

A Woman Virtuous, a Woman Base – the Duality of Female Characters in English Jacobean Drama

Introduction

In the analysis of Jacobean female characters, a recurring pattern can be observed: both according to social and religious notions of that time and according to modern critics, female characters are neatly categorized, being placed on either side of the polar scale, that is, virtuous women, on one side, and sinful women on the other. This view was predominant in the Jacobean Era itself, with numerous scholars highlighting it in their papers: Megan Hickerson remarked on the dual perceptions of women at that time: “They were either seen as temptresses and whores or as virgins and saints” (Hickerson 73); Danielle Clarke stated that “Women were neatly arrayed on either side of a binary split between morality and immorality” (Clarke 137) and Laurie A. Finke emphasized “Cultural perceptions of women as either saints or whores” (Finke 360). Furthermore, this dual perception of women extended to Jacobean drama, with female characters neatly categorized within these plays by other characters, predominantly male, and usually by scholars researching these plays as well. Thus Milly S. Barranger wrote about the essence of Jacobean heroines: “Tragic heroines follow these antithetical extremes of extremes of conduct: the ideal of sublime chastity or the spectacle of fearsome unchastity” (Barranger 179).

However, there is a pattern that I observed after examining plays of that time: the neat categorization is not always as clearly defined as it may seem, for there is a degree of amalgamation between these two opposing sides of women: a saint and a whore, with both the deeds and attitudes of female characters and the others’ perspective on them giving rise to this ambiguity.

In this paper, I will analyze two Jacobean plays— *The Revenger’s Tragedy* by Cyril Tourneur and/or Thomas Middleton and *The Insatiate Countess* by John Marston—the plays that (compared to Shakespearean plays, like Macbeth, Hamlet, King Lear, and many others, or various plays of his contemporaries—John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*, for instance), seem rather unresearched from this perspective. It should be noted that the plays I chose have a major difference in their perspective, with *The Revenger’s Tragedy* being male-centered and *The Insatiate Countess*—female-centered, which defined my choice of these two particular plays. I will examine whether there is a contrast in the portrayal of women depending on their

role in the play and whether women function differently within the framework as either side characters or leading ones. Furthermore, I will examine how traditional views on women, defined mainly by Christian doctrines, shaped Jacobean plays and manifested themselves in these plays. I will, firstly, establish a framework in which women were confined, namely that they were seen through the prism of Eve's sin. Secondly, I will introduce several of the most prominent Biblical female archetypes of that time, the archetypes of both sinful and virtuous women, and I will examine how female characters in the plays can be analyzed as such. I will also look into how the seemingly neat categories where female characters are placed (the realm of sin or virtue) are subverted in them. Three main aspects of the subversion will be observed: firstly, one woman could embody several seemingly mutually exclusive archetypes, being both angelic and demonic depending on the focalization (that is, on the onlooker and his perspective on her). Secondly, with women being seen through the prism of Eve's transgression, sin was often bound to overlap virtue in the perception of a woman, thus disrupting the supposedly neat categories of sin or virtue. Thirdly, this transcendence often resulted in a degree of liminality that female characters possessed, belonging to either both categories simultaneously or, on the other hand, to neither.

I. Cultural and historical background

I.1 Jacobean England

The Jacobean Era was a period in English history during the reign of King James VI of Scotland and I of England, and this period lasted from 1603—the year of King James's ascension to the English throne—until 1625. The Jacobean Era was preceded by the Elizabethan Era, which lasted for over forty years—from 1558, with the beginning of Elizabeth I's reign until her death in 1603. This transition of a female monarch—a woman who led a nation and dominated the political life of a country for such a lengthy period and who, according to Steven Mullaney, “inscribed herself deeply in the cultural imagination of Renaissance England (Mullaney 141, 142) to a male monarch is particularly remarkable from a perspective on gender and misogyny, a phenomenon which Mullaney called “a reincorporation and regendering of monarchy” (Mullaney 139). Even though, for more than forty years, England had a powerful female monarch, misogyny did not stop being prevalent in society. Mullaney remarked on the resurgence of misogyny during the last years of Queen Elizabeth's reign, besides the earliest years of King James's rule: “The misogyny is generally

on the rise in the drama of late Elizabethan and early Jacobean years” (Mullaney 144). Barbara Kiefer also remarked on the insurgent misogyny of the Jacobean time, calling it “a regressive period for women, as a culture dominated by a powerful Queen gave way to a court ethos shaped by the patriarchal ideology of James I” (Kiefer 2). Furthermore, Kiefer indicated the general views on women at that time as being not in favour of women, with the resurgence of views on women’s inherent depravity: “The Jacobean era saw an outpouring of antifeminist or overtly misogynistic sermons, tracts, and plays detailing women’s physical and mental defects, spiritual evils, rebelliousness, shrewishness, and natural inferiority to men in the hierarchy of being” (Kiefer 2). Kiefer’s claim of Jacobean drama as being highly misogynistic and painting women in a negative light is particularly relevant, as it created a specific framework on women, that is, they were seen through the prism of sin, a framework that permeated the society and extended to drama.

The resurging misogyny of both Jacobean society and Jacobean drama is particularly interesting in combination with what Robert Ornstein called “the rise of the heroine” in Jacobean drama (Ornstein 172). Therefore, it can be established that, on the one hand, in the Jacobean Era, women started to play major roles in drama, with numerous plays being centered around and heavily featuring female characters, whose involvement is directly linked to the outcomes of the plays. On the other hand, though having leading roles, propelling the plot, and seemingly having power (as main characters) to express and assert their agency, female characters were still confined within the framework of the original sin and seen as morally depraved and dangerous to mankind, especially to men.

I.2 General views on women

The attitudes towards women in Jacobean England were heavily based on generally accepted doctrines of Christianity—the principles carried from Antiquity and through the Middle Ages and which remained prevalent in English Jacobean society, determining perspectives on women as inherently sinful. Megan Hickerson characterized Jacobean views on women’s depravity as based on Eve’s transgression and ancient views on women’s moral inferiority, stating that predominant attitudes can be analyzed as “Christian beliefs about Eve’s culpability in the fall founded on classical ideas about women’s inherent nature” (Hickerson 71).

Eve functioned as one of the key female figures from the Bible regarding views on female nature; not only was her transgression judged and condemned as it was, but the taint of

it spread to the whole of womankind, with women being directly linked to Eve's fall in their nature. Mariane Hester pointed to the crucial role of Eve's fall in the perception of women by society: "Eve, representative of womankind, had sinned in the Garden of Eden, thus making all women by nature sinful" (Hester). These notions resulted in a negative outlook on both sinful and virtuous women, for even a righteous woman could be associated with sin as a daughter of Eve.

Not only were women associated with baseness because of Eve's original sin, but they were also perceived as instruments of the downfall of those around them, and, particularly, of men, possessing the power to disseminate sin and stray a man from the right path. Cynthia Chapman highlighted the concept of "the 'fall of man' in Christian tradition", the concept that is "based on the reading of a verse with Eve's eating the forbidden fruit and giving it to Adam" (Chapman 241). According to such a rhetoric, Eve, being the first one to be tempted by the Serpent, embraced baseness herself and then transmitted it to Adam as a corrupting and debasing force in her own right, with her role thus being as a corruptor of men and, by extension, of the whole mankind.

These views on women's moral inferiority are displayed in numerous sources of Jacobean England, including religious books, conduct literature, pamphlets, sermons, emblem books, and even books and other writings on witchcraft of that time. The most notable examples of these writings include The Bible, which, besides being one of the most crucial religious books of the Middle Ages, remained highly influential in the Early Modern period and, by extension, in the Jacobean Era; *Daemonologie* of King James I (1597), which was a study on witchcraft and which, according to Wallace Notestein, was an influential book of that time (Notestein 101), with King James thus describing women: "that sexe is frailer then man is, so is it easier to be intrapped in these grosse snares of the Deuill, as was ouer well proued to be true, by the Serpents deceiuing of *Eua* at the beginning, which makes him the homelier with that sexe sensine" (King James 43, 44). Other writings include William Gouge's *Of Domesticall Duties*—a conduct book (1622), which, according to Anthony Fletcher, was one of the central texts of English Jacobean time (Fletcher 165) and which thus emphasized Eve's role in the fall: "Eue, leane more to Satans suggestion then to Gods direction" (Gouge 582). Geoffrey Whitney's *Choice of Emblems* (1585)—a book written during the Elizabethan Era, retained its importance during the reign of King James and beyond, as Gail Kern Paster analyzed (Paster 63, 64), and in which, as Natália Pikli analyzed, "Women appeared in a negative or normative light as allegorical figures as well: most

famously Fortuna (or Occasion) as a strumpet, Envy as a ‘hideous hagge’ and common women as symbolic of fickleness, whoredom or a general danger to men, on account of their unstoppable tongues and loose sexual morals” (Pikli 831). One of the most influential emblems of that book was that of women as “leaky vessels,” with Paster remarking that “in the construction of women as leaky vessels the powerful interests of patriarchal ideology can be seen” (Paster 63). In Joseph Swetnam's *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women* (1615), which, according to Marianne Hester, was highly popular, going through at least ten editions (Hester), it was stated that: “a manner she [Eve] was no sooner made but straightway her mind was set upon mischief, for by her aspiring mind and wanton will she quickly procured man’s fall. And therefore ever since they are and have been a woe unto man and follow the line of their first leader” (Swetnam 1, 2).

