautiful virgin resists malevolent, often pagan male, authorities who would have them renounce her faith, often in

favor of sexual intercourse and/or marriage. She is tortured mercilessly, or undergoes a series of trials, or battles a dragon, but her profound devotion forbids her from capitulating or admitting defeat. Eventually, she is killed for her defiance (Salih 48). She dies a militant virgin, her purity preserved and sanctified, having reached the ultimate completion: not merely death, but death for Christ.

Salih discusses the transition from militant to bridal virginity at great length, explaining the conventional scholarly narrative of medieval virginity:

> The early Christian period produced a gender-neutral model of virginity, in which dedicated virgin women were thought of as manly or even as male, and virginity was a worthy ambition and meaningful category for a man. Virginity was a form of martyrdom, and virgins *milites Christi.* In or around the twelfth century virginity began to be feminized. St Anselm's humanization of Christ and St Bernard of Clairvaux's erotic mysticism contributed to the creation of a climate in which female virgins could be reclaimed for the heterosexual economy and urged to take Christ as their husband in a specifically feminine form of erotic devotion. (Salih 10)

While she provisionally accepts aspects of this narrative, Salih believes it was influenced by a peculiar discomfort with its own subject matter and is careful to point out the problematic assumption that instances of virginity can be easily categorized by the dichotomous systems. Salih's conditional acceptance of the distinction between *militant* and *bridal* virginities depends on avoiding overdetermination (12). Although there is certainly a manifold duality to the virgin identity, and although it is tempting to replicate the binary system in discussing it, it limits interpretation and may ignore what lies outside of its boundaries.

Still, the eventual shift towards the (re)feminization of the virgin body is crucial to my understanding of the ideologies that produced the virgin characters I will analyze. Scholars often date this shift in early modern Europe anywhere from the 11th to 13th century. The growing popularity at the time of the cult of the Virgin Mary elevated and nearly deified Mary as the mother of Christ and of the church. Based on the worship of mother and bride, two distinctly female-coded identities, the veneration of the Virgin helped to reincorporate female monasticism into the marital economy, the very condition of conventional patriarchal personhood many monastics intentionally sought to avoid. The bride-of-Christ narrative also potentially feminized the virgin by renegotiating the performance of gender expected of or prescribed the virgin body and by emphasizing different aspects of conventional womanhood. Whereas some earlier conceptions of virginity linked the mortal body to Christ through resistance, militancy, and often, physical suffering, bridal narratives linked the mortal body to Christ through symbolic marriage. Even though it is an act which may affirm that the virgin body is incapable of fully excising itself from normative marital activity, I wonder if it is possible to read this more optimistically. Giving the monastic woman a legitimate "husband" in Christ is symbolic more than anything. But perhaps this figurative legitimization and assertion of patriarchal control over the uncertain status of the virgin has the power to license or authorize expressions of non-normative sexuality and sexual activity by confining it to the bonds of marriage. Osbern Bokenham (1393-1497), author of the 15th-century *Legends of Holy Women*, provides an account of the life of St Agnes, a virgin martyr who died at the age of thirteen for her refusal to marry anyone other than Christ. Bokenham's description of St Agnes's wishes for a divine wedding are overtly erotic, and suggest conjugal pleasure without the loss of virginity:

And taken of his mouth many a kiss have I,

Sweeter than either milk or honey;

And full often in arms he halsyd hath [embraced, spiritually, sexually] me

Without blemishing of mine virginity,

His body to mine own now conjoined is. (Bokenham 114-115)

Bokenham's *Life of St Agnes* suggests that a marriage to Christ can allow erotic experience that does not strip the body of sanctity but further sanctifies it. Christ as a non-embodied entity cannot alter the embodied virginity of his wives – St Agnes's imagined sexual relationship with him does not conflict with her devotion to chastity, and by extension may not conflict with that required of members of monastic order. Communion with Christ's divinity becomes the apex of sexual experience, surpassing the sexual and spiritual possibilities of mortal marriage. Sexual experience with Christ joins a divine with a mortal body, both sanctifying the mortal wife and correcting her flesh. St Agnes's marriage may offer a compelling alternative to another common view of the female spiritual bodily experience as one in which piety can be best expressed by exultation in the inferiority of female flesh coupled with "physical identification with Christ's suffering and the endurance of extreme physical torture" (Robertson 97). Female embodiment in period texts is often discussed in terms of abjection – these models limit the embodied experience to submission to an inferior or grotesque state, in which the mind/soul can either revel in or loath its uncleanliness (Salih 7). While I submit the model of a spiritually/sexually actualized divine marriage as another embodied experience of virginity, it is limited by its conformity to patriarchal conventions – to merely exchange a mortal for a divine husband, and secular for religious sexual pleasure is to ignore the multiplicity of queer sexual expressions in virginal resistance. St Agnes is also an excellent example of the flexibility of the boundaries between the militant/bridal binary – while her story shares the same narrative structure as that of

other militant virgins like St Katherine, her desire to marry Christ, combining spiritual with sexual actualization, configures her militancy along the gendered lines of patriarchal marriage.

Protestant virginity

The sixteenth century marked a critical ideological shift for European Christianity, as economic shifts in the working class and family unit following the beginning of the decline of the feudal period in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries combined with political changes in the monarchy, and with fomenting shifts in continental Christian thought (Jankowski 77). Reformation thinkers targeted the cult of the Virgin, promoting devotion to the word of Christ as it appeared in the Bible instead. The Roman Catholic worship of the Virgin Mary, as well as the appearance of several sects devoted to the worship of virgin saints like the Katherine Group, demonstrate a reverence for "magical virginity" in spiritually significant women. Both Martin Luther and John Calvin argued against the privileged sanctified position virginity occupied in Roman Catholic theological discourse. For Protestant thinkers, virginity should remain a transitory state belonging to the pre-marital body. Prolonged virginity was unnatural, as it would mean resisting gender specificity: it was, as Luther explained in his 1545 Sermon on Marriage at Merseburg, "to vow and swear something which is contrary to God and his ordinance, namely, to swear that you are neither a man nor a woman, when it is certain that you are either a man or a woman, created by God" (qtd. in Jankowski 80). Virgins who resisted marriage ran the risk of becoming an ontological threat to the patriarchy, potentially representing either a lost commodity or a sexual deviant.

Protestant philosophy insisted on rigid systematization of the sexual economy and limited gender identification to a binary. In saying this I do not argue that Roman Catholic doctrine was

necessarily any less misogynistic than Protestant doctrine – both traditions relied on and supported a binary gender system. But Protestant discourse, through its greater focus on marriage and rejection of monasticism, offered fewer legitimate economic and spiritual opportunities outside of the normative heterosexual secular hegemony. I wish to treat this as framework for understanding institutional change in the early modern period and its broader potential repercussions. Although it continued to accommodate it, Protestantism intentionally discouraged monasticism in favor of maintaining systems of patriarchal marriage. The virgin body was clearly a locus of discomfort for Protestant thinkers, who put a name to the gender ambiguity suggested by certain methodologies of monastic life. For Martin Luther, as for other religious thinkers before and after him, female sexual asceticism was clearly a different way of being a woman and as such, posed a threat to the codified role of women in early modern England.

Milites Christi and *sponsas Christi*

Permanent virginity eventually became an acceptable and then a sanctified spiritual pursuit for women, who were increasingly able to exercise personal – sexual, spiritual, economic – autonomy within the medieval Catholic patriarchal system. Virginity, which was perceived to demand greater restraint from women than men, elevated women to a higher cultural status than they were previously afforded. Commitment to virginity was often configured as an ongoing battle against the unclean forces of sin and even Satan himself, which manifested in the rise of the narrative of the *milites christi*, – the soldiers of Christ – militant virgin warriors. Many medieval hagiographies told the stories of virgin female martyrs who were subjected to brutally violent trials of faith, and who nonetheless remained fervently devoted to Christ and to the protection of their virtue.

The Katherine Group is a collection of texts written between 1190 and 1230 containing the narratives of three virgin martyrs, St Katherine of Alexandria, St Margaret of Antioch, and St Juliana of Nicomedia, as well as two literary tracts, *Hali Meiðhad* (*Holy Maidenhood*) and *Sawles Warde* (*Soul's Ward*, or *Custody of the Soul*) (MS Bodley 34). After attempting to convert Emperor Maxence of Alexandria to Christianity, St Katherine is mercilessly tortured on a wheel and eventually beheaded (Huber and Robertson 4). When St Margaret refuses marriage, she is imprisoned in a dungeon and is visited by the devil in the form of a dragon who swallows her. Upon her signing of the Cross, St Margaret erupts from the stomach of the dragon unscathed, only to be burned, drowned, and beheaded (Huber and Robertson 5). When St Juliana refuses to marry her father's friend and worship his pagan idols, her father has her stripped and viciously tortured, but Juliana remains unharmed. She is tortured again on a wheel, beheaded, and buried at sea (Huber and Robertson 6). Many Catholics venerated these female martyrs, their pure, chaste bodies perhaps further sanctified by the extraordinary violence they endured. Christine de Pizan includes several brief hagiographies in her feminist text *The Book of the City of Ladies.* Many of these accounts refer to the tearing of flesh, the scorching of the body, beheading, and the cutting of hair and breasts. The latter two especially are forms of violence specifically enacted upon conventionally female bodies – acts of violence that both draw attention to their femininity and attempt to destroy it. These martyrs, like Christ, die for the sins of others. Their gender is complicated by their emulation of the "androgynous soul" of Christ, potentially offering them access to a new gender space (Meeks 165). Androgyny and gender-play is overt in the case of St Euphrosine of Alexandria, who lived as a monk under the name Brother Smaragdus after fleeing an unwanted marriage (de Pizan 243-245).

Although the *milites Christi* narrative persisted, the notion of the virgin as aspirational wife of Christ gained emphasis, giving rise to the narrative of the *sponsa Christi*, or the bridal narrative. Although within hagiography they could still be figured as having militant qualities and were indeed still often subjected to physical torture, these virgins were distinguished by their marital devotion to Christ. This was eventually incorporated into female monastic practice, with novitiates taking on the role of young brides, and with the rise of descriptions of holy sexual communion with Christ such as St Agnes's dream of a divine wedding. The bride of Christ, although she retained aspects of her strength and courage, was reassimilated into the conventional gender roles prescribed by marriage, and thus may have posed less of a threat to the stability of the patriarchy. Early female monastics were often treated with a certain degree of discomfort by religious thinkers such as Tertullian (c. 155-220 CE) and St Jerome (c. 347-420 CE), whose works articulated a cultural anxiety about the virgin's place in the gender binary (Salih 25). For instance, in his "Commentarium in Epistolam ad Ephesios," St Jerome identifies a gendered discrepancy between the laic woman's imperative to "[serve] for birth and children," and the monastic virgin's imperative to "serve Christ more than the world," asserting that while the former "is different from man as body is from soul," the latter "shall cease to be called a woman and shall be called man" (qtd. in Salih 23). Through reifying the femininity of the virgin in her position as wife of Christ, however, the laic marital system could potentially recoup its "losses," (to an extent) evade contemporary concerns surrounding monastic gender slippage, and even re-subordinate the virgin women who had intentionally claimed certain forms of patriarchal freedom.

A virgin queen

Both the *milites Christi* and the *sponsa Christi* were medieval examples of women whose virginity was venerated as a source of a holy power. Female virginity through monasticism was not encouraged as the ideal state for all women, but it was presented as a spiritual choice as well as a viable economic alternative to marriage. The Protestant Reformation placed greater emphasis on marriage as the aim of all women, and thus de-privileged female virginity. What to make, then, of the rule of a Protestant queen who located her political prowess in her claim to virginity? Elizabeth I ascended the throne in the year 1558, succeeding her half-sister Mary I, whose reign had been damaged by her unpopular marriage to Phillip II of Spain (Kendrick 38-39). Despite Parliament's entreaties to Elizabeth to marry, Elizabeth chose not to. She solved the issue of gendered public anxieties about her ability to rule and nationalist anxieties about foreign intervention by co-opting the figure of the "virgin warrior," directly recalling the Catholic tradition of the *milites Christi* still embedded in the cultural consciousness of the nation (Kendrick 39).

As Susan Kendrick argues, Elizabeth's implementation of the rhetoric of the virgin warrior enabled her to fend off concerns about her sovereignty, dually affirming her militant ability to protect the nation and her complete devotion to it as married to the nation, (Kendrick 39-40). Elizabeth's claims to gendered embodiment are complex; she is once quoted as having said she had "the body of a weak and feeble woman, but … the heart and stomach of a king" (Elizabeth 326). She was politically empowered by her claim to virginity, recalling the Vestal virgins, who spent a tenure of their lives as avowed virgins in spiritual servitude of the Roman statehood. Elizabeth changes the virginal *miles/sponsa Christi* to the *miles/sponsa civitatis*, the soldier and bride of the state, retrieving and renewing cultural remnants of the Catholic tradition of powerful virginity.

