Precarious Wife: Narratives of Marital Instability in Medieval and Early Modern Literature

By

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York 2014
This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

PRECARIOUS WIFE: NARRATIVES OF MARITAL INSTABILITY IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN LITERATURE

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Precarious Wife intervenes in the propagation of the binary—of privilege and marginalization—inherent in discussions of the institutional identity of wife in the medieval and early modern periods by exposing the vulnerability and malleability of the category often ignored or minimized in discussions of pre-modern women. Drawing on Judith Butler’s work on vulnerability, this dissertation questions the normative trajectory of daughter, wife, widow for medieval and early modern women that excludes people with alternate narratives or identities. While men’s subjectivity spanned multiple identities based on their class, rank, career, religious practices, community, and networks of kinship, women were almost exclusively defined in relation to a male authority. The limitation of “wife” as the lens through which we discuss medieval and early modern women requires critique. Despite cultural expectations of social cache and stability that marriage was presumed to afford, many wives found themselves in precarious conditions because of their marital status. By continuing to view wifehood as the primary and desirable classification for women, modern scholars risk re-inscribing cultural narratives of the idealized good wife while overlooking how women appropriated the narrative for their own ends in order to combat the vulnerability, coercion, and violence that they faced
due, in part, to the expectations of deference that defined the role of good wife. By attending to
the instability of marriage and uncovering the permeability of conjugal relationships, this
dissertation analyzes what happens to women who lose their connection to their central male
authority: their husbands. In doing so, this project refutes the notion that “wife” was a stable and
knowable category sufficient to define women by showing that it was partial, at best, and
ideologically inscribed, at worst.
Dedicated to

Ronald G. Sherwood

and in memory of

Lynn G. Sherwood.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am humbled by the support and encouragement I received from teachers, colleagues, family, and friends throughout my graduate studies and the writing of this dissertation. It is with deepest gratitude that I thank the following people for their patience, guidance, and generosity.

First, I would like to thank my dissertation committee. Mario DiGangi’s compassionate direction, careful reading, thoughtful and detailed feedback, and encyclopedic knowledge of early modern scholarship have inspired me throughout my time at The Graduate Center. His generative questions repeatedly helped me articulate ideas that were previously swirling around in search of form. Without Mario’s kind and constant support, grad school would have been far more grim. I thank Richard McCoy for pushing me to think beyond the topic at hand to the broader political implications and for encouraging me to be more forthright in my arguments. I am indebted to his attentive presence in class, at conferences, during orals preparation, and throughout the dissertation process. Glenn Burger’s “Performing Conjugality: The Medieval Heterosexual Marriage Debate” course sparked my interest in the medieval period, which grew exponentially during our regular conversations in preparation for my oral exam. I am in awe of his ability change my entire view of a text by reframing the question.

I am grateful for the generosity of many members of the faculty at The Graduate Center. In particular, I wish to thank Clare Carroll, Steven Kruger, Tanya Pollard, William Fisher, Matthew K. Gold, Gordon Whatley, Ammiel Alcalay, and Eve Sedgwick. I miss Eve.

The Doctoral Student Research Grant and the Presidential Research Grant offered support for a research trip to the British Library and the opportunity to present parts of my dissertation at the Shakespeare Association of America and the Renaissance Society of America
conferences. I thank the Folger Institute for grant-in-aid to participate in a course in the fall of 2011, which also allowed me time to conduct research at the Folger Shakespeare Library. I thank the staff at the British Library and the Folger for their expertise and assistance.

My thanks to the Society for the Study of Women in the Renaissance, the London Shakespeare Seminar, and King’s College London’s Shakespeare Centre for invitations to speak about my dissertation. The questions and discussions that grew out of those talks were crucial during the development stage of my project.

A plethora of people have brainstormed with me, offered to read drafts, and forced me to talk through my arguments. All of which facilitated connections between texts, solidified ideas, and influenced the shape of the dissertation. Their interest, support, and advice was invaluable. For these things and much more, I thank Gordon McMullan, Susan O’Malley, Pamela Allen Brown, Julie Crawford, Nancy Selleck, Alan Stewart, Richard Nochimson, and Cristina Alfar. A special thanks goes to Cristina for begrudgingly agreeing to be my undergraduate adviser thirteen years ago, for her unwavering faith in me, and for Elizabeth Bourne.

Navigating the dissertation process is daunting and often lonely. I am indebted to the many friends who sat across from me at coffee shops, in the library, or camped out in my apartment. Special thanks to Jack Gieseking, Karen Gregory, Vimala Pasupathi, Amanda Favia, Kathryn O’Donoghue, Lisa Brundage, Q Sarah Ostendorf, Jennifer Mitchell, and Fiona Lee. I thank Jen for the walk and talks and library demonstrations, while Fiona’s late night proof reading, ability to talk me off a ledge, and excellent driving skills, guaranteed my eternal gratitude and friendship.

Thank you to my non-academic friends who never took it personally when I refused to see them for months at a time, but were happy to take me out to celebrate as soon as I came up
for air. Finally, I need to thank my family who never lost hope and were always there to cheer me on. In particular, thank you to Ron Sherwood, Robin Sherwood, Anne Sherwood, Yvonne Graham, Pat Hernandez, and Kari Clawson. My mother, Lynn Sherwood, and my grandmother, Beverly Sherwood, both offered tremendous love and support throughout this process. I regret that they are not here to celebrate its conclusion. I miss them every day.
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INTRODUCTION

“WHY YOU ARE NOTHING THEN”¹

At the end of Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, the Duke attempts to establish Mariana’s social status as he asks in succession, “What, are you married? … Are you a maid? … A widow, then?” (5.1.177–180). Mariana responds each time in the negative, leaving the Duke to declare, “Why you are nothing then” (5.1.183). Though secretly the Duke understands Mariana’s complicated position within the world of the play, his public bewilderment at the notion that a woman can exist beyond the categories traditionally assigned to her highlights the pervasive acceptance of these categories at the time. The repetition of this trajectory—maid, wife, widow—implies a natural progression in a woman’s life cycle that underlines the inevitability of marriage. However, as Karma Lochrie reminds us, in pre-modern Europe, “the category of the natural never implied the average, the widespread, or the ‘norm,’ but rather the ideal, which is not the same thing.”² Amy Froide’s acknowledgement that “the normative people (or put another way, the people who mattered) in early modern England were husbands and wives,” is apt if we accept the progression from maid to wife as a “natural” one for early modern culture.³ Nevertheless, the evidence—as repeatedly seen in historical accounts, court cases, pamphlets, letters, and plays—suggests that marriage was only one marker of identity for women and often a

² Lochrie, xxii.
³ Froide, 3.
problematic one. While men’s subjectivity spanned multiple identities based on their class, rank, career, religious practices, community, and networks of kinship, women were almost exclusively defined in relation to a male authority. The limitation of “wife” as the lens through which we discuss medieval and early modern women requires critique.

_Precarious Wife_ intervenes in the propagation of the binary—of privilege and marginalization—inherent in discussions of the institutional identity of wife in the medieval and early modern periods by exposing the vulnerability and malleability of the category often ignored or minimized in discussions of pre-modern women. Despite cultural expectations of social cache and stability that marriage was presumed to afford, many wives found themselves in precarious conditions because of their marital status. By continuing to view wifehood as the primary and desirable classification for women, modern scholars risk re-inscribing narratives of the idealized good wife while overlooking how women appropriated the narrative for their own ends in order to combat the vulnerability, coercion, and violence that they faced due, in part, to the same expectations of deference that defined the role of good wife.

The qualities of chastity, silence, and obedience are the standard hallmarks of the good wife, but the women discussed in these chapters also display heroic endurance—a gendered quality in early modern culture—and fulfill the feminine labors of marriage and patrilineal succession. The cultural ideal of the good wife implies that women who perform their gendered roles according to social expectations will “weave networks of functional accord.” In _What You Will: Gender, Contract, and Shakespearean Social Space_, Kathryn Schwarz argues that in terms of feminine labor, there is a “gap between decree and execution [that] requires an acquiescence
that is deliberate and transactional rather than innate; through the contradictory logic of prescribed choice, feminine will becomes the means of social contract.”\textsuperscript{5} For Schwarz, early modern women repeatedly choose to acquiesce to “enforced conformity” in everyday interactions. In doing so, they take part in a social contract that allows them to create a “livable space” within their marriage and society, more broadly. Feminine deference, then, should function to help establish and maintain functional accord in the marital union. In response, as Tim Stretton asserts, “husbands enjoyed a monopoly over the management of marital property and an obligation to maintain their wives at a level befitting the couples’ social standing and material resources.”\textsuperscript{6} According to this ideal, then, if women fulfill the labors of obedience, marriage, and patrilineal succession, men equally are expected to provide them with adequate food, shelter, and clothing. This mutually beneficial understanding between husband and wife should secure stability within the household, the marriage, and society. However, as the women discussed in this project show, even the most devout performance of the good wife role does not assure a livable space when men fail to fulfill their part of the contract.

Consequently, cultural expectations of appropriate conduct that renders women good wives are shown to be just that: principles of behavior that are at once socially demanded of women but do not guarantee functional accord within the marital union despite the promises of such portrayed in conduct literature and some early modern plays. The examples of the good wives discussed throughout this dissertation call into question the presumed stability of the category of wife within medieval and early modern culture and literature and show that the progression from maid to wife to widow touted as a natural and desired course for women—with

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{6} Stretton, Marital Litigation, 1.
wife being the social pinnacle and preferred state—is less linear and stable than previously acknowledged. Further, the category of wife, as shown within these historical examples and literary texts, is more messy and less structured than suggested by the cultural frame. Rather than provide women with social and economic protection, being a wife could expose them to violence and coercion. In *Marital Litigation in the Court of Requests 1542–1642*, Tim Stretton argues that “[t]he theoretical restrictions and obligations that marriage imposed on wives and husbands throughout most of English history appear relatively clear and unequivocal…What is less straightforward, however, is the way individual wives and husbands accepted or resisted these restrictions and obligations in daily life.” I am interested in those instances when wives were forced to maneuver within the confines of societal expectations of proper feminine behavior and labor in order to create a space for themselves within and beyond their marital unions. The women discussed in this project respond to their situations in a variety of ways. I will show that the good wife narrative was appropriated and used—to varying degrees of success—by women who desired to remain wives and by those who wished for greater autonomy away from their marriages. The representations of the wives examined in this dissertation reveal varied networks of support outside of their marriages, lines of authority separate from their husbands, non-spousal bonds that were privileged by women, and a diversity of feminine self-identifications beyond the marital union.

The critique of marriage that follows draws on the important work being done by a range of literary and historical scholars. Ruth Mazo Karras astutely argues in *Unmarriages: Women, Men, and Sexual Unions in the Middle Ages* that in order to resist the teleology of seeing the history of marriage leading to our current state, we need to fully understand the range of pair

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7  Ibid.
bonds of a given society. Karras’s work on the medieval period provides an excellent model for thinking about the various relationships that men and women privilege beyond the marital union. Her incorporation of many types of sexual unions suggests a greater fluidity with the marital identity that is a central concern of my own project. Further, her acknowledgement that any such work necessarily “examines a series of moments in medieval history rather than providing a chronologically and geographically complete account” is crucial because it reminds us that there is not one unified history of marriage that is easily traceable. Relationships differ based on cultural influences, religious and legal practices, and personal circumstance. Localized analysis, particularly of exceptional or minority narratives, can help undermine the cultural norms surrounding marriage by showing the variability of experience and its representation.

Like Karras’s work on relationships that problematize the concept of traditional marriage, Cordelia Beattie focuses on unions that make up what she calls the “margins of marriage.” She argues that in late medieval England, “marital status can be seen as a performance that had to be acted out in order to be visible.” Beattie builds on the work of Joan Chandler’s Women Without Husbands to show that the “idealisation of the nuclear family” has prevented scholars from seeing that for many women marriage exists on a continuum. We should consider “cohabiting couples, the separated, the divorced, and women with absent husbands” alongside other narratives of single-women rather than assume that marital status solidified a woman’s identity as a wife. Beattie’s insistence on the performative aspects of marriage is important for my own

8 Karras, 4.
9 Ibid., 5.
10 Beattie, 327.
11 Chandler, 2.
12 Beattie, 328.
work because many couples addressed in this project spent a significant amount of time living apart from their spouses and fostered identities that challenged the primacy of their institutional identities as husbands and wives. In recognizing the need to publicly perform particular gendered labors to create and maintain a marriage, we can address how the women in this project employ tactics that move them along the continuum toward identities that may subvert their status as wives.

In attending to the myriad of female identities beyond the category of wife, Amy Froide focuses not just on single women, but what she terms *never married* women. Froide makes a distinction between life-cycle single women, those who will marry, and lifelong single women, those who will not. Froide’s careful scholarship underlines the challenges that these women faced from local legislation and societal privileging of marriage as the preferred state for women. She argues that

> [w]hile the ideal in a patriarchal society such as early modern England may have been for women to dedicate themselves to conjugal and maternal roles, in reality not all women could or chose to do so. These women were legal adults, free from the control of a male relative, but at the same time they did not enjoy the privileges English society afforded wives, mothers, and widows.\(^{13}\)

In examining the roles that never married and unmarried women played within society, Froide reveals a wider definition of kinship for early modern women than normally recognized in scholarship that remains focused on the nuclear family. Froide explicitly places women without

\(^{13}\) Froide, 7.
husbands—including abandoned wives—within the category of the *unmarried*. The precarious wives addressed in this project at various points in their lives would be considered unmarried based on Froide’s definition. Regardless of whether or not we view the wives within this project as married or unmarried, the risk of the loss of social privilege is constant, even for women who perform their feminine duties as wives. The coercive nature of that threat underlines the precarity of their situations. As such, like Froide’s never married women, the representations of women throughout the following chapters confirm the importance of broader networks of support and kinship for survival and protection from social, economic, and physical violence.

Frances Dolan addresses the threat of violence faced by early modern women within marriage in two projects: *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England 1550–1700* and *Marriage and Violence: The Early Modern Legacy*. In the former, Dolan incorporates a range of historical and literary documents that report and represent domestic crime in the early modern period. Her insightful analysis of the social pressures that shaped these narratives help disclose “the contradictions and violence underlying early modern marriage.” Dolan takes her examination of what she sees as an inherent conflict in the marital union further in *Marriage and Violence*, as she argues that our modern concept of marriage is based on a history of inequality and violence. Her criticism draws on the religious ideal of *uno caro*—that man and woman become one flesh in marriage—where marriage contains space for only one subject and that subject is male. Dolan locates examples of the inequity and coercion derived from the cultural ideal of *uno caro* within the legal practice of coverture whereby a husband

subsumes his wife’s legal identity for the duration of their marriage.\textsuperscript{16} In combining an analysis of court records and fictional accounts of domestic abuse in early modern drama, Dolan uncovers cultural anxieties about marriage often neglected in discussions of the normative frame.

This project furthers the conversations of Dolan, Froide, Karras, and Beattie, regarding the complexities of marital status for medieval and early modern women as represented in both cultural and literary documents. The incorporation of a range of resources and the intentionally broad definition of texts employed within this dissertation follows the example laid out in Subha Mukherji’s work reading historical law cases alongside early modern drama. I agree with Mukherji’s assertion that “[a] comparative enquiry is especially productive since each of these groups of texts is particular in its narratorial investments and strategies.”\textsuperscript{17} But rather than simply show the narratorial differences employed by letters, biographies, and dramatic literature, I attend to the similarities in rhetorical strategy and fictions employed in writings by and about pre-modern women and the representations of women on the early modern stage. As Natalie Zemon Davis, in her work on Fiction in the Archives argues, “the crafting of the narrative” within historical documents can uncover a great deal about what types of stories were effective within a culture and how specific tropes might be utilized and shaped based on the intended audience and desired outcome.\textsuperscript{18} In thinking through the ways that female voices are fashioned, we can begin to understand more fully the cultural frames that structured women’s narratives, as well as how those frames allowed them opportunities for resistance and autonomy. I heed Ulrike Tancke’s warning that women’s “self-writings do not recreate real experience, but only reveal its

\textsuperscript{16} Dolan, Marriage and Violence, 70–82.
\textsuperscript{17} Mukherji, Law, 8.
\textsuperscript{18} Davis, 3–4.
As such, reading textual representations of women shaped in letters and other forms of life writing varies little from those constructed in more traditional categories of literature: they are influenced by the conventions of genre, cultural mores, and audience. Despite my focus on rhetorical similarities, there is also fruitful analysis to be done in places where cultural and literary texts diverge. As discussed in Chapter Four, these moments reveal specific disruptions in the idealized narratives of feminine endurance as a means to secure marital accord.

Kathryn Schwarz’s work on the intentional feminine labor necessary to create a “livable space” within the marital union provides a starting point for thinking about the possibility that women’s “intentional virtue unsettles the tenets of heterosocial hierarchy.” Like Schwarz, I draw primarily on representations of women who employ the expectations of femininity for their own ends. In doing so they show that “willful acquiescence confounds the process of objectification as it answers the demand for compliance.” Through their orthodox performance of obedience, many of the wives discussed here underline problems with the cultural structures that demand their deference without providing adequate assurance that their husbands will fulfill their own part of the social contract. Similarly, for women who perform their intentional virtue to excess—as seen in Chapter Three—their performance destabilizes the structures it is meant to support. This project seeks to show that in appropriating narratives of acceptable feminine behavior, these representations do not simply reinscribe patriarchal authority, but foster a space for strategies that may help offset the precarity that women can face as wives.

19 Tancke, 8.
20 Sanchez 1.
21 Ibid., 6–7.
The emphasis on precarity throughout this dissertation draws on the work of Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*. Butler recognizes that “[l]ives are supported and maintained differently, and there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe. Certain lives will be highly protected…Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as ‘grievable.’”22 While Butler’s primary concern lies with the vulnerability of subaltern populations, her acknowledgement that some lives are rendered more vulnerable than others based on their access to social and economic support, the level of protection they receive, and whether or not their suffering or death would be deemed grievable is pertinent for thinking about the vulnerability of medieval and early modern wives. Admittedly, the category of wife and the social privileges it affords may seem incongruous with the populations that concern Butler. However, as this project will show, women who were wives were exposed to a range of violence and coercion that often made securing or maintaining a livable life a struggle.

For Butler, and for this dissertation, social recognition is essential in order to combat precarious conditions. “A vulnerability must be perceived and recognized in order to come into play in an ethical encounter, and there is no guarantee that this will happen.”23 Wives presumed to be protected by their station and their husbands, then, risk exposure precisely because of the cultural assumption that they are secure in their union and their economic and social status. If women are expected to receive the majority of support from their husbands, they also risk the loss of support from the same. Many of the women discussed in this project seek redress from the vulnerabilities caused by their marital unions. Their petitions for assistance from a range of

23 Ibid., 43.
kinship networks attest to the need for identification beyond their marriages. For, “when a vulnerability is recognized, that recognition has the power to change the meaning and structure of the vulnerability itself.” Through their reiteration of cultural narratives of the vulnerable woman in need of help, these wives reveal a broader social understanding that marriage did not always fulfill the patriarchal ideal of stability and functional accord.

The term “precarious wife” is used in this project in two different, though related, ways: first, by acknowledging that wife was an unstable category for women whose legal, economic, and social positions were subsumed by and often at the mercy of their husbands, and, second, by emphasizing the malleability of the category for women who embraced identities separate from their husbands. In the moment from Measure for Measure discussed at the outset of this introduction, the Duke’s assumption that women who exist beyond the normative frames are “nothing” suggests a stability of classification—if a woman is not a maid, she must be a wife, and she remains a wife until her husband dies—that results in the cultural exclusion of women with alternate narratives or identities. By attending to the vulnerability of wives and uncovering the permeability of conjugal relationships, this project refutes the notion that “wife” was a stable and knowable category sufficient to define medieval and early modern women by showing that it was partial, at best, and ideologically inscribed, at worst. It builds on the work of literary and historical critics who engage with atypical and minority experiences in order to elucidate aspects of womanhood. A focus on the ways that women saw themselves, sought identities unrelated to their husbands, privileged non-spousal relationships, and formed alternate networks of support, illuminates how women created communities and formed subject positions independent from their marriage. The women discussed throughout are wives, but they also spend a considerable

24 Ibid.
amount of time separate from their husbands. In each instance, the conjugal role becomes ancillary to personal subjectivity; however, the primary motivations for the separations differ. In chapters one and two the husbands initiate the separation, while in chapters three and four the wives seek to redefine their relationships.

In Chapter One, “‘Ye turn me into nothing’: When is a Wife not a Wife?” Katherine of Aragon in Henry VIII, or All is True (Shakespeare and Fletcher) and Doris in The Tragedy of Mariam (Carey) identify as wives. The kinship ties privileged in their representations are ones that connect them to their husbands. In fact, by all accounts Katherine and Doris exemplify the early modern ideal of the good wife; however, in spite of their devotion, they suffer displacement, injury, and marital instability when their husbands wish to remarry. At first wives, these women become “nothing.” This chapter looks at representations of women who, in many ways, reverse the performance of those discussed in later chapters. Katherine’s and Doris’s inability to remain wives when their husbands deem them insufficient underlines the precariousness of their position, and allows an interrogation of the category of wife that serves as the basis for status and honor in medieval and early modern culture.

Maternal roles are explicitly tied to marriage and could solidify a woman’s status as a wife; however, they could also instigate suspicion and jealousy. The women in Chapter Two, “‘I am their Mother I must not away’: Self Identification Beyond the Marital Union,” are precarious wives who privilege relationships outside of their marriages in response to their husbands’ destructive behavior. In Dekker, Chettle, and Haughton’s The Pleasant Comodie of Patient Grissill and Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale, Grissill and Hermione epitomize the good wife figure but struggle with remaining devoted to their marriages when relentless coercion from their husbands threatens their children. The diverse networks of support from characters surrounding
Grissill and Hermione and the women’s focus on their relationships with their children help de-center the marital union and reinforce the primacy of maternal subjectivity and alternate communities for early modern women.

Chapter Three, “‘And make my body free to God’: Religious Orthodoxy and Marital Identity,” looks at the lives of medieval semi-religious women who negotiate chaste marriages or argue for separation from their husbands. Born into a wealthy family, Marie d’Oignies feels an early calling to a spiritual life but is compelled to marry. Her husband readily agrees to maintain a chaste union, and she turns to female companionship to guard herself against public scrutiny over her chaste marriage. In contrast to Marie, Margery Kempe marries, births fourteen children, and faces opposition from her husband when she requests a chaste marriage. And unlike Marie, Margery is unable or refuses to foster a community of female kinship and religious supporters. She performs her devotion with fervor, yet it is her fervor that others label disruptive and dangerous. In both instances, these women embody a fidelity to a non-cloistered religious life that leaves them socially vulnerable, even as it demonstrates the malleability of marital unions, and the possibility for personal, physical, and spiritual autonomy.

“I maye lyve in quyet and be free from his vyalence’: Divorce and the Limits of Feminine Endurance” closes the project with a micro-history of the marriage of Elizabeth and Anthony Bourne that shows how women may use the cultural expectations of appropriate behavior for both men and women in marriage to negotiate for a livable space separate from their husbands. In reiterating the economic, physical, emotional, and social violence (“vyalence”) wives may endure at the hands of their husbands, Elizabeth Bourne tactically constructs a story that depicts her as a reluctant petitioner forced to seek sanctuary in the law after repeated attempts to reform Anthony Bourne’s “wicked practises, terrours and tyrannous speeches against
mee, my frendes, kinne, and allies.”

Elizabeth’s knowledge of the law, the cultural mores that inform the law, and the hypocrisy of legal remedies available to men in contrast to those denied women are echoed in early modern literature through the representation of Salome in Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam*. Faced with the inability to bend the law to her needs, Salome tries another tactic; she foregoes “precedent” and claims her will is enough to grant the divorce she seeks. She insists that her husband “shalt no hour longer call [her] wife” (1.6.417). Bourne and Salome demand separations for different reasons; however, in doing so they attest to the need for women to create livable lives of their own choosing and construction, even if those lives emphasize a more fluid hybrid identity beyond the boundaries of social acceptability.

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25 BL, Add. MS, 38170, fol. 151r.
CHAPTER ONE

“YE TURN ME INTO NOTHING”: WHEN IS A WIFE NOT A WIFE?¹

I. “I WILL CONFESSION MYSELF TO BE THE KING’S TRUE WIFE”²

As far as concerns this business, I have offended neither God nor the King, to whom I have always shown obedience as a true wife, and sometimes more so in this affair than my conscience approved of.

—Katharine of Arragon to Charles V, 6 Nov 1531³

Political marriages in the medieval and early modern periods often suffered heightened pressure from the need to secure alliances between powerful families and the demand for the production of a male heir; as such, they were exceedingly precarious. Eleanor of Aquitaine annulled her marriage to Louis VII of France despite the fact that the couple was married for fifteen years and produced two daughters—who were declared legitimate even though the

¹ Shakespeare and Fletcher, Henry VIII (All is True), 3.1.114. All textual citations from William Shakespeare and John Fletcher, King Henry VIII (All is True), Ed. Gordon McMullan, Arden 3rd Series, London: Thomson Learning, 2000.
² Katharine of Arragon to Charles V, 6 Nov 1531. In the Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII. Vol. 5., Katherine’s name is listed as “Katharine of Arragon,” but for the purposes of this chapter, I have opted to use the spelling Katherine for consistency between the historical figure and the character in Shakespeare’s and Fletcher’s Henry VIII. Citations for Katherine’s correspondence will maintain “Katharine” as the spelling; however, all other references within the chapter will be “Katherine.”
couple’s marriage was invalidated. Originally, Pope Eugene III denied the request, but the annulment was granted after the birth of their second daughter when Louis conceded to Eleanor’s wishes. The grounds were consanguinity in the fourth degree. Shortly after, Eleanor wed Henry, Duke of Normandy (future Henry II of England), who was her cousin in the third degree. The hypocrisy of leaving one spouse based on degree of relation, while marrying another more closely related emphasizes an inconsistency of petitions for divorce and implies that in most instances the reasons given were merely excuses to end a marriage. Louis’ son, King Phillip II Augustus of France, employed similar tactics with two of his wives, as did Henry VIII in his divorce from Katherine of Aragon. In each instance, the rationales given were acceptable based on canonical law; however, each divorce also met with resistance from one of the spouses and the church authorities. As Karras shows, “If both parties wanted the divorce, the church would likely have been willing to grant it, but there was considerable backing for a woman who stood her ground.”⁴ The church’s willingness to support a queen’s right to remain in her marital union suggests a cultural understanding that women were at risk of harm should their husbands succeed in dissolving the marriage. However, with the exception of Phillip’s first wife, Isabelle, all of the women discussed in this chapter failed to remain wives even with the institutional backing of the church. Their continued self-identification as obedient and true wives during the divorce proceedings and after their husbands succeed in casting them off underlines the inequity of gendered identities in the medieval and early modern period. If women were only categorized by their relationship to a male authority, then what happened to women who lost their connections to that authority? How were they recognized within the larger social structures? The men remained kings and remarried. The women suffered the loss of their cultural identity—Katherine

⁴ Karras, 65. The same is true of the Pope’s support for Louis VII.
was publically named Dowager, while Ingeborg of Denmark and Doris in *The Tragedy of Mariam* lacked any title that suggested their former status—and much of the economic and social protection they received as wives. Their indeterminate status as first wives fell outside of the maid/wife/widow progression and, as such, left them at risk for lack of social recognition and support.

Writing to her nephew, Charles V, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Katherine sought redress from Henry VIII’s “wicked intention” to annul their marriage. Throughout her letter she named herself as a true and obedient wife to the King, decried the treatment she received at Henry’s court, and implored Charles to use his sway with Pope Clement VII—a prisoner of Charles’ at the time—to deny Henry’s request for an annulment. She began by disparaging her current situation, which caused her much distress. She wrote, “[m]y tribulations are so great,” and “the surprises which the King gives me, with certain persons of his Council, are so mortal, and my treatment is what God knows, that it is enough to shorten ten lives, much more mine.” Katherine prefaced her plea for assistance by positioning herself as a vulnerable woman who feared for her life—from continued mistreatment—and was in need of protection. She claimed that Henry and his associates “treat me in such a manner that I do not know what to do.” In doing so, she simultaneously assumed that there was a cultural understanding of how a husband should behave towards his wife and names Henry as an unfit husband. While Katherine understood that she lacked recourse in this life due to her precarious position within Henry’s

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5 Eleanor of Aquitaine was the exception in that she instigated her divorce and successfully remarried. Further, inheritance rules of Aquitaine were based on paritable inheritance—rather than primogeniture—and allowed women to inherit, so Eleanor maintained economic and social power separate from her husbands. Philip August offered Ingeborg the opportunity to take another husband, but she refused.

court, she maintained, “in the next they will know how unreasonably I am afflicted”; for Katherine, if she remained steadfast to her vows as Henry’s “true wife,” her suffering would be rewarded in heaven. In naming God as the witness to her misery, she established herself as a devoutly religious woman, a marker of a good wife, who was secure in her innocence and aware that the treatment she received at the hands and command of Henry was unjust. In reaffirming the sacramental nature of their union and her devotion to both God and her marriage, Katherine situated herself within cultural assumptions about the universality of marriage and its status as a sacramental institution. In turning to Charles, and by extension the Pope and God, to handle her appeal, she conceded that God was the only authority higher than her husband/king who might take up her cause and right the wrongs Henry had done to her.

Katherine’s expectation of religious restitution of her titles of wife and queen was complicated within England during the time because of Henry’s movement toward the Act of Supremacy whereby he declared himself the head of the church. The precariousness of her position was amplified because privately, in his capacity as her husband, Henry tormented her, while publicly, in his capacity as King, he was able to engage others to do so, as well, and finally, spiritually, as the head of the church, he maintained religious authority to deem their union invalid. Beyond his private removal of his affections as her husband, as her King, Henry limited her access to other networks of support. Katherine argued that Henry’s advisors “deter those who would speak the truth” of her right to remain his wife. She noted that even her closest “council are afraid to speak” and support her publicly and asked that Charles voice his support for her cause so that others might do the same: “If your Majesty speak thus, it will animate those

7 Ibid.
8 Katharine of Arragon to Charles V, 6 Nov 1531.
who wish me well, and show them that there is some one who grieves at my troubles.”

Katherine astutely understood the importance of public opinion and support for her cause. Because Henry’s status as King granted him the power to discount a life as undeserving of protection or recognition, Katherine required someone of Charles’ status to publicly lament her situation in order to counteract the effects of the withdrawal of Henry’s support. Katherine’s situation emphasizes the need for women to maintain extended networks of kin and allies beyond the marital union to help minimize the conditions of precarity within the same.

In seeking the outside counsel and assistance necessary for her survival, Katherine exposed herself to public scorn for appearing to contradict her husband’s wishes. Simultaneously, she revealed a further challenge for wives who must appear dutiful, or face ridicule and judgment of unruly behavior, even when such deference will cause them harm. While her status as Henry’s wife required her obedience to his wishes—in this instance his request for an annulment—her acquiescence to his demands were in direct conflict with her desire to remain a wife. Despite the conflict, she assured Charles that, “As far as concerns this business, I have offended neither God nor the King, to whom I have always shown obedience as a true wife.” She had not offended God because she continued to hold her vows with Henry sacred, and she did not lie about her “virginity when [she] married the King.”

Her dedication to

9 Ibid.
10 Though Katherine’s letter follows the standard convention of women petitioners—as discussed further in Chapter Four—in her rhetoric of vulnerability and need of assistance, she was not without support at Court. Henry’s sister, Mary Tudor Brandon spoke out against Henry’s desire to wed Anne Boleyn, and Mary went so far as to leave London during Anne’s coronation, refusing to attend even though her husband was in charge of the ceremonies. Further, Mary was not the only aristocratic woman to side with Katherine. See Sadlack, 153, and Harris, English Aristocratic Women, 237–238.
11 Katharine of Arragon to Charles V, 5 April 1531.
husband remained intact, even though she confessed that in striving to be dutiful in the face of Henry’s attempt to invalidate their union, she went against her own “conscience.” In doing so, she pointed to the precarious position of wives who attempt to remain devoted to their husbands even when they know it is not in their best interest to acquiesce to the demands of their spouses. Katherine’s self-identification as Henry’s obedient “true wife” implied both that deference is a crucial aspect of a good wife’s labors—though it went against her own desires—and that any other wife Henry might seek after her would be a false wife.