These attitudes created a particular framework which defined a perception of women. This framework was highly prevalent in Jacobean society, with women being confined to this framework of Eve’s original sin and the inherent depravity of the whole womenkind and being judged through the prism of religious condemnation. The same phenomenon can also be observed in the plays, with characters and their attitudes in the plays being a product of their time. Furthermore, it should be noted that several biblical archetypes of women or female behaviours, with the primary ones of them being Eve, the Virgin Mary, and others, women were often labeled according to these archetypes or, rather, according to the stereotypes that these archetypes gave rise to.¹

I.3 Archetypal Sinful Women

Regarding Biblical female archetypes, and as I have already mentioned above, Eve can arguably be called one of the most prominent female characters in the Bible, if not the most prominent, with her temptation and eventual fall perpetuating women as sinful and inferior in the history of Christianity. Aside from general associations of her with the fall, with Eve being tempted first by the Serpent, she was generally seen as being much closer to the Serpent than Adam was, with Jean M. Higgins mentioning the tendency of “drawing parallels between Eve

¹ In the Oxford English Dictionary, an archetype is defined as “the original pattern or model from which copies are made; a prototype” while a stereotype is defined as “a preconceived and oversimplified idea of the characteristics which typify a person, situation etc.” Therefore, a stereotype can be analyzed as a simplified version of an archetype and, following this logic, an archetype gives rise to a stereotype. As a consequence, the strict categorization of women into either whores or saints seems to follow a similar pattern of stereotyping female behaviours and thus functions as another manifestation of the framework in which women were confined.¹

and the serpent and even making her the cause responsible for Adam's fall” in the interpretation of the Bible (Higgins 639).

Another prominent figure in the Bible is the Serpent, who, it should be noted, is not a female character. However, certain female characters in Jacobean drama bear traits of the Serpent in them—the similarity that further serves to emphasize the depravity of these females. The Serpent was, similarly to Eve, a negative Biblical figure, with it having the power to, at first, beguile Eve with its cunning and then, because of this temptation, to cause ruin to the whole mankind (Higgins 641). Furthermore, Higgins examined several readings of Eve as the continuation of the Serpent, the logic according to which Eve, by beguiling Adam, seems to become the Serpent in her own right (Higgins 641).

Another archetype of sinful women is Jezebel who, though considerably less prominent than either Eve or the Serpent, still had her place in history. As Janet S. Everhart remarked, “In both the Hebrew Bible and its subsequent history of interpretation, Jezebel achieves notoriety for her unorthodox exercise of power and her worship of Phoenician deities” (Everhart 688). Jezebel was primarily associated with sin, evil, and treachery: Revelation 2:20 –“seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols.” Furthermore, in addition to being sinful, Jezebel was also associated with seduction—she “painted her face,” thus using her beauty to entrap men. In the figure of Jezebel, the combination of the Serpent’s traits (cunning, persuasion) with those of Eve (temptation and sinfulness) can be seen and, as I will analyze in my later chapters with concrete plays, certain female characters possessed characteristics of Jezebel, being both cunning and carnal.

I.4 The Archetypal Women of Virtue

As a counterpart to the negative examples of archetypal sinful women, there are certain Biblical female characters who served as models of perfection for women besides creating and reshaping certain societal expectations of women.

The Virgin Mary, along with Eve, was a notable female figure in the Bible, having the power to, on the one hand, exonerate women from the sins of Eve, functioning as the second Eve, and, on the other hand, by the intensity of her virtues, to create certain expectations from women by society. The traits that are closely linked with her are her faith and purity, and thus her closeness to God, her divinity and her perpetual virginity. Her presence throughout the life of Jesus from the annunciation and his birth to his death and resurrection make her the most important female presence in the New Testament.

The one female figure coming close to the prominence of the Virgin is Mary Magdalene, who was also among the followers of Jesus, with Harriet Beecher Stowe remarking upon the importance of her as a figure in history: “The repentant Magdalene became henceforth one of the characteristic figures in the history of the Christian Church” (Stowe 208). Therefore, Mary Madgalene’s image can be analyzed as an archetypal image of women and an important figure in relation to them. In the Bible, Mary Magdalene is established as a fallen but recovered woman who was cleansed out of seven devils by Jesus: Mark 16:9 – “Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils.” As a consequence of her repentance, Mary Magdalene became highly pious, as well as a loyal disciple of Jesus (Stowe 210).

I.5 The merging of polarities

Judging by the strict division of the two opposing polarities—virtuous women like the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene being directly opposed to Eve, the Serpent, and Jezebel, it can be supposed that these neat categories of sin and virtue were always observed and that a woman could belong to either one category or another. However, in light of the established framework and bearing in mind the importance of Eve’s original sin in the general views on women at that time, in many cases, sin was bound to overlap virtue in the perception of women.

First of all, as can be seen from several sources of that time, even a virtuous woman could be associated with sin. For instance, in Joseph Swetnam's *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women* (1615), the dubious nature of a woman’s probity was mentioned. Thus Swetnam wrote about women, pointing to their inherent fallibility: “As the best metlted blade is mixt with iron, even so the best woman that is, is not free from faults: the goodliest gardens are not free from weeds, no more is the best nor the fairest woman from ill deeds” (Swetnam 55). Therefore, according to such logic, a woman’s probity was often seen as being on the threshold of sin, and her virtue could not guarantee a woman being perceived favourably by society.

The second reason why a woman’s virtue was, in many cases, bound to be overshadowed by her vice is the problematic nature of the Virgin Mary as an ideal for all women. As Ian Maclean analyzed, the Virgin Mary was a prominent figure at that time, a female ideal: “The Virgin Mary is the second Eve, prefigured by all the major female figures

of the Old Testament and by the description of a good wife...the virgin Mary can easily be transformed into a perfect model of womanhood (Maclean 23). Furthermore, Megan Hickerson referred to the redemptive role of the Virgin Mary, who, with her exemplary moral qualities and virtues, could potentially exonerate women from Eve's sin, by which they were judged (Hickerson 74). However, Maclean pointed to the dubious nature of this argument, claiming that "it is not clear whether this argument works in favour of women as a whole" (Maclean 20). Indeed, due to the prominence of views on women's inherent vice and fallibility, the perfection of the Virgin Mary was not enough to restore women to grace.

Firstly, the Virgin Mary was an unattainable ideal. As Ian Maclean analyzed, "The Virgin Mary's relationship to woman is similar to that of Christ to mankind, a model of unattainable perfection" (Maclean 23). Therefore, bearing in mind the unreachable and unrealistic nature of that ideal, it can be concluded that an earthly woman could hardly conform to that ideal because of its unearthly nature. The Virgin Mary's virtue was an exception, not a constant, and despite her exemplary qualities, the majority of women were still associated with a lack of moral integrity and sin. According to Maclean, the praise and exaltation of the Virgin Mary's probity were not "to the advantage of the mass of women, who, by contrast with these saintly exceptions, remain associated with weaker reason, stronger passions and greater inherent vice" (Maclean 22).

Considering these facts, it can be established that the Virgin Mary was often far from being a source of salvation for most women. As a result of that, bearing in mind the prevalence of views on Eve's sin and the dubious nature of the Virgin Mary as an ideal, sin tended to overlap virtue in the perception of a woman, thus disrupting the seemingly neat categories of a whore or a saint and transcending the views of both society and modern scholars on women as being either completely devilish or angelic—the notions that I highlighted in the introduction. A sinful and transgressing woman was bound to be associated with vice and baseness. However, a virtuous woman could also be associated with baseness despite her moral infallibility. In examining the two plays—*The Revenger's Tragedy* and *The Insatiate Countess*, the plays that, as I previously mentioned, differ considerably in their focalizers, with *The Revenger's Tragedy* being centered around male characters and their trials and tribulations and *The Insatiate Countess*—around the deeds of a main female character—I will, firstly, examine how the framework operates in each of these plays, and, secondly, I will analyze how the pattern that I established, that is, the amalgamation of dualities, manifests itself in these two plays.

II. Patterns of Merging Polarities in *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *The Insatiate Countess*

II.1 *The Revenger's Tragedy* by Cyril Tourneur and/or Thomas Middleton

The Revenger's Tragedy (first performed in 1606 and published in 1607) is a play written presumably by Cyril Tourneur and Thomas Middleton, even though it should be noted that the authorship is not entirely clear, with it being initially attributed to Tourneur and presently primarily to Middleton, though the matter remains ambiguous. The play contains numerous characters from the unidentified Italian court, with both male and female characters playing a crucial part in the plot. Although all the female characters function within a perspective that the dominant male characters establish, their involvement plays an important role in the unfolding events.

