

# [Throughout from lifelong partnerships to a promise of](https://assignbuster.com/throughout-from-lifelong-partnerships-to-a-promise-of/)

Throughout the history of civilization, most adult humans have foundthat pairing off is the best way to start and raise a family.

Everyculture has its own way of treating these pairings – from lifelongpartnerships to a promise of just a few years. Some have been made forlove and some for money. In some relationships, both partners are expectedto remain faithful, in others only one is allowed to stray, and sometimesboth members are given a free rein.

A lot of this is decided by economicfactors and the amount of stress that each culture puts on the subject ofadultery. During the seventeenth century, the British had a very uniqueway of looking at adultery that had little to do with love and much to dowith money. By looking at Thomas Middleton’s A Chaste Maid in Cheapsideand several documents from the seventeenth century, one can see whocheated, why they cheated, and some of the possible consequences ofadultery. There are some instincts that people have developed over millennia ofhunting and gathering that are little inconvenient in modern society.

Oneof those instincts is the desire to procreate – a lot. That is the majorreason why men find it so desirable to cheat on their wives. For a man, itis possible to create a child every time he has sex with a woman as long asit’s a different woman each time. In early civilizations, men had morestatus if they could provide for more women and their children. Ratherlike a pride of lions, in many early societies, there were a few men whowere in charge of the village or community, and they had access to all thewomen and fathered all the children. In return for being the fathers ofthe next generation, they had to hunt and kill to provide for theirchildren and women (Fisher 87-88). This desire for children hadn’t diminished by thetimetheseventeenth century rolled around.

In early modern England, men were veryconcerned about fathering children and providing them with an inheritance. In A Chaste Maid in Cheapside, Sir Walter Whorehound and Sir Oliver Kix areboth noblemen who want to have children. Sir Walter keeps the Allwits sothat he may sleep with Mrs. Allwit. Mr.

Allwit helps raise the childrenthat his wife has with Sir Walter in exchange for money and goods. SirWalter is actually very protective and jealous of Mrs. Allwit’s affections. He even asks Mr. Allwit if he “…were once offering to go to / bed to her(Middleton I.

ii. 105-6)” in a backwards representation of a man’s jealousyconcerning his wife. To Sir Walter, it is very important that he knows thechildren are his. He even has a servant that watches the Allwit’s house tomake sure Mr. Allwit never sleeps with his wife.

Sir Oliver and his wife, Lady Kix, are in a different situation. They have money and want to have children. Unfortunately for them, SirOliver is sterile, though he blames the lack of children on Lady Kix. Theyhear of Touchwood Senior’s abundance of children and Sir Oliver actuallypays Touchwood four hundred pounds to get Lady Kix pregnant. However, hedoesn’t know that this means Lady Kix will be sleeping with Touchwood. SirOliver thinks that Touchwood will be giving her a potion to drink. Thisemphasis on the importance of children in a marriage is one of the reasonswhy women committed adultery in the seventeenth century. They knew thatthey had to have children to make their husbands happy, so if they couldn’thave children with their husbands, they could try with other men.

But women can’t get pregnant every time they have sex with a man. They are only fertile at certain times of the month and it takes ninemonths to carry the child, plus at least a few months between children. Sowhy else would women commit adultery? One answer is simply for variety. Women in the seventeenth century, especially among the wealthier classes, were married off at a young age, often to men old enough to be theirfathers or to complete strangers. More often than not, there was little inthe way of affection or pleasure in the marriage, it was purely forconvenience and money. Because of this, many women sought affection fromother men and became their lovers. In the Allwit’s case, Mrs.

Allwit sleeps with Sir Walter forsecurity. Her husband doesn’t provide for her and the family, so she haschildren with Sir Walter to provide for them. Women of the lower classoften found prostitution to be the best career for themselves, even if theywere married. As Helen Fisher says in Anatomy of Love, “.

.. when you havemany lovers, one brings you something, and another brings you somethingelse (Fisher 96). Sleeping with many men can provide a very steady andsubstantial income for a woman who has no support from her husband.

The reasons for adultery not only vary between the sexes, but alsobetween the classes. Noblemen especially were inclined to cheat on theirwives. Why? Because they could get away with it. As Bill Maher once saidin a comedy special, “ Men are as loyal as their options.

“ While this maynot be the most optimistic view of men, it does seem to be especially trueamong the nobility in seventeenth century England. King Charles II keptseveral mistresses though out his life, even though he was married. One ofthem, Nell Gwynne, was said to have “…had a generous and tender heart, frequently exerting her influence with the King (to whom she was not onlysincerely attached but also consistently faithful) for good and worthyobjects (Dasent 17).” Perhaps Charles was also searching for affectionoutside of his arranged marriage when he took Nell as his mistress.