Henry VIII’s treatment of his wives and the precarious conditions they faced has received exhaustive study by literary and historical scholars. It has also inspired fictional renderings in early modern plays and contemporary popular culture. However, Henry was not the only king to attempt to put aside a wife, or wives. In many ways, Philip II Augustus of France (1165–1223) served as a medieval precursor to Henry. Philip married Isabelle of Hainaut in 1180. Four years later, he renounced the marriage based on consanguinity, the same argument Henry used to annul his marriage to Katherine. Like Katherine, Isabelle sought to maintain her status as Philip’s wife and queen, and understood that in order to do so, she required widespread support for her claim. Refusing to accept Philip’s declaration, Isabelle took to the streets as Jim Bradbury notes in his biography of Philip:

[Isabelle] felt no guilt over her marital conduct and made public demonstration of the fact. She took off her jeweled clothes and emerged from the palace clad only in a chemise, barefoot, and carrying a candle. She distributed alms to the poor, to
beggars and lepers, entering churches in the city to pray. Those who had received her gifts gathered before the palace to demonstrate their support.¹²

Through a public performance of penance, Isabelle garnered backing for her marital claim from Philip’s subjects. Her display of humility, piety, and generosity—all appropriate and traditional traits for a Queen—undermined the King’s attempts to displace her. Isabelle’s performance differed from Katherine’s in that Isabelle’s focused on the public qualities associated with a good Queen rather than the private deference expected of a good wife. Despite Philip’s offers to arrange a new marriage for Isabelle of her choosing, she maintained that her place as his Queen and wife was sanctioned by God and, therefore, indissoluble. Her public religious devotion and virtue, then, served to protect her from Philip’s desire to take another wife. Unlike the hostility and ostracization Katherine experienced from Henry’s councilors, Philip’s advisors urged him to restore Isabelle. The couple remained together due to her successful petition and public performance. Isabelle fulfilled her labor of patrilineal succession—she provided Philip with a son—and died in childbirth a few years later. Isabelle’s ability to keep her position as Philip’s wife does not discount the precarity of her situation or the cultural importance of reputation and feminine virtue for medieval wives. Rather, it shows that in some instances the appropriation of the good wife persona could productively protect women from accusations of marital incompatibility and provided them with one avenue of socially sanctioned resistance when the wives’ desires were in conflict with the husbands’.

However, this tactic did not always work, as seen in Philip’s second marriage. In 1193, Philip married Princess Ingeborg of Denmark. Instead of the four years it took him to object to

¹² Bradbury, 58.
his first marriage, Philip attempted to escape his second marriage the day after his wedding, again claiming consanguinity. Though Philip married Ingeborg in a public ceremony, he refused to let her be crowned queen. He exploited his uncle’s power as Archbishop of Reims “to declare the marriage invalid on the grounds that Ingeborg was related to his first wife, which created the impediment of affinity.” Unaware of Philip’s process against her until after the judgment was awarded, Ingeborg was left with little support. Philip placed her in a convent where he further limited her access to contact with and help from her family. Ignoring a papal edict from Celestine III that declared Philip’s divorce from Ingeborg invalid, Philip wed Agnès de Meran in 1196. Later, Philip tried to petition Rome, again, for a divorce, this time claiming non-consummation.

While non-consummation became a legitimate reason for an annulment in early modern England, in the medieval period consummation was not necessary to form a union, only present consent. Peter Lombard notes in his widely influential Four Books of Sentences (c. 1150) that nothing can form a marriage, “except for the aid of the will expressed by words of present consent, which makes the marriage between them lawful.” Based on the tenets of present consent, Ingeborg and Philip’s union was legal and binding without further need to prove consummation. However, in the face of Philip’s attempts to validate their divorce, Ingeborg

13 Karras, 59.
14 See Karras, 53–59, and Beattie, 329.
15 Lombard, 171. While words of future consent followed by consummation also make a marriage, Lombard did not agree with this view and argued that the intent to marry spoken in the present consent was the only thing that could create a marriage. He did acknowledge that there were impediments to consent, including “error as to person, another as to fortune, another as to condition, another as to quality” (174), but none of those reasons were valid in the case of Philip and Ingeborg.
maintained her claim that she was Philip’s rightful wife and that their marriage was consummated.

Like Katherine, Ingeborg petitioned the new Pope—Innocent III, who would go on to make significant reforms regarding the Church’s official stance on marriage at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215—for help in her suit to be reinstated as Philip’s wife.

My lord and husband Philip, the illustrious king of the Franks, persecutes me, since he not only does not treat me as a wife, but seeking to make my youth loathsome with the solitude of prison, he does not cease to annoy me with the insults and calumnies of his followers, that I should consent to him against the laws of marriage and the laws of Christ.16

Written after Agnès’ death, Ingeborg’s letter attests to Philip’s ongoing denial of her status as his wife. Ingeborg saw Philip’s attempt to break their union as an affront to both secular and religious order. She was allowed “no person or messenger from the land of my birth.”17 Effectively remaining separated from her networks of support, she was unable to seek proper redress for her wrongs. She continued to name Philip her husband, but also listed the ways he failed to fulfill his marital obligations. She claimed emotional, physical, and verbal abuse, as well as coercion in his attempts to get her to acquiesce to the divorce. While a husband was expected to provide for his wife in a manner befitting her station, Ingeborg noted that her “food is often restricted” and that she had “insufficient clothing and it is not such that a queen should have.”18 In exposing how Philip denied her the basic provisions a husband should supply for his

16 Ingeborg of Denmark to Pope Innocent III, 1203, as qtd. in Karras, 65.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
wife, she successfully portrayed herself as a wronged and vulnerable woman, deserving of pity, and in need of relief. Ingeborg’s petition elicited sympathy from Innocent who continued to deny Philip’s requests, but the Pope’s support was not enough to reinstate Ingeborg as Philip’s wife.

In many ways, the concerns raised in the letters of Ingeborg and Katherine speak to the broader problems of precarious wives addressed throughout this dissertation. Katherine’s devotion to her husband did little to guarantee the stability of her status as Henry’s wife. Ingeborg’s naming of Philip as her husband did not make it so in practice. Both women expressed piety toward God, which served as further proof of their status as a good wives because they held the vows they made to their husbands and God at their marriages as one in the same. In declaring their own religious zeal, they simultaneously implied that Henry and Philip were lacking in their own spiritual convictions if they were willing to forgo one union for another. Ingeborg and Katherine foreground the need for wives to maintain support and community beyond the marital union in order to have adequate assistance when facing tribulations within the marriage. Despite the assumption that wives of kings should be afforded greater protection due to their economic and social status, Katherine’s case exposes a heightened risk because when Henry withdrew his support she lost the protection of both her patriarchal and political authorities: she lost the guardianship of her husband and her king. Similarly, when Philip discarded Ingeborg the day after their marriage, she struggled for years to secure assistance because Philip limited her access to her kin and allies. The removal of the husbands’ favor left both women without the help of personal, economic, social, and political networks that should offset conditions of precarity. Finally, after twenty-four years of marriage, Katherine’s struggle to keep her status as Henry’s wife and Queen—categories she desperately wished to maintain as seen materially in her correspondence, where she signed “Katherina Regina” at the
top and bottom of every page—provides a prime example of the vulnerability faced by women even when they successfully perform their feminine duties of chastity, devotion, and patrilineal succession.

II. “AND AM I THUS REWARDED?”

Your graces find me here part of a housewife:
I would be all, against the worst may happen.

—Katherine, Henry VIII, 3.1.24–25

The indeterminate and precarious status of first wives who failed to retain their positions despite their performance of their feminine duties was not limited to historical women but appeared in early modern drama, as well. The rhetoric of devotion and virtue employed by Katherine in her letter to Charles V is expanded in the dramatic characterization of Katherine in Shakespeare’s and Fletcher’s Henry VIII. Doris, Herod’s first wife in Elizabeth Cary’s The Tragedy of Mariam, and Winifred, Frank’s first wife in Dekker, Ford, and Rowley’s The Witch of Edmonton, echo many of the tropes of desertion voiced in Ingeborg in her letters. Ingeborg, Doris, and Winifred express a strong sense of the legal and spiritual wrongs done to them when

19 Shakespeare and Fletcher, Henry VIII, 3.1.133.
20 While the first half of this chapter dealt with the historical Katherine, the second half will focus on the dramatic representation of Katherine within the early modern play Henry VIII.
their husbands remarry. In attending to the ways that dramatic literature deals with the vulnerability of wives whose husbands no longer wish to remain married—or more specifically, wish to take second wives—21—we see a broader cultural confirmation of the instability of the marital union and the problem with socially privileging a category of identity that women had little control over maintaining.

In *The Tragedy of Mariam*, Doris expresses bewilderment over the dissolution of her marriage considering her success in providing Herod a male heir. She points to the security she felt upon her son’s birth, “When thou wert born, how little did I fear / Thou shouldst be thrust from forth thy father’s door!” (2.3.229–30).22 Lack of a male heir was an ongoing concern for Henry VIII and the underlying cause for instability in several of his marriages; however, Doris’ production of a son fulfills the demand for patrilineal succession in her union with Herod and, as such, should strengthen her status as his wife. Cataloging the ways that she properly performed her duties as a wife, Doris questions the validity of Herod’s “hate” that allowed him, under Mosaic law, to discard her in favor of Mariam, and the inequity that grants men the power to put away their wives and denies women any recourse to maintain their status.

What did he hate me for: for simple truth?
For bringing beauteous babes, for love to him?
For riches, noble birth, or tender youth?
Or for no stain did Doris’ honour dim? (4.8.591–594).

21 Frank, in *The Witch of Edmonton*, marries his second wife because of pressure from his father, who does not know of Frank’s first marriage.

Doris connects her own virtue, her social standing from a wealthy noble family, her love and obedience toward Herod, and her ability to produce children as evidence that she was a good wife. She reiterates that her reputation is unblemished. Herod’s hate in the face of these virtues seems unwarranted and cruel. Doris’ confusion when she asks, “Which fault of these made Herod Doris’ foe?” implies that spousal compatibility within the world of the play should lie in women fulfilling their appropriate gendered performance of virtue (4.8.596). The fact that Herod left Doris for Mariam in spite of Doris’ perfect execution of the expectations of wifely duty exposes a fault in the cultural expectations of feminine virtue as a means to obtain marital accord.

Katherine, in *Henry VIII*, similarly objects to her husband’s desire for a divorce and demands to know the reason, which she argues cannot be traced to any fault in the performance of her duties as Henry’s wife. Katherine asks, “In what have I offended you? What cause / Hath my behavior given to your displeasure / That thus you should proceed to put me off” (2.4.17–19). Like Doris, Katherine presents her fulfillment of feminine devotion as evidence of her right to maintain her marital status. She names herself Henry’s “true and humble wife” (2.4.21). In describing her devotion to him, she claims that she fit her mood to match his and never “contradicted [his] desire” (2.4.24–26); she accepted his counselors, even when she recognized they meant her harm (2.4.27–29); and she turned away from her own friends when Henry expressed disfavor with them (2.4.29–32). By recognizing her deference to her husband’s desires—even when it went against her own interests or safety—Katherine contends she has never offered Henry any reason for him to seek an end to their union. She reminds him, “That I have been your wife, in this obedience, / Upward of twenty years, and have been blessed / With many children by you” (2.4.33–35). Her continued patient devotion over the course of their
marriage and her ability to give Henry children serve as further proof that he lacks sound reason to remove Katherine as his wife. Henry cannot deny her claim as a nonpareil wife and reiterates that she possesses the qualities of “sweet gentleness,” “meekness,” and “wife-like government” (2.4.138–149). Although he acknowledges her virtue and claims no man has “[a] better wife,” he still pursues the annulment (2.4.132). In doing so, he undermines the social contract whereby a woman’s obedience, chastity, and production of heirs ought to secure her husband’s companionship and care, an ideal that centers on a promise of stability contingent on feminine labor. Katherine questions the inequity whereby her fulfillment of her wifely duties in no way guarantees that her husband will fulfill his, when she asks, “And am I thus rewarded?” (3.1.133).

In contrast to the favor and protection she should receive from Henry for her virtuous performance, she claims that her husband “hates” her, and that he “has banished [her from] his bed already; / His love, too, long ago” (3.1.120, 121–122). Similarly, Herod’s refusal to acknowledge and reward Doris’ positive work as his wife goes against the cultural ideal and can be read as deviant. For both couples, the husbands’ actions in divorcing their wives and seeking second marriages verify that the ideal of marital stability based on wifely duty is fictive.

Doris recognizes this incongruity between the model and practice of marriage when she notes that there is no recourse or hope for her in terms of regaining Herod’s affection, “For as he did my wretched life despise, / So do I know I shall despised die” (2.3.265–266). Her only solace is the hope that she may secure her son a place in Herod’s care, “Let him but prove as natural to thee, / As cruel to thy miserable mother” (2.3.267–268). With the loss of hope for her own

23 While Mary is the only child of Katherine’s and Henry’s union to survive, they did conceive several other children: two daughters (one stillborn and one who died within a week of birth) and two sons (both named Henry, Duke of Cornwall, and both who died within two months of birth). Katherine’s inability to produce a living male heir is, in part, what spurs his desire for an annulment.
restoration, Doris focuses her energies on her children. The correlation she sets up between the “natural” feelings a father should have toward his children and the “cruel” treatment she has received from Herod implies a social binary whereby love or affinity is read as natural and cruelty is unnatural. As such, even if Herod were to accept Antipater as his rightful heir and prove a natural father, his actions would not, in fact, recompense the unnatural cruelty with which he treats his first and lawful wife.

The tenants of Mosaic law, which allowed a man to put away his wife and take another, complicate a wife’s legal standing to maintain her status and marriage within the world of the play. Mariam reminds Doris that according to Moses, “he that being match’d did deadly hate: / Might by permission put his wife away, / And take a more belov’d to be his mate” (4.8.588–590). While the law grants Herod the legal right to remove Doris and marry Mariam, others critique his actions within the play, thereby suggesting a gap between lawful action and social acceptability. Herod’s brother, Pheoras, names Doris Herod’s “lawful wife;” he notes that it was Herod’s “passion” for Mariam that caused the rift in the first marriage (2.1.31–32). In contrasting law with passion, Pheoras establishes Doris as an appropriate companion for the king because she is lawful and virtuous. Mariam, conversely, prompts Herod to the emotional spontaneity and excess as seen in the passion that drove him to cast off his lawful wife in favor of his feelings for Mariam. Succumbing to his emotions—which also cause him to order Mariam’s death later in the play—in choosing a wife implies that Herod’s decision was a faulty one.24

24 Herod’s susceptibility to acting on his passion reveals a volatility in the character that should render him an unfit ruler and husband. Doris implies such a parallel when she calls Herod a “false monarch” (2.3.326).
The tension between the letter of the law and cultural acceptance of legal action is further complicated by the religious implications of marriage vows. Admittedly, Mosaic law is religious law, but even within the play—let alone early modern England—there exists an understanding that if Herod’s and Doris’ union is no longer recognized in this life, it will be in heaven. Doris claims that Mariam’s “soul is black and spotted, full of sin: / You in adul’try liv’d nine year together, / And Heav’n will never let adul’try in” (4.8.576–578). Doris argues that while an earthly court or king may opt to allow a husband to remarry, God recognizes the unity of the first marriage and serves as the ultimate judge against a husband who leaves his wife. Katherine places her case in the hands of God, as well: the one authority she deems exceeds her husband’s power. “Heaven is above all yet: there sits a judge / That no king can corrupt” (3.1.100–101). She insinuates that a verdict rendered in Henry’s court must be biased and fraudulent—a fault she blames on Henry himself—and that the only lawful and true decree regarding their marriage must come from God.²⁵ Doris and Katherine attest to the religious centrality of marriage, and, as such, they reason that a secular body is unfit to declare their unions invalid. In maintaining their beliefs that God will recognize a man’s first wife as a lawful one, they simultaneously suggest that any other wife will be deemed adulterous.

Katherine and Doris both claim that the spiritual bond of marriage—seen as eternal and proof of the indissolubility of their unions—is primary and should secure marital stability on earth as it will in heaven; however, the ideal does not hold up when public scrutiny denies the validity of the union. In this way, marriage is a societal commitment that must be continually

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²⁵ Doris’ and Katherine’s understanding that God is the only authority that can trump the decision of a husband/king is similar to Hermione, in *The Winter’s Tale*, insisting that the heavens will right the wrongs done to her by Leontes (2.1.104). For further discussion, see Chapter Two.
performed by both spouses and culturally recognized for it to be binding. The necessity for a public avowal of a marriage—even when a religious commitment has been made—is seen explicitly in Dekker, Ford, and Rowley’s *The Witch of Edmonton*. The play also exposes the conflict between personal and public unions, revealing that neither guarantees stability for women. Like Doris and Katherine, Winifred names herself as Frank’s “first only wife, his lawful wife” (4.2.178). She claims that their union is permanent and she will not “Unfile the sacred oath set on record / In heaven’s book” (1.1.202–203). In this way, Winifred situates the marriage as both lawful on earth and in the eyes of God; she implies that the union of husband and wife works to bring men and women into appropriate bonds and behavior sanctioned by society and the church. Though Winifred and Frank are wed by private contract after she becomes pregnant, they both claim their “bridal oath” is valid (1.1.62). Winifred confesses that she “did not bring him / The dower of virginity,” as Katherine swears she did with Henry—Winifred was previously Sir Arthur’s mistress. However, she names him her “kind husband” and claims their union will make her a “repentant wife” (1.1.187, 193). Winifred’s insinuation that through marriage she will become a good woman speaks to broader cultural beliefs that women who are not under the control of a patriarchal authority are at greater risk for deviant behavior and loss of control. In assuming that her marriage will bring social acceptability and stability she represents the ideals of married life; however, Frank marrying Susan at his father’s behest undercuts Winifred’s desire for such a union. For Katherine, Doris, and Winifred, the expectation of stability in marriage fails when their husbands take second wives. When Frank marries Susan to appease his father, Winifred questions how he could, “Dance at the wedding of a second wife?”

when he had so recently married her (4.2.89). In contrast to Henry’s acceptance of Anne Boleyn as his wife in *Henry VIII*, Frank concedes that his marriage to Susan is false. He calls Susan “a whore” and “No wife of mine. The word admits no second” (3.3.27, 32). Despite his public marriage with Susan, Frank admits that his marriage constitutes bigamy—explicitly made a criminal offense in England in 1604—and is unlawful. In marrying two women, he renders them both precarious wives. Susan is tricked into a union that is publicly sanctioned, but her husband refuses to accept her. Consequently, she is exposed to verbal and physical cruelty, and eventually death at the hands of the man who society dictates should protect her. Winifred is not publicly acknowledged as a wife and, therefore, lacks the institutional and social support she requires.

Public recognition of the marital category is vital if women are to maintain their status as wives as seen in the representations of Winifred and Katherine. Without access to her friends and networks of support, Katherine decries, “Alas, I am a woman friendless, hopeless” (3.1.80). The isolation from her “friends” who “live not here” renders her unable to combat the coercion she faces at the hands of Henry, and exposes the extreme precarity for wives of kings who lack personal or political redress when their husbands deem them no longer sufficient (3.1.87, 89). Further, in declaring that “No friends, no hope, no kindred weep for me,” Katherine notes that there is no one to grieve her loss of status, to recognize and combat her vulnerability, to help her maintain a livable life. For Katherine, a livable life includes remaining Henry’s wife. In this way, Katherine’s situation recalls the plight suffered by Ingeborg of Denmark: both women are sequestered, defenseless, and both clinging to a fast desire to maintain their status as wives and queens.

The limited resistance available to Katherine exists, in part, because of her representation as a good wife, which requires her obedience to proper codes of conduct. Accordingly, her ability to entreat the court on her own behalf is limited because if her speech or disagreement with the king and his advisors is seen as being in excess, she risks negating her virtuous performance. Her defense must be balanced with shows of deference. Katherine positions herself as a vulnerable woman in need of protection: “Sir, I desire you do me right and justice, / And to bestow your pity on me, for / I am a most poor woman and a stranger” (2.4.11–13). Her petition is less successful than the wives in Chapter Four because the political authority from whom Katherine desires compassion and assistance is her husband, who is also the private authority that wrongs her.28 Even when addressing Wolsey and Campeius later in the play, she struggles to balance her own need to safeguard her status as Henry’s wife with their judgments of appropriate feminine behavior. She concedes that by cultural standards, a woman should not represent herself in such a suit, but still she asks, “let me speak myself, / Since virtue finds no friends” (3.1.125–126). Although she reiterates her status as an obedient wife to Henry, claiming, “with all my full affections / [I] Still met the King, loved him next heaven, obeyed him” (3.1.128–130), she refuses to acquiesce to the annulment, insisting:

I dare not make myself so guilty

To give up willingly that noble title

Your master wed me to. Nothing but death

Shall e’er divorce my dignities. (3.1.139–142)

28 While Katherine’s situation differs from the wives discussed in Chapter Four, her limited redress caused by the fact that her husband is also her ruler closely relates to the difficulties faced by Grissill and Hermione in Chapter Two.
Katherine situates her innocence and guilt in terms of her marital status. In order to remain a good wife, she cannot agree to the divorce. If she did, she would concede that her union with Henry was invalid, in part, because her marriage with Arthur had been consummated, which she insists it had not. Her repudiation of Henry’s attempts to sever their union become a way for her to maintain her innocence and reputation because in complying with Henry’s wishes, she would reduce herself to an adulterous woman and render her daughter illegitimate. She is guilty of insubordination toward her husband if she refuses Henry, but she is guilty of sin if she does not. For Katherine, the latter trumps the former, unsurprisingly, as she repeatedly declares that her love and devotion toward her husband is only second to her love for God. Consequently, in Katherine’s view, no earthly body can force her to willingly besmirch her name or give up the dignities—the quality and rank—of being Henry’s wife and queen.

Katherine’s argument is sound and continues her orthodox performance of piety and chastity, but it also erases her claim that “all the fellowship I hold now with [Henry] / Is only my obedience” (3.1.121–122). In denying Henry, she removes the one aspect of wifely performance that she has managed to uphold. Her speech and refusal, for the Cardinals, becomes a sign that she is an obstinate woman, as Campeius declares when he informs Katherine, “You wrong your virtues” (3.1.168). In reprimanding her for her refusal to accept the King’s demands, Wolsey underlines the precarious position women face when expectations of obedience are in direct conflict with their need to maintain a livable life. Wolsey warns, “consider what you do, / How you may hurt yourself, ay, utterly” (3.1.159–160). He reminds her that kings respond to obedience, “So much they love it, but to stubborn spirits / They swell and grow as terrible as storms” (3.1.153–164). Henry will be kind and generous to Katherine if she agrees, but will be cruel if she does not. In essence, though Wolsey is situating Katherine as a subject and not as a
wife, he echoes the cultural expectations that feminine obedience will be rewarded with love and care in marriage. However, Katherine’s performance has failed to guarantee such support from her husband up to this point. Based on Wolsey’s threats, Katherine is undone by her defense, but she is also undone without it. If Katherine refuses Henry, she risks her own reputation and the wrath of her King. If she acquiesces to Henry, she loses her husband, her status as his wife, and with it all of the accompanying support and recognition.

For Katherine, the category of wife is central to her self-representation; without it she sees no way to identify herself personally or socially. In response to Wolsey’s and Campeius’ attempt to persuade Katherine to accept Henry’s counsel in the annulment proceedings, she underlines the desperation she experiences in striving to preserve her status. “Your graces find me here part of a housewife: / I would be all, against the worst may happen” (3.1.24–25). In naming herself “part” but not entirely a wife, she concedes that her place as Henry’s wife is in jeopardy. Simultaneously, she voices a desire to remain and act a proper housewife—Henry’s private wife in contrast to his public queen—even if she loses everything else (i.e., the title of queen). The issue of divorce moves from concerns about her reputation and the successful fulfillment of her feminine duties to one of survival. She asserts that the Cardinals’ discussion of the end of her marriage is “so near mine honor— / More near my life” (3.1.71–72). The assumption that her marital status has a direct correlation with her ability to maintain any existence is confirmed when she tells Wolsey, “Ye turn me into nothing,” because of his part in helping the King secure an annulment (3.1.114). If she is no longer a wife, she is not only vulnerable but is rendered—in her mind—a non-person. The phrase recalls the Duke’s insistence in *Measure for Measure* that Mariana is “nothing then,” if she exists beyond the normative gendered categories of maid, wife, or widow (5.1.183). Similarly, for Katherine, the social
recognition of the traditional trajectory for early modern women leaves little space for those who do not fit within the categories. Katherine’s precarious position exposes the instability of the category of wife; and, consequently, underlines a problem with concentrating a woman’s worth, honor, and identification on a single relationship—her marriage—when she lacks the ability to maintain that relationship.
CHAPTER TWO

“I AM THEIR MOTHER I MUST NOT AWAY”: SELF IDENTIFICATION BEYOND THE MARITAL UNION

I. “[G]RIEVABILITY IS A PRESUPPOSITION FOR THE LIFE THAT MATTERS”

On April 30, 1536 in an attempt to ingratiate herself with an increasingly distant Henry, Anne Boleyn presented the King with the infant Elizabeth. Alexander Ales reported the event to Queen Elizabeth in a letter dated 1559:

Never shall I forget the sorrow which I felt when I saw the most serene queen, your most religious mother, carrying you, still a little baby, in her arms and entreating the most serene king your father, in Greenwich Palace, from the open window of which he was looking into the courtyard, when she brought you to him.

I do not perfectly understand what had been going on, but the faces and gestures of the speakers plainly showed that the king was angry, although he could conceal


2 Ales, 527.
his anger wonderfully well. Yet from the protracted conference…it was most obvious to everyone that some deep and difficult question was being discussed.³

In this episode, occurring two days before Anne’s arrest and imprisonment in the Tower of London, Elizabeth serves as a living reminder of Anne’s multifaceted bond with the king: she is his wife and the mother of his child. Anne, as Henry’s wife, has successfully provided Henry with a child, though she fails to produce a son. Henry’s demand for a male heir as requisite work for a wife to be considered legitimate is seen in his treatment of Katherine of Aragon discussed in the previous chapter. Further, Jane Seymour’s ability to produce a living male heir solidifies her status as Henry’s true wife, as seen in her state funeral and his choice to be buried beside her. Despite her failure to produce a male child, through her presentation of Elizabeth Anne seeks to elicit an affective response and she does, though it is not the one she desires. In Ales’s recollection of the event for the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth—one where he is clearly attempting to curry favor with the new Queen by portraying her mother in a sympathetic light—Anne’s attempt to reconnect with her husband through her daughter miscarries. Rather than draw out Henry’s pity and love, Ales claims the moment spurs Henry’s rage even though, according to Ales, the King’s ability to dissemble when provoked is well known. The familial tableau of Anne and Elizabeth that Ales describes fails to call back Henry’s devotion to his wife, and serves as an example that while motherhood can solidify a woman’s status as a good wife, it also may instigate suspicion.⁴ Anne’s public performance of her maternal and marital identities emphasizes her understanding of the precariousness of her position: as she faces accusations of

³ Ibid.
⁴ This tableau calls to mind Paulina presenting Perdita to Leontes in The Winter’s Tale, which will be discussed later in this chapter. For a discussion of the early modern female body, representations of pregnancy, and suspicion, see Ephraim and Gowing.
adultery and treason, she attempts to remind Henry that Elizabeth is the proof of their chaste union. Ales similarly seeks to recuperate Anne’s reputation by portraying her as a chaste wife who has fulfilled her obligations by providing the King with a child who would eventually become Queen. Within Ales’s narrative, Anne fulfills the idealized feminine labors of “chastity, marriage, and patrilineal succession,” but they are not enough.5

As a wife of the King, Anne’s identity and status are inextricably bound to both her husband and her ruler. Her social and political position should “minimize conditions of precarity”; however, as the King’s wife, her access to networks of support remains subject to his will.6 The suspicion of Anne’s adultery comes with an assumption of guilt, particularly when the king supports the accusations. Adultery implies a person capable of moral depravity; in this way the judgment is included in the definition. When Anne’s chastity is questioned, so too is her successful fulfillment of the feminine responsibility to further patrilineal succession through the production of an heir. Anne resists the label of adulterer by clinging to her daughter, a literal reminder that Anne has performed her duty and is a faithful wife to Henry: Elizabeth is living proof of Anne’s labor as a wife, of her chastity and devotion to her husband. Henry’s rejection of Anne’s attempt to publicly claim her position as wife and mother, as evidenced by his anger and her subsequent imprisonment, leaves her vulnerable and ineligible for social recognition and protection. The loss of Henry’s favor exposes Anne to injury and death. In fact, it results in her execution, and, consequently, what Eric Ives calls her status as “a non-person.”7

5 Schwarz, 3. As stated, Anne’s chastity is in question in April 1536 when she approaches Henry, but it is her chastity that Ales attempts to reaffirm in his letter to Elizabeth.
7 Ives, 365.
Anne serves as an example of the importance of commemoration. How others represent and attest to a life, or not, helps to shape individual and cultural identity. In this vein, a queen executed for adultery and treason cannot have been a good wife. In the cultural refusal to speak of Anne in the years after her death, she is discounted as a subject, her life unworthy of recognition and her death unworthy of mourning. Once Elizabeth ascends to the throne, however, Anne’s status as a virtuous mother—and by extension a good wife—must be revitalized in order to substantiate Elizabeth’s legitimacy. In writing to Elizabeth, Alexander Ales provides the empathetic response—the “sorrow” he felt watching Anne present Elizabeth to Henry—that Anne sought, but was denied from her husband. Steadfast in its defense of Elizabeth’s royal mother, Ales’s report of the confrontation at Greenwich, Anne’s arrest, and her beheading works to legitimize Elizabeth through a recuperation of Anne’s reputation. Throughout the letter, Ales imbues his representation of Anne with the culturally prized feminine qualities of modesty, religious devotion, and patience, which he cites as proof of her innocence. He effectively replaces one descriptive judgment with another: a devout modest woman cannot be an incestuous adulteress. He claims that even at her execution, Anne never displayed any “token of impatience, or grief, or cowardice,” but that rather her “constancy, patience, and faith towards God” moved spectators to declare “her innocence and chastity.” Based on this narrative, Anne’s ability to face death with grace creates a transitive effect whereby witnesses who thought her guilty were moved to declare her innocence. The public audience that verifies her virtue—and in doing so names her death grievable—becomes a localized network of support that outlives Anne’s marriage and life. In exposing Henry’s anger over seeing Anne with Elizabeth and affirming Anne’s innocence, Ales recognizes Anne as a mother unjustly accused, and as such re-writes her

Ales, 528–529.
death as a tragedy. Through a representation of Anne as patient and constant Griselda figure—rather than an adulteress—enduring violence at the hands of her capricious husband, Ales solidifies Elizabeth’s legitimacy by testifying to Anne’s virtue, underlines the importance of community in the creation and maintenance of reputation, and provides an example of precarious conditions faced by wives in early modern England.

As Judith Butler acknowledges in *Frames of War*, “[l]ives are by definition precarious: they can be expunged at will or by accident; their persistence is in no sense guaranteed.”9 In this way, Anne Boleyn’s life is no different than any other: all lives are precarious. Precariousness also implies that we live “socially,” that the conditions that sustain or inhibit our access to a livable life are “in some sense in the hands of the other.”10 But bound up in this idea of living socially is the implication that a life is valued; its loss would be felt. “Thus, grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters.”11 In Butler’s terms, then, the cultural refusal to discuss Anne in the years after her death renders her a non-person. The lack of public mourning implies that her death does not matter, that is not grievable, and, therefore, her life is not valued as a life.

For modern society, Butler states that “[p]olitical orders, including economic and social institutions, are designed to address those very needs without which risk or mortality is heightened.”12 Although Butler is speaking of modern nation states, the concept of precarity—the social conditions by which some people are at greater risk for injury and death—is useful for thinking about early modern women. “Precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and

10 Ibid., 14.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 25.
become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death.”13 The implication is that as social beings people participate in networks that help minimize their precariousness, but some people lack the support of these networks. These networks attest to the right to a livable life. In providing support—support that if withheld might result in injury—they verify that a life is valuable and its loss would be grievable. Butler’s discussion centers on the vulnerability of subaltern populations, those who face precarious conditions due to their social or economic lack. It may seem incongruous, therefore, to suggest that wives like Anne Boleyn, those linked explicitly to centers of power in terms of patriarchal and political authority, may suffer from conditions of precarity. However, as a wife of a King, Anne’s vulnerability derives from her exceptionally high social status. If women are expected to receive the majority of support from their husbands, they also risk the loss of support from the same. For Anne, this risk is amplified because Henry is both her husband (patriarchal authority) and her king (political authority). When Henry withdraws his support, Anne lacks access to personal, economic, social, and political networks that should offset conditions of precarity. In this way, it is Anne’s social status as the wife of a king, her marital and political identity, places her at greater risk of injury.