A predominant part of the plot in the play is focused on the character of Vindice and his pursuit of vengeance against the depraved Duke, who had poisoned his fiancée—virtuous Gloriana—before the commencement of the play, with the reason behind the poisoning being Gloriana's refusal of the Duke's lustful advances. Throughout the play, Vindice holds onto Gloriana's skull as a token of his bloody revenge. Moreover, He implemented disguise to conduct intrigues at court whilst interacting with numerous morally depraved characters. Furthermore, Vindice also involved his brother—Hippolito, in his schemes, and the consequence of such manipulations was a sequence of bloody murders that culminated in Vindice's undoing (as well as the downfall of his brother Hippolito) and subsequent punishment. As a result, despite Vindice's conviction in the justness of his cause, he failed to emerge victorious.

A particular framework in which female characters were confined, was established by Vindice himself, with him claiming that

“Were 't not for gold and women; there would be no damnation” (Middleton.2.1.257)².

Therefore, according to him, a woman functioned as an instrument of downfall, possessing the power to stray a man from the right path. As Steven Mullaney analyzed, “Women in general he defines as intrinsically permeable bodies, subject to what might be called a fully recursive incontinence: they let everything in and they let everything out, with women's

² This and subsequent quotations of Middleton's play follow Nick Hern's edition (attributed to Cyril Tourneur), even though now the weight of opinion favours Thomas Middleton

bodies and hence their characters being commonly described as ‘leaky vessels’ in the period” (Mullaney 160).

Furthermore, not only does a woman act as an agent of downfall, according to his rhetorics, but she also has a degrading influence on those around her. This framework is not dissimilar to the generally accepted attitudes towards women in Jacobean times, and this similarity showcases Vindice as a product of his time. Vindice’s distrust of women and their virtue can be observed not only in his speeches but also in his actions: he implemented disguise, disguising himself as a servant of Lussurioso—a nobleman who lusted for Vindice’s virtuous sister, Castiza. In his disguise, Vindice pretended to convince Castiza to lose her virtue to Lussurioso, thus seeking to test her probity and tempting her with promises of wealth: “O think upon the pleasure of the Palace,/Secured ease and state” (2.1.199—200). Vindice’s need to test a woman’s virtue displays his distrust of a woman’s moral integrity: even the most virtuous woman (such as his sister Castiza) could be a potential disseminator of sin and, therefore, had to be tested.

Another aspect of the framework was Vindice’s mention of the women’s vanity and superficiality. Thus he spoke, holding Gloriana’s skull in his hands: “Ladies, with false forms,/You deceive men, but cannot deceive worms” (3.5.97—9), with his words pointing to a woman’s ability to entrap men with their beauty, which was by its nature superficial. Furthermore, he contrasted a woman’s “superfluous outside” with the underlying part of their specious beauty—death. In short, according to Vindice’s perspective, both a woman’s nature and beauty have destructive aspects.

The duality in Vindice’s attitudes towards women can also be observed, as he “sees all women either as morbidly sexual or as bloodless virgins” (Finke 359). However, there is an overlap of sin over virtue in Vindice’s perception of women, for, on the one hand, he places women in two opposing categories of sin or virtue. On the other hand, bearing in mind the framework that Vindice established (women’s inherent sin, women as a source of damnation), the polar views on women merge, with Vindice displaying hostility toward female sexuality, its reduction of all women to whores or potential whores (Finke 359). Thus, from Vindice’s perspective, the saint and the whore merge. According to Laurie A. Finke, in compliance with the framework that was established in the play, a woman’s probity could be as much a source of a man’s downfall as her transgression: “Even the most chaste and virtuous women, whether those locked up in the ‘crystal tower’ of honor or those safely dead, might humiliate or

dishonor a man” (Finke 359). As Peter Stallybrass analyzed, “The play obsessively repeats both the virtuous enclosure of female chastity and the ‘false forms’ of deceptive womanhood. But it is as if the separation of virtue from vice can never be securely established” (Stallybrass 129). Thus, considering this fact, all the female characters in the play operated within a frame of overlapping sin and dubious virtue.

Gloriana

Gloriana is one of the key female characters in the play. Although she is not involved in the action of the play as a living woman but as a skull, she plays a crucial role in the events that unfold and is present in the bloodiest deeds of the characters. This presents an interesting case of the amalgamation of polarities and the subsequent transcendence of the neat system of categories.

In Gloriana’s example, a woman who sacrifices her life to maintain her probity and who, despite her virtue, becomes an instrument of death can be seen. According to Brian Corrigan, “There are two cues and motives for Vindice’s revenge: the death of his father and the death of Gloriana” (Corrigan 291). Thus, Gloriana’s death was the key element that triggered Vindice’s revenge, from which it can be concluded that the loss of her served as a key reason behind the bloodshed that followed. Gloriana’s skull is present in the very first scene of the play: the play begins with Vindice denouncing the corrupt nature of the court that surrounds him while holding Gloriana’s skull in his hands: “Duke, royal lecher, go, gray-hair’d adultery;/And thou his son, as impious steep’d as he;/And thou his bastard, true-begot in evil;/And thou his duchess that will do with [the] devil:/Four ex’lent characters” (1.1.1—5). Moreover, he referred to the skull as an emblem of his dead love: “Thou sallow picture of my poisoned love... Once the bright face of my betrothed lady,/When life and beauty naturally fill’d out/These ragged imperfections” (1.1.14—18). By extension, not only was the skull a symbol of his poisoned love, but it was also a memento mori—an ever-present reminder of death: Vindice called the skull the “shell of Death” (1.1.1). As Laurie A. Finke analyzed, “Gloriana’s skull functions throughout the play as a grisly emblem uniting two dialectical notions of femininity: woman as ideal, as an object of adoration, and woman as death’s head, as a figure that evokes fear and hostility” (Finke 357).

Vindice continued his speech by praising the heavenly appearance of his beloved—“two heaven-pointed diamonds were set/ In those unsightly rings” (1.1.19—20), which, according to Howard Pearce, was evil in its effects, moving even “upright” men to lust

(Pearce 29). There is a duality in Gloriana's beauty: on the one hand, her beauty was divine, but on the other hand, it led men to sin—rhetoric that can be observed in Vindice's words as well, for in the same speech, he points both to the heavenly aspect of her appearance and the sensual nature of it: “’twas a face/So far beyond the artificial shine/
Of any woman's bought complexion/ That the uprightest man, (if such there be,
That sin but seven times a day) broke custom/ And made up eight with looking after her,
Oh she was able to ha' made a Usurer's son/ Melt all his patrimony in a kiss” (1.1.20—27). Two main conclusions can be established from this speech: firstly, Gloriana's beauty had a devil's taint in it, which led to an overlap of sin over virtue in her nature; secondly, the polarities merged: her beauty was both heavenly and carnal in its effects and, consequently, in her, the saint and the whore amalgamate.

After bemoaning his loss and condemning the other court members, Vindice declared Gloriana's skull to be the token of his revenge—“Vengeance/, O keep thy day, hour, minute” (1.1.39—41). Thus, from the very first scene of the play, Gloriana—a virtuous woman who sacrifices her life to save her virtue—in her death becomes a source of his bloody vengeance, which further shows her duality. The destructive power of the skull did not cease at that scene. Throughout the entirety of the play, Vindice resolutely pursues his quest for revenge, with his actions triggering the deaths of many (he murdered the Duke and his son Lussurioso), all the while holding onto the skull as his deadly token.

Furthermore, besides serving as an ever-present emblem of Vindice's revenge and the destruction that it leads to, Gloriana's skull was used as a ploy to poison the Duke—from a passive instrument of destruction, it was transformed into an active agent of chaos. Vindice deceived the Duke into meeting a new lady to satisfy his desires, and instead of a real woman, he brought Gloriana's painted skull as a “Lady”. Upon bringing “the skull of his love dressed up in Tires”, Vindice presented the skull in a sensual light, almost equaling the skull of his dead fiancée to a whore by saying: “here's an eye/Able to tempt a great man to serve God. A pretty, hanging lip that has forgot now to dissemble;/Methinks this mouth should make a swearer tremble” (3.5.54—57), “He's suited for a Lady, I have took care/ For a delicious lip, a sparkling eye” (3.5.32—33). In Vindice's description of a skull (a supposed lady), a carnal aspect can be seen, with him calling the skull “a Country Lady, a little bashful at first as most of them are, but after the first kiss my Lord the worst is past with them” (3.5.134—136). Here Gloriana is not unlike Jezebel in her aspect; in the similar way Jezebel painted her

face to beguile men, Vindice painted Gloriana's face to beguile the Duke into his death. In addition, just as Jezebel acted as a sinful woman and a disseminator of vice and depravity, so was the skull a passive disseminator of lust in the Duke and also a bringer of death. Thus, as a "Jezebel" Gloriana embodies the archetype of a "whore", which is sharply contrasted with Vindice's previous veneration of the skull. As Steven Mullaney concluded, "Vindice's 'chaste lover' is thus costumed as a whore" and "the ideal lover and the painted lady are one" (Mullaney 160).