Conclusions

The four plays that will be central to my analysis are Shakespeare and Fletcher's *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*, and Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's *The Changeling*. All four plays were composed, published, and performed within three decades of one another. Each play represents its virginal female characters differently, and each is uniquely insightful. The character of the Jailer's Daughter in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* falls victim to a disease of virgins due to her unrequited desire for the character of Palamon. In *The Changeling*, Beatrice-Joanna gives her virginity in a barter to try to marry the object of her affections and is ultimately unable to uphold her performance of virtue. Isabella of *Measure for Measure*, a novice nun, pleads with the deputy duke of Vienna for her brother's life but staunchly refuses to trade it for her virginity. Helen of *All's Well That Ends Well* utilizes her virginal "virtue" and her late father's medical knowledge to heal the king and choose a husband. Each of my two chapters will analyze two works, associated with one another on complex and often intersecting axes of power, autonomy, and patriarchal control.

Many permutations of these four plays could make for fascinating chapter structures, and as such they form more of a web than a binary of virginal representation. The loose common denominator around which I have chosen to organize my analyses is not the specific quality of each play's version of virginity, but the effect that it eventually has on its virginal character. My first part will center on the characters of Isabella and Beatrice-Joanna. I have grouped *The Changeling* and *Measure for Measure* together along the axis of religion. Both *The Changeling* and *Measure for Measure* are set in Roman Catholic societies – Spain and Vienna, respectively – but were first performed for Protestant audiences in England. Both plays take an overt and

unique interest in virginity as crucial cultural markers. I take the character of Isabella as an example of the queer virgin and will explore possible erotics of her practice of sexual asceticism, her zealous resistance to the normative sexual economy, and her moral and religious belief system as markers of her queer sexual resistance. I then interpret Beatrice's eventual demise in *The Changeling* as rooted in her failure to recognize and successfully claim a reparative mode of virginity rather than in her sexual activity. The second part of my analysis will center on the characters of the Jailer's Daughter of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and Helen of *All's Well That Ends Well*. Whereas Part One draws heavily on religious discourse, my analysis of the two plays in Part Two is primarily based in medical discourse and contemporary conceptions of the body. In *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, I explore the intersection of class consciousness and virginity in the character of the Jailer's Daughter. My last chapter on *All's Well That Ends Well* examines the dual healing and destructive potential of Helen's virginity.

PART ONE

Measure for Measure

&

The Changeling

Chapter One: Isabella's Queer Virginity

Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* takes place in Roman Catholic Vienna. Seeking to restore moral order to the city, the Duke has deputized Lord Angelo under the pretense of a diplomatic visit to Poland. The Duke does not, in fact, leave Vienna, but remains in the city disguised as a friar in order to watch what unfolds. Angelo is rigidly moral, described by the Duke as "a man of stricture and firm abstinence" (1.4.12). His charge is to enforce the Duke's rule, which has lessened in its severity, and he comes down hard – at least from what we see – on *sex* in particular. Both the major and minor plots of the play are concerned with sexual "misconduct," the former on its preoccupation with matters of virtue and premarital sex, and the latter in that it follows the prosecution of various bawds, pimps, and johns. Obedient to the letter of the law, Angelo sentences a young man named Claudio to death for impregnating his lover Juliet in the hopes that he will serve as an example to the rest of Vienna. Claudio enlists the help of his friend Lucio in asking his sister Isabella, a novice nun in the Catholic order of Saint Clare, to plead his case to Angelo.

The audience's first impression of Lord Angelo's character is through the opinions of the Duke and of Lucio, who finds Isabella on Claudio's behalf. Despite the enormous status difference separating these characters, they seem to agree on Angelo: he is a man so restrained, so exacting, that he is almost inhuman.

According to the Duke,

Lord Angelo is precise,

Stands at a guard with envy, scarce confesses

That his blood flows, or that his appetite

Is more to bread than stone. (1.4.50-54)

Lucio describes him as

a man whose blood

Is very snow-broth; one who never feels

The wanton stings and motions of the sense,

But doth rebate and blunt his natural edge

With profits of the mind, study, and fast," (1.5.57-61).

There is an immediate religious charge to these accounts of Angelo, who clearly practices some form of asceticism. The eroticism implicit in practices of sexual self-restraint is not my chief aim, but I would like to acknowledge the many accounts of Latin Catholic ascetics struggling with sexual attraction to incubi/succubi as a key piece of the theological framework of this play's sexuality, indispensable to the fabric of desire present and suggested in practices of restraint.

What I would like instead to identify in these descriptions of Angelo is the sense of something profoundly unnatural in his nature – the snow in his veins, the denial of hunger and other desires of the flesh – that makes him the perfect candidate for the Duke's crusade against Viennese lawlessness and hedonism. Isabella is not *Measure for Measure*'s only virgin: Angelo, too, takes on an ascetic identity. Isabella's model of virginity lies in her commitment to a life of chastity, but Angelo adopts a model that casts his practice of restraint as the source of his promise as a leader, at the cost of perceived "normalcy." By presenting both a female and a male virgin, *Measure for Measure* does not strictly code its virginal characters as female. Angelo's brand of male virginity may have its own gender implications – especially viewed in relation to the sexual uninhibition of many of the play's other male characters. Hi continence, for instance, does not have the same healing properties that some of the female virginities I explore may have;

despite his intentions to restore moral and legal order to Vienna, the eventual manifestation of Angelo's malignant repressed sexuality poses a severe threat to the safety of Isabella, Claudio, and perhaps even to the city of Vienna itself. Angelo in a sense locates his virginity as the source of his political prowess: he represents the model of the male ascetic who is, rather than overtly castrated or emasculated by his commitment to restraint, empowered by his own virginity.

Angelo provides an interesting comparison to the Roman Vestal Virgins and to the reign of Queen Elizabeth I; in a manner consecrated by the reserve of internal power offered by the claiming of a virgin status, purified by his continence, Angelo adopts the pretense that his "virginity" directly serves the aims of the state. He is fit to rule because he appears – at least at first – to live the letter of Viennese law himself. Angelo's mode of male virginity bears significant similarities to Jankowski's *asporos.* A foil for the eunuch, the *asporos* represented the ancient belief "whereby the virile man could be defined as one who held onto his 'vital spirit,' who 'lost little or no seed'" (Jankowski 35). Indeed, Galen and Soranus were purported to have believed that chastity was tied to bodily health and athletic performance in men (Brown 19). Seminal fluid, for the *asporos,* is a precious, finite resource that could support physical, cognitive, and even moral or spiritual activity. Its retention was crucial: some accounts indicate cultic castration practices within but not limited to the priesthood of several pre-Christian pagan religions (Ranke-Heinemann 99).[1]

When Isabella leaves the convent to appeal to Angelo to save her brother, Angelo is overcome with desire for her. Isabella offers to "bribe" Angelo to mercy with

such gifts that heaven shall share with [him]

… with true prayers,

That shall be up at heaven and enter there

Ere sunrise, prayers from preservèd souls,

From fasting maids, whose minds are dedicate

To nothing temporal" (2.2.154-162)

In this speech, Isabella expresses her disdain for "fond sickles of the tested gold, / Or stones, whose rates are either rich or poor / As fancy values them," offering Angelo instead the only incentive she can access, and the only incentive in which she sees value: genuine prayer rendered more potent by the virginal status of the votarists. Inadvertently, Isabella prompts in Angelo's mind a different exchange: he will only free Claudio in exchange for Isabella's virginity. Angelo becomes inflamed by Isabella's virtue itself, and after her departure struggles with his sexual desire for her.

What's this? Is this her fault of mine?

The tempter or the tempted, who sins most?

Dost thou desire her foully for those things

That make her good? O, let her brother live! …

Most dangerous

Is that temptation that doth goad us on

To sin in loving virtue. Never could the strumpet,

With all her double vigor, art, and nature,

Once stir my temper, but this virtuous maid

Subdues me quite. (2.2.170-193)

It is Isabella's virginal status and her practice of resistance to sex that inspires Angelo's lust for her. Angelo's expression of sexuality is characterized in this encounter by his initial apparent

asceticism – bolstered by the opinions of others – and his spiral into sexual confusion which necessarily involves moral and theological self-examination.

In asking himself if he “[desires] her foully for those things / That make her good” and then asserting that the “strumpet” could “never … once stir [his] temper,” Angelo is demonstrating a clear awareness that his attraction to Isabella is a direct product of the virtue he perceives in her character. Uncomfortable with his “sinful” sexual desire for Isabella, which poses a threat to the organizing structure of his life – his practice of asceticism – Angelo’s mind descends into chaos. It is interesting that Angelo proclaims that Isabella “subdues” him, when in fact she seems to have the opposite effect. The verb “to subdue” suggests submission, force, and control (OED, v. 1a, b, c). Angelo understands his desire for Isabella in terms of conquest, as though she has overpowered him. *He* is the one, however, who subsequently attempts to overpower or “subdue” Isabella through his thwarted intention to assault her. This presents a consistent philosophy that views sex and desire as colonization and conflict. Rather than reaffirm his commitment to moral sexual conduct, Angelo – through numerous feverish soliloquies on vice and virtue, and angels and the Devil – proclaims that “[Isabella] must lay down the treasures of [her] body / To this supposed, or else to let [Claudio] suffer” (2.4.97-98). To this, Isabella replies:

> As much for my poor brother as myself:
>
> That is, were I under the terms of death,
>
> Th’impression of keen whips I’d wear as rubies,
>
> And strip myself to death as to a bed
>
> That longing have been sick for, ere I’d yield
>
> My body up to shame. (2.4.100-105)

In her analysis of *Measure for Measure*, Carolyn E. Brown has posited a latent masochistic sexuality in Isabella's relationship with Angelo, whose own latent sexuality is expressed as sadism. I agree with her assertion that Angelo displays traits of sadism, in the clear sexual pleasure he derives in the notion of sexually violating the unwilling Isabella, and in promising Claudio's torturous, slow death if she does not yield (2.4.165-169). I agree that Isabella's virginal innocence, ardent commitment to chastity, and her evident disdain for the act of sex inadvertently fashion her into the perfect target for Angelo's sexual sadism: a man so fervently austere could not obsess over just any avowed virgin – it must be Isabella, a young and fervently religious novitiate on the brink of committing to a monastic order that will remove her from the sexual economy altogether. I agree, too, with Brown's reading of seductive undertones in some of Isabella's speeches, particularly those in which she supplicates herself to Angelo or appeals to him as a man who must have experienced sexual desires of his own.

I am not convinced that beneath Isabella's outward performance of piety and even that her seeming disgust of [hetero]sexual activity lies an abusive and destructive sexuality that manifests itself in an unconscious provocation of Angelo's rape-fantasy. Instead, I believe – following Theodora Jankowski – that what Isabella takes pleasure in is not the thought of consummating a sado-masochistic relationship with Angelo, but in her passionate resistance to Angelo's attempts to strip her of her virgin status (Jankowski 173). The "bed" to which Isabella refers suggests that the sensations of "longing" and "sickness" she describes may certainly be sexual in nature. Her evocative comparison between death and a bed insinuates a potential eroticism in death that reads like the discourses of virginal Christian martyrs such as those presented in the Katherine Group. Her pleasure is in her affirmation of her faith and her

subversive and resistant virgin identity, and perhaps even the prospect of martyrdom as sexual communion with Christ, not in the suggestion of participating in her own latent rape-fantasy.

Isabella's status as a cloistered Roman Catholic nun is indispensable to my analysis of *Measure for Measure*. She is a symbol of the virgin sanctified and empowered by her resistance – what Jankowski describes as "the locus both of Protestant fears of Catholicism and Protestant animosity" (175). The pre-Reformation nun, after all, has the power to destabilize the patriarchal economy. Her monasticism grants her an alternative to the patriarchal transfer from paternal to marital ownership, as well as a form of economic independence guaranteed by their exclusion of a traditional patriarchal benefactor. As explained by Sarah Salih, "A nun is not absolutely gendered differently from a secular woman, but being a nun is at least a different way of doing femininity" (Salih 120). The intentional choice to pursue the monastic life opens a multitude of possible repercussions for gender identity and eroticism – including but not limited to genderfluidity or other forms of autonomy in gender performance, and non-normative sexual expression such as sexual activity through ascetic discipline, homoerotic/homosexual relationships, asexuality, and autoeroticism. This, too, threatened the monastic order across Europe, as accounts (whether true or false) of sexual activity in convents and monasteries spread across the country. Carolyn E. Brown cites the popularity of certain sects across Italy, Germany, and England whose practices of self-flagellation had grown so "unmistakably promiscuous" that Pope Clement VI issued a bull against them in the fourteenth century (Brown 147).

When Isabella rebukes Angelo's advances, he entreats her to "Be that you are, / That is, a woman; if you be more, you're none. / If you be one – as you are well expressed / By all external warrants – show it now / By putting on the destined livery" (2.4.136-140). This, as referenced by Jankowski, is almost a perfect mirror for Luther's argument at Merseburg, quoted above (5-6).

