The double standard of sexual morality has been a key concept in social and cultural history since Sir Keith Thomas published his pioneering essay in 1959. Subsequent research has served to confirm and elaborate his central thesis: that female sexuality was regarded (by men) as a male possession, so that sexual immorality in women was regarded as a heinous fault while male lapses might be regarded as relatively trivial. Though Thomas and later Lawrence Stone noted that the double standard was less pronounced among the respectable middling classes and was challenged by puritan writers, recent research in the early modern period has found it pervasive among the ‘middling sort’ too. Laura Gowing, in her work on early modern London, has developed Thomas’s model of a gendered morality by showing how women themselves were active agents in sustaining and enforcing a concept of female honour in which sexual honesty was central. Men and women lived by different moral codes, their sexual behaviour ‘incommensurably different’ in its significance. Thus, it was quite common for a man to brand a female adversary not simply a whore, but his whore, confident that she alone would be damaged by his ‘revelation’. Women as well as men recognized sexual insults as by far the most effective weapon against other women, even in quarrels about wholly different issues. Gowing noted that there ‘was no way of calling a man a whore’ nor, she argued more contentiously, of ‘condemning his sexual promiscuity’. Men were most commonly abused as

‘knave’ and ‘rogues’, which had no necessary sexual import, or as ‘cuckolds’, which struck at them through the sexuality of their wives. As several historians have remarked, women were more likely than men to bring defamation suits before the church courts, and in London the imbalance became so pronounced that its consistory court has been described as a ‘women’s court’.

This article sets out to re-examine the significance of male sexual reputation among the ‘middling sorts’ and the ‘honest poor’ — a broad swathe of society. It argues that men’s anxiety over sexual reputation was more important than historians have generally assumed, and might provide women with a valuable means of redress or effective leverage in a variety of circumstances. The threat of exposure and possible prosecution could be a powerful weapon.

Male sexual culture in early modern England was complex and sometimes contradictory. It was quite common in largely male environments such as alehouses to find men boasting of their sexual conquests, real or imagined. Comparable boasts by women were exceedingly rare. But we need to place male boasting in context. Much of it belonged to the discourse of young, single men, servants and apprentices, describing their adventures with prostitutes and maidservants. Some claims reflected simply the fantasies of a repressed apprentice about his master’s wife or maids and, thus, helped to compensate for his social and sexual inferiority within the household. The London servant who took advantage of his employers’ absence in 1598 to lift their bedroom door off its hinges, in order to lie in their bed and romp with their maidservants, was realizing two very common fantasies simultaneously. There is very little evidence, however, that youthful braggarts wanted their alleged feats to become known beyond their own peer groups. There is also little evidence of older, married men indulging in

4 Gowing, Domestic Dangers, 62–4.
6 For an example, see Guildhall Library, London (hereafter GL), Bridewell Court Books, microfilm copies (hereafter BCB) 4, fo. 320r (folio numbers of these volumes are given where available; when they are missing or erratic, I have identified the reference by date). ‘Lewd’ women occasionally boasted of their readiness to lie with any man, or their ability to seduce other women’s husbands.
7 GL, BCB 4, fo. 27r.
similar discourse to any significant degree, and those who did were often viewed with repugnance. Male sexual values were related to age, and to marital and social status, and among the ‘middling sorts’ and ‘honest poor’ sexual reputation formed a significant component of male honour. Preachers and conduct-book writers insisted that adultery was a weighty sin in either sex, and that message appears to have been widely accepted by the end of the sixteenth century among respectable householders. The good husband was faithful to his wife and protected the virtue of his daughters and maidservants. He was betraying his moral responsibilities twice over if he fathered a child on one of his own servants and could expect considerable opprobrium from neighbours. The Essex minister and diarist, Ralph Josselin, noted in 1648 how a once-godly parishioner, accused of such a lapse, now ‘keepes out of mans sight in regard of the shame’. Such a reaction was by no means unusual. Some men fled to escape disgrace and, around 1570, we find one Leicestershire man even telling his wife, in distress, ‘that if it [his maid’s child] were fathered on him he would surely make away himselfe’. Respectable men, like respectable women, valued sexual ‘honesty’ as an intrinsic part of the ‘good name’ that gave them a sense of self-worth and a position of respect within their community. That made the common taunt of ‘whoremonger’ or ‘whoremaster’, used to denote male promiscuity, almost as damaging to men as ‘whore’ was to women, and many men were prepared to initiate defamation suits to silence their detractors and restore their good names.