The unsuspecting Duke kissed the skull, supposing it to be a real woman, and was poisoned by it. After the Duke's realization, Vindice declared the skull of Gloriana to be the reason behind his death: "'tis the skull Of Gloriana, whom thou poisoned'st last" (3.5.150—151). Moreover, Vindice mentioned the ruinous nature of the skull as a bringer of death: "The mortal curse of the earth" (3.5.104). Therefore, from a token of death, Gloriana's skull became almost a revenger in its own right. According to Arthur L. Kistner and M. K. Kistner "Vindice has brought Gloriana to court as prostitute and murderess" (Arthur L. Kistner; M.K Kistner 41). Indeed, the skull had both a destructive and a sensual facet to it, which is further proved by the nature of the murder: the poison was not administered through a drink, for instance, but through a carnal act—a deadly kiss, which was intended to satisfy the Duke's natural lustfulness. Moreover, as Steven Mullaney analyzed, "within the confines of the play, making his chaste lover the vehicle of her own revenge means subjecting her to the fate she died to avoid: she is the painted lady, the courtesan, the whore" (Mullaney 161). Therefore, through Vindice's own deeds and rhetoric, Gloriana functioned both as a murdered righteous woman and a whore, thus combining the two opposites.

Not only did Gloriana's death and, by extension, Gloriana herself cause Vindice to seek revenge and, in the process of it, murder several people, but it also led to Vindice's ruin. As stated by Steven Mullaney, Vindice "undoes himself by undoing the sheer differentiation between the closed body and world of men and the porous and leaky realm of womankind" (Mullaney 161). At the end of the play, after murdering both the Duke and his son Lussurioso, Vindice confesses his murders to a new ruler of the realm: "'Twas we two murdered him" (5.3.97—98). This confession resulted in the execution of both Vindice and his brother, which points to the fact that Vindice, the main revenger of the play, was undone by his own agency. Moreover, with this agency being centered around the murder of Gloriana and with Gloriana functioning as a token of his bloody revenge, Gloriana's destructive power becomes apparent:

it brought ruin upon Vindice and, by implication, his whole family, with his brother being executed along with him.

Gloriana's position on the scale of sin or virtue can be analyzed in the following way: on the one hand, she can be classified as one belonging to the "saint" category. She was virtuous and refused to relinquish her probity, even if it meant her life. Her beauty was heavenly, with her appearance being extolled by Vindice. On the other hand, she can also be placed into the "whore" category, with her divine appearance invoking sexual desires in men and her giving the Duke a kiss of death. Peter Stallybrass states, "Only as a skull, divested of flesh, can Gloriana's memory be reconstituted outside the realm of bought complexions. Alive, despite her chastity, she is described only through the contamination which her beauty is depicted as initiating. For Vindice, it is her violent death which secures her legibility; the transparency of her chastity is only demonstrable when Gloriana, is '[still] as the grave'" (Stallybrass 132). Nevertheless, as can be concluded from the sensual aspect of the Duke's death inflicted by the skull and from the sensual description that Vindice gave the painted skull, even in her death, Gloriana still carried carnality—a quality that was associated with women at that time.

The duality and its subsequent subversion can be traced both in Gloriana's whole essence and her involvement in the events of the play, and Vindice's attitude toward her. As I analyzed before, there was an overlap of sin over virtue in Vindice's general perception of women, with him distrusting their virtue and denouncing the deadly power of womanly charms. This overlap can be traced in Vindice's attitude towards Gloriana as well: on the one hand, he puts her on the pedestal, contrasting her saint-like nature with the corrupt nature of the court besides glorifying his "poisoned love" for her. On the other hand, the pedestal is rather tenuous, with Vindice pointing at the dubious nature of Gloriana as an ideal in his speeches: "And now methinks I could e'en chide myself, For doting on her beauty" (3.5.69—70). The ideal was, if not wholly debased, but put into question, and the exaltation of it was not as ultimate as it may seem at first glance. In the same speech, Vindice made several other comments, which further indicate his doubts regarding Gloriana as the ideal: "Are Lordships sold to maintain Ladyships For the poor benefit of a bewitching minute?" (3.5.74—75), "Why does yon fellow falsify highways And put his life between the Judge's lips, To refine such a thing, keeps horse and men To beat their valors for her?" (3.5.76—79). The rhetorical nature of these questions amplifies his doubt and further demolishes the seemingly inviolate and unshakeable standing of

Gloriana as a “saint”, as Vindice extols Gloriana’s saintly position and overthrows it in his speeches. Furthermore, it implies a rather tenuous position of Gloriana as a saint: if Vindice is so doubtful about her integrity, was there ever an integrity in the first place? Thus, Gloriana’s nature as an ideal is tainted not only in her essence and influence but also by Vindice’s perspective on it, and, by extension, the system of polarities is transcended both by Gloriana’s ambiguous quintessence as a character and through Vindice’s rhetoric.

In addition, the dubious nature of Gloriana’s standing as a paradigm of virtue and integrity (a saint) is sharply contrasted with the more decided standing of her as a whore: she evoked the Duke’s dark passions, propelled Vindice towards revenge, and was present as an emblem of death throughout the whole play. Thus, the tangible effects of Gloriana’s presence all pertain to the “sinful” side of her. In contrast, we only learn about her virtue from Vindice’s speeches, but there are no palpable effects of her virtue, as seen in the play. This contrast leads to the fact that the negative impact of the skull’s presence and, consequently, Gloriana herself overshadow the positive influence that she might have had due to her probity. Furthermore, with Vindice’s ambiguous rhetoric, the whole essence of her probity can be questioned. Gloriana’s position as a “saint” is dubious and tenuous, while her position as a “whore” and as a bringer of havoc is definite and tangible in its effects.

In conclusion, it can be said that within the established framework of the play—a framework that goes in accordance with general views on women at that time, the polarities merged in Gloriana’s character. She transcends the well-established system of dualities: that a woman is either a saint or a whore, being both a righteous woman who sacrificed her life for the preservation of her probity and an instrument of death. Her beauty was heavenly, and yet it invoked the sin of lust and led men to their ruin. She was placed on a pedestal by Vindice and, at the same time, was thrown from this pedestal by Vindice himself. In addition, following the framework of the play that Vindice and other male characters established, Gloriana’s beauty had a sinful element to it. Moreover, as displayed by Vindice, with both her angelic and her demonic images being a product of Vindice’s presentation of her, Gloriana embodies both an essence of a saint and a whore, which further proves the transcendence of the system. Lastly, by representing these two opposite essences, Gloriana can also be analyzed as a character whose standing is liminal—not a complete “saint” as she disseminated sin and brought death upon others, but not a “whore” either, for she was nevertheless extolled by Vindice (alongside his debasement of her) and praised for her heavenly nature.

Gratiana

Gratiana is another female character from *The Revenger's Tragedy*, in whom a similar amalgamation of polarities can be observed. Gratiana's standing in court is highly dependent on the vision of her by male characters, in the same way that her standing on the scale of polarities and her general moral standing are dependent on the male focalizers. Gratiana, just like all the other female characters of the play, operates within a framework established by males that goes in accordance with general views towards women at that time. The main character whose fate Gratiana seems to repeat is Mary Magdalene. Nevertheless, as a direct consequence of the established negative views towards women, Gratiana's standing as Mary Magdalene is dubious, for, as her perceived depravity overlaps her, so is Gratiana's position as "Mary Magdalene" is considerably different from the real Mary Magdalene's. Furthermore, it should be noted that Gratiana can also be classified into other archetypes.

Gratiana is the mother of Vindice, the main revenger in the play, and Castiza, one of the few virtuous female characters in the play. She is initially portrayed as morally weak: she succumbs to bribery (by Vindice in disguise, who decides to test her virtue) and encourages her daughter Castiza to yield to Lussurioso's advances for financial gain. After her temptation, Gratiana is denounced by her children, namely by Vindice, for embracing depravity. However, she repents her corruption after being confronted by her children and is seemingly forgiven by them.

As the readers are introduced to the character of Gratiana at the start of the play, not much information about her is given. As Arthur L. Kistner and M. K. Kistner analyzed, "virtue, in the forms of Castiza, Gratiana, and Antonio's wife, dwells away from the Duke's palace" (Kistner 39). However, it should be noted that not much is known about Gratiana's virtue or its lack thereof before the events of the play.

