CHAPTER 36

Performing Chastity
The Marina Project

Katharine Craik and Ewan Fernie

If chastity has for generations served the needs and desires of men, can it be taken seriously now as a virtue? Chastity has always signified feminine value within patriarchal society, both outside and inside marriage. Writing in the first decades of the fifteenth century, for example, John of Audelay warns in "Chastity of Wives" that if a woman "mared schal be," both she and her worth as a domestic asset are spoiled.[1] Often now dismissed in the west as a medieval superstition, or, at best, as a means of escape from an intolerable situation, chastity seems a worn out version of goodness, a remnant virtue which belongs in and to the past. This chapter proposes however to open up chastity as a forgotten virtue for our own time. It offers an account of the Marina Project, our ongoing creative-critical collaboration with the Royal Shakespeare Company, which has resulted in the creation of a new play entitled *Marina*. The project began with the hypothesis that *Pericles* (1609), by Shakespeare and George Wilkins, provides a uniquely rich and challenging site for exploring whether chastity can be released from its regressive legacy. We seek to open up chastity as a forgotten version of agency which, in the most surprising ways, enables new kinds of assertion and affirmation for both men and women. Chastity disrupts our sense of the way things "have to be" in today's world, emerging as a form of resistance to life in the name of a better one.

We began by attending to what we recognized as the "radical chastity" of the protagonist's daughter. In Act 4, Marina is displaced from her family and country, and sold into sexual slavery at a brothel in Mytilene. Here she militantly refuses sex. The brothel's doorkeeper, Bolt, and her own husband-in-waiting, Lysimachus, regard Marina's "peevish chastity" (4.5.127) as a counter to be bartered, but Marina remains assertively and

[1] John the Blind of Audelay, *Poems and Carols*, ed. Susanna Fein (Medieval Institute Publications, 2009), Carol 21; see Karen Dodson, "The Price of Virtue for the Medieval Woman: Chastity and the Crucible of the Virgin," *English Studies* 99. 6 (2018), 596.

uncompromisingly virginal.[2] When the men complain about the brothel's other "pitifully sodden" (4.2.17) whores, Marina condemns their degradation with prophetic rage. Her invective astonishes the men around her, including Lysimachus, and abruptly converts them into chaste uprightness: "Come, I am for no more bawdy houses. Shall's go hear the vestals sing?" (4.5.6–7). Marina acts in this scene like "a piece of virtue" (4.5.116), shot through with chaste goodness which unfurls spectacularly among others. As the second gentleman claims, "I'll do anything now that is virtuous" (4.5.8). But Marina's chastity takes no familiar form.Rather than the withdrawal and self-negation implied by longstanding patterns of obedience to a patriarchal frame, Marina's chastity emerges instead as a specifically female and singularly effective kind of agency. Her miraculous victory over sexual slavery and predation makes her "the absolute Marina" (4.0.31) – absolutely desirable, absolutely chaste, absolutely virtuous. Male vice leaves no taint upon her.[3]

Marina turns away from sex, but her chastity is powerful also for its resolute refusal of patriarchy. We sensed in the extremity of Marina's actions something in keeping with Martha Nussbaum's account of "vertue" which, by retaining the word's older form, retains its originary sense of "turning," or converting.[4] Marina turns away from her immediate grievous predicament, but also turns (and turns others) away from violence and coercion more generally. But the scene in the brothel is also a pivotal moment in the play that steers the action back into the conventional miracle of romance. So can Marina's chastity really be understood as a version of feminine empowerment – even in a play that Shakespeare co-created with Wilkins whose life was characterized, records confirm, by a particularly unscrupulous and violent strain of misogyny?[5] Marina's sexual unavailability seems more resistant to feminism than, say, Isabella's in *Measure for Measure*. And she is different from more familiar early modern embodiments of chastity – the ethereal majesty of *The Faerie Queene*'s Belphoebe, for example, or the specifically martial virtue of Spenser's Amazonian knight of chastity, Britomart.[6] Marina's chastity does not take the form

[2] All quotations refer to Suzanne Gossett's edition of *Pericles* (Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2004).