For Luther as well as Angelo, for Isabella to swear against normative sexual activity is for her to swear that she is neither woman nor man, that if she is “more” than woman or man, she is “none.” This expresses the deep Protestant fear about the unstable gender of the virgin, and the desire to suppress potential virgin fluidity by confining it to normative sex, therefore making it a “knowable” identity. In resisting this categorization through the act of sex, even at the cost of her brother’s life, Isabella insists on her fluidity, claiming what Angelo casts as deviance as an indispensable part of her identity. In Grace Ioppolo’s editorial notes, “destined livery” is explained as: “expected clothing, i.e., act like a woman, not an asexual girl” (n. 140). Who is this “asexual girl”? It is Isabella’s virginity – unbecoming of, even abject in, a woman of marriageable age – that necessarily un-womans her in the eyes of the man she threatens.

Still, Isabella’s virginity results in the restoration of semi-order typical of Shakespearean problem plays. Like *All’s Well That Ends Well*, the implementation of the bed-trick saves a queer virgin from sexual activity, substituting in her stead a consenting, desirous woman. In the case of *All’s Well*, the resistant Diana is replaced by Helen. In the case of *Measure for Measure*, Isabella is replaced by Mariana, Angelo’s destitute would-be bride. Although I argue that the bed-trick is an inherently problematic plot due to its dependence on sexual deception, I submit that *Measure for Measure* is at the very least more complex than this. This is because the sexual act that first invites the substitution of Mariana for Isabella is a direct assault on Isabella’s sexual autonomy. Isabella’s commitment to sexual resistance is the precondition for the restitution – albeit bleak – of the relationship between Mariana and Angelo. The substitution at the very least replaces an unconsenting victim with a consenting victim, which is certainly small consolation. Does the fact that Angelo only through the workings of Isabella, the Duke-as-friar, and Mariana, did not commit the rape he intended exonerate him? In the world of this play, it does, while also

shackling poor Mariana to a man who has already proved himself unworthy of marrying her for the rest of her life. This is a fact that cannot be remedied by the inexplicable love she appears to possess for him.

At the ending of both plays is the proposal of marriage or at least marital opportunity for the queer virgin – in *All's Well*, the king recompenses Diana (who provides an interesting parallel to Isabella's queer virgin) with the opportunity to choose a husband; in *Measure for Measure*, the Duke proposes to Isabella in the last lines of the play. Both proposals are met with silence. *Measure for Measure* ends with this silence, allowing freedom for the audience to interpret its meaning for themselves. Having discussed at length the relationship between Angelo and Isabella, it is only fair to touch on that between the Duke and Isabella, which I view as in its own right an insidious attempt to infringe upon her virginal autonomy. When the Duke deputizes Angelo, he disguises himself in a friar's habit so that he can oversee the latter's rule. His donning of the monastic uniform of a friar becomes extremely significant when he becomes involved in the plot to save Claudio, and through his attempts to stay Claudio's execution encounters Isabella. Only the audience knows that the Duke's appearance – one which suggests a likewise commitment to monasticism – is merely a costume. For Isabella, however, it is the reassurance of a potential relationship which automatically precludes the option of sexual intercourse. Jankowski discusses the way in which the play positions Isabella as the locus of audience dissatisfaction when she refuses to engage in the play's sexual economy by submitting to Angelo's sexual entreaties, even at the cost of Claudio's life (174-175). This resurfaces at the end, when the play denies a marital resolution by which all errant lovers – as is often the case in Shakespeare's plays – are sorted into their proper couplings. The audience does not know whether the two will marry. They only know that the Duke, intimately aware of her intentional

decision to pursue monasticism, has asked her to rejoin the sexual economy she has so long fought to avoid, which may make him little better than Angelo himself.

Although the play places great emphasis on the intensity of Isabella's personal dedication to a life of spiritual virginity, this certainly grants her certain forms of agency conventionally denied to laic society – primarily, sexual agency *in* her intentional restraint and economic agency in her cloistered life. Her virginal virtue is also, critically, alluded to in ways that I argue have contextual queer possibilities. Her virginity attracts undesired sexual attention from the ascetic Lord Angelo, whose through his own perverse sexual attitudes attempts to rape Isabella. Her virginal resistance is ultimately unviolated, and she is successfully able to protect herself – potentially even, by the end of the play, from the advances of the disguised Duke. I argue that Isabella's restoration of the order of the play – although it results in marriage plots that, albeit a common dramatic tactic in the period, are significantly problematized in the case of *Measure for Measure* – is explicitly rooted in her chastity.

Chapter Two: Performing Virginity in *The Changeling*

Thomas Middleton and William Rowley present their audience with a fascinating case study in the Roman Catholic value of the virginal status in the form of Beatrice-Joanna, daughter of nobleman Vermandero. The play begins with a conventional marriage plot in which Beatrice desires to marry Alsemero but has been betrothed against her will to Alonzo de Piracquo. Beatrice devises a plan to enlist the help of Deflores, a servant of her father's. Deflores agrees to assassinate Piracquo in exchange for sex with Beatrice, who is entangled in a web of sexual deceit that ultimately leads to her demise. The way in which this play deals with questions of female and male uncleanliness, sin, and evil, explores complex questions of what it means to be "fallen," and whether or not "fallenness" can be a reversible state. These questions are illustrated in the bodies of the characters – entwined in their physiognomy as they attempt to grapple with their lust and desire, their choices, and the resulting consequences. I will adopt Schnitzspahn's broader explanation of Beatrice's virginal modality as "within a patriarchal world of language and symbols, an ordered place where tropes are literal and where hymens and virginity are real" as a framework for my analysis of her sexual shame (86). The patriarchal sexual ethos to which Beatrice is accustomed, however, ultimately proves to limit her potential to fully exercise control over her sexuality and construct a newer, more flexible virginity. The play culminates with her death, which suggests important questions about the limits of patriarchal power and stability and probes the boundaries of contemporary virginity itself.

When the audience is introduced to Beatrice, it is through an amorous monologue in which Alsemero speaks of his hopes to wed her.

'Twas in the temple where I first beheld her,

And now again the same – what omen yet

Follows of that? …

The place is holy, so is my intent;

I love her beauties to the holy purpose,

And that, methinks, admits comparison

With man's first creation – the place blest,

And is his right home back, if he achieve it. (1.1.1-9)

Here, Alsemero extolls Beatrice's virtuous perfection, as well as his intention to marry her. He references their first encounter in a church or "temple" as an "omen," indicating that the two would be fated to "the holy purpose" of marriage. Alsemero draws heavily upon a Christian lexicon in this passage, aligning the holiness of the church and the institution of marriage with his own intentions towards Beatrice and Beatrice's own "beauties." Beatrice's virginal attractions make her an optimal candidate for the fulfillment of the holy purpose of marriage. Her "beauties," ensconced in Alsemero's sacralized language, are necessarily indicative of spiritual value and piety, and her physical excellence is tied to her moral excellence. Alsemero's assertion that an appearance which is pleasing to the eye corresponds to an equally pleasing temperament, intellect, and moral character, is an implementation of the aesthetic and ethical framework of physiognomy, a contemporary system of thought by which human virtue could be discerned from human flesh. Alsemero also compares their union to "man's first creation," likening marriage to the paradise of Eden. In doing so, he returns the fallen flesh of mankind to its antelapsarian innocence, implying that Beatrice's sacred virtue – her virginity – has corrected even Eve's original sin. His "holy love" for Beatrice reads like a devotional prayer; it is almost Platonic in tone. To Alsemero, this marital paradise is "his right home back, if he achieve it": a

state approximating Eden is "man's true home, and which he can regain through nuptial bliss" (Ioppolo n. 7-9). Although he refers generally to men in these lines, the conviction that underlies Alsemero's words is that regaining this state of "beginning and perfection" is possible through the sanctification of marriage (1.1.12). In other words, the Fall may not be permanent; the solution is the "holy intent" to marry a virgin woman. This has two primary repercussions for constructing this play's version of virginity: first, it suggests that virginity is a holy restorative force, and second, through Alsemero's understanding of the Fall as a reversible phenomenon, it implies potential for the reclamation of the virtue (virginity) that preceded it.

Visuality is certainly important to the play from its opening lines, when it structures Alsemero and Beatrice's flirtation. Beatrice responds to Alsemero's proclamation of love by stating that "Our eyes are sentinels unto our judgements," deploying the Renaissance body-as-castle narrative utilized in Sir Thomas Elyot's influential 1534 medical work *The Castle of Health* to configure the eyes as the watchful guards of a fortified, enclosed body (1.1.69).[2] In inscribing Elyot's metaphorical construction of the body as a "building" or "fortress" onto herself, Beatrice suggests her own vigilant and systematic protection of her body – chiefly her virgin status, itself envisioned as an enclosure or a "seal." Beatrice is able to engage with Alsemero's romantic overtures in her affirmation of the value of appearance in the assessment of character, suggesting that there can be pleasure in looking and that a pleasant "look" could gain access to the fortressed body, while simultaneously reifying her own discernment and restraint. She continues to counsel Alsemero that the eyes can be "Rash sometimes, and tell us wonders / Of common things, which when our judgments find, / They can then check the eyes, and call them blind" (1.1.70-72). Beatrice is more cautious than Alsemero, and her stance ultimately privileges rational judgment over mere visual impression. Alsemero does not take her playful

warning to heart, responding in jest that his "eyes" and "judgment" are in agreement and await only Beatrice's consent to marry (1.1.73-78).

The inverse of this positive discourse surrounding attraction, beauty, and virtue can be found in Beatrice's relationship to Deflores. Deflores knows that his sexual desire for Beatrice is met with disgust. He then continues to declare that he will "please [himself] with sight / Of her, at all opportunities, / If but to spite her anger" (1.1.98-100). Deflores cannot yet expect to physically consummate his attraction to Beatrice, but must approximate this "pleasure" through sight of her "at all opportunities." His use of the reflexive form of "please" immediately ties the act of looking at Beatrice to a form of autoeroticism. Deflores is clearly aware of Beatrice's hatred of him. Rather than deter him, the prospect of inciting her anger – another form of passion – further arouses his sexual interest; in seeking to be near her "*if but* to spite her anger," it serves as a substitute for and perhaps even supersedes sex. Beatrice, in turn, compares Deflores to the monstrous "basilisk," a mythical serpent with a lethal gaze (1.1.110). Deflores's gaze is, in the span of ten lines of dialogue, likened to both sex and death, which converge in the body of its receiver. It is no coincidence that Deflores and Beatrice eventually die as a result of their combined crimes of murder and adultery.

Beatrice's virtue is, for an agent of the patriarchy, located in her beauty. This is rooted in the idea that signs of virtue can be identified in the physical appearance, a notion which is itself born of Platonic theories about beauty as a representation of virtue as well as societal anxiety about the assurance of female virginity and the stability of patrilineal systems. Because contemporary medical writers could not unanimously agree on a reliable "empirical" virginity test, "virgins" were often identified through their behaviors, mannerisms, and countenances. Portrayals of virginity were "deeply dependent upon the stories women told about their sexual

status and how they acted these stories out, a combination of verbal and physical performance" (Luttfring 98). Luttfring terms this performance of virginity "bodily narrative." These "bodily narratives" not only allowed but required active participation in the construction/reconstruction of the self as perceived by others. They were both private, as only a privileged few could ever testify to the true status of the narrator, and public, as they coopted cultural markers of virtue to present an outward-facing image. Because it functioned as a theoretical license for physical innovation and narrative reappropriation, and because it accommodated female sexual secrecy, performances of virginity were often viewed as ambiguous and unreliable and were met with patriarchal skepticism. Virginity, the most important marital prerequisite, was an unstable bodily paradox for the patriarchy, proven only through fundamentally unreliable physical performance.

Another locus of Beatrice's virtue is her hymen – the "cultural fiction" of her maidenhead to which she herself appears committed (Schnitzspahn 85-86). When Vermandero commands Beatrice to marry Piracquo "within this sevennight," Beatrice replies with an entreaty not to force her to relinquish her virginity so quickly.

> Nay, good sir, be not so violent: with speed
> I cannot render satisfaction
> Unto the dear companion of my soul,
> Virginity, whom I thus long have lived with,
> And part with it so rude and suddenly.
> Can such friends divide never to meet again,
> Without a solemn farewell? (1.1.184-189)

Beatrice calls her virginity "the dear companion of [her] soul," makes the abstraction of virginity into an embodied "friend." Her use of the word "violent," as well as the verbs "part" and

“divide” forecast the traditional understanding of first sexual intercourse as connotative of irreversible loss and rupture (Schnitzspahn 86). This is clearly an intentional obfuscation of Beatrice’s real motive to delay her wedding to Piracquo. It could be argued that Beatrice would not need to believe in the virginal hymen to make this statement, and that it only necessarily signifies her astute understanding of the conditions of her economic imperative to marry. The last statement is true: Beatrice’s subtle manipulation of her father is only effective because she knows that the invocation of her virginity holds social power. The aim of the generic marital model of virginity is to wed young eligible maidens into economic stability as soon as appropriate. Despite this, Beatrice successfully uses her virginity as a bargaining chip with her father, buying herself a few days’ delay. I will later argue, however, that she is deeply and personally committed to the conventional patriarchal model of virginity, and that these two ideas can coexist within her character.