Early modern conduct literature, like Juan Luis Vives’s A Very Fruitful and Pleasant Book Called the Instruction of a Christian Woman, suggests that when a woman marries, her husband becomes her sole avenue for support. “[B]oth father and mother, kinfolks, and all her friends left, she shall reckon to find all these in only her husband.”14 The ideals voiced in conduct literature extends the the laws of coverture whereby a husband’s legal identity covers his wife’s—in marriage her status changes from feme sole to feme covert—into all aspects of daily

13 Ibid.
14 Vives, 112.
life as the model for masculine/feminine relationships. Legally, for an early modern wife much of her access to a livable life rests in the hands of her husband, but with this power comes obligation: a husband is expected to provide for his wife at a level befitting their social status. Many court cases attest to the cultural understanding that a husband should provide for his wife’s care. In one example, *Dame Elizabeth Stafford v. Sir Humfrey Stafford* (1562), the plaintiff notes that the “defendant usyde her during the tyme of the spowsells betwyxt them lyke his deerly beloved wyef in meate, drynke and apparrall,”\(^{15}\) suggesting that at the very least, keeping a wife properly fed and clothed is part of a husband’s duty.\(^{16}\) Even popular ballads emphasize the expectation of mutual affection and proper care in terms of food and housing, “A good Wife she is the comfort of a Man, / If a Man be carefull to comfort her again; / … / And those that are Married and has been long wed, / To make much of there Wives both at Board & at Bed.”\(^{17}\) Tim Stretton reminds us that “[t]he resulting dilution of a married woman’s independence and rights [by coverture] was supposedly for her benefit, intended to remove from the marital union any potential for acrimony or disagreements over property interests, obligations, privileges, and other entitlements.”\(^{18}\) But in limiting support—economic, social, and legal—exclusively to the marital union, coverture, the social institution that was presumed to provide wives with protection, left

\(^{15}\) Stretton, *Marital Litigation*, 44. The reasons for the marital litigation discussed in Stretton’s work vary and the accusations involved may or may not be true. However, the cases are useful in that there is enough repetition in descriptions of how a spouse should behave, or how they once behaved, to make some generalizations about cultural expectations of appropriate marital conduct.

\(^{16}\) Further evidence of the obligation of a husband to clothe his wife is seen in Ingeborg of Denmark’s complaint to Pope Innocent III (discussed in the previous chapter) that Philip Augustus, in refusing to acknowledge her as his wife, did not maintain her in a manner appropriate to her station: “I have insufficient clothing and it is not such that a queen should have” (as qtd in Karras 65).

\(^{17}\) *The Batchelour’s GUIDE*.

them vulnerable to violence and coercion. The vulnerability of wives, even within exceptional cases such as Anne Boleyn, suggests instability with the category that is often overlooked in cultural narratives of marriage, particularly if we consider Ales’s representation of Anne as a patient Griselda figure.

Throughout much of medieval and early modern Europe and England, the patient Griselda figure functioned as the epitome of the good wife: chaste, silent, and obedient. From medieval iterations like Boccaccio’s *Decameron*; Petrarch’s *Letters*; Christine de Pizan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies*; *The Goodman of Paris*; and Chaucer’s *The Clerk’s Tale*; through Renaissance versions such as John Phillip’s *Comedy of Patient and Meek Grissill*; Dekker, Chettle, and Haughton’s *The Pleasant Comodie of Patient Grissill*; “A Most Pleasant Ballad of Patient Grissell;” *The Ancient True and Admirable History of Patient Grisel*; and Thomas Deloney’s *Garland of Good Will*, Griselda’s obedience and constancy in the face of continual testing by her husband is alternately framed as religious allegory, political allegory, irony, or an impossible example that women should nevertheless endeavor to emulate. *The History of Patient Grisel* (c. 1603) and William Forrest’s *The History of Grisild the Second: a Narrative, in Verse, of the Divorce of Queen Katharine of Arragon* (c. 1558) provide specific examples of the

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19 Here I am drawing on cultural narratives of marriage based on conduct literature, the law, and religious teachings like the “An Homily of the State of Matrimony” from *The Second Tome of Homilies* (1563), which bases much of its teachings on Peter and Paul. For example, “[the husband] out to be the leader and author of love in cherishing and increasing concord, which shall take place if he will use measurableness and not tyranny” (16). Scholars’ views on medieval and early modern marriage vary greatly.

20 Throughout this chapter I engage with multiple iterations of the Griselda tale that variably name the characters. I maintain the character names as they exist in each version; however, when referring to the figures more broadly—rather than specific characters—I will use the terms Griselda and Guatier.

21 For further discussion on the Griselda narrative in medieval culture, see Butler, *Language*, 52–53; McKinley, 90–110.
popularity of the Griselda narrative as political and personal allegory as well as its simultaneous—and seemingly conflicting—notions of affirming the qualities of a good wife while exposing the precariousness of the category and the real threat of male cruelty.

The plethora of literary appropriations of the tale over the course of three hundred years attest to its malleability, but also to its acceptance as a cultural touchstone. By the Renaissance, Griselda had become a culturally loaded figure that was synonymous with patience and with the added inflections of prudence and heroic suffering. Modern scholars often struggle with the female stereotypes presented in the tale, despite the variety of framing devices that provide space for critique of the narrative and, specifically, of Gautier’s behavior. In The Goodman of Paris, for example, the narrator’s critique of Walter’s behavior comes in his apology, where is asks that his young wife “excuse me if the story telleth of cruelty too great (to my mind) and above reason.” He further confesses that he has no desire to ask of such obedience from his wife because he is “not worthy thereof” nor is he “not so foolish.” Petrarch says that Griselda’s obedience to her husband is a model for human piety towards God in the face of tribulations. In her work Erotic Subjects, Melissa Sanchez speaks directly to the notion that devotion in the face of cruelty is the sign of love based on the model of religious devotion: “the hagiographic and Petrarchan traditions both see suffering, not joy, as evidence of true love: if we love someone even though it hurts us, our affections must be both selfless and sincere.”

22 Gildenhuys, 12. The heroic suffering of Griselda is one of feminine steadfastness. For further discussion see Rose, Gender and Heroism in Early Modern English Literature.
23 The Goodman of Paris, 92.
24 Petrarch, 669. This view is repeated in The Goodman of Paris, 91–92.
25 Sanchez, 5.
reporting of a man “being overcome by sudden weeping”\(^{26}\) while reading the tale, Petrarch suggests that Griselda’s suffering—much like Christ’s—can and should prompt an affective response.

Griselda is often presumed to be a flat character who is infuriating in her passivity. Beyond the frustration voiced by modern scholars, Griselda’s passivity could be a problem for early modern audiences. As Pamela Allen Brown has noted in *Better a Shrew Than a Sheep: Women, Drama, and the Culture of Jest in Early Modern England*, Griselda figures were not always praised for their commitment to obedience, nor did their representations always elicit sympathy.\(^{27}\) In Dekker, Chettle, and Haughton’s *The Pleasant Comodie of Patient Grissill*, for example, Gwenthyan calls Grissill a “ninny pobbie fool” and “baselies [sic] minded” (3.2.202, 5.2.25) and Julia claims that “Grissils patience” in the face of Gwalter’s abuses is one reason that Julia refuses to marry (4.3.217–218). But whether eliciting pity or disgust, Griselda’s suffering prompts a response. Consequently, the shifts in the repetition of the tale, its use as political allegory, and the affective response prompted by the character’s willful acquiescence all afford the opportunity for complicating the feminine ideals of patience, obedience, and endurance set forth in the tale. In doing so, the narrative also calls into question the actions of Guatier.

The women discussed in this chapter—Grissill from Dekker, Chettle, and Haughton’s *The Pleasant Comodie of Patient Grissill* and Hermione from Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*—are good wives. In Kathryn Schwarz’s terms, they “willfully do what they should [to] further the projects of chastity, marriage, and patrilineal succession.”\(^{28}\) But, as Schwarz argues,

\(^{26}\) Petrarch, 669.
\(^{28}\) Schwarz, 3.
“[t]hrough opportunistic agency, reclaimed autonomy, and strategic orthodoxy, such subjects challenge a monolithic patriarchal order, even when that construct delineates the space within which they contest their inscription.”

Schwarz’s argument is useful in thinking about how the explicitly feminine labor performed by good wives within marriage simultaneously allows for a critique of the union. As Griselda and Hermione maintain an orthodox commitment to chastity and patrilineal succession, they expose a fault in the patriarchal system that demands this labor from them while offering no guarantee of support and stability from the fulfillment of their labor. Their performance of the good wife paradigm forces an examination of the cultural structures that result in conditions of precarity for wives and the behavior of husbands who fail to fulfill their obligations of support and protection when their wives “willfully do what they should.”

Earlier iterations limit Griselda’s response to Guatier’s trials, in part because of Guatier’s demands that she never contradict him in “either in word, or deed, in sign or thought.” Conversely, Dekker and company and Shakespeare grant their heroines the opportunity to speak their minds and grieve the losses they suffer at the hands of Gwalter and Leontes, respectively. In some ways Grissill’s status is lower than earlier Griseldas; Grissill functions and is treated as a servant throughout much of the play. However, her steadfast commitment to her family and her former life, her defense of others who share her economic station, and her ability to recognize the limited space and autonomy that she may claim within her marriage, also render her more complex than the stereotypical good wife in Medieval prose, or on the Renaissance stage.

29 Schwarz, 11.
30 Schwarz, 3.
31 The Goodman of Paris, 79. Griselda’s acceptance of Walter’s condition for the marriage in this particular edition repeats his stipulation with an emphasis on total obedience in thought and deed. She states, “never will I wittingly do or think anything against thy will, and never will I deny anything that thou mayst do against me” (79).
This chapter focuses explicitly on dramatic representations of wives of lords and therefore takes into consideration the threat of personal and political violence derived from the same source. Through marriage to their rulers, wives’ marital identity and political identity are inextricably bound. Fulfillment of the seemingly private feminine labors of chastity, devotion, and patrilineal succession are heightened by their significance for both the patriarchal and political structures. The wife of a king or marquis does not just produce an heir for her husband, but for her country, or march, respectively. Accordingly, the risk of coercion and violence is heightened as their access to redress is limited, as seen in the case of Anne Boleyn. In *The Pleasant Comodie of Patient Grissill*, Grissill’s situation is complicated through her doubly precarious state: she is a poor wife to the Marquesse, her ruler. The term poor wife intentionally is at once descriptive and judgment based. Grissill is a wife, but prior to being the wife of Gwalter, she was a poor woman. While Gwalter gilds her with fine attire, her underlying economic status remains a point of contention for Gwalter’s courtiers and serves as an excuse for Gwalter to continually test and mistreat her. The radically disproportionate distribution of wealth and power within the story—and arguably within medieval and early modern culture—assures that Grissill is always and repeatedly placed in a social condition that exposes her to greater violence. While her status as a Lord’s wife should afford her a higher level of social, economic, and political stability than her unmarried status as the daughter of a peasant, throughout the play Gwalter reminds Grissill of her subaltern position within his household and the meager conditions from which she came. Further, he threatens retribution against his wife and her kin despite her orthodox performance of her marital duties. The category of wife in this instance places Grissill in a constant state of coercive precaution because she is subordinate to Gwalter in all things—in private, public, bodily, and legal senses: he is her husband and her lord.
Despite the disparity in their economic backgrounds, Grissill and Hermione suffer injury due to their vulnerable positions as wives of lords. Both women are married to men of power who actively wooed their wives and profess to love them. Although Grissill and Hermione are devoted to their lords and do nothing to provoke the wrath of their husbands, Leontes and Gwalter act in irrational and tyrannical ways that reveal the conditions of precarity within the marital union. For Hermione and Grissill the tyranny of Leontes and Gwalter is not metaphorical. Laureo claims that Gwalter’s “tyranny / Exceedes the most inhumaine” in forcing Grissill and her family from court (4.2.6–7). Paulina correctly questions whether the lords fear Leontes’ “tyrannous passion more, alas, / Than the queen’s life? A gracious, innocent soul, / More free than he is jealous” (2.3.27–29).\footnote{All textual citations from William Shakespeare, 
*The Winter’s Tale*, Ed. John Pitcher, Arden 3rd Series, London: Methuen Drama, 2010.} In suggesting that the King acts tyrannically in his accusations against Hermione, who is innocent of any wrongdoing, Paulina underlines the threat of a ruler governed by his passions. Consequently, it is their status as wives and Queen/Marquise that place Hermione and Grissill in heightened states of vulnerability because the jealousy and passion that causes their spouses to act in tyrannical ways is sanctioned and authorized by their political authority.

Grissill and Hermione embody the good wife figure but struggle to perform the expected feminine devotion to their husbands when relentless cruelty from their spouses threatens their children. The identity of mother—a necessary component for the good wife role and proof of her intentional virtue—thus destabilizes marital accord in these plays. In response to their husbands’ destructive behavior, the women privilege relationships beyond their marital unions. Gwalter and Leontes’s actions are met with multifaceted opposition by various characters in the text,
revealing diverse networks of support and kinship for Grissill and Hermione. While the husbands publicly shame their wives, other characters in the play, including people close to Gwalter and Leontes, defend the honor and worth of these women. Grissill’s main support comes from her family. Julia, Gwalter’s outspoken sister who self-identifies as a single-woman, reprimands her brother and expresses outrage over his treatment of Grissill. Similarly, Leontes’s lords defend Hermione’s honor, but her most ardent apologist is Paulina. The alliances that these women choose and those that mobilize around Grissill and Hermione—like those that appear in earlier iterations of the tale—occur in part because of the arbitrary violence perpetrated by Gwalter and Leontes and the affective response initiated by the suffering and steadfastness of the wives. The varied trajectories of the two women reveal the diverse tactics used to negotiate for a livable space within their individual structures of coercive domination. In much the same way that Ales’s letter to Elizabeth offers an alternate narrative of the life and marriage of Anne Boleyn, these representations present a minority view of the functional accord that should be granted to good women within marriage. The other voices in the these plays name the losses suffered by Grissill and Hermione as grievable, help shape the individual and cultural identities of these characters within the world of the play and for the Renaissance audience, and underline the instability of the category of wife, even for—and especially for—those who fulfill the good wife ideal.
II. “YOU SHALL FINDE LOUE FOR YOUR OBEDIENCE” 33

You shall finde loue for your obedience, faithe for your truthe, care and study to keepe you, for your redy good will to obey.

—John Aylmer, An harborovve for faithfull and trevve subiectes agaynst the late blowne blaste, concerninge the gouernme[n]t of vvemen, 1599 34

Chastity and devotion are central tenets of the good wife persona and cultural expectations of feminine labor beyond the category of wife, as well. In representations of medieval and early modern women—such as Isabella in Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure or the semi-religious wives discussed in the following chapter—an orthodox commitment to chastity becomes one of the markers of identity that women profess to embrace, often at the expense of patrilineal succession. Chastity is fundamental to how Grissill and Hermione see and define themselves, as a maid in her father’s house and a wife and mother, respectively. For Hermione, it is Leontes’s questioning of her chastity that instigates the rupture in their relationship. Hermione’s anger over his accusations implies that her status as a virtuous wife and mother is critical to her identity. Grissill’s chastity is, in part, what draws Gwalter to her, in much the same way that Angelo and the Duke are drawn to Isabella. However, Gwalter removes Grissill’s base garments—an outward sign that her virtue derives from her humble beginnings—and clothes her in fine attire. Further, he continually tests her devotion to him by placing her in increasingly coercive and cruel circumstances. In both instances, Gwalter’s behavior implies that

33 Aylmer, Sig. R2.
34 Ibid.
Grissill’s chastity is not enough to render her a virtuous wife. For both women, the violence and injury they suffer at the hands of their husbands demonstrates that their status as a good wives is some ways beyond their control; it is contingent on the view and report of another.

For Grissill, her commitment to her life as a chaste daughter is evident in her opening exchange with her father. When we first meet Grissill, her father, Janicola, lectures her on honesty and sin. He claims that due to her poor station, her “honest name” is her only dowry (1.2.48–50). The young, virtuous, and regrettably poor girl whose spiritual superiority and outward beauty make amends for a chasm in class is a common trope in early modern drama. Typically, the young gallant visits his beloved in disguise and eventually reveals himself to her; they encounter resistance from their parents for their class disparity; and the play concludes with the revelation that the heroine is a long lost noble and therefore a worthy spouse for her gentle suitor. Gwalter visits Grissill in disguise, he reveals himself to her, and she endures reprimands from her father, but for Grissill there is no grand reveal. She is not noble and her only dowry, as her father states, is her chastity, without which she would be rendered worthless and unfit for a husband. It is for this reason that Janicola warns his daughter against the advances of the Marquesse, who, we learn, has courted Grissill for some time. Specifically, Janicola cautions, “[B]eware my Grissill / [Gwalter] can prepare his way with gifts of golde, / Vpon his breath, winged Promotion flies” (1.2.57–58). While Gwalter offers expensive tokens and may raise her status at his whim, Janicola suggests that these favors, like the beautiful clothing Gwalter will no

36 In *The Winter’s Tale*, Shakespeare seems to break the Griselda conventions—the long suffering wife and the poor virtuous maiden—into two with Hermione embodying the former and Perdita the latter.
doubt bestow, will only serve to cover the sin beneath—presumably the sin of sex with Gwalter. With his favor, these outward shows of status may disappear as arbitrarily and as quickly as they arrived, leaving only her transgressions: sins that also guarantee her inability to marry (or re-marry) because she will lack the one advantage she can bring to a marriage, her virginity. Grissill marries Gwalter, legalizing their union and removing the threat of sin discussed by Grissill and her father. However, when Grissill’s new clothes and her place as Gwalter’s wife are taken away, she is sent home and left worse off than before for the lack of her virginity. Gwalter maintains the right to remarry, even though his proposed second marriage is a ruse, while Grissill remains unmarried in the house of her father.

Despite her goodness, Grissill’s brief union with the Marquesse effectively renders her unfit for marriage, just as her father prophesizes. Janicola’s wise advice foreshadows Gwalter’s actions and lodges the first dissent against the union between Gwalter and Grissill. Grissill admits that Gwalter has visited them but defends his acts as honorable:

> Although the Marquesse sometimes visit vs,
> Yet all his words and deedes are like his birth,
> Steept in true honor: but admit they were not,
> Before my soule looke black with speckled sinne,
> My hands shal make me pale deathes vnderling. (1.2.68–72)

She denies that she has encouraged or accepted his advances, and argues that if his intentions “were not” honorable, she would kill herself before sinning. The phrase “but admit they were not” can be read in a few ways: 1) Grissill concedes that if Gwalter’s actions were not honorable, she would kill herself before sinning; 2) Grissill acknowledges that Gwalter’s actions were not always honorable; or 3) Grissill claims that she did not accept his advances, whether they were
honorable or not. Based on the context—her defense of Gwalter followed by her threat of suicide—I do not think it is unreasonable to read a combination of the first and last interpretations. Further proof that Gwalter’s actions were not always honorable are seen in Babulo’s reminder that he once struck Gwalter “for offering to haue a licke at [Grissill’s] lips” when Gwalter came to see her (1.2.328). While she is aware of the vulnerability of her position as a poor single woman, her willingness to risk eternal damnation rather than lose her chastity or reputation suggests that for Grissill her identity is bound up with her virtue and her status as Janicola’s daughter. Her opposition rapidly follows that of her father’s, as she denies any possibility of a sexual union, or otherwise, with the Marquesse. This consensus between father and daughter faces the complication of political coercion when Gwalter arrives—with his entourage—and requests the hand of Grissill.

Request is the wrong word. Gwalter approaches Grissill’s family under the guise of requesting her hand in marriage, but as their Lord, the coercive power of his demand negates any real possibility of refusal. Despite this, he publicly stipulates that “by heauen / Vnlesse your free consent alowe my choice, … Ile not call her mine.” (1.2.248–250 emphasis mine). Gwalter

Grissill’s adamant aversion to sin and her desire to remain in her father’s house recall medieval semi-religious women who opted for relationships with God over those of men; here we can read Janicola as a father/God figure. Similarly, Grissill’s desire to remain chaste—and her proclamation that death would be better than sinning—prefigures Isabella in Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure.

Gwalter, as a ruler, places Grissill alongside other types of acquired property, conquered kingdoms. “Vnlesse your free consent alowe my choice, / To win ten kingdomes Ile not call her mine” (1.2.249–250). But here he situates Janicola’s consent (and Grissill’s brother Laureo’s) as equal to, or even more worthy, than those kingdoms. The line foreshadows other instances of weighing the worth of sexual relationships against the possibility of power. In Othello, for instance, Desdemona claims she would not make Othello a cuckold for the entire world, while Emilia admits that sex, and the shame that would accompany it, is a small price to pay to give her husband power over everything (4.3.59–78). See Rose’s The
insists that Grissill’s father and Laureo, Grissill’s brother, approve of the union or the marriage will not take place (1.2.251). In her work on early modern friendship, Laurie Shannon notes that “Equality between agreeing parties suggests a balance of wills, and only that parity can ensure that a contract has been freely entered.”

Shannon’s claim is reflected in William Gouge’s treatise on marriage, *Of Domesticall Duties* (1622):

> [F]or if a man of great wealth be married to poore woman, he will thinke to make her as his maid-seruant, and expect that she should carrie her selfe towards him so as beseemeth not a yoake-fellow, and bedfellow: so as such an one may rather be said to be brought vnto bondage, then marriage.

Gouge delineates a difference in between a husband’s relationship with his wife and that with his servants by suggesting an expectation of intimacy in a wife’s countenance toward her husband. Bedfellow specifically addresses this intimacy, but even yoke-fellow, according to the *OED*, implies a “fellow-worker” or “associate,” and within the early modern period, the term was also used to refer to a spouse. In either instance, the relationship implied is a partnership, not one of servitude. Based on Gouge’s assessment of the lack of acquiescence in a marriage between people from different social classes, Gwalter’s condition that Janicola and Laureo agree to the match is irrelevant because the disparity of their estates invalidates any autonomy implied by the

*Expense of Spirit* on the metaphors of conquest in depictions of early modern marriage, particularly, 121–122.

39 Shannon, 39.

40 Gouge, 189–190.


42 Though Gouge disagrees with the sentiment, he acknowledges that some people “thinke there is no differene betweixt a wife and seruant but in familiarity: and that wiues were made to be seruants to their husbands, because subiection, feare and obedience are required of them.” (358).
request for their blessing. Proof of the emptiness of Gwalter’s stipulation can be seen in the fact that Laureo withholds consent while Grissill begs Gwalter, “Humble not your high state to my lowe birth, / Who am not worthy to be held your slaue, / Much less your wife” (1.2.240–242). She denies the possibility of being his wife, and even states that her status dictates that being his slave would be too high of an honor for her. Her lines warn of the dangers of marriage between people of unequal estates and foreshadow both Gwalter’s treatment of her and provide a literary example of the warnings elucidated by Gouge in his treatise. Though neither Janicola nor Grissill reject Gwalter’s proposal, neither accepts his offer; she is “brought vnto bondage” rather “then marriag.”

Gwalter’s authority, and by extension his claim to Grissill, is accepted because he is Janicola’s ruler, not because Janicola approves of the match. Janicola submits, “What to my Lord seemes best to me seemes so” (1.2.260). In a similar fashion Grissill capitulates, “As her olde Father yeeldes to your dread will, / So she her fathers pleasure must fulfill” (1.2.265–266). While both men represent patriarchal figures for Grissill, there is a difference between the private power of the father, Janicola’s “pleasure,” and the public power of the lord, Gwalter’s “dread will.” In early modern England, the word *dread* suggested something or someone “[f]eared greatly” or “held in awe.”43 Derived from the Middle English verb *dread*, the word often carried the connotation of the mortal fear and reverence associated with a ruler or God.44 The absolute power stipulated by Gwalter’s “dread will,” then, indicates a demand for a patriarchal fidelity akin to religious devotion, one that necessitates the subject acquiesce or risk physical or spiritual

violence. Grissill points out the coercive nature of Gwalter’s proposal as she reiterates that her father agrees to the union because Gwalter’s station demands they obey and revere his desire (his dread will), and that she, likewise, owes the same veneration to her father and his decision. Grissill as a virtuous daughter obeys her father’s acquiescence to Gwalter, but Grissill’s opposition to the marriage and to becoming a wife is made clear when she claims that if the choice had been left up to her—which clearly it has not—“she had rather, / Be the poore Daughter still of her poore Father” (1.2.268–269). Given the option between marrying Gwalter and remaining a poor virgin in the house of her father Grissill would choose the latter. Grissill indicates her devotion to her chaste life at the outset of the play when she declares, “If to die free from shame be nere to die, / Then Ile be crowned with immortallitie” (1.2.51–52). The categories she identifies with and wishes to maintain are those of daughter and maid. Despite Grissill’s patent declaration that she desires to remain a chaste maid, Gwalter mistakenly believes that her only fear lies in the discrepancy of their estates.

Grissill’s commentary on her economic status as an obstacle to the union is a common feature in earlier versions of the narrative leading all the way back to Boccaccio. It also reflects the practice of early medieval European laws that made marriage between disparate estates impossible. In her work on the spectrum of non-marital medieval pair bonds, Ruth Mazo Karras asserts, “because the status of a union depended on the relative social status of the parties, a

Admittedly, coercion and consent are complicated in early modern power dynamics. For further discussion on consent and status, see Shannon; for issues of consent in the forming of medieval pair bonds, see Karras; and for the importance of willful acquiescence as a means to question heterosocial hierarchy, see Schwarz.

While sitting outside working in Act One, scene two, Grissill she asks her father’s permission, “might it pleas your age,” if she could work inside so as to avoid enticing the gaze of men. This show of deference to her father, even in small decisions, also emphasizes her commitment to chastity.
woman of lower social status was likely to be considered a concubine or prostitute rather than a wife.”

Janicola’s servant Babulo, the fool figure in the play, reiterates the impracticality of the marriage between Grissill and the Marquesse when he proclaims himself “a fitter husband” for Grissill. Despite Gwalter’s assurances of raising Grissill’s fortunes, Babulo insists that gilding her with finery will not suffice, that “beggers are fit for beggers, gentlefolkes for gentlefolkes” (1.2.317). Babulo recognizes the cultural restraints that prevent permeability between social classes.

The Grissill of the village, the one who is the daughter of poor Janicola, lives literally and figuratively on the borders of Gwalter’s society. Gwalter and Grissill understand that her lack of monetary worth lies in direct conflict with her inner worth. Grissill acknowledges that her goodness is a product of her chastity and of her humble birth; however, Gwalter’s response to this conflict suggests that according to the cultural ideals of the play it is impossible for Grissill to be at once, poor, virtuous, and the Marquesse’s wife. In order to rectify the issue of Grissill’s low birth, Gwalter intends to have her outward appearance match her inner virtue, but his choice of words is both problematic and telling of the impossibility of the transformation he desires. He states that he will “gild [her] pouertie, and make it shine” (1.2.270), but his words imply that his actions will only serve to impose a superficial layer of worth, a thin layer at best; he cannot change the metal/mettle underneath. Gwalter’s declaration of his desire to disguise her low birth with expensive garments harkens back to Janicula’s earlier warning to Grissill that “in a painted coat goes sin” (1.2.35). For Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass:

47 Karras, 7.
[The o]pposing of clothes and the person was always in tension with the social practices through which the body politic was composed: the varied acts of investiture. For it was investiture, the putting on of clothes, that quite literally constituted a person as a monarch or a freeman of a guild or a household servant. Investiture was, in other words, the means by which a person was given a form, a shape, a social function. 48

The Marquess demands that as an outward symbol of her worth—and her change in status from poor virgin to Marquess’s wife—that she remove her base garments and be dressed in “robes of honour” before he takes her to his home (1.2.270, 273). Through this public action of removing her clothing and insisting she don the finery he has brought for her—an act performed in the previous Medieval iterations—Gwalter gilds her with new clothes and assumes that the facade of wealth will suffice to allow her to transverse the distance between poor virgin and Marquess’s wife. 49 The act of dressing Grissill like a queen makes her a queen; the material allows Gwalter to “shape” Grissill “both physically and socially.” 50

The clothing serves as a reminder of the performative aspects of marriage and how readily the category and status of wife can be bestowed or taken away. As is common in early modern drama, it is the fool of the play, Babulo, who explicitly warns of the precariousness of Grissill’s union with Gwalter. Babulo claims [Gwalter] will most certainly “giue her the belles,

48 Jones and Stallybrass, 2.
49 While Gwalter assumes that the title of wife and the new clothing will be enough to render Grissill an appropriate mate, neither he nor Grissill accept her new status in practice: Gwalter continues to treat Griselda as someone of lower birth and she reiterates her underlying status in her insistence that the clothes she wears are merely “liuerie” (2.2.68).
50 Ibid.
[and] let her flye” (1.2.323). In using a falconry metaphor to describe the dressing of Grissill, Babulo implies that the finery with which Gwalter’s clothes her is like a falconer placing bells on his falcon: it marks Grissill as his, but he may use her or let her go as he pleases, knowing that he will always be able to find—and by extension control—her. Through his metaphor, Babulo exposes the instability that Grissill faces in her marriage to Gwalter. Babulo cautions—as Janicola did previously—that once Gwalter has sex with Grissill, his interest will wane and he will “let her flye.” In many ways, Babulo’s warning rings true: after she fulfills her feminine labor of patrilineal succession, he sends her home and then calls her back. She is reinstated at the end of the play; however, Gwalter’s actions prior to the final scene foreground the inequity between husbands and wives if a woman cannot maintain her status even when she fulfills her gendered obligations.

Despite abundant criticism over the marriage and the Marquesse’s own stipulations for the union not being met, Gwalter exclaims, “Grissill is my Bride” (1.2.282). His acquiring of Grissill reads more as a King impressing a person into his service rather than a man asking for the hand of the woman he loves. In Discourses of Service in Shakespeare’s England, David Evett points to biblical passages that helped inform ideologies of service. He notes that, “the injunctions to servants in those texts are closely preceded by the injunctions to wives. Both injunctions specify nurture by the superior and obedience by the inferior as the raw material of familial mutuality, and they have the effect of putting women and servants at the same level, in the same group.”

The correlation between the service a woman owes her husband and that a

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51 For a discussion on whether or not children born to lower class women could legally inherit, see Karras, 36.
52 Evett, 160.
servant owes his master provides a basis for Gwalter’s treatment of Grissill and his linking of her and his servant Furio within the play. As a poor virtuous maid, Grissill embodies the overlap in these injunctions. Her early objection that she is “not worthy to be held [his] slaue, / Much less [his] wife” is the only instance in the text where Grissill uses the word wife (1.2.241–242). Even after they are married, she never refers to herself as his spouse, but only as Gwalter’s handmaid or servant. In Evett’s terms, familial mutuality fails because despite Grissill’s obedience, Gwalter, as the superior, fails in his duty to nurture those below him.

Gwalter’s desire for a wife/servant recalls Theophrastus’s argument against marriage as quoted in Jerome’s Against Jovinian:

Men marry, indeed, so as to get a manager for the house, to solace weariness, to banish solitude; but a faithful slave is a far better manager, more submissive to the master, more observant of his ways, than a wife who thinks she proves herself a mistress if she acts in opposition to her husband.53

In contrast to the privileging of servant over wife within Theophrastus’s argument, Gwalter wants it both ways: he desires the comfort of a wife but the obedience of a servant.54 As Gouge warns, Gwalter wants a “maid-seruant” but his desire is in conflict with the intimacy he should desire from a “bedfellow.”55 His initial courting of Grissill, his declaration of his feelings, and the moments when he admits that he is moved by her response to his testing all imply a desire for

53 McCarthy, 42.
54 The first time that we see Gwalter after his marriage is in Act Two, scene two. Gwalter informs Furio that Grissill is pregnant, that he loves her, but that he has a burning desire to try her patience (2.2.12–13, 17–18, 2–21).
55 Gouge, 190.
a certain intimacy in their relationship. Gwalter confesses to Furio, “So dearly loue I Grissill, that my life / Shall end, when doth ende to be my wife” (2.2.17–18), but directly after he admits that his “bosme burnt vp with desires, / To trie my Grissills patience” (2.2.20–21). Within these few lines, Gwalter reveals the emotional volatility that Grissill must endure as a wife. He loves her and believes he will die without her, but in giving in to his desires, he also seeks to test and control her. As such the intimacy that should foster stability within the marital union actually endangers it. Frances Dolan underlines the cultural importance of intimacy in marriage in her work on murder pamphlets and ballads. She notes that in “[d]etailing husbands’ violent refusals to act as protectors, partners, or lovers, these texts present the murders of wives as abuses not only of authority but of intimacy.” While Gwalter’s violence does not extend to murder, his refusal to act as Grissill’s protector or partner does intimate an abuse of authority and intimacy. Further, the impulse to test Grissill’s devotion and patience—an impulse not new for Gwalter but seen previously in his testing of Furio (2.2.3–4)—speaks to Gwalter’s need for absolute control, which boarders on tyranny. To marry these two ideals and answer the problem put forth by Theophrastus, Gwalter sets out to mold a wife as submissive and devoted as a servant. However, Gwalter is not a newlywed husband meeting with resistance from a shrew who must be punished, tricked, and beaten down until she succumbs to right rule and sway—a standard comic set-up in Renaissance drama and one that Gwalter points to as a justification for his actions at the end of the play. Rather than a shrew, Grissill is the model of the servant/wife that Gwalter seeks.