What is known is that Vindice—her son, decided to test his mother's (as well as his sister's) virtue by implementing disguise and convincing both to fall. As previously mentioned, this need to test a woman's virtue demonstrates Vindice's inherent distrust of the whole of womankind and his inability to believe a woman's untainted virtue. As a result, an overlap of sin over probity occurs in Vindice's perspective of women. The

same framework applies to Gratiana's case—such an attitude can be observed in Vindice's treatment of her and in society's treatment of her in general..

As a result of Vindice's test of her virtue, Gratiana was temporarily overcome by the temptation (money) to seek advancement through vice, according to Kistner and Kistner, (Kistner 40). In his "temptation" of his mother, Vindice used their lack of money as a means to beguile her: "Madam, I know y' are poor, And 'lack the day, there are too many poor/Ladies already Why should you vex the number? 'tis despised,/Live wealthy, rightly understand the world, And chide away that foolish — Country girl/ Keeps company with your daughter, chastity" (2.1.77—83). In this situation, Vindice acted like the Serpent, tempting Gratiana with promises of wealth, using his eloquence and persuasion, in a similar way the Serpent tempted Eve with the promises of knowledge. Initially, Gratiana refused the temptation, declining Vindice's request to convince Castiza to fall— "Oh fie, fie, the riches of the world cannot hire a mother to such a most unnatural task" (2.1.84—85). Nevertheless, despite her initial resistance, the moment Vindice remarked more about their dire financial situation, Gratiana was tempted, functioning as the fallen Eve who submitted to the Serpent's temptation. She admitted the strength of temptation and pointed to the weakness of her virtues—the promises of material gain easily overcame them: "He touched me nearly made my virtues bate/When his tongue struck upon my poor estate" (2.1.108—109). Moreover, Gratiana referred to the fickleness of the whole womankind and mentioned the easiness with which women can be tempted: "men know that know us,/ We are so weak their words can overthrow us" (2.1.106—107). Therefore, not only through Vindice's perspective and the perspective of male characters in general but also from Gratiana's own confession—a female character written by a male author and thus seen through the prism of men's perspective on womenkind, a woman was prone to temptation (as women are daughters of the fallen Eve). Hence, according to such rhetoric, a woman's virtue could be easily overcome by temptation, and a woman's "saintliness" could quickly turn into whoredom the moment a woman was beguiled by someone's persuasive words, which once again demonstrates the ascendancy of a "whore" over a "saint" in the framework of the play.

Persuaded by Vindice to fall, and thus becoming a fallen Eve, to a degree, Gratiana spoke about the importance of money, demonstrating herself as a tempted, fallen woman: "that enchant our sex; these are the means/That govern our affections" (2.1.124—125). Gratiana embraced baseness and, to Vindice's entreaties that "'Tis no shame to be bad, because 'tis common" agreed, saying that "Aye, that's the comfort on't" (2.1.118—119).

Moreover, tempted by the promises of worldly fortunes, Gratiana herself became a kind of the Serpent. Gratiana attempted to convince her chaste and virtuous daughter Castiza to sin by surrendering her probity to Lussurioso, thus becoming the spreader of baseness. Gratiana spoke about her daughter's virginity, trying to prove to her the importance of sacrificing one's virtue for material gain: "Virginity is paradise, locked up./You cannot come by yourselves without fee" (2.1.157—158). According to Jennifer Panek, "Through Gratiana's fall from 'natural' maternal behavior—the protection of Castiza's chastity—into a perversion of her duty to negotiate her daughter's safe passage through the marriage market," a certain conclusion can be drawn: "despite a mother's scripturally sanctioned claim to authority, it may be in the 'nature' of mothers to be inherently unstable and untrustworthy" (Panek 415, 416); the rhetoric that, once again, confirms the framework—that a woman is morally inferior and needs to be distrusted.

The moment Gratiana surrendered herself to temptation, she immediately fell in Vindice's esteem and became associated with baseness in his eyes, with Vindice remarking his mortification with his mother's temptation with the following words: "I Tried you, and found you base metal" (4.4.31). Furthermore, to Vindice, Gratiana became not only a fallen woman but a disseminator of sin and baseness, with him "converting her into an unnatural bawd" (Ornstein 89) through his rhetoric: "in that shell of mother breeds a bawd" (4.4.10). In contrast to the dubious nature of Gratiana's initial virtue in Vindice's eyes, the dubiousness that can be seen by Vindice's need to test his mother even in her seeming virtue, the nature of Gratiana's fall is decided and definite. Therefore, while Gratiana seemingly belonged to the "virtuous" women category at the start of the play, she was not a saint either, as she was not referred to in such terms by any of the characters. However, the merest temptation "proves sufficient for Vindice to 'unmother' Gratiana" (Panek 415), as Jennifer Panek stated. Thus, the moment she showed her vulnerability in the face of temptation, she immediately became a "whore," now being a cause of shame to Vindice and belonging to an archetype of a decidedly sinful and fallen woman.

Nevertheless, despite the easiness with which Gratiana seemed to fall, she did not stay sinful forever, for she repented, showing genuine contrition for her fall and a desire to be recovered in society. Thus, in her fall and subsequent recovery Gratiana seems to follow Mary Magdalene's fate. However, as I will analyze in the following paragraphs, in light of the framework established in the play, Gratiana's standing as "Mary Magdalene" is dubious, and her recovery in society is very different from Mary Magdalene's.

After her fall, Gratiana expressed remorse for her temporary temptation and, in addition to that, she appealed to heavens asking for forgiveness and displaying her repentance—a repentance that could lead to Gratiana’s unconditional forgiveness by society and her son: “O you heavens? take this infectious spot out of my soul, I’ll rinse it in seven waters of mine eyes?” (4.4.50—52) and “I am recovered of that foul disease” (4.4.121). However, her recovered virtue is not convincing to male characters, for in contrast to Mary Magdalene, who was redeemed through divine grace, Gratiana was forgiven through a male perspective, and the nature of her recovery is not the most promising. Thus Vindice spoke in his forgiveness of Gratiana: “For honest women are so seld and rare,/’Tis good to cherish those poor few that are. Oh you of easy wax” (4.4.60—62). As can be seen from these lines, even in the manner of her forgiveness, the inherent inferiority of women was mentioned with him pointing to their dubious moral qualities. Consequently, despite her repentance and remorse, despite her appeals to heaven and expressions of genuine regret, Gratiana’s forgiveness was still not ultimate. Though recovered, she was still associated with baseness and weaker reason, with a taint of sin being present in her recovery. Therefore, her repentance was insufficient to guarantee favourable esteem of her by the others, which leads to the fact that Gratiana was judged more based on her sins and not on her virtues, which demonstrates the ascendancy of a “whore” over a “saint” in the way a woman is perceived.

In conclusion, Gratiana’s character is another instance of the amalgamation of dualities and the subversion of the seemingly neat categories of sin or virtue. Gratiana seems to follow the fate of Mary Magdalene—a fallen but recovered woman. However, bearing in mind the established framework of the play, in the perception of Gratiana by society, her facet as a fallen woman overshadowed that of a recovered woman, with her fall in the esteem being immediate and her recovery being doubtful. As a result of the overlap of sin over virtue, Gratiana ended up in a liminal position: she was not a fallen woman anymore (because she recovered), but she could not claim back the title of virtue either, her status as not a saint is lost forever (which can be seen in the dubious views on the nature of her recovery).

II.2 The Insatiate Countess by John Marston

The Insatiate Countess is a Jacobean tragedy written by John Marston and first published in 1613. Unlike the majority of the plays at that time, which featured male characters as central characters the main character in *The Insatiate Countess* is Isabella (later known as the insatiate countess herself).

Thus, the main part of the action is centered around her and is shown through her perspective. Nevertheless, despite the predominance of Isabella's perspective, Isabella still operates within the framework established by males, as numerous male focalizers are present in the play. Martin Wiggins emphasized the predominance of misogyny in the social and cultural facets of the play: according to him, "several characters, both male and female, voice negative opinions of women in general: we hear that women are inferior to men in virtue, have no souls, and are actually incapable of doing good; they are, in fact, the cause of men's downfall" (Wiggins 12). Youmi Jung also pointed to the highly misogynistic views on women displayed in the play: "rarely does one scene go by without misogynist attacks against promiscuous women and the title heroine Isabella. Men around her use anti-woman jokes and witty slander to destroy her life. Jilted male lovers fill the pages of the play text and the stage with words deriding her monstrous lust and portraying her male lovers as helpless victims" (Jung 50).

As I previously mentioned, the play is centered around the character of Isabella and her trials and tribulations. At the beginning of the play, Isabella is recently widowed. However, she does not remain a widow for long, as just upon the death of her husband, she is wooed by Count Roberto, and his courtship proves successful. However, she does not remain a widow for long, as just upon the death of her husband Count Roberto woos her, and his courtship proves successful. Isabella quickly gets remarried to Count Roberto, but she proves far from being a loyal wife to him, for, driven by incessant lust, Isabella falls in love with Count Massino on her wedding masque, and they both flee from her husband, Roberto. Isabella then falls in love with Massino's friend—Gnaica—and asks him to kill Massino; nevertheless, the request is not fulfilled, as Massino and Gnaica reconcile in a duel and denounce Isabella. Isabella, outraged by such an outcome, convinces Don Sago, who falls in love with her, to kill both Massino and Gnaica. Sago manages to kill Massino, is captured in his attempts, and confesses, and, because of his confession, Isabella is condemned to death and is executed. Before her death, she is visited by her husband—Roberto—and repents.