In conversation with Alsemero, Beatrice expresses frustration with their romantic quandary, complaining both about the marriage her father arranged to Piracquo. Alsemero suggests that he challenge his rival to a duel, a proposition which Beatrice immediately rejects. The two are unaware that their conversation was overheard by Deflores, who views Beatrice’s unfaithfulness to Piracquo as a sign of promiscuity that may potentially favor him. Meanwhile, Beatrice has decided to use her sexual power to manipulate Deflores into killing Piracquo on her behalf, and begins to flirt with him overtly, suggesting he must have “met with some good physician” for his face “to look so amorously” (2.2.74-76). When Deflores agrees to do her bidding, Beatrice promises to reward him generously.

Beatrice: As thou art forward and thy service dangerous,

Thy reward shall be precious.

Deflores: That I have thought on;

I have assured myself of that beforehand,

And know it will be precious – the thought ravishes. (2.2.129-131)

Beatrice's thoughts of compensation are financial. Deflores's, on the other hand, are explicitly sexualized by the double-meaning of the verb "ravish" as both to enrapture and to rape (OED v. 1a, b; Ioppolo n. 132). Perhaps Deflores has already violated Beatrice's virginal body, if only in "thought:" his consistent use of verbs related to knowledge ("thought," "assured," "know," "methinks") suggests his intentions to "know" Beatrice sexually – to penetrate the barrier of her sexual secrecy, and the bodily enclosure of her virginity. Perhaps the intentional evasion of subject/object clarity in the phrase "the thought ravishes" even signifies Deflores's erotic imaginings of mutual sexual violence as an extension of Beatrice's hatred for Deflores. Beatrice views her plan to "furnish [him] with all things for [his] flight" as a clever plot to rid herself of both Piracquo and Deflores, her "two inveterate loathings" (2.2.145). Deflores, on the other hand, is clearly aroused by the prospect of sexual compensation in the form of Beatrice's virginity:

O my blood!

Methinks I feel her in mine arms already,

Her wanton fingers combing out this beard,

And, being pleased, praising this bad face. (2.2.146-150).

Deflores describes Beatrice's fingers – a consistent site of erotic attraction for him – as "wanton," signifying both lawlessness and lustfulness or a lack of chastity (OED adj. 1a, c).[3] This is a critical shift for Deflores. In his eyes, Beatrice's murderous intent has lowered her and made the two equals: she is betrayed by her flesh in the sense that her desire for Alsemero has

led her to the sin of murdering Piracquo and in the sense that her sinful nature is so present in her body that it imbues even her fingers, which betray her evil. In what Deflores sees as Beatrice's renunciation of morality and innocence, she also loses her chaste virginal status. Her descent to murder renders her "wanton," and therefore a viable sexual candidate when the two were previously separated by rigid class lines and moral status. In his vivid erotic reverie, Deflores imagines embracing Beatrice, being touched by Beatrice, being praised by Beatrice; he is so certain of their sexual future that this vision is almost real for him.

In her solicitation of his help, Deflores has been granted access to privileged information about Beatrice and the lengths to which she has gone to attempt to exercise control over her marriage. When Deflores brings back Piracquo's ring and severed finger as proof of his murder, Beatrice is shocked. In receiving Deflores's help in Piracquo's assassination, Beatrice maintains a certain psychic distance from the crime itself. The sight of his dead flesh, encircled by the diamond ring she was encouraged by her father to send to Piracquo as a token of affection, is a morbid reminder of the gravity of the act. Gregory Schnitzspahn reads Piracquo's finger encircled by the ring as "the persistence of disordered flesh within finely wrought civilization and order" (79). He explains that the patriarchal systems that govern Beatrice's life "denigrate and deny flesh," and that her reaction reveals a certain "naiveté of a consciousness groomed to function within an abstract world of language and symbols, a consciousness disconnected from the life of the body or, in this case, the morbidity of murder" (81). While I agree with his point about the discomfort caused by the revelation of the finger, I hesitate to read Beatrice as possessing "a consciousness disconnected from the life of the body," because such a description does not sufficiently accommodate the manner in which Beatrice intentionally wields her sexual power, nor do I understand her ultimately as a naive woman who fails to exercise control over

her life precisely because of her inability to reconcile her innate “bestial” corporeality with the orderly restrictive systems that confine her (82-83).

Following her coerced sexual intercourse with Deflores – who blackmails Beatrice by threatening to expose her actions to Alsemero – Beatrice’s concerns of judgment and discovery heighten rapidly.

> The more I think upon th’ensuing night,
>
> And whom I am to cope with in embraces, -
>
> One that’s ennobled both in blood and mind…
>
> Before whose judgement will my fault appear
>
> Like malefactors’ crimes before tribunals. (4.1.3-8)

In these lines, Beatrice expresses her mounting fears of her wedding night, even using the verb “to cope with” – an allusion to the sexual nature of the encounter to come that simultaneously serves as a telling indicator of the unease she feels. She points to his nobility: in “mind” as well as in “blood”. The practice of alchemy and physiology in England during the Renaissance depended in large part on the “humors” of the body, especially blood. Beatrice’s anxiety about Alsemero’s nobility stems from the idea that the soul is reflected in the body, that the physical and chemical makeup of a person defines them. She is anxious that Alsemero’s pure, noble, virtuous blood is different from hers, which although noble, was sullied both by her part in Alonzo de Piracquo’s murder and her intercourse with Deflores. Beatrice’s fear understands blood as a fluid that can reveals an identity in the present in addition to the past – Alsemero’s blood is more than his noble heritage, it is his noble character as well.

The language that Beatrice uses subordinates her to Alsemero. The self-loathing that overcomes Beatrice during this soliloquy intensifies and darkens her speech, causing her to speak

in metaphors of crime and judgement. She believes that her "fault" will reveal itself to Alsemero like "malefactors' crimes before tribunals."[4] With this, Beatrice gives Alsemero the authority to adjudicate on her impurity and assign penance for the sins she is so ashamed of. Similar is the usage of words such as "calamity" and "plague," and in one moment Beatrice even seems to suggest that were he to strangle her as she lays by him, it would be justifiable punishment. Her shame at her uncleanliness leads Beatrice to be convinced that her body will betray her crimes and her impurity to Alsemero. This leads her to search through his closet, where she finds a collection of vials containing spirits as well as a compilation of manuscripts by scholar Antonius Mizaldus on physics experiments such as a virginity test in a vial labeled "glass M."

In Act 4, Scene 2, Beatrice devises a plan to protect her sexual secret from Alsemero. She experiments with the liquid in glass M by administering it to herself and Diaphanta so that when given that same liquid by Alsemero in a later scene, she is prepared to impersonate the reaction of a virgin and temporarily reassure him of her maiden status. She then arranges for the virgin Diaphanta – herself sexually attracted to Alsemero – to replace Beatrice in her marriage bed. These alchemical potions promise to empirically test Beatrice's purity, and in her aim to emulate it, Beatrice is seeking the correct performance of virginity and female virtue: "Give the party you suspect the quantity of a spoonful of the water in the glass M, which upon her that is a maid makes three several effects: 'twill make her incontinently gape, then fall into a sudden sneezing, last into a violent laughing – else dull, heavy and lumpish" (4.1.46-50). The impossibility of ensuring virginity through the administration of a test is made possible in the drama, and in the embodied performance of the actors. Beatrice knows she must prepare to falsely emulate virginity to guarantee her value. However, it is not her reaction when administered the virginity test that arouses suspicion in Alsemero and his companion Jasperino.

After chasing Diaphanta to "a back part of the house, a place [they] chose for private conference," Jasperino overhears "[his] bride's voice in the next room … / And, lending more attention, found Deflores / Louder than she" (4.2.91-96). Alsemero asks Beatrice to drink from the glass, and is wholly reassured by her feigned response, telling her that she has "given [him] such joy of heart, / That can never be blasted," announcing to Jasperino that the matter is "settled" and to Beatrice that she is "Chaste as the breath of heaven, or morning's womb / That brings the day forth" (4.3.145-150). It is Jasperino's *second* sighting of Deflores and Beatrice together, engaged in conversation in the garden (another Edenic reference), that induces Alsemero to confront her (5.1.1-11). When Jasperino cautions that the encounter he witnessed "has showed / Enough for deep suspicion," (5.3.1-3) Alsemero responds that

The black mask

That so continually was worn upon't

Condemns the face for ugly ere't be seen –

Her despite to him, and so seeming bottomless. 5.3.4-6

Here, Alsemero describes Beatrice's "black mask" of deceit – in having convinced him of her scorn for Deflores – and "condemns [her] face for ugly ere't be seen," suggesting that her very act of dishonesty has marred her beauty, which he once described as holy. This is the ultimate manifestation of the play's preeminent discourse on the stability of patriarchal systems, which demand that personal virtue be mirrored in external beauty. Beatrice, before she is revealed to have a cruel, self-involved streak, is described as virtuous and beautiful. Deflores's impurity is on display, clearly reflected in his physical appearance. Beatrice's, however, is not. Once Beatrice's transgressions have been revealed, Alsemero is quick to disrupt her façade of beauty and virtue:

ALSEMERO: Neither your smiles nor tears

Shall move or flatter me from my belief:

You are a whore.

BEATRICE: What a horrid sound it hath!

It blasts a beauty to deformity;

Upon what face soever that breath falls,

It strikes it ugly. (5.3.30-35)

Having learned of her crime with Deflores and her loss of her virginity to him, Alsemero immediately labels Beatrice a whore, to which she expresses that the word “whore” destroys and deforms the beauty of the face it is directed at, rendering it ugly. This ties virtue and beauty together on one hand and impurity and deformity together on the other—suggesting that if “whoredom” deforms, then physiognomic evidence of those misdeeds should be visible; the loss of purity must announce itself visibly and clearly. Alsemero is quick to disparage Beatrice’s beauty because he initially believed it to be a marker of virtue. He is uncomfortable that she was able to convince him that she was, indeed, pure. Beatrice’s most grave crime, in Alsemero’s eyes, is that she challenged his comfort in the patriarchal system that was supposed to ensure her purity. Alsemero then seeks to regain this comfort by renouncing the pure beauty he once described and replacing it with sinful ugliness, even in a face that may never actually change. Beatrice, ashamed of what she perceives as her own fall, is complicit in the construction of her identity as a “whore,” aiding and encouraging Alsemero in his process of rebuilding and resignification by agreeing that she is “deformed” and “ugly.” This is an extremely complex and loaded reaction to Alsemero’s words considering that the loss of Beatrice’s maidenhead comes initially in the form of coercion and assault. Beatrice is a tragic figure because she is entirely

unable to envision redemption for herself and is unable to reconcile the multiple realities in which she simultaneously exists.

When Beatrice tries in vain to appeal to Alsemero, beseeching him to remember that she is "true unto [his] bed" (5.3.83), Alsemero confines Beatrice to a closet, calling their marital bed "a charnel" – a burial place, a cemetery (OED n. 1a)– and its sheets "shrouds for murdered carcasses" (5.3.84-85). When Deflores enters the room, Alsemero reveals that he knows the conditions of the former's relationship with Beatrice and locks him into the closet as well. Beatrice's cry of "Oh, oh, oh!" may be dually interpreted as sexual pleasure and/or pain caused by her mortal wound (5.3.140, Ioppolo n. 140-1). This reading plays with the conceit of orgasm as a *petit mort* – little death – and provides an interestingly ambiguous conclusion for the play's consistent commingling of sex with death.

At the intersection of the physiognomic and physiological in *The Changeling* is a fundamental question: if Beatrice's physical/moral "deformation" must be superimposed onto her body by Alsemero and does not actually occur in response to her moral crimes, and if she can perform the feminine virginity and purity she is initially ascribed even when administered an "empirical" test, then can the institutions of patriarchy track and account for female virtue? In the physiognomic sense, Beatrice fears that her body will betray her uncleanliness to Alsemero, and that what she perceives as inner ugliness will be manifested outwardly: a public spectacle of the abject female, Eve in the garden with the serpent. She is left to emulate the virginity of another woman in order to "prove" her own. Tying the two together is a concern with bodies and embodiment, with purity and impurity, cleanliness and uncleanliness, virginity and whoredom, virtue and sin. It is the obsession with the idea that if there is something perverse or flawed in a woman, it should be visible and externalized for the fathers, suitors, husbands, and fiancés of the

world – and it derives from a profound patriarchal fear that sometimes that which *is* deemed perverse or flawed might remain completely invisible, like a fruit that rots from the inside out.