Male (and female) plaintiffs in defamation causes were also very conscious, of course, that unpleasant consequences might follow from a reputation for promiscuity. Despite the double standard, men too were presented before the church courts and


9 Leicestershire Record Office, Wigston, Leics. (hereafter LRO), 1 D 41/4/65, Archdeaconry of Leicester Cause Papers; cf. 1 D 41/4, box 18/2, for a man who fled to Ireland after fathering a bastard child.

10 Laura Gowing’s conclusion that sexual defamation of men related to their wives’ behaviour, not their own, seems too extreme: Gowing, Domestic Dangers, 62. Both in London and the provinces it might relate to either or both: see my When Gossips Meet (forthcoming); also nn. 30, 98 below; see also Susan Dwyer Amussen, ‘“The Part of a Christian Man”: The Cultural Politics of Manhood in Early Modern England’, in Susan Dwyer Amussen and Mark A. Kishlansky (eds.), Political Culture and Cultural Politics in Early Modern Europe (Manchester, 1995), 218–20.
made to perform humiliating public penance. In bastardy cases, they might also be cited before the secular courts, leading to a whipping or, for the middling sorts, a substantial maintenance order. Sexual disgrace might also trigger considerable domestic upheaval. While some men carried on adulterous liaisons quite blatantly, others clearly felt deep shame when the facts emerged, especially if caught in flagrante inside the family home. In such circumstances disgrace might even bring with it a dramatic shift in the domestic balance of power. London artisans knew that adultery could end in a whipping, and that they might lie now at the mercy of a wronged and angry spouse. When a London garlick-man, William Mason, was discovered by his partner in bed with their maid in March 1607, he ‘did earnestly entreat his wife to be good to him and to conceal it and he would give her anything he had’. He had good reason to be nervous. Richard Hogge, a London haberdasher, begged his wife’s forgiveness when she discovered him in bed with their nurse one day in 1579, but she complained to neighbours and he was then prosecuted in Bridewell. Similarly, a brewer found by his wife in flagrante when she returned home unexpectedly was whipped along with his paramour. Though richer citizens faced no such dangers, Samuel Pepys was also mortified when his wife caught him with their maid, Deb, in 1668, recognizing at once the ‘political’ significance of the event and lamenting that she ‘is by this means likely for ever to have her hand over me, that I shall for ever be a slave to her’. As he feared, her threat to leave him or disgrace him publicly brought a major shift in the micropolitics of the household. The same image of domestic upheaval lay behind the threat of a London bawd who told a dissatisfied client in 1578 that unless he paid, ‘she woulde tell a foule tale to his wiffe that she woulde make it to hote for him to abide it’.

12 Thus, an Oxford man pleaded in 1663 that doing public penance for adultery with his maid would ‘breede great discontent and sorrow to his wife’: Oxfordshire Archives Office, Oxford, Oxford Diocesan Papers, c 4, Episcopal Act Book, fo. 122v.
13 GL, BCB 5, fo. 170v. Mason was said to be blind, which would also have weakened his position within the household.
16 GL, BCB 3, 2 July 1578.
For respectable householders, then, sexual reputation played an important part in maintaining moral, social and domestic position. It followed that male anxieties over sexual lapses, real or alleged, might provide opportunities which women could turn to their own advantage. This article explores a variety of contexts in which women made use of male sexual reputation for their own ends, across a spectrum which ranges from seeking redress for major wrongs through negotiation to manipulation and even extortion. The evidence is drawn primarily from the London Bridewell records and Old Bailey trial reports, supplemented by data from secular and ecclesiastical courts in the provinces. The Bridewell served as the city’s workhouse and its governors exercised a wide — if ill-defined — jurisdiction over vagrants, prostitutes, bastard-bearers, runaway servants and other petty offenders. Though no provincial court exercised moral policing on such a scale, and none generated such extensive records, it will become apparent that many of the patterns of behaviour revealed in the Bridewell proceedings were paralleled in other parts of the country. The evidence suggests that awareness of the double standard has in part impeded our understanding of power relations between the sexes. Fear of exposure or defamation could render respectable men vulnerable to wronged or calculating women and, while the sexes were never equally matched in the politics of sexual relations and reputation, it is wrong to see women as no more than passive and helpless victims. They were also agents: sometimes heroic, sometimes highly resourceful, at times cynical and shameless.

