

Throughout from
lifelong partnerships
to a promise of



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

Every culture has its own way of treating these pairings - from lifelong partnerships to a promise of just a few years. Some have been made for love and some for money. In some relationships, both partners are expected to remain faithful, in others only one is allowed to stray, and sometimes both members are given a free rein.

A lot of this is decided by economic factors and the amount of stress that each culture puts on the subject of adultery. During the seventeenth century, the British had a very unique way of looking at adultery that had little to do with love and much to do with money. By looking at Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* and several documents from the seventeenth century, one can see who cheated, why they cheated, and some of the possible consequences of adultery. There are some instincts that people have developed over millennia of hunting and gathering that are little inconvenient in modern society.

One of those instincts is the desire to procreate - a lot. That is the major reason why men find it so desirable to cheat on their wives. For a man, it is possible to create a child every time he has sex with a woman as long as it's a different woman each time. In early civilizations, men had more status if they could provide for more women and their children. Rather like a pride of lions, in many early societies, there were a few men who were in charge of the village or community, and they had access to all the women and fathered all the children. In return for being the fathers of the

next generation, they had to hunt and kill to provide for their children and women (Fisher 87-88). This desire for children hadn't diminished by the time the seventeenth century rolled around.

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

Allwit helps raise the children that his wife has with Sir Walter in exchange for money and goods. Sir Walter 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 jealousy concerning his wife. To Sir Walter, it is very important that he knows the children are his. He even has a servant that watches the Allwit's house to make 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, Sir Oliver is sterile, though he blames the lack of children on Lady Kix. They hear of Touchwood Senior's abundance of children and Sir Oliver actually pays Touchwood four hundred pounds to get Lady Kix pregnant. However, he doesn't know that this means Lady Kix will be sleeping with Touchwood. Sir Oliver thinks that Touchwood will be giving her a potion to drink. This emphasis on the

importance of children in a marriage is one of the reasons why women
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committed adultery in the seventeenth century. They knew that they had to have children to make their husbands happy, so if they couldn't have 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 nine months to carry the child, plus at least a few months between children. So why 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 their fathers or to complete strangers. More often than not, there was little in the way of affection or pleasure in the marriage, it was purely for convenience and money. Because of this, many women sought affection from other men and became their lovers. In the Allwit's case, Mrs.

Allwit sleeps with Sir Walter for security. Her husband doesn't provide for her and the family, so she has children with Sir Walter to provide for them.

Women of the lower class often found prostitution to be the best career for themselves, even if they were married. As Helen Fisher says in *Anatomy of Love*, “

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

The reasons for adultery not only vary between the sexes, but also between the classes. Noblemen especially were inclined to cheat on their wives. Why? <https://assignbuster.com/throughout-from-lifelong-partnerships-to-a-promise-of/>

Because they could get away with it. As Bill Maher once said in a comedy special, "Men are as loyal as their options."

"While this may not be the most optimistic view of men, it does seem to be especially true among the nobility in seventeenth century England. King Charles II kept several mistresses throughout his life, even though he was married. One of them, Nell Gwynne, was said to have "...had a generous and tender heart, frequently exerting her influence with the King (to whom she was not only sincerely attached but also consistently faithful) for good and worthy objects (Darent 17)." Perhaps Charles was also searching for affection outside of his arranged marriage when he took Nell as his mistress.

Noble women were less likely to cheat mostly because of the lack of opportunity. They were guarded and watched through childhood and adolescence by their parents, then held captive by their husbands until they were too old to have children or the husband died. Only widows had something resembling sexual freedom. Without a husband or father acting as a male guardian, a wealthy widow had the ability and the means to keep a lover and face none of the consequences that a married woman would have to confront. Among the lower classes, adultery wasn't quite such a big deal. They didn'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 mean that all working class citizens wanted their spouses to cheat. It was simply something that happened and was dealt with quietly by the family. Many times, if a married woman worked in the household of a wealthier family, she could earn extra money or gifts by

sleeping with her employer. Common people took a very common sense view towards cheating and did not often react too negatively when it happened. A lot of the regulations on sexual behavior in seventeenth century England very closely resemble the early Jewish laws.

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

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

.. that heinous sin of adultery, and secondly those other sins which he committed while he went about to hide and cloake his adultery (Mason 3).”

To Mason and many other preachers, it was incredibly important that their parishioners recognize that adultery isn't just a sin against other people, it's a sin against God (Mason 2). But if adultery is a sin against God, then shouldn't the church deal with these sinners as they do with others (D. T. 10)? It would

certainly make sense on some levels to leave the punishment of adulterers to the church since they hold it as such a terrible crime. However, many realized that it would be difficult to discover or prove adultery without a confession or an eyewitness (D.

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

Also, the noblemen of England felt that they should not have to raise and support the illegitimate children of their wives and they definitely shouldn't have to pass on their wealth to sons who weren't truly theirs. Because of these beliefs, the penalties for people caught committing adultery were extremely harsh. In 1650 Parliament actually passed a law that stated: "...

And be it further enacted...that in case any married woman shall..

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

. and is hereby adjudged felony, and...shall suffer death as in case of felony without benefit of clergy (England 1650).

" For men, the punishment was just as harsh, but only if they were caught sleeping with a married woman (England 1650). Any other extra-marital affairs were simply ignored as unimportant. What's unusual and unfair about all of this is that a woman can be put to death for sleeping with anyone other than her husband, but other than saying men are not
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allowed to sleep with other men's wives, this Act makes no mention of a married man and his lovers. One example of this law against adulteress women occurred late in the seventeenth century.

The Duke of Norfolk's wife, Mary, was accused of adultery and brought before certain members of Parliament to plead her case. The Duke and Duchess both brought forth a series of witnesses including servants and friends. Several of the Duke's witnesses said they saw the Duchess in her chambers and undressed while another man was there. They did eventually find her guilty of adultery, but rather than have her executed, 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 it will lead to death? The vast majority of people who would cheat on their spouses are not the sort of people who feel bad enough about it afterward to ask Parliament to cut off their heads, so it is highly doubtful that many people ever confessed after that particular law was passed. Male or female, rich or poor, it seems that everyone in the seventeenth century had a reason to cheat on his or her spouse.

The characters in Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* represent all sides of this bizarre web of adulterers and their partners in crime. Men like Sir Walter did it to have more children or just for fun. Women like the Welsh Gentlewoman wanted affection and security. Rich people did it because it was entertaining and poor people did it for money. Even facing the sort of consequences of these actions, many men and quite a few women were unfaithful to their spouses. There were religious beliefs and laws that they ignored for the sake of physical pleasure and desire.

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Perhaps the reason humans have such a high opinion of fidelity is because it is so difficult for them to achieve it.