[3] For an existentially and ethically powerful account of what happens to Marina, see Simon Palfrey, "The Rape of Marina," in *Shakespeare's Possible Worlds* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 297–316.

[4] See the introduction to the current volume.

[5] On Wilkins's police record, and his involvement with the sex trade, see Charles Nicholl, *The Lodger: Shakespeare on Silver Street* (Allen Lane, 2007), 204.

[6] See Joanna Thompson, *The Character of Britomart in Spenser's 'The Faerie Queene'* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), 19–60.

of majesty or queenliness. She is an ordinary girl who refuses altogether the "deeds of darkness" (4.5.37), removing herself in almost Dickensian fashion from the vice-ridden world into needlework and other "feminine" accomplishments: she can "sing, weave, sew and dance, / With other virtues" (4.5.186–187).[7] And yet, Marina is more astringent than Dickens's sweeter, smaller heroines; she has a touch of Cordelia's otherworldly coolness. Marina powerfully and, again and again, triumphantly refuses to play the game where women are sold to men.

This chapter begins by setting out a new interpretation of *Pericles* which identifies a teleology of chastity involving the play's central family unit (Pericles, Thaisa, Marina). We read *Pericles* as a study of the arduousness – as well as the defiance and occasional exaltation – involved in leading a chaste life. The chapter goes on to explain how this close reading developed into a collaborative research project and the creation of *Marina*, a new play for our time. Working with a blend of critical, creative, and practice-based approaches, our aim has been to recover *Pericles's* interest in chaste virtue for our own lived realities, opening up a constellation of important issues today.

*

The tutelary goddess of *Pericles* is Diana, the Greek deity of chastity, whose temple provides the setting for the play's climactic recognition scene. Here Pericles attests that Marina continues to wear Diana's "silver livery" (5.3.7). The play's central family unit have throughout the preceding events all demonstrated themselves devout followers. Pericles invokes "bright Diana" when he leaves Marina with Cleon and Dionyza, promising eerily that his own hair will remain "unscissored" (3.3.29–30) until she marries, and Gower attests to Marina's "rich and constant" (4.0.28) devotion to Diana while she remains at Tarsus. Thaisa's first words upon wakening at Ephesus are "O dear Diana, where am I?" (3.2.104), and Marina makes a similar invocation in the brothel: "Untried I still my virgin knot will keep./ Diana, aid my purpose!" (4.2.139–140). Reunited later with Thaisa, Pericles's thoughts are still with "Immortal Dian" (5.3.37). Throughout the play, Diana – and chastity – are linked with constancy, fortitude, self-knowledge, and redemption.[8] Chaste virtue has a powerful capacity, it seems, to disclose the truth to those who embrace it.

[7] Julia Reinhard Lupton discuses Marina's "affective labor" in *Shakespeare Dwelling: Designs for the Theater of Life* (University of Chicago Press, 2018), 117–152.

[8] For a discussion of the play's "conflicting visions of Diana," see Caroline Bicks, "Backsliding at Ephesus: Shakespeare's Diana and the Churching of Women," in *Pericles: Critical Essays,* ed. David Skeele (Routledge, 2009), 205–227 (209). See also Gossett's account of these discrepancies (117–121).

Diana's prominence makes sense in the light of the play's wider interest in chastity's ability to compensate for an original sexual taint. The play begins with a sex trauma in the city of Antioch in ancient Syria. Wooing the daughter of Antioch, Pericles is dismayed to uncover her incestuous relationship with her father. In the context of a play focused on chastity, it seems important to note that "incest" shares with "unchaste" the Latin root *castus*, meaning chaste or pure. Even as Pericles is seeking marriage, he is equally seeking chaste withdrawal. He recognizes that entering into sexuality involves the loss of pristine wholeness when he calls Antiochus's daughter, his hoped-for bride, a "glorious casket stored with ill" (1.1.78). It seems chaste perfectibility waits exclusively for an exceptional man, and Gower has indeed already intimated as much in his earlier description of Antioch's daughter as the "bad child" (1.0.27) who acquiesces to her father's predation. Pericles determinedly seals himself away from the dirty sex revealed by Antioch – but his chastity, far from looking virtuous, actually turns out to be a stale compromise. By the start of the second scene, he is already beset by his "sad companion, dull-eyed melancholy" (1.2.2), and the play will go on to map Pericles's psychosexual displacement onto a series of literal displacements caused by war, terror, famine, and atrocity.