Beatrice's influence does not dissipate with her death. Instead, as Sara Luttfring points out, Beatrice's death leaves the family "ultimately barren," noting that "the female body, and the bodily narratives women construct about and through it, might be threatening and unreliable, but they are also absolutely necessary to the coherence and continuation of patriarchal society" (Luttfring 114-115). The addition of Diaphanta's death leaves a cast of male characters onstage with the sole exception of Isabella, who, as an inversion of Beatrice, feigned madness and unchastity to protect her wifely chastity in the face of her husband's misplaced distrust. In doing so, she both successfully defends herself and reveals that her husband is unable to protect her (Luttfring 115). Alibius is chastened by his failure to trust Isabella, his witless and cruel sexual endangerment of her, and her clever self-preservation. The rest of the men are wholly stripped of their *own* patriarchal imperative to produce an heir and ensure the continuation of title and property. In citing a quote in which Alsemero suggests preference for the "visor / O'er [Beatrice's] cunning face" which "became [her]," (5.3.47-48) Luttfring argues that "there is also the sense that [the men] would have preferred it if Beatrice-Joanna had been able to persist in representing herself as virginal, even if this representation was false … that it was Beatrice-Joanna's appearance of virtue that he desired at least as much as, if not more than, her physical intactness" (115). "*The Changeling*," she concludes, "thus shows patriarchal authority to hinge on women's ability to physically and verbally enact their own sexual containment, a performance that may or may not correspond to actual sexual experience" (115). I agree with Luttfring's argument that the ultimate basis for patriarchal control is the construction of bodily narrative both with and against the world of abstract tropes and symbols which Schnitzspahn discusses.

Bodily narrative is an inherently *personal* identity method. Beatrice recognizes this world of signs, and yet is ultimate unable to construct a personalized adaptation, which leads to her failure to assert personal control.

This is the central conflict of Beatrice's character. Beatrice has a degree of understanding that the virgin status she wishes to claim depends on the construction and maintenance of social performance. Still, she holds on to a firm belief in her own material and moral fall, refusing to believe in the potentially regenerative properties of reclaimed virginity and instead hopelessly submitting to the patriarchal wills of the men around her. Her commitment to a shame-based narrative precludes the possibility for redemption, recovery, and reclamation. This leads Beatrice into a state of cognitive dissonance. With the initial societal transgression of her conspiracy to murder Piracquo, Beatrice asserts the primacy of her life over his, and psychically exits the world of patriarchal convention. But she has so deeply internalized those very structures that seek to assert control over her body that she cannot go far enough to fashion herself a new identity – as a murderess, as a survivor, as a complex woman, as a force of resistance – within the muddy moral waters she has entered. Beatrice's performance of virginity is subversive until it fails her. *The Changeling* does not see Beatrice as an unequivocal villain or victim, and it fails to provide her with alternative options. In her death, Beatrice is prohibited from accessing a newer, more flexible virginal modality. In only admitting to her "fallen-ness" and her unfitness for marriage to Alsemero in Deflores's sexual blackmail rather than in her own solicitation of a murder, Beatrice has relinquished her commitment to traditional morality, but not to the system of patriarchal control. Instead, Beatrice clings to it at least as tightly as all of the men in her world do, and this is why she eventually meets her undoing.

PART TWO

The Two Noble Kinsmen

&

All’s Well That Ends Well

Staging Virginal Madness in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*

The focus of this chapter is to examine an early modern understanding of the virgin body: its function, its purpose, and its value. To this end, I will explore the culmination of ideas, concerns, and attitudes as rooted in period cultural discourse. My analysis considers the body from the medical perspective as well as the literary and dramatic to piece together a broad view of the significance of the virginal female body, with a focus on the complex intersection of virginity and disease. A long medical precedent of "virgin disease," or "diseases of young girls," – by which the adolescent body was characterized as inherently prone to diseased and rendered imbalanced by burgeoning sexual desire – experienced renewed interest in the period as it took on a new name: "greensickness." The notion of a 'virgin disease' can be traced as far back as the Hippocratic *Peri Parthenion* (c. 380 BCE), or *Diseases of Young Girls*, in which Hippocrates describes a malady common in "young girls of an age for marriage, who remain unmarried… especially at the time of the descent of their menses":

> Before puberty they were healthy. Afterwards blood is gathered into their wombs for evacuation. Yet, when the mouth of the exit is not opened and more blood flows in due to their nourishment and the increase of their body, then the blood, not having a way to flow out, rushes from the quantity towards the heart and the diaphragm. When these parts are filled, the heart becomes numb; then lethargy seizes them after the numbness, then after the lethargy, madness seizes them. (250-251)

Hippocrates's description of this disease establishes the category of the "virgin illness"–a classical predecessor of what virgin illness would become by the mid-sixteenth century. In this

"disease of young girls," the virginal female falls victim to her own body, which fails to purge her supposedly foul and putrefying blood. Hippocrates points out that the blood flow itself is caused by the nourishment and development of these pubescent girls' bodies, which seems to suggest that menstruation is a normal if not healthy byproduct of physical maturation in young women.

For Hippocrates, the accumulation of blood in the womb – the "evacuation" of which is stopped by a blockage in the "mouth of the exit" – is the problem. When the womb overflows, the collected blood is redirected throughout the body and "rushes from the quantity towards the heart and the diaphragm."

> When these things occur in this way, the young girl is mad from the intensity of the inflammation; she turns murderous from the putrefaction; she feels fears and terrors from the darkness. From the pressure around the heart, these young girls long for nooses. Their spirit, distraught and sorely troubled by the foulness of their blood, attracts bad things, but names something else even fearful things. They command the young girl to wander about, to cast herself into wells, and to hang herself, as if these actions were preferable and completely useful. Even when without visions, a certain pleasure exists, as a result of which she longs for death, as if something good. (251)

In Hippocrates's virgin disease, the recirculation of menstrual blood to the heart causes the afflicted to descend into madness. He alludes to the attraction of "bad" and "fearful things" to the young girls' spirits, that "command" the young girls to commit suicide. The female body for Hippocrates is thus predisposed to circulatory malfunction associated with the womb. He equates the wombed body with an inability to maintain proper function, exposing its supposed need to be

treated and regulated. “Virgin disease,” even in a medical world that may have predated theories of sexual binarism, was a “female” pathology – *not* as it belonged solely to wombed bodies, as countless period writings refer to men suffering from illnesses similarly coded as “virginal” or “lovesick”, but as it was physically traced to the fallacy of the dysfunctional womb, and as no common male analogue suggests that bodies lacking wombs received the same systemic medical attention or were similarly tied to inherent physiology.

The appropriate treatment as posed by Hippocrates is for young girls to marry “as quickly as possible” and conceive. Recovery and restoration of health depends on the realization of the sexual and reproductive potential of young female patients, in turn ensuring the realization of their cultural value as wives. In asserting that “before puberty they were healthy,” the intrinsic unhealthiness of the pubescent body is implicit: the pre-pubescent body is a healthy one. The pubescent and post-pubescent body is characterized by illness and superfluity. The body is only healthy so long as it can regularly purge its excess. In depicting puberty – in particular, menarche, a quintessential step in the maturation of the female body – as a threat to the body’s health, female sexual maturity in Hippocrates is problematized.

In western European medical thought, Renaissance Europe witnessed a widespread return to classical medical texts such as the original Hippocratic corpus. Translated from the Greek into the Latin of the early modern medical community in 1525 by Marco Fabio Calvi, such writings challenged some of the dominant Galenic theories of the time.[5] Galen’s view of the human body was characterized by shifting balances of the four humors – black and yellow bile, phlegm, and blood. The Galenic body was a volatile and leaky vessel, and prone to imbalance and change. As a result of the emphasis of fluids over flesh, gender boundaries were more of a spectrum than a strict binary. Galenic medical practices were established under the Roman Empire and, along

with practices established by Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and Arabic physicians, remained major influences in European and Western Asian medicine until the late Middle Ages (van den Tweel and Taylor 4-5). Before the advent of centralized medical infrastructure and standardized practice, folk medicine was a mainstay of medical culture.

It is precisely these popular traditions that Helen King attempts to trace in her medical history of the disease of virgins. King situates greensickness – by far the most popular early modern term for virgin disease – in a longer lineage, contextualizing the way in which folk and vernacular medical traditions and revived classical practice converged in the late sixteenth century. Many historians tend to consider Johannes Lange's 1554 *De morbo virgineo* – a "disease of virgins" – from his *Epistolae medicinales* to be the first medical description of the early modern "virgin disease." It is likely that the recovery of classical texts gave rise to an early modern incarnation of the classical virgin illness, as Lange's 1554 letter to an unnamed "old friend" regarding the treatment of his daughter Anna's illness references both the Hippocratic *Peri Parthenion* and Galen's third book on *Dyspnoea* as sources for his diagnosis of the patient.

Rather than constituting one disease, the *morbo virgineo* is an umbrella for the many symptomologies attributed to the young female body. Lange references common terms used in the diagnosis of the virgin disease in the sixteenth century, asserting that it is known to other physicians and specialists by names such as "white fever, pale face & the fever of love." Because 'virgin disease' takes on different vernacular labels, it corresponds with a variable set of symptoms. Among the more common are pallor, an avoidance of meat, malnourishment, heart palpitations, difficulty breathing, swelling in the legs and feet, lethargy, numbness, and dizziness. Although most of the common early modern symptoms are more physiological than emotional, others describe similar symptoms, such as the melancholy and suicidal urges expressed in the

writings of Hippocrates. Lange writes that "There are many illnesses in the catalogue of diseases, lacking a name & not a treatment. Nor has this disease a proper name, as much as it is peculiar to virgins, might indeed be called '*virgineus*'" (Lange 446). Through Lange's letter, we can point to the most important attributes of this early modern virgin disease category: it is rooted in classical medicine; it lacks a formal name; despite this it is widely known throughout European vernacular medicine by numerous names and linked to various symptomologies; it affects virgin women; that it can be treated by conception within marriage.

"Greensickness" was, before it became a "virgin disease," explained after Galen as a humoral imbalance more akin to a form of jaundice or digestive disease generally considered to be tied to the blood. The earliest published use of "greene sicknes" dates to Andrew Boorde's 1547 *Breviary of Helthe*, where it is listed alongside "greene laundes" and attributed to "corruption of blood and debilitie of nature, and faintnesse about the heart" (10). Greensickness's transition into a gendered disease began in the late sixteenth century, with evidence directly linking the disease to the "want of a husband" as early as 1583 with the publication of Robert Greene's *Mamillia. A mirrour or looking-glasse for the ladies of Englande* (Greene 8). Many other contemporary texts, however, still viewed greensickness as related to liver and digestive function. The lack of a centralized or standardized medical practice in the period meant that both theory and practice varied widely, both locally and temporally. By the middle of the seventeenth century, however, the cultural identity of greensickness had been cemented as a disease caused by menstrual blockage in virgin women. Nicolas Culpeper's *Directory for midwives* defines greensickness as follows.

> The Virgins disease, is the changing of the natural colour into a pale and green with faintness, heaviness of body, loathing of meat, palpitation of heart, difficult

breathing, sadness swelling of the feet, eyelids and face, from depraved nourishment […]The first cause is stoppage of terms… The causes of the obstructions of the vessels of the womb, are crude humors, and flegmatick slimy blood. (Culpeper 100-101)

Culpeper's green sickness, like Hippocrates's disease of young virgins, is caused by the accumulation of "crude humors" or "flegmatick slimy blood"–menstrual blood–in the womb. The blockage of fluid causes the onset of other conditions such as dropsy (the swelling of limbs with excess fluid), leucophlegmacy (defined by a habit approximating dropsy, accompanied by paleness and redundant sweating), and cachexy (general bodily deterioration linked with chronic disease and malnutrition). Here, the womb is the vessel for the collection of "bad humors": it aggresses upon the female body, made faulty by its inability to maintain balance through purgation. The solution to the greensick problem is–implied in its label as "the Virgins disease"–sexual intercourse, or "venery." "It is probable, and agreeable to reason and experience that Venery is good [… it] heats the womb and the parts adjacent, opens and loosens the passages, so that the terms may better flow to the womb" (Culpeper 106).

Like Hippocrates, Culpeper recommends conception within marriage as the best treatment for greensickness. Sex "loosens the passages," thus relieving the supposed menstrual fluid blockage of the womb. The physical act of sexual intercourse elevates and transforms the penetrative phallus: no longer a mere body part, it becomes a medical cure. Problematizing sexual deficiency or dissatisfaction gives 'venery' the power to resolve perceived female need. Sexual intercourse is medicalized, increasing its social and medical value. Simultaneously, sex is recentered as distinctly for the benefit of the female body, pointing to ideological tensions about the purpose of sex as well as female embodiment. Critically, this sexual intercourse must comply

with the regulations and confines of the institution of marriage–an institution which is available to the young female patient, whose virginity (and thus marriageability) is certified by the fact of her diagnosed illness. The treatment is not just sex, it is also marriage, followed by sex for the purpose of conception. The certification of virginity and prescription of marriage affirms the physician's place within the marital/sexual market whilst ostensibly removing him from the act or burden of the cure. Early modern medicine, by providing tools for policing sexuality and desire in women, participated in and upheld the structures and values of the patriarchy.