Isabella

Isabella is a character whose ambiguous standing on the scale of polarities can be traced both in her actions and in others' perspectives of her. Isabella's character can be categorized into several opposing archetypes, varying based on the perspective of the onlooker—she was both seen as saintly and angelic, and in no time was she also identified as base and devilish.

Firstly, I will examine Isabella's standing based on her deeds and her own perspective on herself; then, I will analyze how others perceived her.

At the beginning of the play, we are introduced to a newly widowed Isabella, who, right in the first scene, is wooed by her future husband—Count Roberto. Initially, Isabella refuses Roberto's courtship—“My lord of Cyprus, do not mock my grief./Tears are as due a tribute to the dead.” (Marston.1.1.34—35).³ However, despite her initial protestations, Isabella quickly agrees to the marriage. Furthermore, though a widow in mourning, Isabella did not hesitate to express her relief upon her husband's demise, claiming that she wished he died sooner because his presence hindered her freedom: “I mourn thus fervent 'cause he died no sooner:/He buried me alive,/And mewed me up like Cretan Dædalus, /And with wall-ey'd jealousy kept me from hope

Of any waxen wings to fly to pleasure;/But now his soul her Argus' eyes hath closed, And I am free as air” (1.1. 48—54). As can be seen from these lines, Isabella also mentioned the pursuit of pleasure as one of her life priorities. Thus, she established her agency as a free and uninhibited woman and also established herself as a transgressor. Such expressions go against the social expectations of women at that time—that they should venerate their husbands. These views were expressed in numerous writings of that time, for instance, in William Gouge's *Of Domesticall Duties*, in which “wives reverend speech to her husband”, and “a wife's acknowledgment of her own husband's superiority” were mentioned (Gouge 272, 281). Another writing in which such notions were stated is King James Bible

—Ephesians 5:22-24 “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.”

Undoubtedly, it should be noted that Isabella's husband was dead at the time of her speeches. However, she can still be analyzed as a transgressor, for she refused to admit her husband's superiority by expressing that she wished he had died sooner and thus disrespecting his importance and authority over her. Therefore, from the very beginning of the play Isabella is established as a transgressing woman by questioning her deceased husband's sovereignty. Moreover, Isabella promises to forget the memory of her deceased husband, thus further proving herself to be a transgressor: “My lord, I had a month's mind unto you,/As tedious as a full-ripped maiden-head...so my late-dead lord/I put out ever from my memory,/That his remembrance may not wrong our love” (1.1.93—103). By showing her strife for pleasure

³ The edition I will quote in this paper is the following one: Marston, John, and Arthur Henry Bullen. *The Works of John Marston*. J.C. Nimmo, 1887.

besides her disobedient nature as a wife, Isabella can be analyzed as a sinful and fallen woman who falls victim to her desires.

Even though Isabella attested to her love for Count Roberto in her speeches, even claiming to forget the memory of her deceased husband for the sake of her newfound love, she proved far from being a loyal wife to Roberto. At her wedding Masque, Isabella quickly found herself in love with Count Massino—one of the visitors to the celebrations. Similar to the love declarations she expressed to her husband Roberto, Isabella showered Massino with sensual declarations of her desire for him, which further proves her lust as a key motive behind her change of heart: “This god of wine [Bacchus]/Cannot inflame me more to appetite,/Though he be co-supreme with mighty Love,/Than thy fair shape” (2.1.192—195). Moreover, Isabella justifies her quick change, claiming that it was the forces of Cupid and points to herself as one of the weak women who fall victim to temptation, also mentioning women’s fallibility and thus further confirming the framework of women’s natural sin: “Change is no robbery; yet in this change/Thou robb’st me of my heart. Sure Cupid’s here,/Disguisèd like a pretty torch-bearer,/And makes his brand a torch, that with more sleight/He may entrap weak women” (2.1.110—114). As indicated by Martin Wiggins, “Throughout the play she is represented as someone powerlessly watching herself spin out of control: she regularly speaks of the forces that drive her—Cupid, Desire, Revenge—in personified terms which establish her sense of them as external. Unable to govern them, she can only submit in the hope that they will wear themselves out” (Wiggins 18). By mentioning external forces as the reason for her fall, Isabella seems to point to her lust as a separate power not belonging to her, a force that is beyond her control and outside of her reach. Consequently, such logic serves to emphasize her vulnerability in the face of such forces—the mighty external power of carnality and desire sweeps her away. Therefore, according to such rhetoric, Isabella is seemingly tempted by outer influences and thus can be analyzed as a fallen Eve, who was also beguiled by an external force—the Serpent and his cunning.

The way Isabella succumbs to temptation also bears a degree of resemblance to Eve’s temptation by the Serpent to eat the forbidden fruit and her subsequent fall. The only difference lies in the nature of the fall: Eve was beguiled by the Serpent’s cunning reasoning, while Isabella fell victim to her quenchless and uninhibited lust. The mentions of fall can be found in Isabella’s speeches, as she acknowledged her fall: “O no, an easy fall” (2.1.160) and stated her lust to be the key reason behind her fall: “Lust, thou art high;/My similes may well come from the sky” (2.1.207—209). Thus, Isabella was enslaved by sexual obsession, with no

possibility of escape (Wiggins 14). Furthermore, as Eve was a transgressing woman, so was Isabella, “a sexually transgressive character” (Wiggins 18).

Despite Isabella’s passionate declarations of love for Count Massino, with whom they fled from her husband Roberto, Isabella’s affection for Massino does not last. Upon encountering his friend Gniaca, Isabella felt her affection shift towards him. She praised his physical beauty: “Nature did rob herself when she made him,/Blushing to see her work excel herself;/’Tis shape makes mankind femelacy” (3.2.44—46) and announced Count Massino’s fall from her affections: “Forgive me, Count Massino,’tis my fate/To love thy friend, and quit thy love with hate” (3.2.47—48). Isabella also attested to her sexual desire to be the key driving force and her determination to pursue her passion: “I must enjoy him; let hope thy passions smother;/Faith cannot cool blood;/ I’ll clip him were ’t my brother./Such is the heat of my sincere affection, /Hell nor earth can keep love in subjection” (3.2. 47—52). In addition, Isabella once again confirms herself as the victim of her passions: “Desire, thou quenchless flame that burn’st our souls,/Cease to torment me” (3.4.18—19). Therefore, both in her passion for Massino and Gniaca, Isabella can be analyzed as a fallen woman who is susceptible to temptation, a fallen Eve to an extent, a victim of her passions; “she pursues sexual pleasure and celebrates promiscuity” (Jung 50).

Not only does Isabella display traits of a fallen Eve in her deeds, but she can also be analyzed as a Serpent. Isabella declared: “The serpent’s wit to woman rest in me” (3.4.108), “Wit arms a woman” (3.4.112), and “Women are witless that cannot dissemble” (3.3.120). Both through her actions and her own words can Isabella be analyzed as a Serpent. Like the Serpent, who used his wit and cunning to beguile Eve, Isabella also used manipulation and slyness to entrap men. Isabella used her eloquence to ensure Roberto’s, Massino’s, and Gniaca’s love for her, showering them with lavish expressions and epithets. I have already analyzed excerpts of such speeches to Roberto and Massino, but Isabella implemented the same strategy to beguile Gniaca. She declared him to be her only true love and threatened him with her misery should he refuse her affection: “My vow is fix’d in heaven...My life is death with tortures ’less you love me” (3.2.96—97). Furthermore, she offered to stab herself, claiming that “for love a woman dies” (3.2.92), thus manipulating Gniaca further and eventually prevailing, with Gniaca declaring: “I am yours from all the world;/Thy wit and beauty have entranced my soul” (3.2.109—110). Therefore, in this situation, Isabella seems to exhibit traits of the Serpent, beguiling Gniaca with her slyness and Gniaca eventually succumbing to her temptation.

There are other instances of Isabella's manipulation, which prove that she exhibits traits of the Serpent. Isabella pretended to be indisposed to distract Massino from her newly acquired interest in Gniaca. Also, she pretended to repent her lust for Massino and her abandonment of her rightful husband Roberto instead of admitting to Massino her newly acquired lust for his friend Gniaca. In addition, Isabella uses her manipulation in order to convince Gniaca to murder Massino upon her "disillusionment" with him: "Dare thy hand execute whom my tongue condemns,/Then art thou truly valiant, mine for ever;/But if thou faint'st, hate must our true lover sever" (4.2.22—24). Furthermore, upon convincing Don Sago—who fell in love with her at first sight—to murder both of her lovers, Isabella also used her persuasion methods. "My spotless honour is a slave to spite" (4.3.113) and "Be god on earth, and revenge innocence" (4.3.125). Isabella pretended to be a "saint" turned into a "whore" by evil tongues, showcasing herself to be a typical example of evil concealing itself behind the angelic façade. Thus, Isabella can be analyzed not only as a fallen Eve but also as the Serpent.