Pericles's tentativeness and damaged fragility are a moving, truthful response to his traumatic initiation into sex. And yet he must somehow "repair" himself (2.1.118) in order to woo his true love, Thaisa. This wooing again, however, proves determinedly, indeed perversely chaste. The sea offers Pericles a rusty suit of armor from what he bluntly calls his "dead father" (2.1.120), and Pericles enters his second courtship quite literally "clothed in steel" (2.1.150). He is untouchable, pleasureless, closed off from intercourse with the world. Later Pericles will beg Neptune to tame the wild surges of the wind and sea, and to "bind them in brass" (3.1.3), but already his own steel garment resembles an impregnable carapace against desire. It has much in common, visually and emblematically, with his summative descent into prostrate self-neglect. This is the legacy of Antioch: a humiliating form of male chastity as self-chastisement for which Pericles even expresses gratitude: "Antiochus, I thank thee, who hath taught / My frail mortality to know itself" (1.1.42–43). Pericles bears his chastity painfully, like a curse, expressing the human fear of sexuality as male tragedy.

The play also explores and expresses the virtue of chastity through Thaisa. Her father, Simonides, claims that she too has withdrawn into a state of chaste self-cancellation. When the second knight asks after the tournament at Pentapolis whether he can "get access to her," Simonides assures him that his daughter "hath so strictly tied / Her to her chamber that 'tis

impossible." Thaisa has seemingly taken a solemn vow of chastity, "And on her virgin honour will not break it" (2.5.7–12). In fact she has been remarkably sexually avid in her intention to marry Pericles: "All viands that I eat do seem unsavoury, / Wishing him my meat" (2.3.30–31). But Simonides retains aggressive custodianship of his daughter's virginity, and it is he who brings the final dance to a close – "Unclasp, unclasp!" (2.3.103) – ushering Pericles towards a bedroom next to his own. And while the party sleeps, the unchaste Antioch and his daughter are reduced to untouchable filth: "A fire from heaven came and shrivelled up / Their bodies" (2.4.9–10). In no way has Pericles tried to woo Thaisa, and he exhorts her the following morning to reassure her father that he has remained scrupulously chaste (2.5.65–68).

Pericles is therefore "frighted" (5.3.3) into chastity by two fathers (Antioch, Simonides) as well as being bound in steel by his own. It hardly seems virtuous, or a recipe for a happy, healthy marriage – which is why his eventual bride Thaisa's death-in-life at sea seems strangely inevitable, making sense of the otherwise puzzling fact that Pericles carries in his boat her coffin, all "caulked and bitumed ready" (3.1.70). Now Thaisa really does withdraw from the world, sealed up and flung into the "humming water" (3.1.63) – a sacrifice, Pericles tells himself, to appease the storm which greets Marina's birth. She revives only when she is removed altogether from her husband and recreated as a votaress to Diana: "A vestal livery will I take me to / And never more have joy" (3.4.9–10). Thaisa is therefore three times placed by men into chaste spaces: by Simonides, at the tournament; by Pericles, into the sealed coffin; and by Cerimon, into Diana's temple. Her service to Diana seems designed to compensate for Pericles's original trauma at Antioch and his subsequent digging-in against the shame of sex. Here *Pericles* dramatizes the particularly complex and intimate forms of psychosexual displacement that can befall women, and recognizes chaste virtue as a burden which women must fulfill on behalf of men.