56 See 4.1.69–70, 4.1.82, for examples of Gwalter’s acknowledgement of Grissill’s suffering by his actions.
57 Dolan, Dangerous Familiars, 99.
58 Gwalter claims “Ile haue my will and tame her pride, / ... / Ile bridle her” (4.3.237–239).
Gwalter’s belief that a servant may prove perfectly obedient and submissive is a faulty one. Even in the case of Furio, who has been tested and proven true, we see a servant who registers objections to Gwalter’s actions within his asides. Furio’s private dissent—made public by the audience who bears witness to them—supports Babulo’s earlier comment that a ruler lacks the right to control the speech of his subjects (1.2.294). But if we return back to the religious allegory of earlier iterations of the tale, what Gwalter desires is complete obedience in the form of religious devotion. For Schwarz, this “Obedience requires an unattainable correlation between imperative and enactment, a complete absence of frictions, ambivalence or effort. By contrast, secular norms frame a contractual space in which obedience can be serviceable and consent can be sufficient.”

Grissill embodies the patient good wife from the outset of their marriage, offering serviceable obedience. Through her orthodox performance of subservience, one that exceeds the standards of secular norms as viewed and reported by other characters in the play, Gwalter’s actions come across not as the prudent decisions of a husband or ruler, but as tyrannical and coercive. In doing so, the play calls into question the cultural conventions that demand such obedience.

The conflation of Grissill’s personas—wife and servant—appears in her assertion that the rich gowns that Gwalter gilds her with are nothing more than a symbol that she belongs to his house:

Poore Grissill is not proud of these attires,

They are to me but as your liuerie

And from your humble seruant when you please,

59 Schwarz, 27.
You may take all this outside which ineed

Is none of Grissills, her best wealth is neede. (2.2.67–72)

Grissill’s comment comes as a retort against Gwalter’s accusations that her new clothes have left her haughty, but her words also serve a double purpose. She disagrees with his assessment that she has become arrogant—i.e., the garments have not made her proud, or superior, as he suggests. Simultaneously, she reiterates the vulnerability of her position: the clothes are merely a marker of her status as a member of his household; both the attire and her position are easily taken away. She recognizes that her worth and true identity are not merely personified by an outward display of clothing, but lie in her inner virtue. In contrast to her apparent lack of attachment Gwalter’s fine array, she embraces the humility and humble beginnings from whence she came, asserting that her “best wealth is neede” (2.2.72). Unlike the clothes and status that may be conferred or removed, Grissill names her lack as her best virtue. In this way, despite her precarious status as a Marquesse’s wife, she maintains a fidelity to her original identity: “the poore Daughter … of her poore Father.” In a similar vein, she professes that her old dress is more practical and possibly better because it offers greater warmth (2.2.74–76). Grissill’s defense of her upbringing as the foundation of her virtue, her declaration that the clothes she dons are merely the Marquesse’s “liuerie,” and her refusal to name herself as Gwalter’s spouse, all emphasize her understanding of the instability of wife as the constitutive marker of her identity.

In continually presenting herself as a handmaid— with the connotations of religious devotion—Grissill’s submission toward Gwalter and her acceptance of his demands and insults renders his trials of her all the more cruel and absurd. Grissill’s servitude is stressed in Act Two, scene two, when Gwalter insists that she stoop to tie the shoes of his groom, Furio, orders that
she fetch wine, and offers her services to his courtiers. He states “Tis but her office: what she
does to mee, / She shall performe to any of you three” (2.2.137–138). The sexual undertones in
Gwalter’s offer to his noblemen are unmistakable, particularly when he orders Grissill to treat his
noblemen as himself: “And as you bowe to me, so bend to them” (2.2.142). Grissill is pregnant
during this scene, a physical reminder that one of her marital duties includes sex with Gwalter. If
Grissill’s office—the category she embraces—is one of service, she protects herself from the
sexual implications of Gwalter’s offer. Grissill’s willingness to embrace servitude becomes a
performative tactic because in acting as Gwalter’s servant she avoids the baser category of
whore. Her virtuous enactment of the handmaid/Marian figure—a connection made more overt
by her physical pregnancy—helps safeguard her reputation as she attempts to fulfill her duties of
chastity and patrilineal succession.

In the face of Gwalter’s abuses, Grissill performs of the role of handmaid, one that aligns
her with the figure of Mary as a symbol of chaste devotion. As a queen descended from a line of
Kings, Hermione cannot employ the same self-deprecating device. Much as Grissill draws her
virtue from her humble birth, Hermione draws hers from her high-born status. At the outset of
The Winter’s Tale, Hermione has already fulfilled her feminine labors of marriage, chastity, and
patrilineal succession. The young prince Mamillius is well and Hermione is visibly pregnant with
another child. Despite her virtuous performance, the occasion of Hermione’s physical pregnancy
coinciding with Polixenes’s visit becomes a point of unease for her husband. William Gouge
warns against the very behavior Leonte’s displays when notes that some men, “through jealous
suspicion…vpbraid [their wives] with lightnesse, and to say that the childe is none of theirs.”

For Gouge, “To lay this to a wiuues charge vniustly, is at any time a most shamefull and odious

60   Gouge, 401.
reproach: but in the time of childbirth whether iust or vniust, a thing too too spightfull.\textsuperscript{61}

Without provocation, Leontes accuses Hermione of adultery, treason, and conspiracy. As Leontes’s wife, she cannot escape his open accusations. In fact, it is Leontes’s public slander of his wife that breaks the bond between them and initiates the series of events that lead Hermione to fake her death and remove herself from court. In doing so, Hermione fulfills Gouge’s final warning that a husband’s accusations may drive a wife to “vow neuer to know their husbands again.”\textsuperscript{62} She warns Leontes that when he learns he is wrong, he will regret his actions in calling her “an adultress,” “a traitor,” and “a bed-swerver” (2.1.88, 89, 92).

\begin{quote}
How will this grieve you

When you shall come to clearer knowledge, that

You thus have published me? Gentle my lord,

You scarce can right me throughly then to say

You did mistake. (2.1.96–100)
\end{quote}

She informs him—in legal terms—that because his slander was public (“published”) a confession of error would be insufficient to balance out the injury. Leontes cannot take back the damage he has done to her honor or, by extension, their relationship. Hermione claims she “must be patient” and wait until the “heavens” right the wrongs done to her (2.1.104).\textsuperscript{63} Her application of legal terms and supplication to the Gods for justice, indicate a break with her marital identity where a private act of repentance by her husband may have been enough to remedy a private act

\begin{footnotes}
\item[61] Ibid., 402.
\item[62] Ibid.
\item[63] Hermione’s willingness to endure until miraculous intervention eases her suffering aligns her with the Catholic models of piety. For more discussion on the difference between Catholic and Protest modes of suffering, see Sanchez, 16–19.
\end{footnotes}
of slander. However, Leontes’ indictment of Hermione is public and sanctioned by his authority as king. Hermione, therefore, faces the allegations not as a wife, but as a subject and submits her case to the Gods—the only authorities higher than the king.

Hermione moves away from defining herself as Leontes’s wife toward a performance of her role as a subject and mother as she leaves Leontes physically and emotionally. Hermione’s parting remark to him, “Adieu, my lord: / I never wish’d to see you sorry; now / I trust I shall” suggests her previous love for him and her personal stake in his happiness (2.1.122–124). She also acknowledges that she knows that Leontes is wrong and is clear that the truth will prevail, but no longer is emotionally invested in his impending remorse. Further proof of her marital break is found in her requests for attendants, which she explicitly makes to her king: “Who is’t that goes with me? Beseech your highness / My women may be with me, for you see / My plight requires it” (1.2.116–118). Without waiting for Leontes to approve, she demands, “My women, come, you have leave” (2.1.124). She insists on the company of her women to protect herself and her unborn child (2.1.116–124). In Act Three, scene two, the trial scene, her identification with the role of mother is further emphasized when she claims that she defends herself because her reputation reflects directly on her children: “For honour, / ’Tis a deriavtive from me to mine, / And only that I stand for” (3.2.42–44). Foregoing any effort to restore marital accord, Hermione instead safeguards her bonds with other women and the honor and lives of her children.
III. “MY SOULE KNIT TO YOUR SOULES, KNOWES YOU ARE MINE”

Can a mother forget the child of her womb? … Therefore let no man blame a mother … since every man knows that the love of a mother to her children is hardly contained within the bounds of reason.

—Dorothy Leigh, *The Mother’s Blessing*, 1616

Early modern views on the relationship between a mother and child vary. Some religious and legal tracts emphasize that the fathers maintain sole custody and responsibility for children engendered from a marriage. Donna Long concedes that, “[f]or the early modern mother, possession would seem a foreign concept, given the patrilineal privilege.” Religious arguments tend to focus on the idea that procreation is an obligation to God and, therefore, children belong to God. “The premise that a child belonged first to God, then to its biological father, and, upon his death, potentially to the Crown, displaced the mother from the living child.” However, in practice—even in legal practice—the rules and expectations are more malleable.

64 Dekker, Chettle, and Haughton, 5.3.196–197.
65 Leigh, 293.
66 See Long’s overview of views from Stone and Macfarlane, in particular, 187–188.
67 Long, 188.
69 For example, in the case of Elizabeth Bourne, discussed in Chapter Four, she successfully petitions the Privy Council for the right to have a say in her youngest daughter’s marriage despite the fact that her husband has already negotiated a match. The council sides with Elizabeth, demands that halt to the intended union, and requests that the guardian appointed by her husband Anthony return Elizabeth’s daughter for fear that Mary Bourne will be
The cultural expectations of a father’s right to a child and the mother’s inability to “forget the child of her womb” come into conflict to such an extent that it causes both mothers to separate, at least for a time, from their husbands. Grissill and Hermione spend extended time away from court and return at the end of the narrative to be reunited with her children. Hermione chooses her exile; Grissill does not. But in each instance I will show that these wives privilege their status as mothers in their moments of reconciliation. In response to their husbands’ behavior, the wives create “[c]ovenants of allegiance, affiliation, fidelity and reciprocity”; they create alternate livable spaces through diverse networks of support from characters surrounding them. Rather than exemplifying Vives’s decree that women “shall reckon to find all [family and friends] in only her husband,” the livable space for these characters is not necessarily one shared only or primarily with their husbands. In these texts, other characters attest to the virtue of Grissill and Hermione and comment on the injustice of their treatment. The various reactions of these networks define the husbands’ actions as unreasonable while acknowledging the grievability of Grissill’s and Hermione’s distress. Further, Hermione’s willingness to leave Leontes and remain with Paulina on the premise that Hermione may be reunited with her daughter destabilizes the edict that a wife’s first duty should be to her husband. Similarly, Grissill’s inability to maintain her devotion to her husband when he demands she relegate herself to the status of nurse to her children, her defense of those who share her station, including Furio contracted in marriage for which the mother disapproves. In demanding the release of her daughter the Council writes, “takeing care that noe suspected persons have accesse unto her, and that she be not contracted to anie; onely her mother maie repaire unto her when and as often as shall stand with her pleasure and good lyking” (PC 2/15 f. 341). See also SP 12/203 f.68, PC 2/15 f. 131, and PC 2/15 f. 179.

70 Leigh, 293.
71 Schwarz, 3.
72 Vives, 112.
and her family, and her increasing critique of Gwalter’s behavior, serve to unhinge this Griselda narrative from its referential frame.

Faced with a weak position within Gwalter’s household and his abject humiliation of her within Act Two, scene two, Grissill performs an outward show of patient devotion even as she expresses dissent and disapproval. In this way Grissill’s tactics differ from Hermione’s. Grissill’s asides, her exchanges with Furio, and her commentary to her family, all provide her with the opportunity to make the audience aware of her struggle to endure Gwalter’s abuses and her grief over losing her children. In doing so, this iteration of the tale explicitly questions the inequity that grants Gwalter power at the expense of Grissill’s suffering. Earlier prose narratives suggest that while Griselda maintains a stoic exterior, she must be suffering inside. Medieval versions frequently observe that Guatier knows that Griselda loves her children and is pained by the thought that he has had them killed. The shift towards allowing Griselda a verbal and affective response may attest to the fact that by the early modern period the possibility of a woman passively accepting the murder of would render Grissill an unnatural mother. Regardless, the instructions and critiques that Grissill weaves into her submission create a space for growth in the Griselda narrative that implies a mutual right to instruction within marriage. On her knees in an attempt to defend Furio from Gwalter’s threat of death, Grissill appears the picture of subordination; however, she also exalts the virtues of compassion and claims that the world reveres a merciful king (2.2.110–111). Her words read as a lesson for the Marquesse, suggesting that Gwalter himself is deficient in the qualities, such as mercy, of a good Lord. Hermione performs a similar slight against Leontes’s rule when she wishes that her father, the Emperor of

73 See Luckyj, “Disciplining the Mother” 113, for biblical evidence that states a false mother is one who would let harm come to her child.
Russia, was alive to see her trial because he would look on her misery “with eyes / Of pity, not revenge” (3.2.122–123). By identifying herself as a daughter of a merciful king, Hermione reiterates her status as a princess separate from her marriage to Leontes and implies that she has seen examples of how to rule (her father/pity) and how not to rule (her husband/vengeance). Through their discourse, the women offer instruction to their husbands on how to be better rulers; in each instance the focus is on mercy and non-violence. Grissill’s critique of Gwalter’s tyrannical rule subsequently exposes her own unjust torment at the hands of her husband when she asks of Gwalter, “Forgiue [Furio’s] fault though youle not pardon mee” (2.2.112). In asking for forgiveness for Furio and acknowledging that she has no hope of the same clemency at the hands of Gwalter, Grissill through her own virtuous performance indirectly points out a flaw in Gwalter: his lack of parity and compassion when dealing with his subjects, his household, and his wife.

Gwalter’s testing finds the limit of Grissill’s patient disposition when the Marquesse expresses disdain with her family. Grissill appears ready to suffer humiliation and threats of violence to her own person, but she struggles to refrain from defending those that she loves. When Gwalter scorns her brother and father, Grissill promptly urges that Gwalter “cast them downe, / And send poore Grissill poorely home again” (2.2.120–121). Maintaining a show of fidelity, Grissill uses the opportunity of his critique of her family to leave Gwalter. These lines could be read as evidence of her desire to please the Marquesse, even at the cost of her family; however, Gwalter voices contempt only for her family and yet Grissill proposes that they all be sent home, including her. Similarly, after Gwalter offers her up to his courtiers, as discussed previously, she gives her husband a backhanded compliment about his ability to tolerate the obvious flattery of his noblemen (2.2.146–147). Gwalter chastises her for her impropriety and
tells her to leave (2.2.148–149). She responds in the affirmative and offers to stay away, “if you please, nere more beholde the day” (2.2.150). Her comment may be read as an attempt to please Gwalter by removing herself from him for the day. She also may be suggesting that she will kill herself if he so desires and never see daylight, again. While the second reading may be extreme, in her opening scene Grissill claimed that she would kill herself before sinning (1.2.71–72). Whether we read her offer as one of absence or suicide, when taken with her previous comment we must at least entertain the idea that Grissill wishes to leave Gwalter’s company completely. Within the span of forty lines Grissill suggests that she leave Gwalter twice: she first requests to be sent home, and when that does not work she offers a permanent solution in suicide. Cleverly, both of these are done under the pretense of pleasing him. Her desire to return home comes up, again, when the Marquesse banishes her father, brother, and Babulo from court in Act Three, scene three. Before the arrival of Furio, Gwalter, and his attendants, Grissill displays grief at the loss of her family and blames herself for their despair. In comforting them and reaffirming their alliance, she insists that they will “finde content” at home (3.1.47); content that she herself is denied within Gwalter’s court.

The contention Grissill faces between negotiating a livable space as Gwalter’s wife and her desire to protect and maintain a strong sense of kinship with her family encounters further complication after she gives birth to twins. With her children comes the category of mother, a title that Gwalter tries to remove, but Grissill fights to maintain. The Marquesse repeatedly reminds her that she is “but [a] nurse to them, they are not [hers]” (4.1.149), and though she admits her lack of a claim, “I know my gratious Lord they are not mine” (4.1.50), she becomes progressively outspoken in her dissent and freely expresses her grief. In direct opposition to
Gwalter’s mandate that she leave the children, she asserts to an equally frustrated Furio,74 “I am their Mother I must not away” (4.1.93). She calls them “[her] babes,” confesses that her “heart akes” for them. As Dorothy Leigh corroborates in The Mother’s Blessing (1616), Grissill cannot forget the children of her womb; the identity of mother turns out to be one that Gwalter cannot as readily manipulate.

The History of Grisild the Second: a Narrative, in Verse, of the Divorce of Queen Katharine of Arragon, written by William Forest, provides another example of the centrality of the mother/child relationship in an appropriation of the Griselda narrative. Forest writes that after the death of their son, Walter’s (here a stand-in for Henry VIII) “harte (nodoutes) it went ful nye; / But, touching the Mother specyalle, / Neauer was theare woman (I think nolesse) / That for her childe myget shewe more heauyness.”75 While both parents suffer at the loss of the child, Grisilde (the Katharine figure) bemoans that “I was a mother, and nowe am none.”76 The importance of the child in defining female identity suggests a stronger correlation in the mother/child relationship and its possibility for at once fulfilling the purpose of marriage and shifting the wife’s primary relationship from her spouse to the child. After Grisilde and Walter divorce and she is sent from court, Forest notes, “Yeat worste thyne of all, which did her most

74 Furio’s asides reveal his own anguish at discharging Gwalter’s orders. Furio asserts, “I shall drowne my heart, with my teares that fall inward” (4.1.140), and when he is forced to take away Grissill’s children, he comments that it would be better if he “were rid of [his] office” (4.2.168). In this way, Furio, like Grissill, struggles with devotion to Gwalter and lodges private—made public through the presence of the audience—dissent against the trails of the Marquesse.

75 Forest, 39.

76 Ibid., 41. Forest also notes the difference in class between the standard Griselda and Katharine. As such, he sees her suffering as more extreme because, “she a noble woman of byrthe and delycatly brought upp, therefore the more harder adversytee tendure, thother farre base[r] brought upp in pneurye and hardenes, brought tot he same state agayne she myght the easyer suffre ytt” (20–21).
hurte, / Her dearest Doughter from her was holden short.” The separation of Grisilde and her Doughter (Mary), then, becomes a greater trial for Grisilde than the split between her and her husband. The threat of the loss of her children causes a similar distress for Dekker’s Grissill and prompts Gwalter’s decision to send Grissill and her children home. When mother and twins are banished after she refuses to part from them, she claims that they will “laugh and liue content” away from Court and by extension away from Gwalter (4.1.100, 113, 136, 183). When she returns home, she repeats the sentiment and tells her father that Gwalter “Hath banist me from care to quietness” (4.2.39). Her declarations that she will live a content quiet life as a poor mother makes clear that her time as a wife has been anything but happy.

Grissill’s failed attempts at functional accord in Gwalter’s court align her with other mothers—on stage and in early modern England—who attempt to use the proof of their feminine labor, their children, to solidify the bond with their husbands. Like Katherine’s references to Mary as proof of the legitimacy of her marriage to Henry, or Anne’s presenting Elizabeth to Henry discussed at the outset of the chapter, Grissill returns to Gwalter after he declares her banishment and entreats him, “Oh see my Lord, / Sweet prettie fooles they both smil’d at that word / … / Can you thus part from them?” (4.1.194–198). The act appears as one of desperation on the part of the woman to preserve her family and her standing as a wife. Simultaneously, it

77 Ibid., 85.
78 Forest writes his Griselda narrative for Queen Mary, and as such, this political appropriation of the tale works to memorialize Katharine, in much the same way that Ales venerates Anne Boleyn for Elizabeth. In both instances, and in The Commoditye of Pacient and Meeke Grissill (c. 1560)—believed by Ursula Potter to have been written for Queen Elizabeth about Anne and Henry—the Griselda figures are exalted as devoted and exceptional mothers, even in the face of their husbands’ cruelty. It is interesting to note that the Griselda tale is one that is malleable enough to emphasize the mother/child relationship, despite the tradition of focusing on the relationship between Griselda and Guatier.
indicates a fault in early modern gender mores that demand children as part of a good wife’s labor, but leave wives with little redress or maintenance when the fulfillment of their labors fails to secure their status.

According to Ursula Potter, Anne Boleyn’s entreaty to Henry VIII at Greenwich may have inspired a scene in John Phillip’s *The Commoditye of Pacient and Meeke Grissill* (c. 1560) in which the Nurse presents Guatier’s daughter to him in hopes of softening his resolve to murder the child. For Potter, this appropriation of the Griselda tale situates Anne Boleyn as a chaste, virtuous, and devoted wife and mother. This version also highlights the importance of the mother/daughter relationship through the addition of a mother for Grissill, another departure from the majority of the medieval editions. Notably, the play was written for the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth. Phillip’s interpretation seeks to establish the virtuousness of Anne and consequently the legitimacy of the new Queen. In this way, Phillip’s use of the Griselda narrative is similar to Forest’s *The History of Grisild the Second*, written for Queen Mary. In both instances political appropriations of the tale work to memorialize the mothers, in much the same way that Ales venerates Anne Boleyn for Elizabeth. The Griselda figures are exalted as devoted and exceptional caretakers, even in the face of their husbands’ cruelty. The Griselda tale is malleable enough to emphasize the mother/child relationship, despite the tradition of focusing on the relationship between Griselda and Guatier. Phillip’s and Forest’s appropriation of the Griselda

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79 Potter 22–23. After the son is born, the nurse has a long quarrel with Diligence, the supposed murderer, about wanting to protect the child (1381–1427). When her appeal fails, the nurse calls the marquis a “cruel father” and leaves for court to comfort Grissill and “cry out” against the Marquis (1427, 1448–1451).

80 The exception to this is found in a fourteenth century Italian edition of the tale in Giovanni Sercambi’s *Novelle* (c. 1369). While Phillip gives Grissill both a mother and a father, Sercambi replaces the father with a mother. For more on Sercambi’s version see Potter, 25m and Severs *Literary Relationships*, 21.
story to substantiate and witness the injuries of Anne and Katherine, respectively, foregrounds the flexibility of the story as a political and cultural allegory. Moreover, the repetitions of the tale throughout the medieval and early modern periods indicates its cultural acceptance as a story that not only epitomizes and reaffirms the qualities of a good wife, but simultaneously exposes the precarious nature of the category by showing that even the most obedient and patient wife—Griselda—is at risk of coercion, emotional violence, public humiliation, and displacement at the hands of her husband.

In a departure from the scene described by Ales and from previous iterations of the Griselda narrative, Phillip splits the wife figure: Grissill reaffirms her devotion to her husband—though only after she bemoans the loss of her daughter—and the Nurse forcefully and loquaciously defends the babe while simultaneously providing the majority of the commentary and criticism leveled at Guatier (1097–1107, 1122–1131, 1150–1161, 1173–1174, 1401–1413, 1418–1425, 1428–1451). The splitting of the mother figure in two, a patient wife and a nagging defensive nurse, calls to mind Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*.81 Though both Hermione and Paulina are high-born, Hermione functions as a type of Griselda and Paulina—a steadfast and vocal defender of Hermione—a nurse figure who brings the infant Perdita before Leontes. Like Anne facing an angry Henry, Grissill entreating Gwalter, or the Nurse confronting Guatier, Paulina stands up to Leontes; she counters his verbal attacks with her own in order to protect Hermione and Perdita. The presence of Paulina and the Nurse emphasize the importance of bonds beyond the relationship between husband and wife. Both Paulina and the Nurse create a

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81 See Baldwin.
space for a critical female voice within their respective texts.\textsuperscript{82} The critical female voice allows Hermione and Grissill to remain more reserved and measured in their critique of their husbands, thereby maintaining their performance of the good wife persona. Further, the multifaceted praise for the women and criticism of the husbands confirms the social facet of reputations within the texts and the early modern period: Hermione’s and Grissill’s status as good wives are confirmed and defended by the community that surrounds them, even when the same is under threat from their husbands. In doing so, these representations verify the need for social networks for women when the institutional ones fail to provide the necessary support to sustain a livable life.

In \textit{The Pleasant Comodie of Patient Grissill}, the critical female voice is Julia, the Marquesse’s sister. While Grissill offers veiled objections to Gwalter’s actions, Julia makes her objections to Gwalter, and to marriage, in general, more explicit. She asks “would you wish me to loue? when loue is so full of hate? how vnlouely is loue? how bitter? how full of blemishes?” (4.3.205–206). Historians like Lawrence Stone, who characterizes early modern marriage as “brutal and often hostile,” echo Julia’s pessimistic view of relationships.\textsuperscript{83} Admittedly, Julia’s adamant commitment to her single life and her refusal to accept the affections of any of her suitors comes across in the play as a standard romantic comedy trope. Julia, the comic unmarried maid of the play, bemoans the evils of men and the troubles that women endure in marriage. She even chastises women for the trouble that they bring upon themselves in marriage: “I alwaies wish that a woman may neuer meete better bargaines, when sheele thrust her sweet libertie into the hands of a man” (4.3.210–211). Julia notes that her “brother insults our Grissill” and that

\textsuperscript{82} Phillips also gives Grissill a group of ladies in waiting, like Hermione, who witness her suffering. In earlier prose iterations, including Boccaccio’s, there are women of the court who express sorrow over Guatier’s treatment of Griselda.

\textsuperscript{83} Stone, \textit{The Family}, 117.
poore Grissill is martred by her Lord” (4.3.207, 209). She asks that her brother “Vex not poore Grissill more” and insists that he does her wrong (4.3.236, 239). In the subplot, Julia’s quarrelsome behavior and commitment to a single life pairs well with Gwenthyan, a Welsh widow, who also fulfills standard comic conventions as she rails against her new husband. In presenting these three archetypes—opinionated single woman, patient wife, shrewish re-married widow—the play animates established ideas about women, but does so in a way that re-writes their standard representations. Gwenthyan reveals that her behavior is a response, in part, to Gwalter’s treatment of Grissill: she “pridles” Sir Owen so that he may not do the same to her. Her final declaration that “tis not fid that poore womens should be kept always vnnder” proposes that some women rebel as a proactive defense against gendered structures of subordination (5.2.290–291). In regards to Julia, this play differs from contemporary texts like Taming of the Shrew or Much Ado About Nothing—Julia’s commentary and character most closely resemble that of Beatrice—in that Julia’s refusal to take a husband does not change at the end of the play; she is steadfast in her outspoken defense of single-women and her empathy toward women in difficult marriages. In this light, Julia and Gwenthyan offer alternative perspectives on marriage and critique expectations that women remain compliant within their unions.

The presence of the critical female voice as represented by Julia and Gwenthyan allows Grissill to continue her gendered performance of wifely obedience, but in the latter half of the text the rectitude of her character is complicated by the revelation that she dissembles. Grissill’s ability to counterfeit when needed intimates that the outward show of chaste obedience trumps the expectation that the deference is genuine. She notes this change in herself when her father Furio also notes the conflict between his need to perform an observable deference and his own private dissent against Gwalter’s demands.
asks about her banishment. Grissill crafts a tale for her father of how the Marquesse suffered at their departure—though the audience, and Grissill, both know that she is lying. In fact, at the end of her report, she states, “And by my truth (if I have any truth), / I came from Court more quiet and content, / By many a thousand part then when I went” (4.2.56–58). Grissill’s brief aside, “(if I have any truth),” reveals the extent of her fabrication, and her ability to feign a response to fit the occasion. She also confesses that if anything is truth, it is not Gwalter’s remorse over seeing his family leave, but rather these last lines that she speaks. She comes from court “more quiet” than when she left home, in part, because she returns home without the “thousand part” of Gwalter’s entourage. In claiming, again, that she is more content in her return to her father’s house, she reminds the audience that she left under duress.

While Grissill’s peace in returning to her father’s house with her children is short-lived, the time with her family reinforces her desire for her former life, the reality that her comfort and virtue are bound up in her humble beginnings, and her privileging of the kinship ties between her father, brother, Babulo, and her children. In Act Four, scene two, Furio arrives at Janicola’s house to take away Grissill’s children. The skills she has learned to counter the coercive actions of Gwalter and protect her family become apparent when Furio interrupts her return to her quiet life. Gwalter, who is also present but in disguise, states that the “Marquesse is a tyrant and does wrong” to take away her babes (4.2.169). Grissill appears to defend Gwalter by stating that “I would not for the world that hee should heare thee” (4.2.170); however, she does not disagree with Gwalter’s statement, she only states that she would not want Gwalter to hear that he is a tyrant. Her comment may be more for the protection of the disguised man who voices his dissent in the presence of Furio than a disagreement with the man’s view of Gwalter. Directly after, Grissill claims that Gwalter is not “A tyrant, no he’s mercy euen her selfe” (4.2.171). Her
comment seems out of place, even absurd, considering that she chastises Gwalter for his lack of mercy, as discussed above. At the end of the same speech she confesses that her responses are feigned. She reveals that “God can tell, / My heart saies my tongue lyes” (4.2.180–191). Her lie may be in regards to her comment that Furio “lookes gently” and will not hurt her children. It may also be read as a confession: God knows the truth of her heart; he knows her defense of Gwalter is a lie. Throughout this scene, Gwalter is present but in disguise. We know from the beginning that Gwalter initially wooed Grissill in disguise, and that Grissill, her father, and Babulo all knew that it was the Marquesse in spite of his attempts to conceal his identity. With this in mind, it is possible that Grissill recognizes Gwalter as the disguised stranger and makes shows of devotion in order to appease him. She knows from previous experience that resisting him and his desire to cause her pain is futile.

Grissill acknowledges the problems of active resistance and suggests that sometimes silence is the only option when language fails to instigate change. Her silence—a key characteristic of the good wife figure—can be read less as submission and more as an understanding of the limits of protest and the need for functional accord particularly because her husband is also her ruler. In a discussion with her brother in Act Five, scene one, Laureo, angry over Gwalter’s mistreatment of Grissill’s family, protests, “Shall I in silence buy all our wrongs?” Grissill responds, “Yes, when your words cannot get remedy” (5.1.91–92). Her willingness to turn to silence when words fall short allows us a space to read her silence not as a simple acquiescence to Gwalter’s rule but also as a form of resistance. Much like her feigning, the silence provides a virtuous veil that shields her and her family from the vulnerability and harm they might otherwise endure at the hands of Gwalter. In sharing her tactics with her

85 For further discussion of the role of silence as opposition, see Luckyj.
brother, Grissill emphasizes the necessity of such strategies to preserve a livable space and verifies her devotion to her family and their well-being.