Another archetype that Isabella seems to embody is that of Jezebel, which can be seen in the combination of Isabella's wit and cunning with her carnality and physical attributes. Similar to Jezebel, who functioned both as a seductress by "painting her face" and as a persuasive and cunning spreader of baseness. Shortly before her execution and upon her repentance, Isabella thus spoke about her hair, pointing to the seductive nature of her physical appearance: "O, these golden nets,/That have ensnared so many wanton youths." (5.1. 202—203). Consequently, by being seductive, carnal, and conniving, Isabella displays traits of Jezebel.

From the perspective of her by the others, Isabella was associated both with heaven and hell. She was both glorified and debased, being placed on the two polar opposites—a saint and a whore. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the overlap of sin over virtue occurs in the perspective of her by society and, namely, by male focalizers. Thus, the seemingly neat system of categories is disrupted.

At the beginning of the play, as Count Roberto—her future husband, is wooing Isabella, he greatly idealizes her in his speeches and puts her on a pedestal. In addition, he refers to Isabella as a saint—"And God defend that any profane hand/Should offer sacrilege to such a saint!/Lovely Isabella, by this duteous kiss,/That draws part of my soul along with it" (1.1.23—26) and referred to Isabella in terms pertaining to heaven: "Had I but thought my rude intrusion/Had waked the dove-like spleen harbour'd within you" (1.1.27—28).

Furthermore, in speaking of his adoration of Isabella Roberto did not refer to the fleshy aspect of their love but spoke about the pure nature of it: “my love’s as chaste as thou art fair,/And both exceed comparison. By this kiss,/That crowns me monarch of another world/Superior to the first, fair, thou shalt see/As unto heaven my love, so unto thee!” (1.1.83—87). As can be seen from this speech, Roberto, firstly, perceived both Isabella and their connection as exceptional and sublime and, secondly, put Isabella in the position of a saint as a direct consequence of such perception. Thus, on the scale of polarities, Isabella belonged to the “virtuous” and “saintly” category according to such focalization.

Nevertheless, Isabella does not stay a “saint” in Roberto’s eyes for long, as, after encountering Count Massino during her wedding masque, she immediately falls in love with him. They fled from Roberto. Upon Roberto’s discovery of her escape, he immediately denounced and cursed her by exclaiming: “The gods send her remorse, a poor old age,/Eternal woe, and sickness’ lasting rage!” (2.4.17—18). Isabella fell in her husband’s esteem and, by extension, fell from the pedestal and became associated with baseness and hell. Roberto referred to Isabella as a source of his “degenerate shame” (2.4.47), as “the great whore”: “the meanest whore/Will have one buckler, but your great ones more” (2.4.25—26). Roberto indicated the primary motive for Isabella’s escape as lust: “To let the nuptial tapers give light to her new lust!” (2.4.29). Lastly, he referred to Isabella not only as a sinful woman but as a monster: “The shores of Sicil retain not such a monster,/Though to galley-slaves they daily prostitute” (2.4.27—28). Thus, the moment Isabella acted not in accordance with Roberto’s idealized image of her as a saint, she quickly fell in his esteem. From one extreme—saint, she moved to another—whore. A certain tendency can be observed: the position of Isabella as a “saint” in Roberto’s eyes was tenuous and conditional and was not based on the real nature of Isabella but instead on Roberto’s projection on her and the ideal image he created in his perception. The dubious nature of Isabella’s perceived virtue can be contrasted with the decided nature of her sin: she fell quickly and irrevocably and was denounced not only as a depraved woman but also as a monstrous one.

In her relationship with Massino, a similar pattern can be observed. Initially, Massino refers to Isabella in terms pertaining to heaven and idealizes her: “For such a beauty, brighter than his Danae, Jove should (methinks) now come himself again./Lovely Isabella, I confess me mortal— Not worthy to serve thee in thought, I swear” (2.3.69—72). In addition, she was equaled to a saint with Massino referring to her as a “sweet saint!” (3.2.65).

However, the moment Isabella loses interest in Massino (finding herself in love with his friend—Gnaica) and grows cold towards him, all the idealization disappears. Isabella is

alluded to as a “gaudy child of pride, and nurse of sin” (3.4.161). From a saint, Isabella became a disseminator of sin and a carrier of vanity in Massino’s eyes. Massino also pointed to the fickle nature of Isabella’s virtue, as, according to him, it was quickly consumed by her lust: “and [your] loves endure/Like dew upon the grass; when pleasure’s sun/Shines on your virtues, all your virtue’s done.” (3.4.157—159). This perceived fragility of virtue demonstrates the ascendancy of sin over virtue in his perception of Isabella. Furthermore, Massino, not unlike Roberto, completely debases Isabella and pointed to her insatiate lust as a source of her coldness: “Farewell, Isabella, poor in soul and fame,/I leave thee rich in nothing but in shame./Then, soulless women, know, whose faiths are hollow,/Your lust being quench’d a bloody act must follow” (3.4.186—189). The nature of Isabella’s swift fall in Massino’s eyes is similar to her fall in Roberto’s perspective: just like her fall in Roberto was decided and irrevocable, so it was in Massino’s eyes. Therefore, in both these cases, Isabella’s probity was dubious and her depravity definite. Isabella is also seen in a devilish aspect by Massino, with him referring to Isabella in the following terms to his friend Gniaca: “Thou dotest upon a devil, not a woman,/That has bewitch’d thee with her sorcery,/And drown’d thy soul in lethy faculties” (4.2.63—65). Not only did Isabella transform from a “saint” into a “whore”, but she also became utterly demonic.

Aside from that, Massino denounced not only Isabella but the whole of womankind and touched upon the inherent depravity of women: “Man were on earth an angel but for woman./That sevenfold branch of hell from them doth grow;/ Pride, lust, and murder, they raise from below,/With all their fellow-sins. Women are made/Of blood, without souls.” (3.4.175—179). This shows the framework in which women were confined. Despite his initial exaltation of Isabella, Massino still held beliefs about the sinfulness of women, which shows an overlap of sin over virtue in his perception of women. Furthermore, bearing in mind the tenuous position of Isabella as a “saint” and the decided position of her as a “whore”, it can be said that the archetype of a “saint” was overshadowed by the archetype of a sinful woman. Thus, there is a predomination of depravity over probity, which leads to the amalgamation of polarities.

In the view of Isabella by her second lover—Gniaca, idealization can also be observed, even though he, unlike the other two men, also referred to the carnal pleasures that their love offered: “Thou creature made by love, composed of pleasure...In thee both wit and beauty’s resident” (3.4.40—42). However, despite the mentions of sensuality, the exaltation of Isabella was also there, as in duelling with his friend Massino Gniaca declared himself a revenger of Isabella’s honour, describing Isabella in the following way: “She that’s most

wise, most loving, chaste, and fairest” (4.2.62). Nevertheless, just as with two other men—Roberto and Massino—Isabella also fell in Gniaca’s esteem and, in place of a paradigm of chastity, came a spreader of baseness. Upon reconciling with his friend Massino in a duel, Gniaca describes their “freedom” from Isabella’s corrosive influence in the following way: “We have escap’d the snares of her false love,/Vowing for ever to abandon her” (4.2.94—95). According to his logic, he and his friend Massino were ensnared by Isabella’s temptations (or beguiled by the Serpent), and then they freed themselves from her degrading influence. He also spoke about his disillusionment with Isabella as, at last, leaving the scope of her lust: “Now I am got out of lust’s labyrinth” (4.2.107). In the nature of Isabella’s fall in Gniaca’s eyes the same pattern as with Roberto and Massino can be observed: the position of her as a “saint” is fragile and not based on her real qualities, and the position of her as a “whore” is decided and irrevocable.

In the view of her by society, Isabella was judged more based on her sin rather than her virtue, which can be seen both by the precipitancy of her fall in the others’ esteem and by the ascendancy of her sins over her virtues in the way she was judged. As established by Youmi Jung, “Isabella’s promiscuity still is predominantly considered dangerous and viciously attacked” (Jung 59), and “her actions are relentlessly condemned until she is executed at the end” (Jung 50). However, not only was Isabella condemned during her life, but also after her death, she was still denounced for her lasciviousness.

This dominance of her vices over her virtues in the views of others can be seen in another archetype that Isabella seems to embody: Mary Magdalene. Shortly before her execution, Isabella was visited by her husband Roberto, who encouraged her to seek God and find repentance. As Fiona Martin analyzed, “Her encounter with Roberto is the catalyst for Isabella to transcend the physicality of her body—associated with lustfulness and shame — and to both imagine and accept her separation from it” (Martin 15).