Noble women were less likely to cheat mostly because of the lack ofopportunity. They were guarded and watchedthroughchildhoodandadolescence by their parents, then held captive by their husbands untilthey were too old to have children or the husband died. Only widows hadsomething resembling sexual freedom. Without a husband or father acting asmale guardian, a wealthy widow had the ability and the means to keep alover and face none of the consequences that a married woman would have toconfront. Among the lower classes, adultery wasn’t quite such a big deal. Theydidn’t have the vast estates or the money to pass along to their children, so being faithful wasn’t so vital to them.

Although, this does not meanthat all working class citizens wanted their spouses to cheat. It wassimply something that happened and was dealt with quietly by the family. Many times, if a married woman worked in the household of a wealthierfamily, she could earn extra money or gifts by sleeping with her employer. Common people took a very common sense view towards cheating and did notoften react too negatively when it happened. A lot of the regulations on sexual behavior in seventeenth centuryEngland very closely resemble the early Jewish laws.

These laws statedthat a woman must be a virgin on her wedding night and she must remainfaithful to her husband for the rest of her life. A married man, however, could have sex with concubines, prostitutes, servants and widows if hewanted. The only women that a married man was not allowed to sleep withwere married women (Fisher 81).

This is also similar to the ancient Greektraditions regarding marriage and sexuality. Well-bred Greek girls weremarried in their early teens to men roughly twice their age and they had toremain faithful. The men, like the Jews, could sleep with anyone theywanted except another man’s wife (Fisher 82). In a religious sense, the people of the seventeenth century didbelieve that adultery was a major sin. Some of them even believed thatadultery could lead to more violent crimes and confusion among the people(Bloody 5). This idea that adultery is a terrible crime goes back to theBiblical story of David. In Francis Mason’s sermon on adultery, he saysDavid committed “.

.. that heinous sin of adultery, and secondly those othersins which he committed while he went about to hide and cloake his adultery(Mason 3).” To Mason and many other preachers, it was incredibly importantthat their parishioners recognize that adultery isn’t just a sin againstother people, it’s a sin against God (Mason 2). But if adultery is a sin against God, then shouldn’t the church dealwith these sinners as they do with others (D. T. 10)? It would certainlymake sense on some levels to leave the punishment of adulterers to thechurch since they hold it as such a terrible crime. However, many realizedthat it would be difficult to discover or prove adultery without aconfession or an eyewitness (D.

T. 10). In some cases however, adultery canaffect the legal status of a person. If a woman bears a child that is nother husband’s, then that child can be denied any inheritance.

Also, thenoblemen of England felt that they should not have to raise and support theillegitimate children of their wives and they definitely shouldn’t have topass on their wealth to sons who weren’t truly theirs. Because of these beliefs, the penalties for people caught committingadultery were extremely harsh. In 1650 Parliament actually passed a lawthat stated:”…

And be it further enacted…that in case any married womanshall..

. be carnally known by any man (other than her husband, exceptin cases of ravishment) and of such offense or offenses shall beconvicted as aforesaid by confession otherwise..

. and isherebyadjudged felony, and…shall suffer death as in case of felony withoutbenefit of clergy (England 828).

“ For men, the punishment was just as harsh, but only if they were caughtsleeping with a married woman (England 828). Any other extra-maritalaffairs were simply ignored as unimportant. What’s unusual and unfairabout all of this is that a woman can be put to death for sleeping withanyone other than her husband, but other than saying men are not allowed tosleep with other men’s wives, this Act makes no mention of a married manand his lovers. One example of this law against adulteress women occurred late in theseventeenth century.

The Duke of Norfolk’s wife, Mary, was accused ofadultery and brought before certain members of Parliament to plead hercase. The Duke and Duchess both brought forth a series of witnessesincluding servants and friends. Several of the Duke’s witnesses said theysaw the Duchess in her chambers and undressed while another man was there. They did eventually find her guilty of adultery, but rather than have herexecuted, the members of Parliament let the Duke have a divorce (Norfolk 1-22). So why would anyone confess to adultery when it’s possible that itwill lead to death? The vast majority of people who would cheat on theirspouses are not the sort of people who feel bad enough about it afterwardto ask Parliament to cut off their heads, so it is highly doubtful thatmany people ever confessed after that particular law was passed. Male or female, rich or poor, it seems that everyone in theseventeenth century had a reason to cheat on his or her spouse.

Thecharacters in Middleton’s A Chaste Maid in Cheapside represent all sides ofthis bizarre web of adulterers and their partners in crime. Men like SirWalter did it to have more children or just for fun. Women like the WelshGentlewoman wanted affection and security. Rich people did it because itwas entertaining and poor people did it for money. Even facing the sort ofconsequences of these actions, many men and quite a few women wereunfaithful to their spouses. There were religious beliefs and laws thatthey ignored for the sake of physical pleasure and desire.

Perhaps thereason humans have such a high opinion of fidelity is because it is sodifficult for them to achieve it.