Hermione’s privileging of her kinship with Perdita (and Paulina) is more overt than Grissill’s association with her family and occurs as a rupture with Hermione’s former sense of self. When Hermione lists the blessings in her life in Act Three, scene two, she includes the “favour” of Leontes, her son, and her newborn daughter (94, 96–97, 98–99). Subsequently, she bemoans the loss of all three and asks Leontes, “Tell me what blessings I have here alive, / That I should fear to die?” (3.2.107–108). For Hermione, then, a life where she is no longer an honored wife and mother is not a livable one. Though she initially names her daughter in her list of blessings, her identity as she describes it in this scene derives from the men in her life, “For behold me, / A fellow of the royal bed, which owe / A moiety of the throne, a great king’s daughter, / The mother to a hopeful prince” (3.2.37–40). She is the wife of Leontes and thereby a queen; she is the daughter of the Emperor of Russia and a princess by birth; and she is the mother of Mamillius, the future king of Sicilia. With the loss of Leontes’s love, the death of her father, and the death of her son, Hermione is left without the signifiers of her identity. Her only hope lies in the oracle’s prophecy that her daughter may be found. While Grissill is sent home, Hermione chooses to leave the court. In faking her own death and ensconcing herself at Paulina’s until the return of Perdita, Hermione refuses Leontes’s remorse and penance and with

86 Hermione mentions during her trial that she wishes her father “were alive” (3.2.120).
87 I acknowledge that my reading of Hermione’s disappearance and restoration at the end of the play is one that is divisive. While I accept that frequent readings and performances of the text focus on Paulina’s insistence that we must “Awake our faith” in order for Hermione/the statue to come to life, I think it is a mistake—and one that diminishes Hermione’s agency—to discount the clues that Hermione has been hiding at Paulina’s in the intervening years.
them his love and kinship.\textsuperscript{88} By her own admission, she only returns to public life when her daughter is found (5.1.120–128).

Without hope of her children’s survival, Grissill’s concern revolves around protecting her family, and it is her family that levels much of the critique against the Marquesse’s final trial of Grissill. The diverse alliances Grissill forms throughout the text provide ample critique of the structures that allow Gwalter to continue with his seemingly arbitrary testing of his wife, and by extension her family. Though the trials continue, several characters readily voice objections; even Gwalter comments on the fact that he is moved by Grissill’s suffering (4.1.69–70, 4.1.200). When Gwalter declares that it is time for him to take a second wife, he demands that Grissill act as a servant to his new bride and ready his house for the wedding.\textsuperscript{89} While earlier iterations of

\textsuperscript{88} Hermione’s removal from state and personal affairs and her belief in the power of the Gods to right the injustices against her align her with medieval semi-religious women like those in beguines who formed communities of devout women. Hermione places her fate in the hands of the Gods/planets several times and gives the Oracle credit for Perdita’s preservation (2.1.105–107; 3.2.115–116; 5.3.121–128). Hermione’s absence from court for sixteen years appears similar to the anchoresses who lived in seclusion. The anchoresses were often from well off families who were able to afford to pay for their keeping and were frequently tended to by close female family or friends.

\textsuperscript{89} In both \textit{The Pleasant Commodie} and \textit{The Winter’s Tale} the fathers imply, if briefly, a physical desire for their daughters. Admittedly, Gwalter’s elaborate plot that to take a second wife, who happens to be his daughter, is a ruse to further test his wife and to reveal that both of his children are alive and well. Despite the fact that he never intends to marry Gratiana, his daughter, the set-up is both uncomfortable for the incestuous implications and the age disparity. Even Grissill cautions the Marquesse to “consider of her tender yeares” as she urges him not to treat Gratiana as harshly he has treated Grissill (5.2.148). In this manner, Grissill continues to defend those who face a similar fate of being dominated by Gwalter while simultaneously building further networks of alliance. In \textit{The Winter’s Tale} the situation is arguably more uncomfortable because Leontes does not know that Perdita is his daughter. Florizel asks Leontes to intercede with Polixenes on behalf of Florizel and Perdita, claiming that “At your request, / My father will grant previous things as trifles” (5.1.220–221). Leontes responds that if he were to ask Polixines for anything, he would “beg your precious mistress, / Which he counts but a trifle” (5.1.222–223). The exchange is quick, but Leontes clearly states his sexual interest in Perdita. Paulina immediately reminds Leontes of Hermione and chastises that his “eye hath too much youth in it” (5.1.224). While we are
the tale have ladies of the court who express sorrow over seeing Grissill’s mistreatment, in Dekker’s version the majority of the critique stems from Laureo, Janicola, and Julia. Laureo’s commentary here, as it has throughout the play, demonstrates the importance of the kinship between Grissill and her family. In Amy Froide’s work on the importance of kinship bonds for early modern singlewomen—an arguably apt category for Grissill who spends a majority of her life in her father’s house, away from Gwalter—she argues that, “siblings were equally, if not more, important” than parents.\(^90\) Relationships between brothers and sisters often involved “material assistance;” however, like Laureo with Grissill, they could also be protective.\(^91\) In his defense of his sister, Laureo goes so far as to proclaim that Gwalter should take a new wife quietly rather than “proclaime this injurie / And vexe Grissill with such laweless wrong” (5.1.64–65).\(^92\) Laureo’s insistence that Gwalter’s second marriage is illegal because the Marquesse is still married to Grissill calls to mind the complaints of Katherine of Aragon’s supporters who declared Henry’s marriage to Anne invalid based on the same grounds.

Whereas earlier in the play Grissill would step in with quiet objections to protect her kin and others from Gwalter’s attacks, at the end of the play the protests against Gwalter’s behavior grow more adamant and consequently suffer greater reprimands from the Marquesse. When meant to read Leontes attraction for Perdita as foreshadowing of their familial bond and a reminder of his continued attraction for Hermione, the moment is awkward and recalls the discomfort of the Marquesse planning a false marriage to his own daughter. It is also worth noting that in Pandosto, Shakespeare’s source for The Winter’s Tale, Pandosto persists in his pursuit of his daughter, calling her to his chamber in secret, and entreating her to acquiesce to his love. When she denies him, he threatens her with death.

\(^90\) Froide, 52. See, also, Sara Butler’s The Language of Abuse for further examples of brothers protecting their sisters from marital violence in late medieval England, particularly 189–194.

\(^91\) Ibid., 60–61.

\(^92\) Laureo continues his protest in the Marquesse’s presence. Laureo insists that Gwalter does “gross wrongs” and “cursed acts” (5.2.64, 68). Also, Grissill’s brother threatens to continue his proclamations against Gwalter wherever he goes.
threatened with the imprisonment for his refusal to behave, Laureo declares, “Lodge me in dungeons, I will still exclaime, / On Gwalters cursed acts and hated name” (5.2.67–68). Refusing Grissill’s advice of silence, Lauero learns the cost of defiance. Janicola’s acknowledgement that he “indureth wrong”—after he has spent much of the play acquiescing to the Marquesse’s demands and treatment—points to the excessiveness of Gwalter’s injuries to Janicola’s family, and the limits of endurance for even the most devout subject (5.2.102). Janicola’s final confession that Gwalter’s trials are too much should not be undervalued. While he has supported his daughter throughout, he has consistently placed his lord’s needs and desires first. In acknowledging Grissill’s suffering, Janicola joins the community that witnesses the precarity of her situation and, as such, names her life grievable.

As her defenders meet with resistance, Grissill readies the Marquesse’s second wife with care and outwardly with perfect patience and joy, but there is disruptiveness in her compliance. When he inquires if Grissill willingly gives the young maid to Gwalter in spite of any envy she may feel, Grissill replies, “I do my deare Lord, and as willingly / As I deliuered vp my maiden youth” (5.2.75–76). It seems that Gwalter has succeeded in taming Grissill, but we must think back to both her initial thoughts of suicide over transgressing with Gwalter and her proclamation that she would rather stay at her father’s house than become the Marquesse’s wife. It may be true that Grissill offers the second wife’s innocence as willingly as she did her own, but that does not mean that Grissill was happy about Gwalter’s first marriage, or is happy about his second. Gwalter mistakes Grissill’s intent here as he did with her initial objection to their union at the beginning of the play; Gwalter assumes that he has molded the most patient and obedient woman ever. As her reward, Grissill is reinstated as Gwalter’s wife and she is reunited with her lost
children. This moment of reconciliation reads as arbitrary as the trials that Gwalter instigates earlier in the text.

The emotional trauma suffered due to Gwalter’s actions and, consequently, the precariousness of Grissill’s position, is palpable in her response to the reunion with her children. If we had any doubts about Grissill’s emotions regarding Gwalter, her last lines remove them, “Ioy feare, loue hate, hope doubts incompasse me. / Are these my children I supposed slain?” (5.3.193–194). Her joy from the reunion with her children, along with her love for them is apparent. She may only cling to hope that Gwalter’s torments are at an end, but her fear and doubts are understandable considering the years of coercion, threat, and emotional violence she has suffered at the hands of her husband. That leaves us with hate. The only person she can direct her hate toward is the Marquesse. Gwalter’s behavior produces a struggle whereby Grissill’s inner suffering spills over into her attempt to maintain shows of deference. The inequality in authority and lack of mutual accord within the marriage of Gwalter and Grissill that results in Grissill’s public confession of fear and hate calls to mind William Gouge’s warning that, “Contrary also…is the sterne, rough, and cruel carriage of husbands, who by violence and tyranny goe about to maintaine their authority. Force may indeed cause feare, but a slauish feare, such a feare as breedeth more hatred then loue, more inward contemp, then outward respect.”

Despite Grissill’s attempts to appease Gwalter throughout the play, her last lines are not to him but to her children: “Blessing distill on you like morning deaw, / My soule knit to your soules, knowes you are mine” (5.3.196–197). Her love and focus are directed toward her

93 Gouge, 355.
children; she claims them readily and in more concrete terms than she hinted at before. Hermione’s only lines in the last scene of the play echo those spoken by Grissill,

You gods, look down,

And from your sacred vials pour your graces

Upon my daughter’s head! Tell me, mine own,

Where has thou been preserved? (5.3.121–124).

Both mothers bless their children and claim them for their own in separate terms from their relationships with their husbands. Gwalter responds to Grissell that, “They are [yours], and I am thine” (5.3.198). He attempts to situate himself into a marriage and a family that he has spent years destroying. Rather than reconciliation, he is met with silence, a silence that I would like to suggest is rife with resentment and resignation that her “words cannot get remedy” (5.1.92). Grissill does not speak for the remaining 110 lines of the play.

Similarly, though Hermione embraces Leontes when she first descends from her place as a statue, she does not speak to her husband but only addresses her daughter. “Knowing by Paulina that the Oracle / Gave hope thou wast in being, have preserved / Myself to see the issue” (5.3.127–128). Hermione admits she kept herself in hope of being reunited with her daughter, but says nothing of Leontes or of her choice to live away from the king during the intervening years; her focus is on her daughter. Hermione uses the word “preserved” to describe her and Perdita’s time away from court, suggesting that both mother and daughter were protected and safe away from court, away from Leontes. Hermione’s self-identification in these final moments, as it has been for her previous years of solitude, is as a mother.

While others in The Pleasant Comodie fall in line to praise Gwalter’s judgment, as expected at the end of a comedy, Julia voices her dissent:
besides our selues there are a number heere, that haue behelde Grissills patience [and Gwalter’s] tryals…amongst this company I trust there are some mayden batchelers, and virgin maydens, those that liue in that freedome and loue it, those that know the war of mariage and hate it. (5.2.275–283)

Julia moves her objections to Gwalter’s actions from the world of the play to the world of the early modern England. Her comment that “besides our selues there are a number heere” expands her protest—and by extension the protest of both Grissill and Hermione—to include those in the audience who Julia assumes also object to Gwalter’s “tryals” of his wife. In including the audience in her speech, Julia connects Grissill’s patience and suffering at the hands of Gwalter to the spectators who have witnessed Grissill endure Gwalter’s abuses. Grissill’s hate—an emotion she conceals as she endures Gwalters abuses, but finally articulates in the moment of reunion with her children (5.3.193)—surfaces in Julia’s declaration that for many, marriage is war. Those who know this war—Grissill, the audience, and by extension husbands and wives in early modern England—hate it. Julia’s final protest against Gwalter and marriage, in general, occurs in stark contrast to Grissill’s silence. However, Julia’s observations articulate the emotions behind Grissill’s silence: Grissill may be silent and obedient, she may be silently protesting, or she may be tired of lying and opts to focus on her role as a mother reunited with her lost children after years of pain and separation. Sir Owen nods to the last of these when in the final words of the play he notes that Grissill’s silence is because she “is weary” (5.2.297). In asking for the audience’s applause, Sir Owen includes calling on “awl that haue crabbed husbands and cannot mend them, as Grissill had” (5.2.). The implication in Sir Owen’s critique of Gwalter’s refusal to “mend” his ways suggests that despite the purported comic resolution of the play, the Marquesse’s behavior has been unacceptable and requires correction. Sir Owen provides further
proof of this assessment with his comment that rather than Gwalter taming Grissill, that Grissill’s patience “bridled” (bridled) the Marquesse. In the final moments, then, Sir Owen and Julia extend the play’s critique of marriage, and explicitly Gwalter’s actions, to the audience by acknowledging their shared experience: Grissill’s grief and the precarious position she occupies as a wife are not limited to representations on the stage. In doing so, the text implies that the arbitrary violence and coercion Grissill sustains at the hands of her husband is not unfamiliar to early modern women.
CHAPTER THREE

“AND MAKE MY BODY FREE TO GOD”: RELIGIOUS ORTHODOXY AND MARITAL IDENTITY

I. “[U]NEQUIVOCAL AND PERFECT FREEDOM”

[T]he two great religious and secular states to which almost all persons of the female sex commit themselves should display unequivocal and perfect freedom as their most natural character.

—Gabrielle Suchon, Treatise on Ethics and Politics, Divided into Three Parts: Freedom, Knowledge, and Authority, 1693

Gabrielle Suchon, a seventeenth-century French philosopher and former nun, opted to live a contemplative life within the world rather than remaining cloistered as part of a formal religious community. Despite her own choices, Suchon concedes that the majority of pre-modern women—“almost all persons of the female sex”—enter into marriage or religious orders as their primary commitment or “vocation.” While the same assumption could be made for men,

2 Suchon, 88.
3 Ibid.
4 Stanton and Wilkin, 2.
Suchon sees fewer restrictions for men within these vocations because she believes that men more readily negotiate for contemplative space within their commitments, what she terms the “mastery of a free and imperious way of acting.” In contrast, she argues that women are more often “excluded and deprived of” the opportunity to do so by the constraints placed upon them, whether within the marital union or by the church. Suchon’s viewpoint, writing at the end of the seventeenth-century, is based on more codified structures of female religious life and lay marriage in her time period that do not necessarily represent the complexity of medieval gender relations. However, while her contention that marriage or religious orders “should display unequivocal and perfect freedom as their most natural character” may not reflect the reality of women in late seventeenth-century France, it is very much in line with the experience of some medieval nuns, like Hildegard of Bingen, or semi-religious women, like the beguines of the thirteenth century. For Suchon, regardless of the vocation that they choose, women, like men, should be able to structure their lives in such a manner that they maintain the freedom to pursue a contemplative life free of commitments—even within marriage or as part of a religious sect. Similarly, Suchon argues that women’s free consent is crucial in selecting marriage, a cloister, or a celibate and contemplative life; but that women frequently lack the opportunity for such consent due to external familial and societal pressures. Often described as the first beguine, Marie d’Oignies (1177–1213) faced such familial pressure to marry, but was able to pursue a celibate life because her husband granted her a chaste union and deferred to her spiritual pursuits.

In Suchon’s terms, the celibate life freely chosen is one where women continue to live in the world—a regular community, as opposed to sequestration—but outside of the restrictions of

5 Suchon, 88.
6 Ibid.
the secular or religious states (i.e., marriage or religious orders). This option, according to Suchon, offers the greatest rewards, but also provides the greatest challenges. Unlike the set schedules of devotion and service demanded by a cloistered life or the stress and obligations of attending to a husband, children, and household, women who live chastely in the world, have “time, energy, and resources to provide instruction to the ignorant and shelter to the needy, as well as tend to the sick.”7 Medieval anchoresses, beguines, and other semi-religious women were able to carve out lives separate from traditional lines of patriarchal authority, within or outside of marriage, and fulfilled the call of public service suggested by Suchon. Women unfettered by religious or secular states benefit from the time for devotion, learning, and personal growth, and are able to focus on performing good works for their community. Chastity freely chosen—beyond the confines of traditional structures that encourage the observation and control of women—should be viewed as more pure because it requires continual commitment: the chaste life must be repeatedly chosen and performed for it to be maintained. Further, it wants the societal support of more traditional secular and religious vocations.

Cultural expectations that move women towards marital and spiritual commitments serve to place women under the control of male figures—husbands or religious leaders. For Suchon, “the universal custom of establishing oneself in a cloister or in a household under a husband’s control,” keeps women subservient and restricts their behavior.8However, she argues that despite assumptions of feminine frailty and aptitude for sin, women’s self control and devotional practices are not predicated on their subservient relationships to a male authority. Rather, “a love

7 Stanton and Wilkin, 234, and Suchon, 239.
8 Suchon, 238.
of virtue and a zeal for honor—not bars—make women well behaved and restrained.”\(^9\) It is not the patriarchal control or surveillance within marriage or the church that moves women to chastity and devotion, but women’s own desire for virtue regardless of their marital or religious status.

By her own admission, Suchon’s view of women’s ability to govern themselves and pursue a contemplative life is “unconventional.” Despite this, the state she argues for “has always had many advocates but [it] still lacks generalized approval and remains subject to opposition and contrariness.”\(^10\) Just because a “neutral life” is viewed as “dangerous” by those who disagree with her assessment, Suchon claims that their “scorn” does not “compromise its merit in any way.”\(^11\) Her reminder is useful for thinking about the minority stories of feminine experience and marriage beyond the more “universal” ideals. Despite her focus on women in late sixteenth-century France, the type of freedom that she imagines for women outside of “the two great” vocations is apt for discussions of the malleability of identities for medieval women within those same vocations, particularly wives whose identities were defined as much by their piety and religious devotion as their secular marital one.

The women discussed in this chapter are wives, but their marital status, religious orthodoxy, and performance of piety underscore the precarious conditions faced by spiritual women who exist outside the traditional confines of the convent. Social privileging of the category of wife and the cultural assumption that wives remain appropriately under the control of their husbands should offset part of the vulnerability endured by semi-religious women. To some

\(^9\) \textit{Ibid.}, 90.
\(^10\) \textit{Ibid.}, 237.
\(^11\) \textit{Ibid.}, 238, 239.
extent, this is true. Margery Kempe’s and Marie d’Oignies’ relationships with their husbands offer a measure of protection and freedom. After many years of marriage and fourteen children, Margery’s husband eventually accedes to her desire for a chaste marriage—in part because she agrees to pay his debts—and travels with her during her early pilgrimages (1.11). Unable to combat the familial pressures to marry, Marie weds at fourteen, but her husband quickly grants her desire for a chaste spiritual life and aids her in her work with leper colonies (1.3.80–81). In each instance, the husband’s support helps facilitate the transition from the woman’s secular union to a religious one. In the case of Margery, however, the transition is both messier and never truly complete: at first her husband refuses her request and even after he grants it, he demands that she continue to share his bed; and after years of separation Margery returns to care for him at the end of his life (1.9, 1.11, 1.76). Rather than simply replacing one bond or marker of identity with another, the marital and religious identities exist together exposing a variety of statuses that often overlap and are based on performance and public interpretation of that performance.12

For semi-religious women, like Margery, who clothe themselves in the white garb customary for spiritual virgins (or virgin widows), the category of wife leaves them susceptible to public ridicule for performing an outward show of a specific pious identity that society views is at odds with their marital status. In dressing as a virgin despite the fact that she is a wife and mother, Margery’s performance is criticized as a lie. Similarly, wives who maintain close associations with their husbands expose themselves to greater scrutiny from those who question

12 See Beattie, 328, and Karras, 4, for a discussion of ways that various relationships constituted unions that could be viewed as marriage or various identities that could be seen as coexisting.
the couples motives for making vows of chastity, as well those who doubt whether the couple can successfully uphold their vows while living in close proximity.\textsuperscript{13}

Medieval and early modern wives who wish to pursue more devout religious lives face a perilous navigation between the performance of their marital status and secular commitments while balancing their religious piety and devotional practice. Above all, they risk disruption of this balance through a negative public perception of their performance. Further, to borrow Kathryn Schwarz’s terms, women in spiritual marriages face heightened secular and religious surveillance, in part, because the “intentional virtue” of semi-religious women “unsettles the tenets of heterosocial hierarchy.”\textsuperscript{14} Many women, like Margery, fulfill their marital labors of patrilineal succession before requesting release from the conjugal debt; however, Marie and her husband John agree to a chaste marriage from the outset of their union. But beyond the issue of procreation, semi-religious women’s performance of piety—often more extreme and public than their husbands’—places them as the spiritually superior partner within the union.

Women’s role in the spiritual labor within medieval and early modern households was significant. Religious orthodoxy, whether practiced within the marital union, the cloister, or as an individual practice, helped shaped a women’s identity as a good wife or nun. However, through the women’s orthodox performance of piety, these wives perform their intentional feminine virtue to excess, which renders them socially dangerous and open to accusations of heresy. Women whose devotion is public—and in many ways it needs to be public to be verified and counted—risk having their orthodox performance read as dangerous. As Ulricke Tancke and

\textsuperscript{13} See Elliott, \textit{Spiritual Marriage}, 138–141. Elliott notes that some issues surrounding chaste marriage derive from the practice in Cathar doctrine. As such, for the church, “lay chastity is uncomfortably like heretical chastity” (139).

\textsuperscript{14} Schwarz, 1.
others have noted, “[t]he ubiquitous notion of the ideal female as ‘chaste, silent and obedient’ was pervasive” in pre-modern Europe. But while “[t]he opposite extreme, an outspoken and assertive woman, was portrayed as sexually incontinent, by way of associating women’s interaction with the outside world through speech with the metaphorical as well as literal openness of their bodies,” for semi-religious women, the voracity of their speech equated not necessarily with sexual excess, but spiritual incontinence. Though female speech “was sanctioned within the context of a woman’s religious and domestic duties,” prohibitions against women proselytizing created a specific challenge for the public devotional practices of semi-religious women. As stated in 1 Corinthians 14:34: *mulieres in ecclesiis taceant non enim permittitur eis loqui sed subditas esse sicut et lex dicit* (women should keep silent in churches, for they are not allowed to speak, but to be subject, as the law says). Paul’s order goes on to situate a woman’s spiritual guidance in the hands of her husband, noting that women should remain silent in church and seek answers at home from their husbands. For both Margery’s and Marie’s husbands, the acknowledgement of their wives’ capacity for spiritual zeal and expertise locates the men as the obedient spouse, following the religious instruction and desires of their wives, and disrupts the gendered order that calls for masculine authority and feminine submission.

Women’s religious devotion—an essential quality for medieval and early modern good wives—when performed with orthodox rigor simultaneously calls into question the stability of

15 Tancke, 7.  
16 Ibid.  
17 Ibid.  
18 1 Corinthians 14:35, *The Vulgate* (c. 1300s).  
19 Ibid.
gender relations within marriage and, on a broader scale, disrupts marital identity when the language of spousal fidelity sifts from their husbands to God. As Ruth Mazo Karras notes,

A great deal of the scholarship on medieval women over the last several decades has been on women who rejected marriage for spiritual reasons and focused their lives on a union with Christ or a relationship with a holy man. Either of these types of union could be, and was, discussed in marital language. These women underscore how important marriage was as a structuring image or metaphor for women’s lives, even women who chose not to enter it.\(^{20}\)

While Karras’ interest lies with women who forgo marriage for a religious life—whether cloistered or within the world—her discussion of the appropriation of marital language for spiritual women is still pertinent for the medieval women discussed in this chapter who, though married, still situate their religious commitments in terms of spiritual marriage. Neither a traditional secular wife, nor a wife of God located within the structures of a convent, these women underline the malleability of the category of wife, while simultaneously exposing the limits of the category to aptly encompass their multiple identities.

In returning, then, to Gabrielle Suchon’s promotion of a life free from the main secular or spiritual vocations—marriage and religious orders—Suchon acknowledges the diversity of marital states and identities, and argues that a similar plurality is found in states of celibacy:

[I]n the state of marriage, which represents a universal type, we find several species or different kinds. Some persons have always lived without commitments, such as young girls; others, after recovering their initial freedom through the

\(^{20}\) Karras, 10.
death of their spouse, commit themselves anew to a second or third marital alliance. Moreover, we see a broad range of conjugal situations every day; some couples are united and peaceful, others in strife and divorce. The Neutral type I call voluntary celibacy also features a great deal of diversity: it is no less fertile in forming different species than the other vocations.21

Rather than assuming that marital unions, religious unions, or lives free of commitment all look the same or conform to a standard ideal, Suchon, rightfully—and somewhat obviously—notes that identities shift, change, and exist in multiple formats. While she argues for the validity of celibate lives, regardless of their form or what it takes for women to maintain their desired lifestyle, her rationale is readily extended to secular marriage and the lives of semi-religious women who are wives, but also create identities and communities separate from their husbands. Some women live in close proximity to their spouses; some opt for semi-enclosed cells attached to a church similar to religious hermit or anchoress; while others live in female communities, or travel with other semi-religious pilgrims. The instability and variability of the marital union provides medieval semi-religious women the opportunity to reimagine a union more suited to their own pursuits. In each instance, the secular marital identities for these women become almost ancillary to the spiritual bonds and community commitments.

21 Suchon, 248.
II. “[B]Y LOUE OF SPRITUEL SPOUSEHODE”

I have chosen you and taken you as my spouse, for it pleases me and likes me to do so, and for I wish to show you my privy secrets...I take you to me as my spouse to my own personal delight, as it is according and fitting that God have his delight with a chaste soul. —St. Bridget of Sweden, Liber Celestis, c.1370

In the passage above, God not only declares a desire for a spiritual marriage with St. Bridget of Sweden, but also enacts the union with words of present consent: “I take you to me as my spouse.” In reporting the vision, Bridget—who becomes a member of the Third Order of St. Francis after her husband’s death and subsequently establishes her own order, the Brigittines—aligns herself with other religious and semi-religious women who employ the terminology of marriage to describe their relationships with God. The language is intimate, “for it please me” and “personal delight,” and implies a lack of choice on the part of Bridget: God takes Bridget to wife without the necessary consent of a secular union. A more extreme case of spiritually coerced marriage is found in the example of Margery Kempe and God: “the Father said to this creature, ‘Daughter, I will have you wedded to my Godhead, for I shall show you my secrets and my counsels, for you shall dwell with me without end’” (1.35). While the sentiments between Bridget’s and Margery’s visions are similar including an intent to share in God’s “secrets” and

23 Sweden, 138–139.
the expression of the words of present consent—“I take you Margery, for my wedded wife”—Margery purposefully refuses to respond (1.35). Instead, she “kept silence in her soul” rather than explain to God that, “all her love and all her affection was set on the manhood of Christ” (1.35). Margery’s trepidation over the spousal is clear. Admittedly, when Bridget receives her vision of a spiritual marriage, her husband is dead; and she is a widow, free to make religious vows or remarry. However, Margery remains married to her husband, John, at the time when God takes her to wife. Though her husband and she have taken vows of chastity and live apart, the marriages exist simultaneously: Margery’s devotion grants her both secular and spiritual unions. In her subsequent pilgrimages, she draws on the power of both, using her heavenly spouse as a guide and her earthly one—even in his absence—as a cultural means of protection from those who would harm her.

Similarly, Marie d’Oignies’ marriage, though singular, is described as one that spans this life and the next and attests to a more malleable and evolving bond than implied by traditional secular unions. Marie receives a husband (also named John) because her parents are resentful of her religious fervor and refusal to dress or act as their family’s status and station deem appropriate. “And therefore they, hauynge envye at hir gracyous dedys, whanne she was fourtene yeere olde, maryed her to a yonge man” (1.2.56–57). Acknowledging that “she hadde not openly power of hir owne body,” because it belonged to her husband in marriage, Marie keeps the

24 That there are similarities between Margery’s account of her marriage with the Godhead and St. Bridget’s spiritual union with God is unsurprising. St. Bridget is one of Margery’s main influences, along with Julian of Norwhich and Marie d’Oignies. See 1.39.
25 Metaphorically, her religious vows make her a bride of Christ, regardless of her visions.
26 See 1.51 for an example of Margery relying on both unions for protection. She argues that her husband “gave [her] leave with his own mouth” to go to York, but her spiritual knowledge that satisfies her accusers comes from God.
mortification of her flesh private (1.2.63–65). Compelled by her “meeknes” and “prayers,” the Lord “enspyred” John to suggest a chaste marriage so that Marie “myghte more frely seue oure Lorde” (1.3.80, 81, 84). Rather than merely grant his wife a chaste marriage so that she may have freedom to pursue her own spiritual work, John takes part “to folowe [Marie] in holy purpos and holy religyone” (1.3.89). While their marriage begins as a secular union, John’s willingness to free Marie from her physical obligation to him and embrace her spiritual calling as his own transforms their bond. Jacque of Vitry notes that as John “was departyd from hir by carnelle affeceyone, the nerre was hee knytte to hir by loue of spirituel spousehode” (1.3.90–91). The opposition between secular and spiritual unions suggests that secular marriage is limited by physical desire and earthly temporality; however, the union between Marie and John is deemed by God as a “reparelde matrymoyne” (restored marriage), one where God “wolde gyue agenyne to hir in heuene hir felowe” for withdrawing “from fleshely luste in erthe” (1.3.93–94). In this way, Marie’s union with John serves as both an earthly/secular marriage and a divine/spiritual one. They must release each other from their physical marriage so that they may more freely pursue the spiritual through Marie’s piety and good works—much like the recommendations made by Gabrielle Suchon at the outset of this chapter. The reward for their earthly piety is everlasting fame, “a blessed kynde of martirdome,” and their reunion in heaven (1.3.100–101).

The central authority in the union shifts from John to Marie, but Vitry is clear in his narration that the real focal point of the union, and the impetus for John’s conversion to chastity, is God.

Jacques of Vitry is careful to qualify his description of Marie’s piety: he is not “preisyenge the exces, but tellyne the feruoure” (1.2.66). For Vitry, Marie’s ability to tolerate the physical pain is proof of her grace, not an example to follow. Gabrielle Suchon, rather than downplaying the physical excess of piety, notes the difficulties of maintaining “fasting, vigils, and other kinds of mortification to scourge the body” when women “are under a husband’s power and who are involved in caring for a family” (262).
Their “spirituel spousehode” implies devotion beyond a typical pair bond that destabilizes the traditional marital structure; the rupture in their earthy union is predicated on the promise of future/eternal stability.

In her work, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock*, Dyan Elliott explains the distinctions between the terms “spiritual marriage,” “chaste marriage,” and “celibate marriage.” For Elliott, celibate implies the lifestyle choice of a single person, rather than a married couple, though she concedes that the term “celibate life” is sometimes used to denote “a married couple’s transition to chastity.” Chaste marriage frequently describes a union where both spouses are faithful to their marriage vows (as opposed to adultery); however, throughout this chapter, I have used Elliott’s definition of spiritual marriage as applicable for chaste marriage, as well. While spiritual marriage can refer to a number of “quasi-nuptial” or metaphorical unions— like those between Christ and the church or Margery and God—Elliott defines spiritual marriage as a marital relationship where a man and woman consent to release each other from their obligations of the conjugal debt. The conjugal debt granted spouses access to each others’ bodies based on the precepts of 1 Corinthians 7.4: *mulier sui corporis potestatem non habet sed vir similiter autem et vir sui corporis potestatem non habet sed mulier* (the wife hath not the power of her own body, but the husband; and, likewise, the husband hath not the power of his own body, but the wife). The mutual vow of chastity serves as an

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29 Ibid., 5.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 4.
32 The Vulgate (c. 1300s).
agreement that the couple will maintain their marital vows, but abstain from their licit physical relationship.

As Elliott notes, rarely did both parties enter into this agreement equally, despite the necessity of mutual consent. For example, when Margery first implores her husband to consent to such a union, he refuses her. Eventually, he concedes, but only under the conditions that they “lie still together in one bed as [they] have done,” that Margery “shall pay [his] debts” before she makes her pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and that she “shall eat and drink with [him] on Fridays” (1.11). Though Margery prefers to keep her fast on Fridays, she concedes to John’s demands and he grants her desire, stating, “As free may your body be to God as it has been to me” (1.11). As he releases Margery’s body from the conjugal debt, John implies that Margery is free to grant God the same access that John once enjoyed. In this way, John implies that their secular union has ended, which leaves her free to enter into a union with God. While Margery and John made their vows “under a cross,” the mutual consent and intent to maintain a spiritual marriage required the witness of a religious authority, and, as such, became a public acknowledgement of the couple’s piety as evidenced by their sexual abstinence. Public slander and doubt of their ability to maintain their vows while living together is what finally drove Margery and John to live apart to “avoid all perils” and any “suspicion…of their incontinence” (1.76).