The identity of and discourse surrounding greensickness and, more broadly, the virgin symptomology, grew more distinct in early modern England in the seventeenth century. Greensickness was both a reflection of and fuel for cultural concerns surrounding the virgin female body. This complex cycle of influence also found an outlet in period literature that distilled the societal conversation and may have widened the scope of public knowledge. Many period plays include interesting and varying depictions of virgin bodies, sexuality, and desire. I will be looking at the character of the Jailer's Daughter of Shakespeare and Fletcher's *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. The Jailer's Daughter is a young woman suffering so intensely from her unrequited sexual desire for the nobleman Palamon (a Theban prisoner of war) that she is driven to a madness that threatens to destabilize the patriarchal systems she lives in. The Jailer's Daughter is most interesting precisely because of the confluence of her madness with her clear class consciousness. She is nameless, identified solely in economic and patriarchal relation to her father through the Jailer's working-class profession and through his patriarchal ownership of her as an unmarried maiden. She is almost an incidental character, and yet she is indispensable to the dramatic effect of the play. The Jailer's Daughter has been largely overlooked in most critical discourse surrounding Jacobean drama, at times positioned as a cruder footnote to *Hamlet*'s

Ophelia, or as a comical character to an extent rendered amusing or even ridiculous by her illness. My analysis draws upon works by Douglas Bruster and Lorraine Helms, who published interesting interpretations of the Jailer's Daughter as a uniquely political character freed by confines of social normativity to provide crucial – if opaque – social commentary.

Like Helen of *All's Well That Ends Well*, the Jailer's Daughter is aware of the status difference that impedes her sexual satisfaction – but unlike Helen, the Jailer's Daughter's sexual desire is explicit, coursing through her complex soliloquies. Helen, in her virginal desire for Bertram, never wavers in her sanity. The Jailer's Daughter succumbs to madness after Palamon leaves in search for Emilia after she frees him from her father's jail. The Jailer, concerned for his daughter – who has until now rejected the advances of the Wooer – consults a doctor for a "medical" opinion. According to her doctor, the Jailer's Daughter's madness can only be alleviated through calculated sexual deception. He advises her suitor to take on the role of Palamon in wooing and sleeping with her, on the pretense that if the Jailer's Daughter perceives her sexual desire satisfied, her sanity will return.

The trope of madness arising from unsatisfied sexual desire can be present in greensickness, the frenzy of the womb, and broader diagnostic categories of hysterica passio and melancholy. Madness was thought to be caused by morbid fluid imbalances initiated by the bodily strain of unsatisfied sexual desire. The trope of the madwoman is not uncommon in works of Renaissance drama. Her sexuality is often overt, clear, and expressive – her inhibitions eradicated, the madwoman's behavior supersedes propriety, although she often conforms to a certain dramatic code or language. Wavering between opacity and lucidity, the madwoman can be a vehicle for a more incisive commentary than the work's other – "saner" – characters. The Jailer's Daughter's mad virginity is a unique force of sexual and political disruption in the play. I

argue that the excess her virginity inscribes on her – of sexuality, of language, of desire – is the source of a class and gender commentary made available by her madness.

The bulk of the Jailer's Daughter's time onstage occurs after her virginal disease develops, often in long soliloquys. She is in some respects a "choric" character whose sole role as a direct agent in the plot is to free Palamon (Bruster 278). Her disordered "mad" speeches stand in contrast with her initial display of profound social and class awareness in her consideration of her sexual options with Palamon.

> Why should I love this gentleman? 'Tis odds
> He will never affect me: I am base,
> My father the mean keeper of his prison,
> And he a prince. To marry him is hopeless;
> To be his whore is witless. Out upon't,
> What pushes are we wenches driven to
> When fifteen once has found us! (2.4.1-7)

The Jailer's Daughter clearly perceives a certain futility in her desire for Palamon, aware of her low status in comparison with his. She is pragmatic in her evaluation of her prospects, acknowledging that "'Tis odds / He will never affect [her]," because she is "base" whereas he is a "prince." As impossible as it would be to marry him, it would be equally foolish for her to engage in sex with him without the social and financial security provided by marriage. Her casual mention of the prospect of being his "whore" is a sharp class contrast with the play's major plot, in which Arcite and Palamon – two noblemen – who vie for the affections of Emilia, herself sister-in-law of Theseus, Duke of Athens. The Jailer's Daughter then proclaims in annoyance at the lengths to which young women are driven to satisfy their desires, marking

fifteen as an age of both marital availability and burgeoning sexuality. The Jailer's Daughter groups herself under the term "wenches," a potential class identifier with a threefold significance as "a girl, maid, or young woman," a "girl of the rustic or working class," and "a wanton woman; a mistress" (OED n. 1a, b, 2). Her reference of the "pushes" they are "driven to" is a direct allusion to the arousal of adolescent sexual desire.

Although this libido is traditionally meant to be safely channeled into marriage, the Jailer's Daughter weighs other (less normative) sexual alternatives more cogently and confidently than her higher-class counterparts. Her expulsive assertion of frustration – "Out upon't" – individuates between the realms of the physical and the mental by constructing her sexuality as a distinct – at times unwelcome – entity: she identifies her sexual impulses as necessarily separate from the practical world as she understands it. The Jailer's Daughter's lower socioeconomic class grants her access to a world with a different sexual ethos and practice; although the conventions are much the same, her brand of virginity is not initially characterized by a fantasy – class-fantasy, the fantasy of innocence and unknowing – but of an economic awareness that characters such as Emilia need not engage with. Douglas Bruster discusses the recurrence of numbers in the Jailer's Daughter's "mad" discourse as a product of her class, arguing that "her emphasis on figures locates her character in a quotidian, ledger-centered sphere; full of numbers, her speech is the language of reckoning, of the shop and tavern tallies" (282). I maintain that the Jailer's Daughter's class experience is crucial to her individual sexual identity, forming the basis for her navigation of desire and the language she uses to express it. She continues,

First, I saw him …

Next, I pitied him –

And so would any young wench, o' my conscience,

That ever dreamed, or vowed her maidenhead

To a young handsome man. Then, I loved him,

Extremely loved him, infinitely loved him! …

Once, he kissed me.

I loved my lips better ten days after:

Would he would do so every day! (2.4.7-15; 25-27)

The Jailer's Daughter's desire for Palamon, as that of the lovelorn young virgins to whom she compares herself, comes to life here. The evocative nature of her proclamation that she "loved him, extremely loved him, infinitely loved him!" followed by her sexual fantasy that he kissed her occupy an interesting middle-ground between the youthful language of a starry-eyed first lover and the sexually charged language of an assertive lover with realized desire. Upon making her decision to free Palamon, she declares that "would fain enjoy him," in another clear expression of sexual desire (2.4.30), which is followed by her decision to free him:

Say I ventured

To set him free? What says the law then?

Thus much for law or kindred! I will do it!

And this night, or tomorrow, he shall love me. (2.4.30-33)

In her exclamation, "Thus much for law or kindred," the Jailer's Daughter's choice to free Palamon explicitly becomes one which threatens both political and domestic repercussions. She refers to an unspecified "law" which serves as a stand-in for her awareness of the political power structure in which she lives and in which her father directly participates. Freeing Palamon – regardless of her intent – is then both an act of political resistance and domestic agency.

The Jailer's Daughter's unsatisfied sexual desire for Palamon, who abandons her in the woods near Athens in search of Emilia and Arcite, prompts her to decline into greensick madness. She appears onstage for a series of soliloquys in which she grows increasingly detached from reality.[6] When the Wooer finds her on a riverbank, surrounded by water-flowers and bullrush, the Jailer's Daughter has begun talking to herself. He reports back to the Jailer:

> Then she sung
>
> Nothing but 'Willow, willow, willow" and, between,
>
> Ever was 'Palamon, fair Palamon'
>
> And 'Palamon was a tall young man'. The place
>
> Was knee-deep where she sat; her careless tresses
>
> Awreath of bullrush rounded; about her stuck
>
> Thousand fresh water-flowers of several colors…
>
> Rings she made
>
> Of rushes that grew by and to 'em spoke
>
> The prettiest posies: 'Thus our true love's tied',
>
> 'This you may loose, not me,' and many a one.
>
> And then she wept, and sung again, and sighed,
>
> And with the same breath smiled and kissed her hand. (4.1.79-94)

This passage closely aligns the Jailer's Daughter with another, more famous, tragic greensick Shakespearean heroine: *Hamlet*'s Ophelia. The Daughter's "careless tresses" are a dramatic motif associated with female madness – in an early Folio of *Hamlet*, stage directions specify that Ophelia enters "playing on a lute, and her hair down singing," (Charney 452-453). Comparisons

between this speech from the Wooer and Queen Gertrude's speech upon notifying Laertes of Ophelia's death are clear:

> There is a willow grows aslant a brook,
>
> That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream;
>
> There with fantastic garlands did she make
>
> Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples
>
> That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
>
> But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them:
>
> There, on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds
>
> Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke;
>
> When down her weedy trophies and herself
>
> Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide;
>
> And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up:
>
> Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes;
>
> As one incapable of her own distress, or like a creature native and indued
>
> Unto that element: but long it could not be
>
> Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
>
> Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
>
> To muddy death. (4.7.166-183)

Crowned with flowers and rushes, and surrounded by garlands of flowers, both madwomen sing to themselves by the side of a brook. The shared floral and natural imagery (especially the overt parallel with the willowtree) – "hoar leaves, crow-flowers, nettles, daisies," in *Hamlet*, "bullrush, black-eyed maids, mulberries, daffadillies, cherries, damask roses," in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* –

are in part a reflection of the naturalistic state to which sufferers are driven by their madness, and their assimilation into natural spaces outside of the marital domestic spheres that they may not be able to successfully produce. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia drowns herself in this brook – a danger clearly laid out in medical texts on greensickness, such as the Hippocratic *Peri parthenion*, which warns against the disposition of one afflicted to "wander about, to cast herself into wells, and to hang herself, as if these actions were preferable and completely useful." Upon seeing the Wooer across the river, the Jailer's Daughter "saw [him], and straight sought the flood," throwing herself into the river to escape his pursuit (4.1.95).

The figures of Ophelia and the Jailer's Daughter are both a product of a culture which imagined virginity as a deeply unstable and potentially disruptive force. The chief difference between their characters is how the two are conventionally portrayed and consequently understood. The resolution of the Jailer's Daughter's sexual conundrum has conventionally been staged as a plot with both tragic and comic elements. The politics of Ophelia's discourse and eventual death may be more overt than those of the Jailer's Daughter as a result of the class gap between the two. Ophelia is a tragic high-class virgin; the Jailer's Daughter is not. Her attempt to transgress class boundaries in her sexual pursuit of Palamon is pathetically echoed in her eventual marriage with the Wooer. The Jailer's Daughter is eventually returned to the domestic realm she explicitly decided to leave, her attempt to cross class lines is unsuccessful, and the prescription of marriage – framed as a cure – represents little more than the systematization of patriarchal sexual control at the hands of the doctor, the Jailer, and the Wooer. In the taming of her "mad" virginal sexuality in marriage, the Jailer's Daughter no longer poses a threat to political, class, and domestic order. Helen, of *All's Well That Ends Well*, is a character whose plot to marry across class lines is ultimately successful. Her form of virginity is not as internally

malignant as the Jailer's Daughter's in that it does not explicitly endanger her own body, but Helen's employment of her healing power is certainly morally ambiguous. I interpret both Helen and the Jailer's Daughter's forms of virginity as bodily states that take on a form of morbid excess that can be read as a threat – either to their own body in the case of the Jailer's Daughter, or to the bodies of others in the case of Helen.

Helen as "Doctor She"

From its first scene, Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* establishes its interest in the bodies of its main characters. The king of France, suffering greatly from a fistula, has given up hope of treatment and "abandoned his physicians" (1.1.14). The Countess Rossillion bemoans the death of Helen's father, Gerard de Narbon, an able physician "whose skill was almost as great as his honesty," asserting her confidence that had he been living, the king's disease would have long since been cured (1.1.19-20). It is Helen's inheritance of her father's secret "receipts" for cures that enables her to treat the king's fistula and guarantee her choice of husband. Helen, protagonist of *All's Well*, is a fascinating Shakespearean case study. The play itself, far from romantic tragedy, is generally both performed and read as a dark romantic comedy, its overwhelming bleakness driven by the understanding that the apparently virtuous, clever Helen's romantic attentions are inexorably fixed on the unworthy Bertram. *All's Well* still clearly favors Helen: her beauty and virtue are acclaimed by those around her, she proves herself capable of treating the king, she surpasses her low status to marry Bertram, and she overcomes his challenges to the validity of their marriage. By the end of the play, all *is* well that ends well. The way in which Helen's virtuous/virginal status–which is foregrounded throughout the play–factors into her character arc raises questions about sexual agency: both in its manifestations and its repercussions.