I

Courtship and marriage provided the most familiar context where women might seek to make use of male sexual honour or reputation to secure a particular goal. Most often they were trying to push or shame a reluctant partner into marriage. In some cases, this entailed blocking other plans he was making by revealing or even inventing damaging information about his personal circumstances. When Alice Fare became worried that her partner was secretly planning to marry another woman in 1604, she spread a report (which she later admitted was false) that he had already

married *her* privately three months earlier.\(^{18}\) A more common scenario was that of the pregnant woman trying desperately to regularize her position. When Blanche Samson, servant to a Westminster vintner in the 1630s, discovered that her master was planning to marry a gentlewoman with a dowry of £500, she called on the bride’s mother to announce that she was already pregnant by him: ‘in that regard he was no fit match for her daughter’. Her initiative succeeded: the marriage was called off and Blanche was later able to marry him herself.\(^ {19}\)

Among courting couples it was usual for a man to agree to marry if his partner found herself with child, and this mutual understanding lay behind the willingness of many young women to commence a full sexual relationship before the marriage ceremony. If the man proved unable or unwilling to honour his word, his partner faced a bleak future. A pregnant servant was likely to be turned away, destitute, to give birth wherever she could find shelter, and she faced a whipping, public humiliation (penance) imposed by the church court, or both. She was also pressed to name the father, who would then come under strong pressure himself from the local community and parish officials to marry her, or at least to provide maintenance for her infant. Some women were reluctant to identify the father, either from fear or misplaced loyalty, but others were active agents rather than victims in this process, taking steps to publicize their plight and maximize pressure on the men involved. In 1630, for example, Anne Gilbert, a Leicestershire servant, informed neighbours that her master was the father of her unborn child and was therefore ‘fit for no other woman but herself’.\(^ {20}\) Such a move was likely to trigger communal pressure on him, reinforced by the threat of prosecution should he refuse to marry her or provide maintenance. If the father obstinately denied all responsibility, the pregnant woman might treat her own appearance before the magistrates as an opportunity to bring further pressure to bear on him. The London Bridewell records contain many cases where a single mother claimed she had been seduced by a firm promise of marriage, whereupon the alleged father would be summoned and examined and, if he confirmed her account, the couple would be ordered to marry with speed. Some men who initially denied

\(^{18}\) GL, BCB 4, fo. 460r.

\(^{19}\) GL, MS 9583/1, fo. 67r, Churchwardens’ Presentments, 1610–40.

\(^{20}\) LRO, 1 D 41/4, box 8/129–30; cf. 1 D 41/4, box 55/187–95.
giving any promise of marriage eventually confessed under close examination and agreed to marry; and, occasionally, the governors would order a man to marry despite his persistent denials, if the woman had convinced them that her version of events represented the truth.\textsuperscript{21} Far more often, in Bridewell as in the provinces, a man who admitted paternity but denied any promise of marriage would be ordered to pay maintenance. These episodes remind us that even single mothers might be able to play an active if limited role in shaping their own fate. And while it was often a parish official who reported them to the magistrate, some women turned to the courts voluntarily, ready to face punishment in order to trigger official pressure on the father when informal methods had failed.