Beyond public perception, chaste marriage was not without its problems or challengers within later Medieval Europe. One of the greatest threats to couples that wished to make such vows was the Catholic Church. As the church attempted to establish its primacy within the social structure of the three estates—clergy, nobility, and commoners—they moved more firmly toward

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33 Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage*, 251–256.
privileging celibacy for the clergy. If lay married couples—particularly lay women within marriage—maintained chastity practiced by the clergy, they threatened to remove one of the tenets that set the clergy apart from the other estates. In essence, “lay chastity, whether heretical or orthodox, had the potential to challenge the structure of Christian society.” In order to remove the dangers of such a challenge, “[i]t was necessary to deflect the laity from too rigid an imitation of the theological model of marriage.”\textsuperscript{34}

The performative aspect of lay marriage—whether a secular union that followed a more traditional paradigm and resulted in the production of heirs, or a chaste bond thought to produce spiritual fruit through displays of piety and good works—means that there exists the continual potential for flux. In fact, some spouses granted vows of chastity, but later renounced them and reasserted their right to the conjugal debt. Further proof of the instability in marital performance can be seen in the union of Margery and John; for them, the vow of chastity served as a precursor to more formalized separate living arrangements and occurred after the couple had fulfilled their marital obligations of patrilineal succession. Some spouses continued to cohabitate after their vows, while others lived separate.\textsuperscript{35}

Based on the varied performance of marital unions and the importance of public perception of those performances, Cordelia Beattie’s claim that “marital status can be seen as a performance that had to be acted out in order to be visible,” seems accurate.\textsuperscript{36} It is the public view and judgment of marital identity that becomes particularly problematic for semi-religious women. Whether church accusations of heresy or societal assumptions that a man and woman

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 141.
\textsuperscript{35} Elliott, \textit{Spiritual Marriage}, 251–256.
\textsuperscript{36} Beattie, 327.
living together cannot possibly maintain their vows of chastity, wives like Margery and Marie remain vulnerable to external judgments of both their unions and their piety. It is unsurprising, then, that Margery and Marie maintain close associations with their husbands at the outset of their spiritual unions, thereby protecting their reputations and remaining safely under the authority of their husbands, at least according to public perception. But as their religious performances and reputations grow, it is also not surprising that both women establish lives separate from their spouses. Jacques of Vitry notes that despite Marie’s continued alliance with John and their work in Williambroc, she “couetyd to gif herselfe to God allone” (2.9.1137–1138). Marie receives a vision of Oignies, “that she saw neuer byfore” and subsequently takes leave “of John hir husbonde and of his brothere Maister Guy, hir gostly fader” (2.9.1143, 1147–1148). Her move to Oignies and her residence within a semi-enclosed cell connected to the church help transition Marie from the pious wife of John to more fully embody her identity as a semi-religious woman who becomes known as the first beguine.38

In many ways, Marie’s identity as John’s wife—even as a chaste wife within a spiritual union—prevents her from forming her full identity as mulieres religiosae (religious woman). And despite the break in the performance of her marital union when she moves to Oignies, Marie does not separate entirely from male authority figures: her piety is observed, interpreted, and documented by Jacque of Vitry. Through Vitry’s observation of Marie’s devotion to and belief in God’s grace, her life becomes a religious performance to learn from and emulate. It is through

37 John’s brother Guy serves as Marie’s long time confessor and spiritual advisor prior to her move to Oignies.
38 As Jennifer N. Brown, notes, the term Jacques does not use the term beguine to describe Marie, in part, because it carried negative connotations during the time that he was writing (247). For further discussion of the beguine movement and Marie’s role within it, see Simons, 130–131.
her daily performance of piety that Marie instructs other women and members of her community.\footnote{39} Her example constitutes an approach to religious life that varies from the preaching of male clergy. Marie’s ability to transverse her performance from maid to wife to semi-religious woman appears more smoothly in Vitry’s \textit{Vita} of Marie’s life than in Margery’s struggles in \textit{The Book of Margery Kempe}.\footnote{40} While Marie maintains a constant network of religious and secular supporters, Margery cannot or chooses not to do so. Margery faces a constant threat of accusations of heresy, in part, because of her refusal to limit her gendered performance to a recognizable identity. For example, she maintains when questioned “I am no maiden; I am a wife” and yet she dresses in white, like a virgin or chaste widow (1.51). Her desire to emulate the religious lives of women like Marie d’Oignies and Julian of Norwich is seen in stark contrast to her inability to do so effectively. Margery’s struggles expose the precarious conditions faced by some semi-religious women who fall outside of the traditional structures of secular or religious commitments. Simultaneously, the instability of medieval marital structures create a space for the malleability of Marie’s marital identity that allows her to pursue her religious orthodoxy at the cost of her secular identity. In both instances, the women show the dangers and advantages for women who must balance social expectations of secular marriage with a desire for greater personal piety and spiritual autonomy.

\footnote{39}{Her example and its instruction extends out to included the audience—both ecclesiastical and laity—that Vitry imagines for Marie’s \textit{Vita}.}

\footnote{40}{Admittedly, Vitry points out that Marie’s family rejects her piety and she meets people who doubt her devotion and require proof of her piety, such as the priest who chastises her for her continual weeping until through Marie’s prayers he, too, suffers the same affliction (1.5.146–169).}
CHAPTER FOUR

“‘I maye lyve in quyet and be free from his vyalence’: Divorce and the Limits of Feminine Endurance”

I. “The canon lawes of this realme doe at this day admit a devorse betwene a man and his wife”

All [women] are understood either married or to bee married and their desires [are] subject to their husband, I know no remedy though some women can shift it well enough.

—T. E., The Lawes Resolutions of Womens Rights, 1632

Published in 1632, though written near the end of the sixteenth century, The Lawes Resolutions of Womens Rights underlines the cultural assumption that early modern women were either wives, or soon to be wives. Within the orthodoxy of patriarchal order, husbands maintain the right to control their wives’ behavior. But, as T.E. notes, and Dympna Callaghan elucidates

1 BL, Add. MS, 12507, fol. 204v. All transcriptions in this chapter are mine, with the exception of BL, Add. MS, 38170 and BL, Add. MS, 38170, fol. 176–178, which I transcribed with Cristina León Alfar. Transcriptions can be found at, http://opencuny.org/bourne/. Within this chapter, corrections to the manuscripts have been denoted with square brackets and contractions have been silently expanded. See the digital appendix for semi-diplomatic transcriptions.

2 BL, Add. MS, 38170, fol. 178, no date.

3 T.E., B3v.
in her introduction to *The Impact of Feminism in English Renaissance Studies*, there are “contradictions, gaps, and ‘wiggle-room’” in social practice not explicitly accounted for within the “patriarchal precept.”

T. E.’s description of women who successfully navigate the social demands for obedience and deference to their husbands by “shift[ing] it well enough” carries undertones of duplicitous action often reiterated in literary representations of women, particularly those who avail themselves of legal redress in order to get their way. As Subha Mukherji notes, “[w]omen in legal situations are repeatedly associated in the drama with doublespeak, contradictions, law-tricks, stratagems and sexual intrigue.”

Leonora’s attempt to disinherit her son in Webster’s *The Devil’s Law Case* and Vittoria’s boldness while on trial for her husband’s murder in Webster’s *The White Devil* offer two examples of former wives behaving badly at law. In Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia dons male garb and goes to law in defense of Antonio. In Shakespeare’s *All’s Well that Ends Well*, Helena initiates a bed trick in order to fulfill the legal conditions of Betram’s letter. The acquiring of Betram’s ring and her subsequent pregnancy—the results of her stratagem—allow her to claim a legal right to her husband even though he has refused to accept their union throughout the play.

Representations of women utilizing legal knowledge to their advantage within early modern drama vary in terms of social acceptability. Leonora’s self-slander—her false accusation of adultery against herself—is read as unnatural. Rather than acting “like a widow,” Vittoria’s “scorn and impudence” condemn her as much as her guilt (3.2.120–121).

Her refusal to perform shows of deference and entreat the court for mercy suggests an expectation of the same for

4 Callaghan, 10.
6 See Mukherji’s discussion of Vittoria and the “spectacle of corruption” in *Law*, 155, 166.
women at law. Despite going against Betram’s desires, Helena’s questionable tactics seem justified because they re-inscribe patriarchal order: through her fulfillment of her feminine labor of producing an heir she simultaneously produces a spouse by forcing her prodigal husband to recognize their marriage. In contrast to Helena’s work to restore the family unit, Salome in Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam* insists, against the tenets of the Mosaic Law, on her right to a divorce. Salome’s blatant disregard for appropriate gender roles and structures of authority may best encapsulate the threat of women who use legal redress to counter the cultural belief that wives are subject to their husbands. As such, Salome’s attitude and reputation condemn her as much as her desire to leave her husband.

Like representations of women at law in drama, early modern women similarly face heightened scrutiny of their personal character when seeking legal redress. Often social judgements of their actions are less bound by the legal validity of their argument and more by the cultural rhetoric they employ to shape their argument. In a complaint dated 6 December 1582, Elizabeth Bourne crafts a narrative of a long-suffering wife who has patiently endured a variety of abuses from her prodigal husband, Anthony Bourne, over the course of their sixteen-year marriage. Rather than employing the law to recall her husband, Elizabeth seeks a legal separation. Her intent—the right to live separate from Anthony—leaves her vulnerable to slander because she seeks to free herself from the control of her primary male authority, her husband. However, the rhetoric she uses to describe her own suffering and Anthony’s behavior mimic the tropes of the prodigal husband and patient wife narratives as seen in early modern drama. Elizabeth situates her experience within a broader cultural narrative of vulnerable good wives and, in doing so, helps protect herself from accusations of inappropriate conduct.
In reading Elizabeth Bourne’s letters and petition for separation from her husband, Anthony, alongside representations of good wives married to similarly prodigal husbands in early modern plays *The London Prodigal* and *The Yorkshire Tragedy*, we can begin to understand the cultural rhetoric of wifely suffering that allowed Elizabeth to safeguard her reputation, while crafting legal and personal identities separate from her husband. While cultural narratives in letters and legal documents may seem incongruous with dramatic representations of women in early modern drama, I follow the example set by Subha Mukherji in her work *Law and Representation in Early Modern Drama*. In thinking about early modern law, Mukherji argues that “the historically produced compound of dramatic representations” is more likely to present “a cumulative and composite notion of women’s legal pursuits” compared to “the accidentally preserved products of legal documentation.” Early modern drama explores a range of legal experiences; in doing so, it provides the opportunity to glimpse cultural assumptions about “perceived legal or quasi-legal roles.” While Elizabeth Bourne’s petition for a divorce falls squarely within the legal purview to which Mukherji refers, I am more interested in how Elizabeth appropriates the cultural rhetoric of the long-suffering wife in order to obtain her separation, how the terminology of deference allows her to elicit empathy for her cause, and how her cultural understanding of tropes of acceptable female behavior—as exemplified in the prodigal Husband plays—affords her the opportunity to craft narratives that attest to her reputation while further damaging her husband’s.

It is important to concede at the outset the challenges of reading letters and legal documents as evidence of truth—particularly before delving into the delicious accusations Elizabeth levies against Anthony. Many scholars have cautioned against assuming that archival

7 Froide, 7.
documents present clear or accurate depictions of history. I would venture that in instances of divorce, this warning is even more paramount. Admittedly, it is tempting to be swept-up in the soap-operaesque tales of the Bournes’ troubled marriage. While I am fascinated by the outlandish stories, I am not interested in any moral judgment of Anthony’s alleged actions or Elizabeth’s presumably near-martyred suffering; I acknowledge that it is likely that neither party was innocent and that their relationship, like all relationships, was complicated. In fact, even if we could uncover some truth of lived experience—which we cannot—it would be irrelevant.

What is essential is the account of marital instability that arises in the Bournes’ letters and legal documents. Elizabeth’s narratives and desire for divorce challenge literary representations of patient endurance where appropriate feminine behavior restores a husband’s devotion. Here I follow Natalie Zemon Davies’ model as presented in *Fiction in the Archives* and focus on the performative aspects of the writing, the rhetoric Elizabeth employs in soliciting help from her networks of support, the cultural frames with which she works and pushes against in the process of her correspondence, and “the crafting of a narrative.” Davies’ work on letters of remission and pardoner’s tales is particularly apt for thinking about how cultural ideals influence the crafting of a specific narrative when a woman turns to law. With letters of remission, Davies notes that the author needs a “supplication to persuade the king and courts, a historical account of one’s past actions, and a story.” Similarly, through her requests, Elizabeth Bourne needs to provoke empathy from those in power, provide a narrative of her history that portrays her as a long suffering wife, and a story. The story is crucial in that it helps construct a context for her

8 For example, see: Amussen, Davies, and Stewart.
9 Davies, 3. See Daybell, “Scripting a Female Voice,” for his discussion of the mechanics of women’s letters of request.
10 Davies, 4.
assertions of appropriate feminine behavior—particularly in contrast with the narratives she constructs of Anthony’s inappropriate conduct—which, in turn, helps secure her desired protection from those above her. In analyzing the rhetoric and content of her claims, we cannot discover the truth of her experience, but we can begin to recognize what stories carried weight and how women might employ them in order to offset the precarity of their marital identity.

As it stands, few scholars have worked on the life of Elizabeth Bourne or her contentious marriage. James Daybell’s important work on early modern letters has brought him in contact with the Bourne’s case and Elizabeth’s plethora of correspondence; he notes that over eighty of her letters survive. Charles Angell Bradford presents detailed family histories for Elizabeth Bourne, Anthony Bourne, and John Conway, and an overview of their disputes based on the British Library Add. MS. 23212 in an unpublished typescript Conway Papers held at the Folger Shakespeare Library. L. M. Hill discusses the Bournes’ dispute in his work on the career of Julius Caesar, and Cristina Alfar focuses on Elizabeth’s rhetoric surrounding her desire for a divorce in her complaint to Caesar. Even with increased interest in Elizabeth Bourne’s letters over the last ten years, there remains a great deal of work to do on the manuscripts and Elizabeth’s keen understanding of what Subha Mukherji calls “ritualistic self-representation.”

Ritualistic self-representation pertains to the “manipulation of appearances” that move beyond “physical or legal” in order to tap into “the power of public ritual.” Bourne continually


12 See Hill, 7–16 and Alfar, 61–103.

13 Mukherji, Law, 220.

14 Ibid.
presents herself as a wronged and helpless wife in need of relief; and she circulates accounts of her marital history that support her self-representation in documents to powerful allies, or would-be allies. For example, in Elizabeth’s letter to Julius Caesar dated 18 August 1582, she writes “nowe I ame dryven to consele my lyfe and to absent my selfe from the cownseles letters through feare of Mr Bournes vyolence and leste he should take me in to his posessyon agaynst my wyll.”\(^\text{15}\) According to her letter, if her whereabouts are known Anthony may take her by force and insist that she live with him, thereby granting him access to her estate and her person; she fears such contact would result in economic and physical injury, respectively. The desperation of her concealment and refusal to appear before the Privy Council—essentially going against the demands of the highest governing body—underlines the extreme precarity of her position. She portrays herself as a vulnerable woman in need of protection from a husband who threatens “vyolence.” Through the application of cultural narratives of feminine weakness her letters demand a public ritual—saving the woman in distress—shared with Caesar and, by extension, the Council. That her pleas are successful suggests the power of the narrative within early modern England, and the cultural understanding that marriage, rather than offering stability, could endanger a woman and render her susceptible to coercion.

In order to understand the cultural influences that allow Elizabeth Bourne to “shift it well enough,” my focus remains situated predominantly on the literary aspects of her writings: her appropriations of the good wife narrative of patient endurance and her depictions of Anthony as a prodigal husband. Notwithstanding the inclusion of a number of culturally loaded motifs of

\(^{15}\) BL, Add. MS, 12507, fol. 204, 18 Aug 1582. For a full transcription, see http://opencuny.org/bourne/bl-add-12507-fol-204/. Anthony requests that the Council force Elizabeth to live with him, again. In response, she goes into hiding and subsequently petitions the same Council for the legal right to live separate from him.
feminine behavior that echo those found in conduct literature and early modern drama, Elizabeth’s correspondence and petition for separation remain minority narratives. As Susan Dwyer Amussen reminds us, frequently the evidence that remains in archives and court cases is “atypical.” If the Bournes had not been economically and politically connected, if they had not repeatedly caused trouble for high-ranking members of Elizabeth I’s court, and if their lives had been less scandalous, it is likely that their letters would not have survived. However, contrary to the designation by the nineteenth century archivist who processed the Conway Papers at the British Museum, the domestic nature of the dispute between Elizabeth and Anthony does not render it “Of no importance.” Rather, the case between the Bournes exposes the limitations of patient endurance exalted in conduct literature and represented on the early modern stage.

16 Amussen, 6.
17 Conway Papers, which house a majority of the correspondence in question, were kept as part of the estate of Edward Conway, a member of James I’s Privy Council and later his secretary of state. Edward Conway was originally betrothed to Elizabeth Bourne’s eldest daughter Amy Bourne, though Amy later married Fulke Conway, Edward’s younger brother. Both John Conway and his eldest son Edward were embroiled in the Bourne case. Elizabeth called on both for advice regarding her case, even asking for feedback on letters and petitions. Elizabeth requested that the council place her under Edward’s protection during the duration of the case.
18 When Conway Papers were found and split up, two sections regarding Edward’s professional life at court went to the National Archives while the majority of correspondence concerning Elizabeth and Anthony Bourne were given to the British Museum and labeled of “Of no importance.” For more on the history of Conway Papers and the relationship between the two families, see Charles Angell Bradford, Conway Papers Original Typescript (S.I., 1936).
The prodigal husband plays provide a good literary and cultural counterpoint to the specificity of the marriage of Elizabeth and Anthony Bourne. Luce in *The London Prodigal* and the Wife in *The Yorkshire Tragedy* epitomize the long-suffering wife figure that is married to a morally corrupt man. In presenting the wives’ ability to act when their husbands cannot, their seeming devotion to their marriages in the face of verbal, physical, or economic abuse, and their ability to build networks of support for their cause based on their own reputations, the plays explore a variety of culturally sanctioned responses for women married to prodigals. Elizabeth’s own application of these responses at once aligns her with representations of the good wife in early modern drama while underlining the limits of these representations. For Luce and the Wife, their orthodox performance inspires their husbands’ amendments. The narrative of female endurance, then, intimates that through the feminine labors of chastity, devotion, and obedience, a wife will find relief from the precarious state produced by her husband’s behavior. Unfortunately, while the case of the Bournes replicates many of the arguments of the prodigal husband plays, it also calls into question the feasibility of a cultural ideal that assumes that appropriate female behavior leads to male repentance. When the ideal fails, and it does according to Elizabeth’s correspondence, early modern wives are left vulnerable and forced to negotiate a delicate system of safeguarding their reputations while actively seeking redress.

The loss of status and fear of slander become central concerns for women who utilize the law for their own advantage; however, Salome, in Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam*, makes no attempt to assert her own virtuousness and displays no concern with safeguarding her reputation, as Elizabeth Bourne does throughout her writings. In fact, when Salome first contemplates the “wrong” she would do Constabarus in marrying Silleus, she quickly dismisses her “honourable” thoughts as “childish” (1.4.279, 282, 281). Instead, she acknowledges that her
“honour [is] wip’d away, / And Impudency on [her] forehead sits” (1.4.294–295). Men, like Herod, are able to dismiss their wives at will; however, Salome’s reflection on her own actions underlines one double-standard of Mosaic law: a man may leave his wife without adverse ramifications, but a woman must accept her husband and endure within her marriage or face the ruin of her reputation. By Salome’s own confession, if she were honorable she never would have framed her first husband Josephus—which resulted in his death—so that she could marry Constabarus, nor would she consider leaving Constabarus for Silleus (4.1.286–289). It is not just the law but also the fear of disgrace, according to Salome, that keeps women from pursuing their wills. Salome’s embrace of her tainted reputation leaves her unconstrained in her questioning of the bias of Mosaic law: “Why should such privilege to man be given? / Or given to them, why barr’d from women then?”(1.4.305–306). As Cristina Alfar notes, in “[l]ocating the inequity between men and women in Mosaic law that bars women from divorcing their husbands while allowing husbands to divorce their wives, Salome rejects the constraints placed upon her as a married woman.”

In Of Domesticall Duties (1622), William Gouge discusses the basis for the double standard of Mosaic Law whereby a man could seek a divorce “in case he hated” his wife, but a woman could not. Not unlike the rationale for coverture, Gouge argues that the “law questionlesse was made for relief of the wife, lest the hatred which her husband conceiued against her should worke her some mischeife, if he were forced to keepe her as his wife.”

Though no longer the contemporary law of the realm, Mosaic Law, as interpreted by Gouge,

19 Ibid., 62.
20 Gouge, 352.
21 Ibid. For the suggestion that coverture was intended to protect women from arguments that might arise over property rights in marriage, see Stretton, Marital Litigation, 2.
underscores the early modern precepts that women are passive, subject to their husbands, and in need of protection. In Gouge’s reading, only the husband’s hate and desires are relevant. The husband’s capacity for “mischeife” caused by marital discord discounts and dismisses the possibility of the wife’s retribution when experiencing similar animosity toward her husband or her right to live separate from him in order to protect herself from his “mischeife.” Finally, the argument that it is for the wife’s safety that the husband readily be able to divorce her neglects to acknowledge the social and economic vulnerability of wives who are abandoned by their husbands.

In The Tragedy of Mariam, Salome decries the inequity in the law when she notes that any man “Who hates his wife, though for no just abuse, / May with a bill divorce her from his bed. / But in this custom women are not free” (1.4.301–303). The law, which presumes to safeguard wives, leaves women susceptible to emotional and physical violence as represented in the three resolutely unhappy wives within the play. As discussed in Chapter One, Doris expresses anger over Herod’s ability to end their union despite her virtuous performance of her wifely duties, including providing him with two sons. Herod avails himself of the law in order to divorce Doris and marry Mariam. But while Herod’s wishes and the law allow him to put away Doris without cause—except his desire to take another wife—Mariam, lacking legal recourse, remains stuck in an unhappy marriage. Her dislike for Herod is so great that Alexandra speculates that Mariam will “joy” at his death and that her joy will not be “causeless joy” (1.218). Mariam’s merited pleasure in Herod’s imagined death goes against the concept that the desire of good wives should be subject to their husbands. Instead, the joy implies a gap between

outward shows of obedience and inner feelings: Mariam may perform her duties as a wife, but she yearns to be free from her union with Herod. The play, then, portrays two virtuous wives, unable to remedy their precarious positions because of their lack of legal standing. The “performance of wifely duty” is shown to be an “ideological construct” where stability “becomes impossible to guarantee.” Doris loses her status and the identity of wife; her children lose their inheritance. Unable to extricate herself from her marriage, Mariam suffers Herod’s mischief—though not born out of hate—and, eventually, the loss of her life. Mariam and Doris embody the patient long suffering good wives who hazard their lives and living but maintain their good names.

Salome’s willingness to “be the custom-breaker: and begin / To show my sex the way to freedom’s door” represents the broader cultural threat of women who are able to “shift it well enough”: they offer an example that other women will follow (1.4.309–310). The antagonism Salome expresses in refusing to be “led by precedent” and opting to give in to her “will” rather than abide by the “law” implies both a break from other representations of wives in the play and early modern ideals of wifely obedience. Refusing the cultural gendered ideals of male privilege/action and female obedience/endurance, Salome declares that women can “hate as well as men” and, therefore, should be “free” to employ the same “ancient use” in order to release themselves from an intolerable marriage (1.4.308, 1.5.137, 1.5.33). While Doris and Mariam exemplify women who are subject to their husbands, they are punished for their obedience within the world of the play. The social, economic, and physical vulnerability suffered by these precarious wives is seen in stark contrast to Salome. Admittedly, Salome’s pursuit of her own aspirations is portrayed as a stain on her reputation, a frequent danger faced by early modern

23 Alfar, “Elizabeth Cary’s Female Trinity,” 61.
women who use the law to negotiate for space separate from their husbands, but she is the only
woman in the play who is able to combat the presumed defenselessness of her gender and status
as a wife. Salome recognizes the threat posed by her example when she surmises that “Though I
be the first to this course do bend, / I shall not be the last, full well I know” (1.6.435–436). Her
commentary and acknowledgment that she knows there will be others who follow her course—
who will question the limits of the law in order to craft their own identities—foreshadows the
experience of the early modern readership for Mariam.24

In contrast to the limits of Mosaic Law that is the basis for Salome’s status as the custom
breaker, Herod’s abandonment of Doris, and Mariam’s confinement within her marriage in The
Tragedy of Mariam, early modern wives were able to sue for separation. William Perkins, in
Christian Economy: or, A Short Survey of the Right Manner of Erecting and Ordering a Family
According to the Scriptures (1609), concedes that, “in requiring of a divorce, there is an equal
right and power in both parties, so as the woman may require it as well as the man; and he as
well as she.”25 Spouses could sue for separation or annulment, what Perkins calls divorce, but we
must be careful to heed Tim Stretton’s reminder that, “[d]ivorce in the modern sense—a legal
dissolution of marriage allowing either or both parties to remarry—was not an option for most
individuals before 1857.”26

24 As a closet drama, The Tragedy of Mariam (1613) was likely read rather than performed.
The readership is not explicitly feminine; however, Elizabeth Cary’s authorship and her
public personal struggles with her husband, Sir Henry Cary, do lend a particular
contemporary cultural resonance to Salome’s prediction that other women will pursue their
desires and leave their husbands. See Weller and Ferguson’s “Introduction”, specifically 4–9,
for a discussion of Carey’s battles with her husband.
25 Perkins 171.
26 Stretton, Marital Litigation, 3. It should be noted that a divorce by private act of parliament
was possible, but not until 1670 and it was very expensive. What Elizabeth Bourne obtains,
There were two types of legal pronouncements regarding marital separation in early modern England: divorce *a vinculo matrimonii*, a release from the bond of marriage where the marriage is declared invalid and annulled; and divorce *a mensa et thoro*, a legal separation from bed and board where neither spouse is allowed to remarry. Annulments were granted on the grounds of bigamy, pre-contract, non-consummation, enforced marriage, and when either party was underage. Separations were granted primarily on the basis of adultery and cruelty. As Susan Dwyer Amussen observes, “[b]oth women and men sued for separation, but more women did so than men.” Despite a theoretical equality in access to legal redress, “a sexual double standard usually applied so that husbands could separate on the grounds of adultery alone, while wives had to prove cruelty.” Julius Caesar notes in his response to Elizabeth Bourne’s complaint against her husband, Anthony Bourne, that legally a woman could petition for a divorce *a mensa et thoro* based on adultery.

The canon lawes of this realme doe at this day admit a devorse betwene a man and his wife. And the case doth as well lie on the womans side to chalenge and have a separation from her husband being an open adulterer, as on the mans side to have a separation from his wife being an adulteresse.

discussed later in this chapter, is a declaration awarded by the Privy Council—similar to a private act of parliament—that she may legally live separate from her husband.

27 Throughout this chapter, I use the term divorce primarily to mean a legal separation—in the modern sense—but have opted to maintain the word divorce because that is term used within the documents I address.

28 Amussen, 127.


30 BL, Add. MS, 38170, fol. 178, no date. For a full transcription, see [http://opencuny.org/bourne/bl-add-38170-fol-176/](http://opencuny.org/bourne/bl-add-38170-fol-176/). At the time of Elizabeth’s complaint in 1582, Julius Caesar was not yet a Master of Requests, but was an up-and-coming lawyer in London with strong connections to court through Francis Walsingham (Hill 7–16).
While Caesar states that both men and women could seek divorce based on adultery alone, the word “open,” proceeding “adulterer” and missing before “adulteresse,” serves as a reminder of the discrepancy in this apparently equal law: a man could separate from his wife if he could prove she had committed adultery; a woman had to prove that her husband was a known adulterer. This difference appears slight, but while a man only needed to prove one instance, a woman needed to prove that her husband had frequently and openly sinned, which usually became part of a larger complaint against his moral, economic, and spiritual threat to her and their household. Because of this double standard, in practice men sued for separation in instances of adultery while women based their petitions on accusation of cruelty. Regardless of the reasons for such petitions, ecclesiastical courts favored a “come to charity” model for disputes; they emphasized living in harmony over granting separations. Consequently, as Laura Gowing has shown, a divorce *a mensa et thoro* was granted on a limited basis with men suing successfully based on adultery 42% of the time, while women’s claims of cruelty were successful in 26% of the surviving cases. Most divorce cases never made it to judgment; those that did took approximately 2–3 years to process. Despite the difficulties, there was one benefit to ecclesiastical law: church courts regularly ignored the doctrine of coverture.

Walsingham is also the likely tie between Elizabeth and Caesar as both Elizabeth and her mother, Lady Amy Mervin, wrote to Walsingham requesting his help with the separation (NA, SP12/158, fol. 85, 3 July 1582).

33 That women sue for separation based on cruelty makes sense considering the prevalence of female petitioners employing the terminology of female weakness and vulnerability as discussed later in this chapter.
34 Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 181.
Though ecclesiastical courts granted women the right to bring actions to court without the permission of their husbands, women faced added scrutiny in going to law. Women seeking separations risked slander and accusations of adultery from their husbands in retaliation, while those who sued on the basis of cruelty were obligated to publicly detail the humiliations they suffered at the hands of their husbands.\(^{36}\) In each instance the possibility of public infamy placed women in jeopardy and exposed them to social and economic vulnerability. The potential monetary losses of dissolving a marriage could prompt a husband to slander his wife. If a woman was found guilty of adultery, she forfeited her portion rights, any inheritance that had been under her husband’s control during their marriage, and her husband’s obligation to pay for her maintenance. Consequently, allegations of cruelty were often met with countersuits of adultery for financial reasons.\(^{37}\) Salome’s understanding of the ill repute she will suffer through seeking a divorce is confirmed by Constabarus who entreats her to “eschew deservèd shame, / And seek to be both chaste and chastely deem’d” (1.6.393–394). In warning his wife against the shame that will come in demanding her freedom and rejecting the limits of Mosaic Law and Constabarus’ own wishes, Constabarus underlines the importance of public opinion: Salome should not only strive to be virtuous, but she should endeavor to seem so, as well.

Chastity without community confidence in and recognition of that virtue limits the power of the good wife performance. In fact, it suggests that a woman’s actions are less significant in constructing her reputation than the collective interpretation of her actions. In this way, a wife might use cultural knowledge in order to produce what Kathryn Schwarz calls “authentic

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\(^{37}\) For more on the accusations of cruelty see Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, chapter six, especially 206–229.
impersonation.” In Schwarz’s terms, “the performance of feminine roles answers the need for social stability, and privileges the issue of how virtue signifies over the question of whether it refers.” Based on this concept, it is the public representation of chastity and feminine obedience that is crucial, particularly when a woman takes action that would otherwise be read as disrupting patriarchal projects. Early modern wives, like Francis Howard in her divorce from the Earl of Essex and Elizabeth Bourne in her separation from Anthony Bourne, risked public shaming when seeking relief from the law to rectify what was often viewed as a private and family matter—even though the forming of a marriage and the policing of socially acceptable marital behavior was seldom private. Consequently, a wife’s need to maintain a narrative of patient endurance, even in the face of seeking a separation from her husband, was paramount.

In defense of their reputations, many early modern women strove to craft narratives—both in letters garnering support from friends and family and in their legal complaints—that demonstrated their status as long suffering good wives forced to go to law for protection of themselves and their kin. The descriptions of their suffering employ a number of cultural expectations of feminine performance exemplified in conduct literature and early modern drama. In some ways the narratives crafted by early modern wives, such as Elizabeth Bourne, reiterate elements of the patient Griselda figures discussed in Chapter Two or the exemplary behavior of wives in the prodigal husband plays, such as the Wife in The Yorkshire Tragedy (1608) and Luce in The London Prodigal (1605). These texts intimate that long suffering and patient wives

38 Schwarz, 11.
39 Lindley, The Trials of Frances Howard, 89–93. Mukherji, Law, 215. See Panek, 61–92, regarding the public pressures and scrutiny faced by men in marriage; and in one example of public regulating of the relations between spouses, see Pamela Allen Brown’s discussion of community condemnation of domestic violence, 118–149.
married to tyrannical or prodigal husbands are rewarded with the return of their penitent husband, and that the goodness and forgiveness of the wife can restore the husband to proper behavior. However, representations of similarly suffering good wives presented in letters and legal documents suggest a boundary of endurance and the implausibility of cultural ideals that advise that marital accord may be obtained predominantly through the performance of feminine obedience and endurance. These depictions expose the vulnerability of the category of wife for women who are unable to recall their husbands to them through idealized behavior. They also reveal the possibility of women employing the same narratives in order safeguard their reputations while simultaneously negotiating for a space and identity separate from their husbands. As Mukherji argues in *Law and Representation in Early Modern Drama*, “We can now begin to see how the notion of acceptable models of female behavior at court itself made space for strategy.” Through their appropriation of the good wife trope, some women are able to exploit the precariousness of their marital union to remove themselves from the same.