Helen's sexual status is neither understated nor implicit. In the first scene, she is approached by Parolles, who instigates a dialogue sometimes referred to by scholars as "the virginity debate" by asking Helen if she, in her solitude, meditates on her virgin status. What

ensues is a quick banter in which each character's stance is made clear. Parolles's is straightforward:

> It is not politic in the commonwealth
> Of nature to preserve virginity. Loss of virginity
> Is rational increase and there was never
> Virgin got til virginity was first lost…
> 'Tis too cold a companion;
> Away with 't! …
> Virginity breeds mites,
> Much like a cheese; consumes itself to the very
> Paring, and so dies with feeding his own stomach.
> Besides, virginity is peevish, proud, idle, made of
> Self-love, which is the most inhibited sin in the
> Canon. (1.1.131-141; 147-152)

Helen holds a more nuanced stance than Parolles's crude one. "How might one do, sir," she asks, "to lose it to her own liking?" (1.1.156-157). Helen, who first asserts that she would "die a virgin," now wonders how she can control her own sexuality, presumably to the ends of marrying Bertram (1.1.141). Parolles represents one dimension of the popular patriarchal view of virginity: that once a maiden is of marriageable – sexually available – age, she should aim to lose her virginity quickly; the maintenance of a virgin state does not signify virtue, but rather a selfish, miserly act of self-love. Virginity is a good to be shared unselfishly. Parolles commodifies the state of virginity itself, calling it "a commodity will lose the gloss with lying; the longer kept, the less worth. Off with't while 'tis vendible" (1.1.152-154). By making

virginity a “vendible” good, he gives it a shelf life: the longer a virgin state is maintained, the less it is worth. The most valuable virgin is the *young* virgin – the virgin with the most sexual appeal and potential. This both fetishizes the inexperienced nubile and reduces her to the status of a commercial object. Parolles then jokes that “Virginity, like an old courtier, wears her cap out of fashion: richly suited, but unsuitable” (1.1.161-163). Virginity, maintained too long, Parolles argues, is not only decreasingly valuable but embarrassing. Through comparing it to a visible item of clothing, Parolles externalizes virginity, seeming to suggest that at least in his world, virginity is not a private matter, but a popular affair, discussed alongside fleeting fashion trends. Virginity is necessarily something that one must have and subsequently relinquish to participate fully in the marriage market. In Parolles’s mind the virgin body, unsexed too long, consumes itself. This parallels the common medical belief that greensickness could cause malnourishment in young women, causing their bodies to waste away. The comparison of unsatisfied sexual desire with a form of morbid consumption gives virginity the power to ruin, corrupt, and destroy. Rather than paint a traditional picture of a virginal body at the mercy of its own instability, Parolles condemns the virgin. The “mites” bred by such selfish, inhibited virginity feed themselves, and in doing so, consume the body and self “to the very paring.” Virginity, in the view of men like Parolles, is intrinsically malignant.

While Helen seems to entertain Parolles’s lewd turns of phrase, she thinks about herself. Her low social status as the daughter of a Rossillion physician is an obstacle to the achievement of her primary goal of marrying Bertram, son of the Countess of Rossillion. By the end of the “virginity debate,” Helen has already begun to hatch a plan to circumvent issues of status and all but ensure her marriage, which she hints at in a monologue at the end of the first scene.

Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie,

Which we ascribe to heaven…

The king's disease--my project may deceive me,

But my intents are fix'd and will not leave me. (1.2.212-225)

In the last couplet of the monologue, Helen alludes to the king's disease–the fistula established earlier–and asserts that her "intents are fix'd" on Bertram's hand. This is an interesting commentary on female desire and marital agency within the social structures which would ordinarily discourage a marriage between two such different people. When the audience gains access to Helen's psyche with this monologue, what it sees is a woman plotting not only to take control over her own marital and sexual status, but also to manipulate the patriarchal social structures that confine her – both of which Helen may successfully achieve. Helen's intelligence and resourcefulness are clearly displayed in this speech, as is her desire for Bertram. What is not clearly displayed is any sign of amorous reciprocity in Bertram. Helen's plan dually symbolizes a remarkable play for female marital agency and a self-interested gambit for an unwilling husband.

The use of the word "remedies" in this speech serves both to refer to the solution to Helen's desire for Bertram and the medical solution she provides for the king's fistula. Helen's successful treatment of the king's fistula constitutes an act of healing, or remedying. Critically, however, Helen's treatment of the fistula is *concealed*. A fistula, or fistule, occurs when an untreated abscess causes an abnormal connection between two organs that do not typically connect. Fistulas – often used to describe unrelated abscesses, ulcers, and sores – of several varieties were relatively common before modern hygiene, but arguably the most common would have been the *fistula in ano*. F. David Hoeniger explains that Shakespeare would have had this in

mind, perhaps ambiguously masking the location of the king's fistula to jokingly suggest this to his audience (290).

Ambiguity, in fact, masks the entire healing process, which takes place offstage. The contents of the medical notes bequeathed to Helen by her late father, Gerard de Narbon, are purposefully left unclear. Of this mysterious cure – "the dearest issue of his practice, / And of his old experience th'only darling," Helen writes that her father "bade [her] store up as a triple eye, / Safer than [her] own two, more dear" (2.1.104-105; 106-107). Well before the play's publication, medical works such as surgeon John Arderne's *Treatises of Fistula in Ano and of fistulae in other parts of the body…* (1376) had addressed the treatment of fistulas, which were often too advanced for topical treatment and required surgical intervention. When Helen offers her services to the king, still nothing is revealed about her medical treatment. It is clear from others' praise that Helen, after her father, is known to be a capable healer – surprising as it is, as the Countess muses, considering that Helen is an "unlearned virgin." Although the king has accepted that he will die of his fistula, Lafeu entreats him to see Helen anyway, calling her "Doctor She." (2.1.77).

> I have spoke
> With one that, in her sex, her years, profession,
> Wisdom and constancy, hath amazed me more
> Than I dare blame my weakness. (2.1.80-83)

Despite his obstinacy, Helen eventually convinces the king to accept the terms of her offer – even by underplaying her own abilities, suggesting that "He that of greatest works is finisher, oft does them by the weakest minister" (2.1.134-135). Their conversation, pertaining

more to the king's acquiescence than the practical plan for a cure, intentionally conceals the body as well as the healing process.

The significance of Helen's role as "Doctor She," however, is complex and cannot be understated. By the early modern period, some female healers had earned local acclaim for their abilities, and a few female doctors had even contributed to the medical canon. The ambiguity of Helen's cure, as well as the secrecy she swore to her dying father, are unsurprising for the time, as some folk practitioners went to lengths to protect their knowledge. In healing the king, Helen places herself in the position of doctor, which not only endows her with agency over the bodies of others but positions her in a conventionally male position. Indeed, Helen bests the physicians who failed to heal the king before her, becoming both healer and savior. And in curing the king, Helen ensures her own aims, and exercises unprecedented agency over her marital prospects. Her marital freedom, however, comes at the cost of Bertram's. Bertram, a young man with status and a title, is depicted as immature, self-centered, and flighty. Although Helen seems to be favored in the play for her virtue, the result is the same: Helen has secured a more-than-reluctant husband by the means she deemed necessary.

A return to the original line "our remedies oft in ourselves do lie" may prompt a consideration of the line's suggestive undertones. Helen's "problem" is her wish to marry Bertram, which is obstructed by her low status. Encoded in Helen's love for Bertram is her sexual attraction to him, which, for her, may only be "legitimately" fulfilled within the confines of marriage. Helen's unfulfilled sexual desire is problematized, even medicalized, by the use of the word "remedy" in reference to the solution she's planned. This parallels the conventional structure of the greensick virgin's need for intercourse, but Helen's agency inverts it: Helen is not a passive patient, prescribed marriage as the end to her menstrual woes. She controls the

terms of her own "remedy." The remedy for the king's illness does also lie in *herself*, as Helen alone has the knowledge that enables his cure. Beyond that still, the remedy for the king's illness may literally *lie in herself*: Helen's cure is stored up as a "triple eye": more valuable to her than her own two eyes. According to Frankie Rubinstein, the "triple eye" may be a sexual pun referring to her vagina or virginity. This reading positions body as remedy, a notion made only more compelling by the sexual subtext of Lafeu's description of Helen,

> Whose simple touch
> Is powerful to araise King Pippen, nay,
> To give great Charlemain a pen in's hand
> And write to her a love line. (2.1.77-80)

Lafeu expresses a joking reluctance to leave the king and Helen together: "I am Cressid's uncle, / That dare leave two together; fare you well" (2.1.95-96). The "araising" of "King Pippen" – "Pepin" in other editions – as well as "to give great Charlemain a pen in's hand" are both allusions to male sexual arousal. These jokes suggest – a suggestion that Shakespeare's audience would have accessed – is that the king's ailment is, in nature or in cure, sexual. The references to the male erection may joke that the king's "fistula," or illness, is his sexual impotence.

The ambiguity around the king's fistula and its cure intentionally masks the healing process, leaving the audience to interpret freely. If the king's ailment is, indeed, the above-mentioned *fistula in ano*, then its requisite surgical intervention constitutes an act of penetration. The penetration of the king's anus unlocks a rich set of implications for sex and gender politics in *All's Well*. Helen's triple-identity as a maiden, a healer, and a [surgical] penetrator is crucial – her act of penetration allows her not only to heal a king, but consequently offers her marital agency, all the while enabling her to ostensibly maintain her virginal state. These sides of

Helen's identity intersect in interesting permutations. It is not merely that her act of healing depends on her [surgical] penetration of the king; I posit that the effectiveness of this act of healing depends on the mystical potency of Helen's virginity itself, reserved as a powerful force and harnessed by Helen in the achievement of her ends.

When Helen finally convinces the king to allow her to try to heal his fistula, it is by appealing to his notions of female humility and Christian modesty: when the king asks, "Upon thy certainty and confidence / What dar'st thou venture?" Helen replies,

> Tax of impudence,
>
> A strumpet's boldness, a divulged shame;
>
> Traduced by odious ballads, my maiden's name
>
> Seared otherwise; nay, worse of worst, extended
>
> With vilest torture let my life be ended. (2.1.167-172)

If Helen's cure proves ineffective, she will not only be subject to social shaming and alienation, but ruin, torture, and death. The phrases "tax of impudence" and "a divulged shame" speak to the perceived immodesty, disrespect, and presumptiveness of Helen's promise to cure the king. Helen's language takes on a strong sexual charge in these lines, comparing her boldness in believing herself capable of curing the king to the boldness of a "strumpet"– a sexually promiscuous woman or prostitute – and declaring that failure would "sear" her "maiden name." Helen's "maiden name" refers to her propriety, virginity, and modesty. In Helen's words to the king, her failure strips her of all virtue, and relegates her to the status of the morally – sexually – abject. The stakes of Helen's appeal to the king are high: either she ensures social elevation through an advantageous marriage or risks utter social (sexual) ruin.

By emphasizing modesty, virtue, and propriety in her suit to the king, Helen begins almost to fashion herself into a saint, drawing comparisons with the tradition of virgin martyrdom. She is clearly aware of the cultural value of her status and uses it in skillful manipulation of her narrative. In explaining her plan to the Countess Rossillion, Helen insists that

> There's something in't
> More than my father's skill…
> That his good receipt
> Shall for my legacy be sanctified
> By th' luckiest stars in heaven. (1.3.239-243)

This serves to elevate Helen's cure to a miraculous status. Interestingly, Hoeniger compares Helen to Saint Helena, mother of Constantine, who, like Shakespeare's Helen, performs a "divinely sanctioned, miraculous cure" (Hoeniger 293). Helen's cure is ensured not only by her father's expertise, but by something greater – something heavenly. The king, convinced of Helen's cure, responds that he believes "some blessed spirit doth speak his powerful sound within an organ weak," agreeing with Helen's earlier suggestion that God enacts miracles through unsuspecting vessels like herself – a uneducated, unmarried virgin woman of low status. Helen asks the king not only to trust her, but to trust *heaven*. In humbly deemphasizing her active role in healing and emphasizing her passive role as a conduit for heavenly acts, Helen cleverly distinguishes herself from the experience-based "empirics" the king so disdains. In her elevation to divine savior, Helen's virtue and ability is sanctified, almost deified; she becomes a saintly conduit for the king's cure. The cure itself is indeed widely deemed a miracle, with the publication of a broadside that calls it "A showing of a heavenly effect in an earthly actor"

(2.3.23-24). Helen's mysterious ability to cure the king of his fistula makes her so powerful that she is an actor of "heavenly effect," a role to which she may only be entitled due to her apparently unsullied virtue. Helen's maiden status – both an inalienable part of her identity and a status she seeks to lose – takes on a wondrous, divine power that reflects the cultural value of virginity. Virginity, for Parolles, is malignant and destructive. For onlookers of the king's recovery, it serves as a wellspring for her divine healing abilities. But what does it signify for Helen?

Helen's healing abilities extend, in a way, past her curing the king. She also "heals" Bertram of his less virtuous husbandly qualities through her legitimization of their marriage. When Bertram abandons Helen, he issues her a challenge he deems impossible: prove that she has taken his ring and fallen pregnant by him, and he will accept her as his wife. In an interesting subversion of typical marital sexual dynamics, Bertram withholds from Helen the act of consummation – which would typically realize a marriage. Proof acts as an interesting conceit in Renaissance drama, reflecting a broader cultural concern with ensuring purity. In Thomas Middleton's *The Changeling*, as I have discussed, protagonist Beatrice-Joanna is asked to prove her virginity by ingesting a tonic in front of her would-be husband Alsemero. In *All's Well*, however, Bertram asks that Helen prove she is *not* a virgin. He places the onus of consummation – and thus sexual responsibility – on Helen.