Isabella shows remorse for her actions and admits her transgressions to be the reason for her downfall and infamy: “Had I with you enjoyed the lawful pleasure,/To which belongs nor fear nor public shame,/I might have lived in honour, died in fame!” (5.1.187—189). Isabella also begged her husband’s forgiveness, thus displaying genuine contrition: “Your pardon on my falt’ring knees I beg, /Which shall confirm more peace unto my death/Than all the grave instructions of the Church” (5.1.190—192). According to Fiona Martin, “at the final, crucial moment her concern is for the salvation of her soul,” with Isabella’s insatiability being “replaced with humility and penitence”. And “although her transformation is sudden, it appears to be genuine” (Martin 16). Isabella was forgiven by Roberto, with him claiming that:

“Pardon belongs unto my holy weeds,/Freely thou hast it” (5.1.193—194). Nevertheless, the same cannot be said about the rest of society, and here lies a significant difference between Isabella’s nature of “recovery” and that of Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene’s recovery was decided and was achieved through divine grace, while Isabella’s repentance was achieved thanks to men, namely her husband Roberto. Fiona Martin pointed to the importance of Roberto’s role in Isabella’s repentance: “Her encounter with Roberto is the catalyst for Isabella to transcend the physicality of her body—associated with lustfulness and shame — and to both imagine and accept her separation from it” (Martin 15). Therefore, Roberto acts as an intermediary between Isabella and God; if it had not been for his involvement, Isabella would probably not have repented her sins. This shows the contrast between Isabella’s facet as “Mary Magdalene”, with the necessity of a man to bring her closer to God and the real Mary Magdalene—her involvement in the life of Jesus and her connection to the divine.

Isabella’s recovery and repentance remain mostly unacknowledged, and in the eyes of society, that is, the men commenting on her death, she is remembered as an insatiate countess, not as a repented woman. Thus spoke Medina—a nobleman—upon her death: “She died deservedly, and may like fate/Attend all women so insatiate” (5.2.229—230). Not only was Isabella’s repentance overshadowed by the gravity of her sins in society’s eyes, but her fate was declared a warning, a moral lesson to transgressing women like her. Therefore, even though Isabella seems to follow the fate of Mary Magdalene (fall—repentance), the nature of recovery is different. It is as if Isabella was given no chance to recover, with society focusing on her downfall and not on the potential of her recovery, which is shown both by the fact that she was remembered as a sinful woman and by the fact that despite her repentance and genuine contrition, Isabella was still executed and not given a chance to live. As stated by Martin Wiggins, the murder of Massino “supplies the legal pretext, but her greater offense lies in her sexual appetite and the active role she takes in satisfying it” (Wiggins 13). Martin Wiggins also pointed to the emphasis on Isabella’s lust in the eyes of others: “it seems that Isabella is killed as much for her promiscuity as for her part in the death, while Don Sago, who actually committed the murder, is pardoned. Again the double standard is apparent” (Wiggins 12).

Therefore, it can be concluded that the predominance of sin over virtue in society’s view of her demonstrates the overlap of a “whore” over a “saint” in the way Isabella is perceived and judged, thus disrupting the system of polarities. The rapidity of Isabella’s fall in the others’ estimation shows the conditionality and the fragility of a woman’s virtue in the others’ perspective; a woman was usually on the threshold of sin, which, once again, leads to

an overlap. The dubious nature of Isabella's perceived probity is sharply contrasted with the profundity and irrevocability of her sin in the esteem of others since Isabella's position as a 'saint' was tenuous and conditional, while her position as a 'whore' was definite. Thus, three main points can be established: firstly, Isabella embodied several ostensibly mutually exclusive archetypes. Secondly, the archetype of a saint was overshadowed by the archetype of a sinful woman (Jezebel, Eve), which shows a disruption of the well-established system of polarities. Thirdly, Isabella's standing at the end of the play has a degree of liminality to it. She is not a saint (as she sinned and fell) but seemingly does not belong to a category of a sinful woman either (due to her repentance), yet society remembers her as a fallen woman.

Conclusion

As can be seen from both of the plays that I analyzed, that is, *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *The Insatiate Countess*, with the former being centred around male characters and the latter having a female character as a lead, the framework of the inherent sinfulness, inferiority, and depravity of women was so prevalent and significant at that time, that it extended both on male-dominated plays (*The Revenger's Tragedy*) and plays with a lead character being a female (*The Insatiate Countess*).⁴

Furthermore, the notions of women's depravity in these plays were carried and mentioned by male focalisers in their judgement of women and the condemned female characters themselves, proving themselves to be products of that time and, by extension, products of a male authorial perspective. Though possibly not written to serve as explicitly didactic role as certain conduct books or pamphlets, the plays both confirmed existing attitudes towards women and, by implication, could also play a role in perpetuating these notions.

My main purpose in analyzing these two plays was, firstly, to establish how the framework of a woman's sin overlapping her virtue in the judgement of her by society manifests itself in these plays and how female characters operate within this framework. Secondly, I aimed to show how still confined within this framework, a female character's standing transcends the neat categorization of women into either saints or whores—a categorization supported both within the plays themselves by male focalizers, functioning as a

⁴ It should be noted that the research I conducted is not limited to these two plays and allows for more analysis from a similar perspective, as the pattern is by no means limited to them and it can be applied to other plays, both male-centered, such as John Ford's 'Tis Pity She's a Whore, for instance, and to female-centered plays as well, such as John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, and numerous others.

part of the framework – and maintained over centuries by numerous analyses by scholars. Several aspects of female characters achieve this transcendence: in the first place, one woman could be classified into several seemingly mutually exclusive archetypes, belonging both to the “saint” and to the “whore” category, depending on the focalization. Secondly, as the whole of womankind was perceived through the prism of Eve’s fall, with a woman being generally judged more based on her sins rather than her virtues, sin was often bound to overlap virtue in society’s view of a woman, which resulted in a disruption of seemingly neat system of polarities. Lastly, this overlap could result in a liminal position of a female character, as a woman could be classified either into both categories or neither.

As can be seen from my analysis of *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, women operated within a framework of their inherent depravity, with damnation, downfall, and degradation all being primarily attributed to them and seen as natural outcomes of their involvement in the events. This perspective extended to both women who sinned—such was Gratiana, for instance, with Vindice’s need to test her virtue and her turning into a “bawd” in his eyes the moment she showed her vulnerability in the face of temptation and on righteous women, such as Castiza—as Vindice, despite her virtue, still felt it incumbent upon him to test her probity and thus displaying his distrust of any woman’s qualities, however righteous she may be. Another virtuous woman who operated within the framework and in whose case an amalgamation of polarities can be seen was Gloriana, with Vindice, despite his exaltation of her exemplary qualities, still questioning her integrity and the justifiability of his revenge.

Not only were female characters in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* perceived through the prism of sin they were deemed capable of, but they also serve as instances of the transcendence of duality. This fact leads to the conclusion that the pattern I observed was confirmed. This pattern can be traced both in Gloriana’s case, as, by turning his virtuous beloved—a “saint” into a “whore” and an instrument of death and remarking upon the carnal power of her beauty, Vindice himself subverted the seemingly neat system of polarities. In addition, Gloriana’s standing on the scale of polarities appears to be rather liminal, as she can be classified either into both archetypes or neither, because of their seeming mutual exclusivity.

In the fate of Gratiana, a confirmation of the pattern can also be observed: even though she appears to follow the fate of Mary Magdalene, her recovery and restoration of virtue had a taint of sin to it, as becomes apparent from Vindice’s rhetorics. Therefore, in Vindice’s condemnation of her, the archetype of a sinful woman eclipsed that of a virtuous one, with Gratiana’s facet as a “bawd” being considerably weightier than that of a “saint” and her

genuine contrition failing to restore her completely. Furthermore, there is also a degree of liminality in Gratiana's standing, with her being fallen yet recovered and recovered yet forgiven through the lens of women's inherent sin.

In Isabella's case, a similar tendency becomes evident, as, firstly, even though a main character of the play, Isabella still operated within the framework of a woman's depravity, with her standing as a "saint" being tenuous and that of a "whore" –definite and irrevocable. Secondly, Isabella embodied several archetypes that, according to certain scholars, can by no means coexist in one person, embodying the archetypes of Eve, Mary Magdalene, the Serpent, Jezebel, and that of a saint, with her standing depending both on her deeds and on the perspective of these deeds by others. Thirdly, the concept of liminality can also be attributed to her, as, at the end of the play, Isabella cannot be analyzed as an utterly sinful woman due to her repentance but cannot be placed into the "saint" category either, because of the ascendancy of her sin over her virtue in the eyes of society.

In conclusion, the pattern that I established in the introduction of my paper is confirmed by the analyses provided here, as in both plays the transcendence of the system of dualities can be observed.

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