Wives who are able to employ such strategy and obtain the legal right to live separate from their husbands may not be able to remarry, but they also trouble the category of wife and T.E.’s assertion that all women are wives, or wives in training, and should be viewed as such. Amy Froide in her important work on lifelong single women in the early modern period correctly questions, “If a woman was likely to be unmarried for two-thirds of her lifespan, then why do those of us who work on the early modern period continue to view marriage as the normative state?” Froide’s push back on the centrality of marriage is furthered by Ruth Mazo Karras’

41 Froide, 3.
work on the variety of relationships that did not constitute marriage in Medieval Europe. Cordelia Beattie adds “the separated and the divorced to the never married and the widowed as those who might be considered as single” in her discussion of the “margins of marriage” or to shift the emphasis, the “margins of singleness.” The work of these scholars explicitly calls into question the tendency of early modern narratives to privilege marital status as the primary identifier for women. While Karras concedes that for Medieval Europe “whatever pair relationship is most privileged in a given society is ipso facto what that society considers marriage,” she also notes that “the line between what was marriage and what was not was not sharply drawn.” Karras’ work, then, most closely aligns with Beattie’s in terms of thinking through other unions and a broader definition of singleness. Both scholars recognize the fluidity of identities beyond the marital union that women and men embodied. They also tease out the margins of marriage where unions differ greatly from the ideals repeated in conduct literature and sermons. Drawing on the work of Froide, Karras, and Beattie—and in contrast to T. E.’s assertion that women are or will be married and consequently that their will is subject to their husbands—it may be useful to think of marital identity and autonomy on a broader spectrum of experience.

Central for Froide in this respect, as well as for my own work on precarious wives, are the wider networks of kinship within which women participated. Froide points out that “[w]hen a woman was single or widowed she might well have activated ties of kinship, friendship, or

42 Karras.
43 Beattie, 237.
44 Karras, 3, 2.
neighbourhood that she did not need to rely on during her married years.”\footnote{Froide, 7.} Although I agree with Froide’s assessment, I will show that kinship and networks were essential to the success of women whose marriages placed them in socially, politically, and economically precarious positions. For these women, it was often the relationships they fostered beyond their marriages that allowed them to negotiate for a livable space, protect themselves and their reputations from the abuses of their husbands, and seek redress for the wrongs that they endured. In contrast to Froide’s argument that early modern women activated ties of kinship when single, I argue that these social networks were vital for wives and women who sought to separate themselves from their husbands.

II. “\textit{ONe LIFE, ONE LOVE, AND ONE LIKING}”\footnote{BL, Add. MS 23212, fol. 12, 20 Feb Unknown Year, 16r.}

In a letter written from Elizabeth Bourne to Anthony Bourne, she attempts to explain to him the reasons that she refuses to live with him. The detailed history of their union that she presents in the letter as evidence of her resolve to deny his “\textit{whyseth reconsyliacion}” seems unnecessary because she is writing to her husband, who presumably knows the history. But as the note at the beginning of the letter reveals, Elizabeth sent a draft of the letter to Edward Conway for his review and asks that once he has “perused [her] letter” that he share it with Caesar before returning it her. In sharing the letter with Conway and Caesar and asking them to sign the letter—and in doing so provide public witness to its contents—she hopes to control their
interpretation of the events chronicled in the letter and also prevent any attempt Anthony may make after to “mysconster [her] meaning.” The public dissemination of her letter complicates the notion of private correspondence. Considering the intended wider audience, Elizabeth takes great pains to detail the many problems they faced in their union in contrast to the ideals of marriage purported in religious writings and cultural expectations of marital accord. Adamant in her doubt of his ability to “unfained retired from sin to virtue,” she claims that without his genuine reformation it would be a “daingnerous life for us to live in soe near [a fel]lowshippe as man and wife.” Her letter explicitly draws on narratives of marital harmony and cultural fears of the chasm between seeming virtuous and being virtuous, though this anxiety is usually applied to women’s chastity, not men’s. In calling out his lack of ability to leave his adulterous life behind him, Elizabeth suggests that a man’s reputation and the community’s judgment of his fitness as a spouse may be tainted by the public knowledge of or belief in his sexual transgressions. Regardless, she concedes that if she could trust his repentance—which she might if he returned to a faith in God and cast off his long-time mistress—she would happily acquiesce to live with him. If not, residing together as husband and wife would place them both in precarious conditions.

In contrast to the longstanding animosity between the Bournes, Elizabeth draws on religious teachings of marriage in her claim that the ideal for a married couple is, “one life, one

47  Ibid., 16v.
48  See Daybell, The Material Letter, 12, 18–19, 111, for a discussion of the false notion that early modern letters were private.
49  BL, Add. MS 23212, fol. 12, 20 Feb Unknown Year, 15r, 16r.
50  Ibid., 16r.
love, and one liking.” For Elizabeth, when a couple works together they do so in “one continewing care in both our hearte to [the] increase of our good.” In reiterating the model, she highlights faults in her own marriage and infers that the model is idyllic and likely unattainable. She closes the letter by claiming that “If I may live to enjoy this happiness,” Anthony’s true reform and their reconciliation, she will disregard “the sufferance of all my sorrowes well satisfie [me] which I have indured.” Through adopting the terminology of idealized spousal behavior—the unity of person and the mutual desire to increase the family and estate—she shows a willingness to return to that model, while simultaneously pointing out why that standard is impossible for their relationship. In ending with an appropriation of the narrative of feminine endurance, Bourne characterizes herself as a long suffering good wife waiting in hope of the correction and return of her prodigal husband, but she also reiterates that within a functioning marriage the couple should work together to care for each other and further their estate. In her refusal of her husband’s demand for spousal cohabitation, her desire to offer a corrective for his behavior, and her emphasis on the mutuality of masculine and feminine care for the stability and reputation of the early modern household, Elizabeth challenges early modern assumptions of wifely passivity. Though her case and marriage may be a minority story for early modern women, it is not without precedent in contemporary literature and cultural documents.

Garthine Waller’s work on female violence astutely calls into question the assumption that early modern wives were “characterised by passivity and weakness.” In Crime, Gender and Social Order in Early Modern England, Walker observes that while women’s violence was in

51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid., 77.
the minority compared to men, the assumption that this discrepancy was a result of “biology, of prescriptive social roles” or of “the internalization (by either or both sexes) of patriarchal ideology” is insufficient for understanding women’s violence.\textsuperscript{55} While female defendants comprised a small percentage of assault cases, over half of women prosecuted were wives: a significant number when we consider that approximately only one third of all early modern women were married.\textsuperscript{56} Walker notes that in many cases, the focus revolved around the household or household goods, implying that women were explicitly not passive in regards to their obligations to protect and help run their estates. Of the cases that involved protecting the household, be it people or property, seventy percent of the women implicated were wives, not an insignificant number and one that supports Walker’s claim that early modern wives were expected to protect their homes. “Both household ideology and practical circumstances required wives to maintain the integrity of their households with and without their husbands’ participation…Contextualising women’s non-lethal violence in terms of household authority and obligations challenges the historiographical insistence upon women’s negligible participation.”\textsuperscript{57} 

Scholars have long asserted the claim that despite narratives of obedience and passivity, women were central in the running of the household and protecting the family’s interests. As Margaret Ezell illustrates in her work on the early modern patriarchal family, “although the character of the Good Wife in seventeenth-century representations stresses her duty to her husband and her devotion to furthering his fortunes, it does not represent her as feeble, incapable

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\textsuperscript{55} Walker, 75.  
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 76.  
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
or servile."⁵⁸ Rather, she is “husband’s partner, she is expected to be able to take over his work when the occasion arises.”⁵⁹ Linda Pollock’s work on the education of early modern upper class women supports this assumption as she shows that while women were raised to show deference to patriarchal figures—fathers or husbands—they were simultaneously expected to be capable of independent action.⁶⁰ Walker’s, Ezell’s, and Pollock’s assertions are furthered by Graham Holderness’ observation that “Scholars have exhaustively mined public and private records…and successfully demonstrated that women wielded and exercised power and authority in many areas of social life: control over medicine, food production and other peoples’ bodies; or power over moveable property and assets within the home.”⁶¹

Contemporary literature offers further support of the claims that women played an active role in household affairs and did not always concede their ideas and intents in favor of their husbands’. John Shirley, in The Illustrious History of Women (1686), focuses a chapter on what he calls “The Character of a Virtuous Wife.”⁶² Following the structure and tone of earlier conduct literature publications, Shirley claims that women should endeavor to console their husbands and not cross them when they are angry; however, he notes that rather than renounce their point of view, women should wait until their husbands are calm and then “she mildly argues the Matter with him.”⁶³ Shirley balances the expectation of obedience with the acknowledgement that women may successfully employ tactics in order to gain their desire, even when it is in

⁵⁸ Ezell, 41.
⁵⁹ Ibid.
⁶⁰ Pollock, 231–258.
⁶¹ Holderness, 3. See also Wall and Korda for specific discussions of women’s role in overseeing the people of the household and property, respectively.
⁶² Shirley, 154–156.
⁶³ Ibid., 155.
contradiction to their husbands’ own wishes. In this paradigm, the performance of passivity is required before action may be taken. A similar dichotomy is found with female supplicants who must present shows of deference and submission, even as they actively petition for their cause, a paradoxical device to which I will return to later in this chapter. While Shirley explains that under the correct conditions virtuous wives have the ability to influence and refute their husbands’ decisions—in opposition to the patriarchal ideal—he takes his argument for female action further with a discussion of a wife’s duty to act in her husband’s absence. He claims that a good wife “[o]fficiates his place, in regarding and taking care of his Affairs.” Though he admits that when the husband is present, “she [i]ntermedles in his concerns no further than she is required,” he still leaves a space for her participation in matters of the estate even when problems necessitate that she leave the home, particularly when “urgent occasions require.”64 Shirley’s discussion of the roles of good wives, then, supports the conclusions drawn by scholars, such as Walker, Ezell, Holderness, Wells, and Korda, who explore the dynamic contributions women make in furthering and protecting the economic health of their family, particularly when their husbands are unable to do so.

Considerations of a wife’s active position within the marital union may seem counterintuitive to a discussion of the precarious conditions faced by wives in early modern England. However, it is exactly the struggle between the persistent cultural expectations of feminine passivity and obedience and a wife’s need to play an effective role that can amplify the conditions of precarity when those two elements are at odds. A wife must seem chaste, silent, and obedient, but simultaneously be capable of practical enterprise. This duality forces women to perform shows of deference even when, and especially when, they execute their own judgment in

64 Ibid.
fulfilling their desires. Without successfully maintaining this balance, wives risk being deemed rebellious, immoral, or masculine. As Cristina Alfar discusses in *Fantasies of Female Evil*, “when women fail to perform their femininity through appropriate behaviors such as submission and obedience, they are accused of monstrosity and manliness, attributes that are posed as betrayals of fathers, husbands, and lovers.”

For early modern women, there is a fine line between authorized action and transgression, and the distinction is often one of public perception. Moreover, when a wife procures help for her husband in order to protect the household economy and reputation, her supporters may read her intervention as warranted but that does not guarantee approval by her husband.

In early modern drama, the tension between a wife’s publicly sanctioned acts for the betterment of her family and a husband’s repudiation of her behavior is seen repeatedly in the prodigal husband plays. Like the Griselda figure discussed in Chapter Two, the prodigal husband is another early modern character type, one often paired with a long suffering good wife. The prodigal spends his inheritance on revels and women, and generally besmirches the reputation of himself and his family through bad behavior and economic ruin. Frequently, he desires to remain single, or he loves one woman while his family forces him to accept another as his wife. The husband’s conduct varies, but it may include riotous behavior, gambling, adultery or bigamy, pandering, and threatened or actualized murder. The prodigal is in some ways the male opposite of the female Griselda, and within these texts it takes an extreme performance of patience on the

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66 Panek argues that public pressures that men assume when they marry—the sudden increase in community scrutiny and obligations—may result in rebellion portrayed in the prodigal husband plays.
part of the wife to return the husband to right rule and sway. But the patience of the wife is rarely
depicted as passive.

*The London Prodigal* (1605) and Middleton’s *The Yorkshire Tragedy* (1608) both portray
good wives who actively seek remedies for the precarious conditions they find themselves in due
to their husbands’ reckless behavior. The spouses at the center of *The Yorkshire Tragedy* are
named Husband and Wife. The Husband’s gambling and rioting ruins both his reputation and his
estate; his lands are mortgaged and his friends are in bonds for his debts. In an attempt to rectify
the dissolute fortunes of their home, the Wife leaves Yorkshire for London and petitions her own
kin, her uncle, for support. Her absence from the domestic sphere suggests the extreme
circumstances she finds herself in; as Shirley reminds us, women should only travel when
“urgent occasions require.”67 Rather than continue to suffer her husband’s abuses—he calls her
harlot, his children bastards, and threatens her with physical violence—she procures a position
for him at court that he might work to restore both his credit and their lands. In contrast to
Froide’s claim that single women and widows activated ties of kinship not necessary for married
women and Vives’ edict that wives “shall reckon to find all” in their husbands, the precarious
position of the Wife forces her to rely on the help of her kin.68

The Wife’s confidence in the appropriateness of her stratagem is seen in her imagining
that the news of her arrangements for him will “make new league between us, and redeem / His
virtues” (3.22–23).69 She assumes that her plan will call back his affections and curb his
debauched behavior, although she has gone against her husband’s original request that she sell

67 Shirley, 155.
68 Froide, 7, and Vives, 112.
69 All textual citations from Thomas Middleton, *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, Ed. Stanley Wells,
her dowry lands for his use (2.91–92). The Wife hopes that through her own labor of securing him a position she has fulfilled their mutual goal: removing the threat of economic ruin. In this vein, the Wife’s actions fulfill Margaret Ezell’s decree that a good wife must maintain a “willingness to labor on behalf of her family” and a “complete identification of her interests with those of her husband.” However, the husband has no desire to reform and the Wife’s interests extend beyond those of her prodigal spouse. She affirms, “By this good means I shall preserve my lands / And free my husband out of usurer’s hands” (3.29–30). In securing a job for her husband, she stands to free him from his debts, thereby saving herself and her children from poverty. Also, she reveals a personal stake in maintaining her lands that intimates a desire to protect her family’s wealth and her children’s inheritance, in direct opposition to her husband’s desires. Her trip, then, provides a remedy for her husband’s economic desperation while allowing her a means to maintain her property, property that is under her husband’s control, but which he cannot sell without her family’s permission.

By the laws of coverture, a wife’s property and inheritance became the husband’s in marriage; however, early modern property law required the wife’s or her family’s permission for land to be sold or placed in trust. In attempting to gain access to ready money to satisfy his pleasures, the Husband demands that the Wife consent to sell the property that comprises her dowry. Until she does, he threatens to “forever hold thee in contempt, / And never touch the sheets that cover thee, / But be divorced in bed” (2.87–89). Beyond the promised scorn, the separation from bed becomes a prime factor in the Husband’s intimidation technique. If the Wife refuses his request, he posits that she is to blame for the failure of their marriage. The implication is that if she concedes, he will continue to live with her, which would maintain the outward show

70 Ezell, 41.
of functional accord. In an attempt to preserve her marriage, the Wife yields, “Sir, do but turn a
gentle eye on me, / And what the law shall give me leave to do / You shall command” (2.93–95).

Even though she does not go through with the sale, but finds another remedy for their economic straits, her stated willingness to amend the fissure in their union at all costs—even that of her dowry—highlights the social importance of cohabitation for the preservation of reputation and marital status, particularly for women. The Husband’s threat, then, points to the hazard of coercion within marriage and the vulnerability of wives who must give in to their husband’s commands in order to maintain a livable space.

Elizabeth Bourne narrates a similar example of a woman selling her property in order to satisfy her husband and keep him in her company, a tactic that ultimately fails for Bourne. In her complaint to Julius Caesar, she establishes that Anthony is prone to feigning reconciliation in order to gain access to her inheritance. She claims that shortly after they were married, “hee left my compainie, and lived in the liberty of his rainging affections with divers women.”

According to Elizabeth, when she confronts him he pacifies her: he asserts that financial disagreements with his father keep him from home. Elizabeth suggests that they travel with her family; he concedes and “continued for a time in good vsage of mee, to my greate comfort.”

The implication of Elizabeth’s narration—as it is in the *The Yorkshire Tragedy* when the Husband threatens divorce and the wife begs for a gentle look—is that a wife merely desires the presence of her husband and his kindness to requite her labors. In a reverse of the moment when the Husband threatens desertion if the Wife does not sell her lands, Elizabeth reports that


72 BL, Add. MS, 38170, fol. 151v.
Anthony assures her that sale is necessary “for the reliefe of vs both, during his fathers life,” and that when Anthony receives his inheritance upon his father’s death, “hee would recompence” his wife.\(^73\) In Elizabeth’s retelling, she notes that Anthony “winne[s her] consent” to the sale and that he provides assurances to her mother and friends. The inclusion of outside witnesses suggests that the economic well being of the family is a public matter, that others can attest to Elizabeth’s claims, and that when Anthony is foresworn he breaks his oath to his wife and the witnesses. Directly after he receives payment “hee left [Elizabeth] alone as before; and continued in London by the space of halfe a yere, and spent 500 pounds in vaine loue with a gentlewoman.”\(^74\) In naming her husband an open adulterer since the outset of their marriage and crafting a narrative that exposes a pattern of behavior whereby her husband only returns home to gain access to her inheritance, Elizabeth establishes herself as a long suffering wife who has done all she is able to remedy the division between herself and her husband, much like the Wife in *The Yorkshire Tragedy* who assumes that her efforts will “make new league between” her and her husband. Conversely, the historical example of the Bournes and the dramatic representation of the Wife and Husband in *The Yorkshire Tragey* present instances where the wife’s labor in attaining monetary gain for the husband fails to secure marital accord and stability for the wife.\(^75\)

Elizabeth and the Wife are seemingly are left without recourse when their labors fail to recall their husbands; however, their suffering does not go unnoticed and as such is affective if not effective. Elizabeth’s mother demands that Anthony explain how he intends to use the money for her daughter’s relief and when he does not respond, “shee charg[es] him with his loose life

\(^73\) *Ibid.*
\(^74\) *Ibid.*
\(^75\) *Ibid.*
and the wronge that hee did” to Elizabeth. Similarly, the Husband’s irate response to the Wife’s initiative in *The Yorkshire Tragedy* is seen in stark contrast to the Servingman and Gentleman who praise her actions as virtuous, and, as such, offer public support for her performance. The Gentleman reiterates the Wife’s goodness to the Husband, insisting that of all of the husband’s faults his greatest lies in not prizing her: “of all the worst, / Thy virtuous wife right honorously allied, / Thou has proclaimed a strumpet” (2.152–154). He further names her “Kind and obedient” (2.177). Upon hearing about the position at Court, the Servingman echoes the Wife’s own hopes when he states, “If [the Husband] should not now be kind to you and love you, and cherish you up, I should think the devil himself kept open house in him” (3.24–26). The servant’s implication is clear: if her solution does not restore marital accord, there must be something aberrant in him. Their presence within the play attests to the Wife’s virtue and helps to offer community support and sanction for her action. In praising her orthodox commitment to her marriage, they deride the Husband’s conduct as unnatural.

The Wife’s ability to act when her husband cannot, or will not, fulfills the demands for feminine labor in marriage, but it also exposes the limits of marital obedience and the precarious conditions suffered by wives of prodigal husbands. At what cost must a wife maintain her obedience to a husband who seeks their social and economic destruction? Where is the limit of appropriate female deference when acquiescence would lead to ruin? The Wife’s lack of obedience in refusing to sell her dowry is met with further derision and violence from the Husband. He calls her a “politic whore” (3.49), blames her for ruining his reputation by “set[ting] down the history of me, of my state and fortunes” to those in London (3.50–51),

Admittedly, within the prodigal husband plays, the wives’ labor eventually leads to reconciliation; however, in both *The London Prodigal* and *The Yorkshire Tragedy* the reunions come long after the wives’ initial efforts.
threatens her with violence (5.69–70), and eventually stabs his sons and the Wife (4.1, 24, 26). The extreme precarity of her position, where she must chose between losing any hope of maintaining a livable life or losing her husband and children, indicates a fault in the system that requires her devotion and labor without affording her access to economic, physical, or personal stability.

The Wife in *The Yorkshire Tragedy* and Luce in *The London Prodigal* rely on their own reputations and networks of support when their marriages fail to provide them with adequate maintenance to sustain a livable life. While the Wife procures a position for her husband, Luce volunteers to work in order to make amends for her husband’s economic recklessness. When Matthew is arrested for debt on their wedding day, Luce supplicates to the Sheriff and Matthew’s Uncle in hope of securing Matthew’s release. She asks, “what good or gayne can you receiue, / To imprison him that nothing hath to pay?” (E2r). Luce points out the irrationality of debtors’ prisons where men without means are confined, unable to work to repay their debts. In contrast to her husband’s prodigal ways, Luce publicly affirms her own reputation and worth in her petition for Matthew’s Uncle’s support:

> Alas, I nere ought nothing but I paid it,

> And I can worke, alas he can doe nothing:

77 In some ways, Luce’s performance on her knees begging for her husband’s release—though he does not deserve it—recalls Mariana’s entreaty to the Duke for Angelo’s pardon in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*. As the Duke notes, Mariana deserves “a better husband” (5.1.421). Like Luce, Mariana offers her own labor in order to secure her husband’s release, as she begs Isabel to join her in her petition, “Sweet Isabel, take my part! / Lend me your knees, and all my life to come / I’ll lend you all my life to do you service” (5.1.426–428).

I haue some friends perhaps will pittie me,
His chiefeſt friends doe seeke his miserie.
All that I can, or beg, get, or receiue,
Shall be for you. (E2r)

Luce’s declaration of her virtue solidifies her status as a good wife, while unsettling her husband’s position as the head of the household. She provides an apt example of Schwarz’s claim that “intentional virtue unsettles the tenets of heterosocial hierarchy.” In contrast to Matthew’s prodigal ways that land him in prison, Luce points to her own fiscal restraint. His accumulation of debts and inability to remedy their economic distress diverges from her willingness to humble herself and labor to aid him. Finally, her own good reputation as seen in her network of friends disposed to help her is the converse of her husband’s standing, which has left him friendless due to his poor credit. In securing her husband’s release, Luce portrays herself as restrained, humble, and of good credit. Her petition effectively acts as a verbal bond presented to Matthew’s Uncle. The Uncle pays for Matthew’s release “not in regard of him,” but because of Luce (E2r). Further, the Uncle gives Luce “100 angels,” money that should go to her husband as the head of the household, but the Uncle explicitly forbids it (E2r). Luce’s performance reads as an example of feminine orthodoxy—while enduring hostility from her husband, she prostates herself in his defense. As a result, the Uncle treats her as someone to be pitied, aided, trusted, and respected, unlike her husband. As Jennifer Panek discusses in her work on the pressures of...

79 Schwarz, 2.
80 Though Luce was enforced by her father to marry Matthew, when Matthew’s father’s will is proven false, Luce loses the support of her father who is unhappy with the news of Matthew’s fall from favor. In response, he first demands that Luce leave her husband; and when she refuses, her father gives her portion to her sister (E1v).
public scrutiny and credit in the prodigal husband plays, “the public nature of [the wife’s] submission paradoxically undermines her husband’s authority even as she elaborately defers to it.”\textsuperscript{81} For Panek, even when the wife is acting in the husband’s best interest, “the fact that it is \textit{public} means it is felt by the husband as a kind of defiance, insofar as it works to discredit him.”\textsuperscript{82} It is the larger audience—one that sees the wife as worthy and the husband as deficient—that generates both the anxiety for the husband and the precarious condition for the wife because in seeking needed support for her family, she discredits her husband’s ability to do so. Through providing evidence of her acceptable behavior in an attempt to help her husband, Luce inadvertently publicly names Matthew as unfit.

The economic acumen and understanding of the power of reputation and its ability to foster or destroy networked support shown in the portrayals of the Wife and Luce resonates beyond early modern drama in the correspondence of Elizabeth Bourne, similarly bound to a prodigal husband. Anthony leaves the realm in late spring 1577 with his long-time mistress without the Queen’s consent. Subsequently, he is captured and placed in the Tower of London.\textsuperscript{83} According to the Statute of 13 Elizabeth, Ca3, “any native departing the kingdom without the Queen’s license forfeited to her Majesty the profits of all his lands and also his goods and chattels.”\textsuperscript{84} Though restitution is granted upon the offender’s submission, the Bournes incur a one thousand pound fine that places them in an economically precarious state. Similarly,
Anthony’s actions—breaking the laws of the realm while publicly absconding with another man’s wife—causes further damage to the family’s reputation, which makes it more challenging for Elizabeth to seek aid because his credit—like Matthew’s in *The London Prodigal*—is found lacking. Like her counterparts in early modern drama discussed previously, due to the failings of her husband, Elizabeth petitions for assistance in negotiating an economic settlement to protect her estate.

Good Mistress Morgan with my harty thankes for your great Curtesy, showed me, I commend my selfe to you most hartelie praying you amongst the rest of your Freindshippe towards me that you will wyttsafe to delyver me a letter to good Mistress Blanchaparry and that you will entreat her most ernestlie to move her Majestie for me in a Reasonable sute.86

Elizabeth solicits Mistress Morgan’s help in entreating Blanche Perry to convince the Queen to approve a payment plan for the Bournes’ fine.87 At the time the letter is written, Anthony Bourne is not a prisoner in the Tower as evidenced by Elizabeth’s declaration that if a settlement cannot be reached, Anthony “shalbe imprisoned and I vndone.”88 Presumably, then, he is capable of negotiating the terms himself, but it is Elizabeth’s reputation and connections that facilitate the opportunity. Rather than simply “managing their [husbands] affairs in their absence,” as Tim Stretton suggests, women might act when their husbands’ behaviors threaten their estate, as seen

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85 Wyttsafe is a middle English form of vouchsafe. “vouchsafe, v.” *OED Online*.
87 Mistress Morgan was wife of Queen Elizabeth’s apothecary, Hugh Morgan. As the chief gentlewoman of Queen Elizabeth’s Ladies of the Privy Chamber, Blanche Parry was a top-level attendant. She also attended Princess Elizabeth while she was held in the Tower of London in 1554 during Mary’s reign.
88 BL, Add. MS, 23212, fol. 187.
in Luce’s and the Wife’s interventions. Elizabeth’s intervention occurs by her employment of a rather standard early modern form of appeal.

In Lynne Magnusson’s work on the rhetoric of letters of request, she identifies linguistic strategies or “social scripts” that appear repeatedly in such letters. The first is “humility and entreaty” and the second is “supposal and assurance.” Elizabeth begins her letter with humility by acknowledging her debt for the kindness Mistress Morgan has shown her. The entreaty comes as Elizabeth beseeches further aid in having Mistress Morgan act as a conduit for another request, this one to Blanche Parry. Elizabeth ends her letter with a supposal, she assumes that Mistress Morgan will be successful in her suit, and provides an assurance—“I will requite any good you shall doe me to the uttermost of my power”—by offering different cash payments to Mistress Morgan depending on what outcome she negotiates. The understanding of these rhetorical strategies is useful because they similarly appear in verbal appeals on the early modern stage as seen in Luce’s petition to Matthew’s Uncle. The conventional structure, whether in literary or cultural documents, implies a broad social acceptance of the form. As such, the request becomes a culturally sanctioned mode of correspondence—verbal or written—for women to be heard, otherwise, as Luce notes, “womens words are faint” (E1v).

A similar structure of humility, entreaty, supposal, and assurance combines with the rhetoric of feminine need in the speeches of Luce and the Wife within the prodigal husband

91 Ibid, 63.
92 BL, Add. MS, 23212, fol. 187.
93 This holds true in the Court of Requests, as well, where, as Tim Stretton has shown, one third of all cases involved female litigants. See Stretton, *Women Waging Law*, 7, 70–73, 129–154, 178–215.
plays. Luce begs the favor of her husband’s Uncle and the Wife seeks relief from her own Uncle. Within the worlds of the plays, when a woman lacks support from her husband, she turns to another male familial authority figure. This idealized version of kinship works to maintain patriarchal authority and guarantees that a wife’s labor for her family remains bound to and supervised by an appropriate male figure. However, the example of Elizabeth’s letter of request to Mistress Morgan intimates that this ideal was not always possible or the most fruitful course for early modern wives. Elizabeth draws on a network of highly influential women capable of effecting change and negotiating financial settlements without relying on the input of their husbands. In doing so, Elizabeth’s letter depicts the aptitude for independent action and thought by early modern women, at least when corresponding with other women.

While Magnusson’s rhetorical scripts apply to various forms of early modern petitions by both genders, James Daybell argues that women employ what he terms as “negative female gender assumptions” including “female ‘weakness,’ ‘frailty,’ ‘vulnerability’ and women’s intellectual and physical ‘inferiority’ to men.” Elizabeth’s application of these tropes appears throughout her correspondence, particularly in her letters to Julius Caesar, John Conway, and Edward Conway; however, her letter to Mistress Morgan omits any suggestion of feminine intellectual inferiority. In fact, Elizabeth’s economic shrewdness and understanding of the financial obligations of their estate—particularly in contrast to her husband’s amassed debts—

94 Luce loses her father’s support because she refuses to forget her vows to Matthew and God and take another husband. In lacking access to relief from her father, she turns to her husband’s family.
95 Admittedly, Elizabeth repeatedly calls on her step-father James Mervin, particularly when dealing with legal matters and the Lords of the Privy Counsel, but she seeks help from men and women outside of her family, as well.
96 Daybell, “Scripting a Female Voice,” 15.
along with her assumption that Mistress Morgan and Blanche Perry will both comprehend the benefits and necessity of the solution Elizabeth proposes, suggests that all of these women possess a certain fiscal intellect. The Wife in *The Yorkshire Tragedy* and Luce in *The London Prodigal* both display similar financial wisdom. The Wife secures a post for her husband rather than risk the permanent loss of monetary gain from selling property, and Luce acknowledges the dangers of buying on credit and declares her willingness to work to secure her husband’s freedom. The rhetorical strategy and fiscal shrewdness apparent in Bourne’s letter reiterates Luce’s own claim of financial restraint in her verbal plea. Further, Luce and Elizabeth imply that if their requests are met, they will compensate those who aid them—Luce offers to labor, beg, or steal to compensate Matthew’s uncle for his assistance, while Bourne promises a cash settlement—revealing an acute sense of the workings of the culture of credit and exchange.

Admittedly, Elizabeth’s intended audience in this particular petition is comprised of well-educated and connected women, rather than men who may expect shows of gendered deference. While avoiding some negative female gender assumptions, Elizabeth stresses her vulnerability. In writing to Mistress Morgan, Elizabeth refers to herself as a “poore unfortunate friend” and despairs “yf I can not obtayne this favour I and all myne shall presentlie beg and be vndone.”  

She extends her suffering to those around her and, as such, implies that she seeks relief for the good of her family, not just herself. In Daybell’s terms, the repeated use of the narrative of feminine vulnerability shows that women had a keen understanding of cultural gender roles and would consequently employ a specifically feminine “rhetorical skill in wringing out the maximum amount of empathy for their situation.”

97 BL, Add. MS, 23212, fol. 187.
helplessness that Daybell points to in women’s letters to men whereby they depict “themselves and other women as objects of pity, as victims of poverty and suffering,” becomes a performative tactic to obtain a desired outcome.\textsuperscript{99} The view that “[g]reat effort was made by women to emphasize the level of distress experienced, their unfortunate, miserable condition, and often their desperation, lack of comfort or help elsewhere,” supports my argument that wives were often viewed and represented as inhabiting a precarious position within early modern culture.\textsuperscript{100} If the stability and companionate marriage championed in conduct literature was assured within their society, the terminology of vulnerability would lack sway. Although I agree with Daybell’s assessment of the practice of eliciting pity through an appropriation of feminine weakness, the custom also serves to couch a woman’s overt attempt at action—which may be deemed inappropriate or beyond the purview of a good wife—by underlining the precariousness of her situation and need for protection. In this way, women may appropriate the social script to their own advantage. In contrast to her letter to Mistress Morgan, the appropriation of gendered rhetorical scripts appears repeatedly in Elizabeth’s correspondence seeking aid to sequester herself from her husband and her complaint detailing her argument for a divorce \textit{a mensa et thoro}.