But the play reserves its most thoroughgoing exploration of chastity for Marina – who, unlike Pericles and Thaisa, does not or cannot take refuge from sex. Whereas Pericles is shocked into chaste withdrawal, and Thaisa is withdrawn by others, Marina seems determined to "persever in that clear way" (4.5.110). The model of chaste virtue she proposes is quite different from renunciation or traumatized self-shrouding, and puts into practice a kind of vertue-in-resistance which seems capable of reversing the play's conscious or unconscious patriarchal purpose. Through Marina, chastity becomes a way of rejecting, absolutely, the way things are. As she

says to the men who haunt the brothel, "Do anything but this thou dost" (4.5.177). It is Marina who follows through on chastity's teleological promise, transforming sexual withdrawal into a powerful and generative way of saying "no" to worldly vice. Marina's chastity indeed temporarily exceeds the patriarchal limits of the play. She will later be displaced from herself once more in the closing scene in order to save her father, redeeming him and cleansing the sins of the world. Pericles's revealing phrasing, in the re-union scene, admits a sense of patriarchal guilt: "O, come, be buried / A second time within these arms" (5.3.43–44). Nevertheless Marina's chastity cannot so easily be buried, dismissed, or assimilated. On the contrary it seems to issue a direct challenge to our own complicity in the less than ideal forms of life we inherit. For this reason it deserves to be recognized as a thoroughly modern virtue, and to be explored with our most serious and compassionate attention.

The Marina Project took its cue from this interpretation of *Pericles* as a portrait of a family defined by the obligations, displacements, and burdens of chastity. Reconsidering the play from Marina's point of view, we began to see her refusal as a remarkably dynamic, vigorous, and direct kind of action, and a spirited rejection of the given forms of life and love. Marina's "radical chastity" had come into focus as a progressive, virtuous form of resistance. We set out to write a new piece of theatre focused on female perspective and agency which could investigate chaste virtue as an existential and spiritual challenge to the current order. We wanted Marina's subversive energy to grow to its natural conclusion, and the radical, unfulfilled promise of *Pericles* belatedly to be fulfilled within our own present context. Inspired by the play's expansive geopolitical landscape across Syria and the Mediterranean, we began to explore how diverse political, cultural, and social contexts have converged, through history, to create today's interpretive frameworks for understanding chaste virtue. We remained interested in chastity as a sign of difference in the western world, but also, potentially, as a source of solidarity and cross-cultural exchange. As a deliberate rebuttal of the contemporary political situation, albeit one with complex roots in tangled political and cultural circumstances, radical chastity began to emerge as a common provocation capable of cutting across the allegiances that separate people along racial, cultural, and religious lines.

With all of this in mind, we tried to inhabit as fully as possible the predicaments dramatized in Shakespeare and Wilkins's original play, fusing traditional academic epistemology with the more experimental approaches offered by practice-based theatre. Moving between literary criticism and new creation, and drawing insights from a series of workshops, which

brought academics, artists and theatre practitioners into conversation, we were ready to create a new work of art.[9] Our aim was to find a dramaturgical practice capable of bringing literature and Shakespeare to bear on trenchant social structures, particularly those surrounding gender and sexuality; and, at the same time, to write a dramatically convincing piece of theatre that might reanimate the virtue of chastity in and for the present. We wanted in particular to recognize the world's continuing investment in chastity, not least within the family, where men and women, husbands and wives, sons and daughters, seek authentic self-expression, self-reliance, and dignity. We hoped to lay bare individual life stories with clarity and empathy, avoiding the forms of detachment that sometimes characterize academic responses to literary works from the distant past.

Our new play, *Marina*, is set in contemporary Sparkhill, an inner-city, multicultural, district of Birmingham. The action takes place over twenty-four hours in a supermarket, Quick & Easy on Narrow Way, starting first thing on Christmas Eve. Quick & Easy is owned by a white-British man, Ant, who lives above the store with his Greek Cypriot wife, Philly, and daughter, Marina. Ant embodies the predatory "league of fathers" (Antioch, Simonides) we found in Shakespeare's original. His unremarkable, faded supermarket has been struggling under the shadow of a food hygiene contravention found to originate in one of the store's meat deep freezers. At the beginning of the play, Ant resolves to give things one last shot with an ambitious Christmas sale. He enlists the help of Leila, a British-born Muslim who has been working for years at Quick & Easy as a temp, and Mike, the supermarket's shelf-stacker. Ant's determination to shift all of his Christmas stock before sundown triggers a series of unrealistic and disturbing sales tactics in which his staff become unwilling accomplices. It emerges that Ant has another incentive to make quick money: the supermarket is embroiled in a planning dispute dating back to 1987 when Ant surreptitiously folded part of the premises of the mosque next door into the supermarket's backroom.