Because Bertram views his marriage with Helen as invalid, he can justify his pursuit of the maiden Diana, who cooperates with Helen to help the latter meet Bertram's demands. The linkage between these conceits of proof and virginity attempt to address fundamental fears about the internality of female virtue and desire. It is the obsession with the idea of the *secreta mulierum*, or the secrets of the female body.[7] To put it plainly: the patriarchy depends on the

ensured cultural value of women as a marital/sexual commodity. If women can conceal desire, impurity, and sexuality, then they can destabilize the systems to which they are confined. It is only by revealing/ensuring virtue that these systems can attempt to regain stability.

To legitimize her marriage with Bertram, Helen enlists Diana's assistance in a Shakespearean bed-trick. The bed-trick, Kaara Peterson argues, is more than just a plot device in the dramatic toolbox, as both women required for the bed-trick have a "highly circumscribed identity," and because the trick itself depends on popular medical constructs of the time (Peterson 378). One either desires to avoid sexual intercourse to protect her maidenhood or to protect the secret of her lack thereof. The other may desire sexual intercourse for a variety of reasons. Their desires are in balance, complementary. In *All's Well That Ends Well*, Helen solicits the bed-trick, utilizing Bertram's unrequited sexual desire for the virgin Diana to achieve her aim of sexual intercourse with Bertram. Hypothetically, Helen *cannot* prove that Bertram is the father of the child she carries. There is no empirically accurate Renaissance paternity test she and Bertram can take; the bed-trick exists in an onstage world subject to its own sexual laws, in which sex and virginity are things that can be proved and externalized in neater configurations than the world offstage.

In the world of *All's Well*, the success of the trick depends on Helen's sexual fulfillment, and her conquest of the errant Bertram. It is Helen's myopic pursuit of Bertram that drives the plot device of the bed-trick – in bed, Bertram believed himself visited by Diana. It is Helen who consummates her marriage with Bertram. The legitimization of their marriage leads Bertram to finally accept Helen as his wife, curing him of his unworthy ways. The bed-trick also, however, represents a breach of sexual consent. In her trespass on Bertram's supposed liaison with Diana, Helen effectively rapes Bertram, forcibly subduing his desire for sexual and marital freedom and

overcoming his clear resistance to marrying her. Within the context of this play I take rape to include acts of sex that depend on non-physical force such as coercion and deception: Helen does not so much win Bertram as she outsmarts and dominates him. It should be noted that this may not have been the view of a period audience. Her actions may have been viewed as a clever restitution of marital values, or as a necessary evil in response to her abandonment. Her agency, derived originally from a healing act, is transmuted into violence and deceit. In her relationship with Bertram, Helen becomes pursuer, and Bertram becomes an object of pursuit. He no longer holds the sexual agency he thinks he does because he has unknowingly given it to Helen, imbuing her sexuality with new influence. Helen's violent sexual mastery of the unruly Bertram "tames" him.

Helen combines marital with sexual agency through the bed-trick and the subsequent legitimization of the marriage through consummation. Indeed, Helen wields enough sexual power to in a sense conquer both the king and Bertram. The king's fistula is defined not by a malignant *growth*, which might even signpost a perverse sexual potency, but by a malignant *abscess.* His illness is defined by empty space succumbing to bacterial infection and consuming its own mass, causing the formation of an unusual passageway between organs and/or body cavities. As such, it is defined by the empty space it creates, like a vacuum within the flesh. Corporeal decay and physical absence [of flesh] aligns the king's fistula with vaginal virginity, a physical state which is defined necessarily by a complete absence of penetration, and which is believed holds the power to destroy the body itself.

In both cases, penetration is medical: the cure for the fistula is surgical, and the cure for greensickness is intercourse. Helen's medical – potentially surgical – power over the king's cure gives her agency over his body and renders him physically beholden to Helen. It is a form of

sodomy, foreign penetration that resists or subverts patriarchal sexual economy. As an expression of non-normative sexuality, Helen's healing of the king, permitted by her virginity, has the power to complicate her expression of sexuality. It is a source of power with which she is able to effectively bargain her way into the economic and social nobility. Her body becomes the vessel for a virginal force that drives Helen's sexual desire for Bertram, enables her "miraculous cure," affects the sexual politics of her healing practices, and ultimately drives her to an almost medical malignancy in her control over the bodies of the men around her.

CONCLUSIONS

Virginity was a powerful cultural status in the Renaissance period – it operated a signal of virtue, and yet it was simultaneously a dangerous and possibly disruptive force that posed a physical and ideological threat to the body and even to the patriarchal social order. When I began my work studying the distinct ways in which Renaissance medical discourse began to shape a new conception of the virgin body – and the human body more broadly – as a pathological, systematic entity, my literary analyses were limited to greensick female characters. In conducting my research, I often found myself wrestling with the profound complexity of the various spheres of cultural influence, and with the potential feminist repercussions of my analyses. My aim is to bring different representations of virgin bodies into conversation with one another as parts of a broader constellation. While I was and am interested in the cultural iconography of the diseased virgin, I grew increasingly fascinated by virgin characters whose narratives were not confined to illness.

The virginity of which I speak is both affect and effect, an ongoing somatic process in which the virgin is directly involved in the construction of her identity. I hoped to explore new possibilities for these virgin women not to erase the ideological structures within which they functioned but to utilize a new and evolving theoretical vocabulary to examine them both as imagined characters with genuine complexities, and as legible evidence of a cultural consciousness. Virginity was then and remains a fiction that required active and continuous collective participation for survival. Sarah Salih concluded her book *Versions of Virginity* by eloquently maintaining that virginity "is never a default category; no one is ever born a virgin, in the full sense, and so it is always insecure, dynamic, but also recoupable. Virginity is a process in

time, with a beginning, and an end" (242). It is both an intensely personal status to claim, and yet inherently public in its dependence on an audience. Although virginity suggests perfection, its performances are imperfect, flawed, and human. The virgin body is also subject to the eternally fruitless endeavor of finding proof where there is none.

Virginity is not only a crucial component of the Renaissance sexual and social order, its value under constant debate in the Protestant Reformation, but – I maintain – central to the ordering of these dramatic characters' identities. I believe that their personal relationships to virginity can be configured as the source of their capacity to affect the spaces around them. In *Measure for Measure*, Isabella's virtue is grounded in her commitment to virginity, which I have argued can be read in modern terms of queerness as an intentional non-normative sexual practice. Her purity arouses the desire of the play's other "virgin," the fiercely ascetic Lord Angelo. Isabella's commitment to a life of chastity restores order and saves her brother. In *The Changeling*, Beatrice-Joanna's attempts to perform virginity fail not because of the fiction of empirical "proof" but because she cannot envision reconstructing a version of virginity for herself that extends past the confines of the patriarchal virginal vocabulary. *The Changeling* is also about the violence that ensues when – to put it simply – people care too much about virginity. The figure of the Jailer's Daughter in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* represents the biological threat of virginity. She is the best embodiment of the Renaissance "frenzy of the womb." Helen of *All's Well That Ends Well* uses her virginity, as well as her father's healing abilities, to successfully transcend class boundaries and marry the man she desires where the Jailer's Daughter failed to do so. She is an interesting example both of the power of virginity to heal those around them and its more morbid or disruptive potential. Each of these women – with varying degrees of success – barter with their virginity, harnessing it as a unique source of

personal control within the confines of a patriarchal society that traditionally denied women many forms of self-determination that were available to men, and limited the personal agency they could exercise. These characters *use* their virginity; they order their lives around their virginity; they structure themselves *with* their virginity. They are intelligent, savvy, and complicated, and the way in which they wield the power they have reflects their intense awareness of its conditionality.

Despite its abstraction, virginity has the potential to offer bodily innovation in a way that is still extremely present and salient in our modern discourses on sex and sexuality. It seems to me as though there is no grand purpose for my research other than to add to the evolving scholarly discourse surrounding virginity and virgin bodies, and to begin to think about these concepts in new ways. I think it does not need a grand purpose to justify its existence, and that it is enough that I have found the virgin body to be an interesting thing to think with and about, in decoding and reflecting on cultural ideas about sex and sexuality. I am deeply indebted to the research of the many brilliant cultural historians and medieval and Renaissance scholars who are doing just that. I am also profoundly grateful for the help and guidance I have received from my advisor, Professor Aaron Kitch, and the three members of my committee, Professors Ann Kibbie, Emma Maggie Solberg, and Aviva Briefel.

NOTES

[1] Even now, there is a thread of pages littered across the Internet with titles such as “10 Benefits of Semen Retention that [Will] Turn You [Into An] Alpha Male,” or “19 Powerful Benefits of Semen Retention: A Warrior Strategy.” Published by pseudoscientists on irreputable sites with the chief aim of attracting web traffic and advertising revenue from the woefully celibate, these articles boast the supposed benefits of withholding ejaculation, such as increased motivation, sleep quality, sexual attractiveness, creative energy, intellectual and scholarly aptitude, and confidence. The site Retention Goal proclaims in bold text that “Semen is the real vitality in man.” For more information, see “19 Powerful Benefits of Semen Retention: A Warrior Strategy.” *Mr. Mindblowing*, 26 Sept. 2021, https://mrmindblowing.com/semen-retention/; “15 Benefits of Semen Retention.” *Retention Goal*, https://retentiongoal.com/15-benefits-of-semen-retention/.

[2] The purpose of Elyot’s tract is to instruct the common reader “whereby every man may know the state of his own body, the preservation of health, and how to instruct well his physician in sickness that he be not deceived” (Elyot 1). Elyot, who never sought physician training, sought to educate the lay reader in basic healthy living, including basic nutrition and the diagnosis of common diseases, with the core tenet that every man is fundamentally responsible for knowing and caring for their body. The body-knowledge that Elyot encourages requires the creation of a bodily narrative not dissimilar from the *virginal* bodily narrative as it suggests that the person most qualified to speak authoritatively on the status of the body should not be its physician but its owner. This opens up a more capacious interpretation of the possibility of unconventional virginities.

[3] At the end of the first scene, Deflores retrieves a pair of gloves Beatrice has discarded. When she leaves, he attempts to pull the gloves onto his own hands and proclaims that "She had rather wear [his] pelt tanned in a pair / Of dancing pumps than [he] should thrust [his] fingers / Into her sockets here" (1.1.224-227). His "thrusting" his fingers into her glove "sockets" is a substitution for his desire for sexual penetration. Deflores's erotic fixation on Beatrice's hands is again alluded to when Beatrice touches his face, and promises to make him a face tonic (2.2.81; 84)

[4] The image of Beatrice arguing her case before a tribunal is likely a clear reference to the aforementioned trials of Frances Howard, who sought an annulment of her marriage to the Earl of Essex. Howard was granted her annulment, but not without considerable skepticism from the English public. Rumors suggested variously that Howard, who married her husband at the age of thirteen, had engaged in an extramarital sexual affair with her second husband, Robert Carr, or that she had sent her maiden cousin in her stead for the famous virginity panel in which a veiled Howard was examined by a jury of midwives and matrons, etc. Only years later, Howard and Carr – later named the Earl of Somerset – were tried for their suspected involvement in the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury, a former friend of Carr's who strongly opposed the marriage. Howard eventually confessed to conspiring to poison Overbury. She and the Earl of Somerset were briefly held in the Tower of London, and eventually pardoned. Their lower-class accomplices to the crime were executed. I am indebted to the historical overview of the trial included in Sara Luttfring's article on "Bodily Narratives and the Politics of Virginity in 'The Changeling' and the Essex Divorce." For a primary text chronicling both the Essex and Overbury trials, see Sir Francis Bacon's *A True and Historical Relation of the Poysoning of Sir Thomas Overbury*, London, 1641. For a more detailed analysis and examination, see Mara Amster's chapter in *The Single Woman in Medieval and Early Modern England: Her Life and*

Representation, eds. Laurel Amtower and Dorothea Kehler, Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2003; Alastair Bellany's *The Politics of Court Scandal in Early Modern England: News Culture and the Overbury Affair, 1603-1660*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

[5] Unlike Hippocrates, Galen is thought not to have written a gynecological text. Galenic gynecology is drawn from excerpts from the many texts attributed to him.

[6] For analysis of the Jailer's Daughter's soliloquys, see Douglas Bruster's article on "The Jailer's Daughter and the Politics of Madwomen's Language."

[7] The original *Secreta mulierum* (or *De secretis mulierum*) is a work of thirteenth-century natural philosophy frequently – possibly erroneously – attributed to German Dominican friar St. Albertus Magnus. The *Secreta* was written to instruct men (likely monks) in female anatomy, reproduction, and sexuality. In her translation from the original Latin, Helen Rodnite Lemay comments that Pseudo-Magnus' message is that the female body and sexuality is fundamentally evil, lascivious, and corrupt.

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