\textbf{III. “I CAN NOT WITHOUT EXTREME FOLLY REFUSE THIS LAWFULL MEANES”}\textsuperscript{101}

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{101} BL, Add. MS, 38170, fol. 158v, 6 Dec 1582.
Husbands and wives could not sue each other, except in “ecclesiastical courts, which allowed married women to bring actions in their own right,” in instances of defamation and “separation proceedings.”

Elizabeth took advantage of her right to sue at court, admitting in her initial letter to Caesar that “A bowt fower yeres passed I dyd retayne cownsell and dyd serve [Anthony] wyth process and he wold not appere and answer hit.” Within this statement, Elizabeth reveals a problem with the ecclesiastical process for divorce: Anthony is able to stall Elizabeth’s first attempt at a legal separation by refusing to appear in court. According to ecclesiastical law, a wife is able to sue in her own person, but if the other party delays or refuses to comply, the church courts are limited in their recourse. The church could excommunicate a person or demand penance, but arresting or fining a delinquent litigant was only an option for common law courts. Considering the difficulty of proving cruelty, the time to judgment (often 2 or 3 years), and the limited success of separation lawsuits, Elizabeth’s impulse to circumvent the church court appears sound.

In some ways, her decision to utilize her economic and personal resources—here, her mother—in order to gain the favor of Sir Francis Walsingham and the Privy Council, which in turn facilitate her access to the legal assistance of Julius Caesar, fulfills Salome’s own circumvention of the law. Salome asserts that her high status allows her to claim the divorce she desires, “And with an off’ring will I purge my sin; / The law was made for none but who are poor” (1.4.311–312). While early modern law was not necessarily accessible for the

102 Stretton, Marital Litigation, 3.
103 BL, Add. MS, 12507, fol. 204, 18 Aug 1582.
104 Within the surviving documents, it is unclear if Elizabeth has Caesar process her suit through the Church court. In his response to her complaint, he answers her questions based on the laws of the Ecclesiastical courts; however, there are no records of the Bournes’ case within the surviving court records and the Indenture that grants her a portion and recognizes her “sole lyfe” is demanded by and submitted to the Privy Council (NA, SP13/c, fol. 028, 18 Jan 1385.).
poor—legal disputes tended to require a great deal of money to process—Salome’s point about the ability of those in power to bypass the normal legal means is apt for Elizabeth’s case. But while her powerful networks of support and her financial means opened up channels that she would have otherwise lacked, Elizabeth still had to assume the posture of deference and desperation in order to obtain the legal status of femme sole.

Lady Amy Mervin, Elizabeth’s mother, shows similar feminine deference and employs the rhetoric of desperation on behalf of her daughter when writing to Sir Francis Walsingham to follow up Elizabeth’s own “Sypplycation to mye lordes of the councell.” As one of Queen Elizabeth’s ladies in waiting and wife to one of the Queen’s legal advisors, Lady Mervin wielded some influence at court, as is evidenced by her correspondence with Walsingham. Mervin begins her letter with seeming disdain for her daughter’s “unwylling mynde to be reconsyled to her husband.” She suggests that if motherly affection did not force her to “tender [Elizabeth’s] well [b]eing as [her] awne,” she would be furious that Elizabeth refuses to follow the advice of her betters who wish her to reconcile with her husband. By chastising her daughter’s behavior—in her refusal to live with Anthony, her disregard of advice, and her “lyving a fugytive in continuall feare” rather than submit to the Council—Mervin acknowledges the proper behavior and obedience required by Elizabeth’s status as a wife and a woman subject to patriarchal authorities (her husband and the Council). However, Mervin also acknowledges her position as a mother

105 The exception to this was the Court of Requests, which was an equity court that became known for receiving claims from widows, orphans, and the poor. See Stretton, Women Waging Law, 180–187. Caesar, Elizabeth’s lawyer, became Master of Requests at the end of the 1500s.

106 NA, SP 12/154, fol. 85r. The “lordes of the counsell” to whom Lady Mervin refers are the members of the Queen’s Privy Council. The following quotations from Lady Mervin’s letter are all from this manuscript; for a full transcription, see http://opencuny.org/bourne/na-sp-12-154-85/.
who is obligated to defend her daughter; if she did not, she claims she would make a “shipwrack of Nature conscience and creddyte.” In claiming her status as a mother, Mervin provides a sort of rhetorical apology for her subsequent defense of Elizabeth and her plea for aid for her daughter. In echoing Elizabeth’s own descriptions in her correspondence, Mervin prays, “Naye woulde god she shoulde lyve but in feare and not rather in assurance” of Anthony’s violence. Further, she points out that as a femme covert, Elizabeth lacks legal redress if Anthony forces himself upon her property, person, or goods: “What lawe can she have agaynst him yf he shall eyther enter upon her landes, or can combyn eyther her parson or anye of her goodes[?]” She offers witness to Anthony’s supposed habit of disregarding his legal agreements: “what will he care for the breache of his band,” when he has done so before. She closes her plea by asking the Council’s assistance in protecting her daughter from Anthony’s assured abuses, “I besceche you consyder what better dealinge, then after this rate can be expected for mye daughter, unlesse your honorable compassions and authoratyre prevente him.” In locating the Council as Elizabeth’s last hope of defense against a man Lady Mervin claims is prone to violence and breaking his oaths, she argues for their intervention, stresses the necessity of community support for wives in vulnerable positions,\(^{107}\) and points out the heightened precarity for women who must balance the often conflicting requirements of patriarchal deference and self preservation. Lady Mervin’s acknowledgement of her daughter’s unorthodox actions and her defense of the same affords one example of early modern women’s need to preface their appeals, particularly those addressed to

\(^{107}\) Elizabeth drew much support for her separation from her own family members who were powerfully connected at court. Her mother, Lady Amy Mervin, notes that she will “make suche frendes as I can for the favor of your cause” and that Elizabeth’s step-father, James Mervin, similarly “sollycyte[s]” at court for Elizabeth (BL, Add. MS, 23212, fol. 195, no date). Further, Lady Lucy Audley, Elizabeth’s sister, attempts to encourage Elizabeth to stay with her, claiming that “my home shall ever be to you as you owne” (NA, SP 12/172, fol. 174, 28 Aug 1584.).
men, with a stated understanding of appropriate models of female behavior. Similarly, in asking for assistance that if granted would go against the patriarchal projects of marriage and patrilineal succession, Mervin situates the request as unconventional, but necessary when men fail to provide suitable conditions for marital accord. In attesting to Anthony’s poor credit—as seen in his disregard for his bond—and tendency toward violence and economic ruin, Mervin affirms cultural expectations of appropriate male conduct while simultaneously maintaining that her son-in-law’s conduct fails to meet such expectations.

Elizabeth Bourne’s complaint dated 6 December 1582, in which she catalogues charges against Anthony as evidence of her need to obtain a divorce a mensa et thoro, combines many of the gendered rhetorical strategies discussed throughout this chapter: she names Anthony a prodigal husband; acknowledges the cultural stigma of speaking publicly against him; portrays herself as a vulnerable wife in need of protection from his violence (emotional, economic, physical, and spiritual); and includes a litany of honorable witnesses who may attest to both Anthony’s malicious behavior and her suffering, thereby referring the judgment of their reputations to a larger community. Over the course of eight double-sided folio manuscript pages, she represents herself as long-suffering wife while crafting a narrative for Anthony that renders him an unfit husband who embodies the bad spouse trifecta of cruelty, adultery, and abandonment.

In opening the complaint by stating that Anthony began his adulteries “immediately after [they] were married,” Elizabeth infers that for sixteen years her husband has never fulfilled his marital obligation of “chaste loue.”¹⁰⁸ She acknowledges that at the outset of her marriage, she

¹⁰⁸ BL, Add. MS, 38170, fol. 151r. For a full transcription, see http://opencuny.org/bourne/bl-add-38170-fol-151/.
maintained “hope of his amendment,” assuming that “time should teach him the difference betwene vice and vertue (considering then his young yeres).” Her description of both his adultery, his youth, and her willingness to endure, to “bury my secret sorrowes a long time in silence,” situate Anthony as a prodigal husband enjoying the vices of youth and her as the long suffering wife, awaiting his amendment. Her appropriation of this narrative aligns her with literary figures of the patient wife and places Anthony’s actions within a broader cultural frame of the riotous youth. In many ways, the rhetoric of Elizabeth’s words echo those of the wives in the prodigal husband plays. Luce, in *The London Prodigal*, tries to make excuses for her husband’s behavior when she urges, “Impute his wildnesse syr, vnto his youth, / And thinke that now is the time he doth repent” (E2r). Though Matthew, her husband, is not so soon reconciled to her, just as Anthony is not to Elizabeth, Luce assumes, as Elizabeth did, that the cause is his youth. While Luce and Elizabeth perform the expected feminine behavior of patience in response to actions of their husbands, the Wife in *The Yorkshire Tragedy* in her initial monologue expresses the underlying anxiety and vulnerability that women face when married to prodigal husbands:

What will become of us?

…

Are these the virtues that his youth did promise—

Dice, and voluptuous meetings, midnight revels,

Taking his bed with surfeits ill beseeming

The ancient honour of his house and name? (2.1, 6–9)

109 Ibid.
While her critique of her husband is private in that it occurs as a monologue, it is made public by the audience who witnesses her distress. The Wife’s stated fear for her family suggests that their access to a livable life is bound up in her husband’s actions, which currently leaves them susceptible to economic and social ruin due to his gambling and adultery. In impoverishing his estate and his reputation, the Husband’s behavior extends beyond his own destruction to the detriment of his wife, children, and his family’s name.

As Jennifer Panek has shown, the prodigal husband plays “hint at a kind of male marital discontent” that derives from anxieties of “the social role of husband in its liminal stages.” Panek argues that because of the gendered nature of the early modern credit system, men were subjected to increased public scrutiny upon marriage. The frequency with which the rebellious husband figure appears in literary and cultural documents implies a cultural unease with spouses who refuse the tenets of patriarchal strictures, while exposing the social pressures that may drive men to rebel from the domestic sphere. The problem with Panek’s observations that men must work through the transition from “bachelor to husband” and the literary representations that imply the success of that transition—particularly when husbands are married to patient wives—is that neither accounts for occasions when men refuse repentance and reconciliation. Though Elizabeth initially bears the burden of her husband’s behavior and assumes that he will repent, she concedes that “time wrought contrary to my hope: in steade of my wished good and his amendment, I haue found nothing but the continuall increase of his ill, to a due confirmation of my despaire of better.” In this light, the prodigal husband plays become idealized narratives

110 Panek, 61, 62.
111 Ibid., 62.
112 BL, Add. MS, 38170, fol. 151r.
whereby a woman’s orthodox performance of feminine obedience and endurance inspires her husband’s repentance; her patience is rewarded with marital accord. In contrast, Elizabeth’s case exposes the limits of female endurance when reconciliation fails to occur. In noting the “continuall incease of his ill,” Elizabeth challenges the notion that feminine labor will secure marital accord. In appropriating the cultural rhetoric of the prodigal husband and insisting that her husband has remained one for sixteen years, Elizabeth underlines the precarious position of wives who are expected to maintain obedience and devotion to husbands who refuse to repent.

The further challenge of Elizabeth’s case derives, in part, from the fact that despite her husband’s long abandonment where he “refused to liue with mee, theise sixe yeres, in breach of his holy vowe of chast matrimonie,” Anthony now desires to return home.\textsuperscript{113} Her petition, then, becomes a protective strategy—a countersuit to Anthony’s request to the Council that they require that she accept him—and an example of Susan Dwyer Amussen’s claim that legal separations “‘formalized living arrangements most couples had long since made.’”\textsuperscript{114} Though Elizabeth had previously sought a separation from the Ecclesiastical courts during their time apart, Anthony’s return acts as a catalyst prompting her to pursue the divorce with a heightened sense of urgency. In defense of her refusal to appear before the Council at Anthony’s behest—for fear of her lack of legal recourse should he take her into his possession against her will—she claims that beyond “satisfieng of [her] betters and the worlde,” she narrates her history to safeguard against slander and the ruin of her reputation, “to avoide the imputation of an vnreasonable creature in my selfe.”\textsuperscript{115} In couching her complaint against Anthony as a show of

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{114} Amussen, 127.

\textsuperscript{115} BL, Add. MS, 38170, fol. 151r.
deference to satisfy the Council, she thwarts accusations of willful disobedience—in refusing to appear before the Council—and the stigma of shrewish women who complain about and chide their husbands.

For Elizabeth, the expectation of feminine silence within the good wife trope comes into conflict with the equal expectation of obedience to authority. She exploits this conflict to her advantage as she positions herself as a reluctant petitioner. She bemoans:

> So heavy bee theise griefes, and so vnfit a thing it is for a wife publickely to complains against her husband, that is vnwillinglie, by his owne want of gods grace and good considerat

Her keen understanding of the dangers, the “discursive risk,” of speaking out against her husband in a public sphere primarily inhabited by men suggests a political and legal savvy that is in some ways incongruent to the image of private patience and suffering—her willingness to take his “sinnes” and her “sorrows” to the grave—she portrays through her words. Elizabeth’s narrative teems with evidence of her knowledge of “acceptable models of female behavior at court,” that she appropriates as a performative tactic to achieve her desired goal: a separation from her husband. Throughout the complaint she uses rhetoric of endurance to describe her torment, which allows her to maintain a balance between idealized female passivity while fulfilling her need for legal action. Her account of Anthony’s continued adultery, as well as her

116 Ibid.
117 Bodden, 57.
118 Mukherhi, 255.
economic, emotional, and physical duress, underlines her vulnerability and her need of the Council’s help.

As discussed previously, while adultery and cruelty are the primary grounds for a legal separation in the early modern period, there existed a gendered division in cases whereby men claimed adultery and women cruelty. The split reflects cultural fears of gendered disorder. The unchaste female threatens to disrupt patrilineal succession, marital and social order. For men, the line between appropriate levels of violence for correction and inappropriate tyranny is often more blurred. Drawing on the work of Martin Ingram, Frances Dolan claims that despite acceptable forms of physical correction, in Ecclesiastical cases where men were accused of cruelty, “the community judged such men’s domestic violence as a symptom of uncontrol and abnormality,” even to the extent of assuming that such inability to restrain oneself implies “mental disturbance or instability.” For men and women, then, the gendered accusations of adultery and cruelty both result in broader implications of social instability that requires community enforcement and containment.

The violence that the Husband threatens and subsequently inflicts on the Wife and their children in *The Yorkshire Tragedy* reflects this fear of immoderate behavior pushed to instability. When the Husband discovers that the Wife has not consented to sell her land as he demanded, the Husband draws a dagger on her and threatens, almost distractedly, “Money, whore, money, or I’ll—” (3.69–70). The quick entrance of a servant interrupts the Husband’s attack and seems to call him back to his senses. The Wife decries, “Was ever wife so wretchedly beset? / Had not

120 Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars*, 201–103.
the news stepped in between, the point / Had offered violence to my breast” (3.80–82). Further evidence of the distraction that accompanies violence occurs when the husband “Tears his hair” before stabbing his son (4.82 SD). And, finally, when the servant tries to subdue his master, the Husband admits his own lack of restraint in exercising his authority; “Com’s thou between my fury to question me?” (5.30). The representation of excessive force and unnatural cruelty exhibited in this scene of filicide is an extreme case; however, the threatened violence, lack of control, and the need for an intermediary to protect the wife from further abuse are all elements that appear in Elizabeth’s accusations against Anthony.

In a similar situation to the Husband demanding the Wife sell her property for his own use, Elizabeth claims Anthony ordered her to return to him half of the portion allotted for the maintenance of her and her daughters. In response she offered him “the whole, so hee woulde refuse” Mistress Pagnam (his long-time companion). According to Elizabeth:

Hee fell so passionate at this my answere, that he reviled mee with all the ill wordes hee could devise: hee offred mee the terrour of his dagger, (which my father Sir James Marvin saved mee from) with solemne othes vowed, hee would teare the skinne of my backe; if hee might not, hee would blowe vp mee and my howse with gownepowder, but hee would bee revenged and rid of mee.122

In offering him her entire portion if he would leave his mistress, Elizabeth begins the narrative by situating herself as the morally superior one in their relationship. She does not deny him his claim to her finances, but she asks that in return for her acquiescence he agree to live a chaste life. Her deference to her husband simultaneously acts as a corrective. Rather than accept her offer, he verbally abuses her, threatens her with a dagger, and when her step-father refrains 122 BL, Add. MS, 38170, fol. 153v.
Anthony from harming her, he vows bodily harm and revenge. The specificity and severity of the crimes he threatens—skinning her and blowing up her house—function to shock the reader and suggest that Anthony, like the Husband in The Yorkshire Tragedy, is unstable. Her use of “passionate” as her descriptor for his behavior implies his volatility and excess of emotions. In this one example, among many, Elizabeth represents herself as the wronged spouse attempting to help her husband reform. She points out Anthony’s readiness to foresake his bond in demanding part of her portion. She shows his refusal to leave his incontinent life with Mistress Pagnam. She names him emotionally unstable. And she verifies the immediate and future threat of cruelty beyond the physical: he is capable of verbal, emotional, physical, and economic violence. Finally, in noting that she would have been harmed without the intervention of her step-father, she situates herself as a defenseless woman in need of protection while providing a credible witness to the entire event.

Elizabeth’s broadening of her definition of cruelty to include various types of intimidation follows standard conventions for female litigants. As Laura Gowing has observed, “Although canon law restricted the definition of cruelty to physical violence, plaintiffs and their witnesses, especially women, attended with as much care to the economic, mental, and verbal cruelty that gave violence its context, revealing the broader popular conception of marital breakdown.”123 As both Bourne and Gowing’s work on domestic violence show, early modern culture defined a range of abuses as violence and considered them all as evidence of instability in a marital union.

Though cruelty is the only offense that Elizabeth needs to prove in order to secure a separation, she spends a substantial amount of time detailing Anthony’s alleged adultery.

123 Gowing, Domestic Dangers, 210.
Elizabeth mentions ten specific instances of adultery in the complaint. Many of the women she mentions by name, including several wives of gentlemen. In providing names and reiterating stories told of Anthony’s exploits, she satisfies the demands for divorce set forth by Caesar: Anthony is an “open adulterer.” The descriptions include charges of illegitimate children, excessive spending, and instances of disease. Even when describing “his loose life”—a phrase she uses repeatedly—she takes pains to demonstrate how his excess with women spills over into a lack of restraint in other areas of his life, or as she states, “ill doings breede ill thinkings, and of corrupted manners spring perverted judgements.”

She situates his adulteries as a symptom of a broader pattern of corruption. In this pattern she includes spiritual depravity, claiming that his “licentious and wanton life doth make me feare least hee bee growen into a kind of atheiste a thing most dangerous to them that shall live with him.”

The Wife in The Yorkshire Tragedy observes a similar sign of moral degradation in her husband when she observes that he, “Forgetting heaven, looks downward” (2.16). The suggestion in both the play and within Elizabeth’s complaint is that if someone is capable of the depraved behavior exhibited by the Husband and Anthony, they must have lost faith in God. In naming Anthony an atheist, Elizabeth moves beyond the claim of him as an unfit husband who may physically cause her injury, to a larger argument that his soul is damaged and therefore he is untrustworthy and likely to bring about the ruin of others. She reiterates an early modern cultural link between adultery, religion, and the threat of contamination when she notes that, “[t]he punishment of adultery by the lawes, nowe in use with vs, is excommunication” and “since hee or shee worthely incurreth excommuncation, who keepeth companie with an excommunicate person… I holde it damnable

124 BL, Add. MS, 38170, fol. 157r.
125 Ibid.
Elizabeth employs rhetoric of religious devotion to justify her desire to live separate from her husband. While she positions her argument as one of declaring her own virtue and commitment to God—in contrast to her husband—she intimates that if the Council forces her to live with him, they will not only place her body in jeopardy but her soul, as well.

In detailing Anthony’s moral and spiritual corruption, Elizabeth narrates a history of his life that contends he is incapable of change or remorse; specifically, he is incapable of living with her in “chast matrimonie.” She attests that there are, “manie others [women] I could particularly name; but theise are to manie, for mee to hope, that ever hee will bee reformed; hee beganne so young, and hath continued so manie yeres.” Initially, she describes him as a rebellious youth and herself as a patient wife holding out hope for his amendment, like the Wife and Luce; however, Elizabeth shifts the narrative to one of continued depravity on his part and her loss of faith after his many false attempts at reconciliation. Unlike Matthew and the Husband in the prodigal husband plays, Anthony will not repent. For Elizabeth, the main factor in his refusal to mend his ways is Mistress Pagnam.

Master Bourne hath, not vpon anie heate or sudden motion of his minde, but vpon a long and deliberate purpose (yea since his fained shewe of desire to liue with mee), so dispossed, mee of his loue (if ever hee loued mee), and so fixedly hath placed it on Mistres Pagnam, that it is impossible to remove it.

126 Ibid., fol. 165v.
127 Ibid., fol. 151r.
128 Ibid., fol. 152v.
129 Conversely, Elizabeth’s narrative may suggest that the spousal reconciliations that end many early modern plays would likely be short-lived if the texts continued past the moment of reunion.
130 BL, Add. MS, 38170, fol. 157r.
In contrast, Anthony’s “passionate” outbursts or the heated affairs of his youth, Anthony is steadfast when it comes to his devotion to Mistress Pagnam. Despite gestures Anthony makes toward reconciliation, Elizabeth argues that marital accord between the Bournes is impossible because he will never leave his mistress. Through her acknowledgement of Anthony’s love for Mistress Pangman, Elizabeth presents herself as precarious wife, not unlike Doris and Katherine discussed in the Chapter One, who is left with little recourse when her husband’s affections cause him to seek another wife. Elizabeth names Anthony’s love for Mistress Pangnam permanent and as proof of their bond she reiterates Anthony’s abandonment, his “wilfull refusall to dwell with” her for “6 yeres.”

The strategy of naming in order to suggest identity, describe character, and solidify or decline relationships occurs in a specific material and performative context within Elizabeth’s complaint to Caesar. As with her correspondence, repetition and naming are important for Elizabeth within the complaint. The stories told in her letters to family, friends, Anthony, and Caesar, all appear here, as well. The language is rehearsed, the details more explicit, the list of grievances longer, the witnesses above reproach, and the spiritual attack on Anthony more direct. For Elizabeth, this complaint becomes the final dramatization of their marriage and her revocation of her status as Anthony’s wife. Anthony may reclaim her as his wife through his stated intent to reconcile and live together, but Elizabeth firmly argues for an end to their marriage. Nowhere is her refusal to accept Anthony as her spouse seen more clearly than in the two instances within the sixteen-page account where she mistakenly writes “my husband.”

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131 Early modern marriage law, of course, does not permit Anthony and Mistress Pagnam to marry, but their devotion, longstanding cohabitation, and children, all imply a level of commitment beyond a fleeting affair.
132 BL, Add. MS, 38170, fol. 157v.
word husband appears frequently throughout the document; however, these are the only two places where the possessive “my” occurs. In the other instances Elizabeth uses “a husband” or “her husband” as a general term when suggesting how a person should or should not act within marriage. She also uses “her husband” as a reference to the men Anthony has cuckolded. But in the two places where she writes “my husband” the text is crossed out. Admittedly, this linguistic amendment was likely scribal rather than authorial, but what remains is a physical denial of Anthony’s place within Elizabeth’s life. The act of consciously renaming “my husband” within the document attests to an end of that relationship within her mind and within the legal construct of her complaint. The physical crossing out of Anthony as Elizabeth’s husband suggests the broader break with him that she seeks through her complaint. As Gowing notes, in early modern England “A formal decree of separation was, technically, the only way in which a couple could live apart” It is this formal decree that Elizabeth requires, but not because she and Anthony need the court order to live apart. As Elizabeth repeatedly proclaims: “hee hath refused to liue with mee, theise sixe yeres.” It is not Anthony’s absence that drives her to seek protection from the law, but his sudden intent to make amends and live with her, again. Her mistrust of his motives are clear: “I am most assured hit is not any remorse of conscience, repentance of your sinne, or love of mee

133 Ibid., fol. 152v, 156v, 157r.
134 Gowing, 181.
135 BL, Add. MS, 38170, fol. 151r.
that moves you nowe to live with mee hit is bare neede.”¹³⁶ She argues that Anthony is driven by monetary need to seek her company, and fears for her own physical and financial ruin if he is allowed access to her property and her person.

Throughout her letters and the complaint, it is clear that physical proximity and control over access to her person, her property, and her kin, are paramount to Elizabeth’s notion of herself and her relationships. Those with whom she chooses to interact are given titles of endearment and knowledge of where she “consele[s] [her] lyfe.”¹³⁷ In contrast, she sequesters herself from others, particularly those who encourage her reconciliation with Anthony. Her control over her physical space mirrors her attempts to control her legal status. In an undated letter to Anthony, she defines their relationship based on times of absence and presence: “when you had me, I was your wife.”¹³⁸ Her statement infers that for Elizabeth, a crucial signifier of identity and marital status lies in whether or not the couple inhabits the same space. By placing the comment in the past tense, Elizabeth denies the name of wife, but she also inadvertently sets up a conditional by which if Anthony has her—if he is able to gain access to her—she will be his wife, again. Her fear of him taking her “in to his posessyon agaynst [her] wyll” makes sense

¹³⁶ BL, Add. MS. 23212, fol. 14, 20 Feb Unknown Year.
¹³⁷ See Elizabeth’s naming of Edward Conway as “sonne Conway” (BL, Add. MS. 23212, fol. 12) or her confiding in her sister that she stays at Sarsden (NA, SP12/ 175, fol. 21, Nov 1584). Elizabeth’s awareness of the danger she faces if others have control over her physically continues after she is granted her separation from Anthony (NA, SP 12/198, fol. 36, 6 Feb 1587). For a transcription of the latter two examples, see http://opencuny.org/bourne/.
¹³⁸ BL, Add. MS. 23212, fol. 12–16, 20 Feb Unknown Year. Though the year of the letter is unclear, it is likely 1583 or 1584. Within the letter Elizabeth references the involvement of the Privy Council. In a note to Edward Conway she references Caesar to whom she first wrote in July 1582.
within this definition of marriage, as does the urgency with which Elizabeth Bourne seeks a legal separation from Anthony Bourne, a separation that is repeatedly discouraged by the Lords of the Council but ultimately granted.

Elizabeth’s ritualistic self-representation as a precarious wife becomes a way to protect herself from the slander she may incur as a woman seeking legal redress against her husband. The repetition of this narrative also fosters public identities for Elizabeth and Anthony that are open to equally public censure. Her writing, in effect, propagates the stories told about him.

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139 BL, Add. MS, 12507, fol. 204, 18 Aug 1582.
140 NA, SP13/c, fol. 028, [18 Jan] 1385. For a full transcription of the “Arbitrators Report, Indenture of Award,” see http://opencuny.org/bourne/na-sp-13c-fol-028/. Though the Arbitrators reiterate their hope that the Bournes will reconcile—“That if hit happen any reconciliacion to be had between the saide Anthony Bourne and Elizabeth his wife (as the said arbitrators hope and wysh and the saide Anthony Bourne himself doeth pretend and faithefully promiseth to endevore and seeke)”—they make provisions for Elizabeth to live separate from her husband. John Conway is charged with overseeing Elizabeth’s “porcion of lan[d]s or other substaunce whatsoever due, lynntted, or appointed for themaineteynaunce of the saide Elizabeth Bourne during her sole lyfe or sepparacion from the saide Anthony her husband” (emphasis mine). The Indenture explicitly gives Elizabeth a designated maintenance and legally acknowledges her “sole lyfe.” It also guarantees that if the couple reunites, Elizabeth will have a say in the bonds concerning her property, “the saide Anthony Bourne wyll geve and performe goode and sufficient assurannce aswell for the security and goode vsage of the person of the said Elizabeth his wyfe to her lykinge, as of her goodes and landes” (emphasis mine). In granting Elizabeth femme sole status, but also outlining conditions for the couple’s reunion, the Arbitrators inadvertently expose the malleability in marital status for early modern couples. Elizabeth was a femme covert, but now may live a sole lyfe. If she and Anthony reconcile, she would become femme covert, again, but according to the Arbitrators, she would maintain some control over her property, essentially straddling the two identities.

141 The infamy of Anthony’s affairs is documented by others, as well. John Conway, after hearing of Anthony’s plans to flee to France with Mistress Pagnam, writes a lengthy plea advising Anthony to “leave her and your unlawful passions if it be possible” (As qtd. in Bradford, 58–62.). Further, one of Anthony’s affairs is the topic of a joke by Francis Bacon in a section on “Apophthegms” in his Works: “Secretary Bourn’s son kept a gentleman’s wife in Shropshire, who lived from her husband with him. When he was weary of her, he caused her husband to be dealt with to take her home, and offered him five hundred pounds for reparation. The gentleman went to Sir Henry Sidney, to take his advice upon this offer;
Throughout her correspondence, her stories of Anthony’s neglect, scheming, and “incontinent life” function as both offensive and defensive maneuvers. She defines Anthony as a prime example of a corrupt man who is physically and spiritually diseased through reaffirming his infamous reputation as an adulterer, history of legal trouble, explosive temper, economic waste, and his “dissolute and loose life.” Through Elizabeth’s telling, Anthony’s identity becomes synonymous with that of a bad husband and perhaps more importantly a bad subject. In contrast to her wayward husband, Elizabeth’s heroic patience and endurance serve as an example of model female behavior. In reiterating Anthony’s personal failures, Elizabeth simultaneously shows herself to be exemplary. By naming Anthony an unfit husband who has abandoned her for six years, Elizabeth argues that in essence she has lived as a femme sole and now deserves the legal right to remain so.

The example of Elizabeth and Anthony Bourne serves as a case study of cultural narratives surrounding acceptable behavior for pre-modern husbands and wives as it simultaneously catalogs the social, economic, emotional, spiritual, and physical dangers that early modern wives may face. As Elizabeth works through the litany of accusations against Anthony and his failings as a husband, she implicitly draws on and reaffirms cultural assumptions about how a husband should behave. Similarly, her self-representation aligns her with appropriate feminine behaviors, while, somewhat counterintuitively, allowing her to craft an identity separate from her husband.

telling him; That his wife promised now a new life; and, to tell him truth, five hundred pounds would come well with him; and besides, that sometimes he wanted a woman in his bed. By my troth, (said Sir Henry Sidney) take her home, and take the money; and then whereas other cuckolds wear their horns plain, you may wear yours gilt” (Bacon, 131)

142 BL, Add. MS, 38170, fol. 156r.
143 Ibid.
In arguing that she is a good wife who upheld her end of the marital social contract, Elizabeth maneuvers into a space where she is not a wife, but neither is she “nothing.” Unlike Mariana in Measure for Measure who is not a maid but not yet recognized publicly as a wife, Elizabeth and the other women discussed throughout this project are wives and are not wives. The disconnect between these women and their socially sanctioned male authority, their husbands, exposes an instability in the category of wife that is often overlooked by modern scholars who reiterate a normative trajectory for pre-modern women—daughter, wife, widow—based on their relationship to a series of male authorities.

While some women are forced into these new identities against their will, others exploit the malleability of the category of wife by employing various tactics in order to foster alternate identities. Based on the selection of case studies considered here, the effectiveness of the strategies, whether to maintain the status of wife or move away from it, depends heavily on the woman’s success in garnering support with her cause, usually from networks outside of her marriage. For women in unions with men who occupy multiple lines of authority—those who are husbands, rules, and even spiritual heads—their precarity is heightened because their husbands have greater control over their access to aid. The importance of kinship and alternate networks of support is, in some ways, unsurprising because as social beings identity is always contingent on the public recognition and acceptance of that identity. Further, while the primary focus of this project has been on how marital instability impacts pre-modern wives, there are broader questions to be asked about how seemingly personal shifts in marital identities impact households, families, friends, communities, and political networks; the ramifications extend far beyond the social limitations of the categories of husband and wife.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used in texts and notes:

BL    British Library
NA    National Archives
SP    State Papers
PC    Privy Council

II. MANUSCRIPTS

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BL, Add. MS, 23212, fol. 12, 20 Feb unknown year.
BL, Add. MS, 23212, fol. 17, 20 Feb unknown year.
BL, Add. MS, 23212, fol. 182, no date.
BL, Add. MS, 23212, fol. 187, no date.
BL, Add. MS, 23212, fol. 195, no date.
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