While Ant keeps trying to turn a profit at the expense of others, those around him begin to pull away, one by one, seeking different forms of chastity. Ant's wife, Philly, has found herself bound into sexual servitude. Desperate to make money in order to build a new life away from Ant and Birmingham, she sells sex in a makeshift brothel set up in the disputed

[9] For a longer discussion of this initial process, see our chapter on 'The *Marina* Project," in *New Places: Shakespeare and Civic Creativity,* eds. Paul Edmondson and Ewan Fernie (Bloomsbury Arden, 2018), 109–125.

backroom. One of her clients is Mike, whose visits are financed by the money he regularly steals from the supermarket tills. Scared and confused by these encounters, in which Philly is elaborately costumed as a bird, Mike develops a profound interest in Islam, particularly its redemptive understanding of chastity. Mike is counselled by a compassionate imam from the mosque to whom he reveals his sense of guilt, and his desire for Marina and the virtue he sees expressed in her. He asks the imam to bless him, to re-name him Mohammed, and to accept him into the Muslim faith. Matters come to a head when a homeless man, Perry, arrives unexpectedly at the supermarket in an abject state of self-cancellation to reveal himself as Ant's former business partner and Philly's former lover. Confronting Ant, he attempts to reclaim what he considers his own – including paternity of Marina. Incensed by this, and by the unfavorable outcome of the planning application, Ant accuses Perry of ruining both Quick & Easy and his wife.

In different ways, the play's three men (Ant, Mike, Perry) all invest in the shop's dirty money, and all attempt to define and possess Marina as daughter or lover. For her part, Marina offers at the play's conclusion an unexampled version of chaste resistance capable of rising from the tangled, broken state of things. Her radical chastity is revealed through her strength to contest the ways in which religion and family define relations between men and women, and her corresponding defiance of the cruelty and coercion, the shame and the fear, that such intimate direction gives rise to. Marina redistributes what's left of the shop's wealth, refusing the versions of the future that Ant, Mike and Perry have set out before her. She flings open the door of the backroom to the mosque next door, embracing the free flow of people, resources and ideas. As Quick & Easy closes for good on Christmas morning, relinquishing its stock and space back into the hands of those who need it most, Marina uncovers a better world: on the other side of the supermarket, the other side of the mosque, the other side of Christmas.

Marina therefore attempts to consider chastity in its widest possible applications, taking in economic, political, and spiritual concerns as well as intimate, bodily forms of self-definition and self-expression. Chastity involves the body and psyche in our play, but also extends to the collective imagination and to the world at large. For our reinvented Marina, chastity has nothing to do with strictness or withdrawal. Instead it is a form of creative hope, and an alternative way of life, realized through the convictions of an unremarkable young woman in unremarkable circumstances. Chastity's redemptive power is not confined here to the worlds of fairytale

or romance, but becomes a mode of action in the real, the tarnished and incomplete world. To do this, however, it must break with our world's old terms, especially its damaged and damaging ways of defining – through chastity – relationships between fathers and daughters, or husbands and wives. Like other forms of virtue, chastity begins as an aspiration towards goodness – but this particular version of goodness, as Shakespeare and Wilkins's original play amply demonstrates, tends to cleave in the direction of some people's interests at the expense of others'. As Marina reminds her silent, unresponsive and stubbornly chaste father, towards the end of *Pericles*,

> She speaks,
> My lord, that may be hath endured a grief
> Might equal yours, if both were justly weighed. (5.1.77–79)

Our play aims equally and justly to weigh Marina's grief, and to follow through on her capacity to act decisively to change her circumstances and those of others. *Marina* dramatizes chastity in the stream of life as it is lived, in ordinary places, ordinary streets, and ordinary social connections. Through the resources of drama itself, where virtue takes the form of recognizable character, chastity emerges something to do and to be, and chimes with a host of more-or-less nameable forms of human flourishing.