Our sympathies lie rightly with the mother in such a predicament. But a woman’s unique ability to name the father of her child might also open up a wide range of opportunities for the unscrupulous. A few, knowing the real father was unable to marry or provide for them, set out quite shamelessly to trap some other man into marriage. Thus, when Elizabeth Lawrence, a Portsmouth servant, found herself pregnant in the summer of 1653, she attempted to find a husband by promptly sleeping with two other men, fathering her unborn child on both and claiming that they had each promised to marry her. One later declared in disgust that he ‘could find it in his heart to kick her’.\textsuperscript{22}

Pregnancy was by far the most pressing and common context in which women tried to push men into marriage, but by no means the only one. An ambitious maidservant might set out to seduce an unmarried employer (reversing the far more usual pattern), in the hope that affection or fear of exposure would then lead him to offer marriage. George Snape of Wapping, mariner, confessed penitently to a church court in 1617 that he had lain with his servant ‘by her allurements because she would have him to marry her’.\textsuperscript{23} John Sarton of Epping, also unmarried, recalled how as he lay in bed on 6 July that year his servant Anne Cole ‘cam starke naked into his Chamber’ and into his bed, promising that whatever he might do she would not become pregnant. He confessed that he had accepted the invitation,

\textsuperscript{21} See, for example, GL, BCB 1, fo. 88\textsuperscript{r}; BCB 2, fo. 250\textsuperscript{r}; BCB 3, fo. 18\textsuperscript{r}.

\textsuperscript{22} Portsmouth Record Series: Borough Sessions Papers, 1653–1688, ed. M. J. Hoad (London, 1971), 2, 150.

\textsuperscript{23} GL, MS 9064/17, fos. 209\textsuperscript{r}–210\textsuperscript{r}, Consistory Court Act Book.
though he subsequently turned her away to avoid further temptation. As these incidents suggest, sexual forwardness in a woman was very unlikely to secure a genuine offer of marriage, for few men felt any moral obligation towards a 'light' partner. Some women concluded that a combination of carrot and stick — sex plus the explicit threat of public disgrace — might provide more effective leverage, and there were several ingenious stratagems based on this formula. Some even succeeded. In 1607, a Bridewell witness recalled a widow describing her device to catch a new husband, one Fann: ‘she would plot to get the said Fann to marry her by this practice viz. That she would suffer him to lie with her and then the watch should come and take them in bed together, and then she would force him to marry her. The which practice she did put in use and so married him’. Fann, a barber, chose to limit the damage to his good name by legitimizing their union. His new wife had earlier given birth to a child by another man while still a widow, and presumably had decided that a bold strategy was worthwhile. It was unlikely to appeal to more respectable women, however, for it carried a high risk of disgrace and prosecution. Moreover, a woman of low standing would find it very hard to manipulate a respectable man into marriage under any circumstances. A London fishwife, Johane Crane, discovered as much in 1605 after a lengthy sexual relationship with a young bricklayer whom she had hoped to marry when his apprenticeship was completed. Johane had been prepared to rely on his promises, while reminding him from time to time of her power to harm him by disclosing their relationship. ‘Thomas’, she would say, ‘yf you will not marry me when you come out of your tyme I will make you lose your freedome’. In the event, Thomas not only reneged on his promises, but also ignored her desperate appeal when they met again in the street one day: ‘Thomas, you promised me marriage once and if the tyles and wyndow at your Masters could speake they could tell as much’. Her public reproach landed them both before the Bridewell court, where Thomas made light of his earlier promises and explained that he had never seriously contemplated marrying an oyster-seller.

Many of the attempts to shame men into marriage seem to have originated, as here, in consensual sex where there had been

24 Ibid., fo. 239r.
25 GL, BCB 5, fo. 239r.
26 Ibid., fo. 46v.
no clear understanding about future intentions, or where the man was going back on his promises. The women involved adopted a wide range of tactics. Thomas Barford, defendant in a Cambridgeshire matrimonial suit in 1569, described resentfully how the plaintiff had first lured him from the street into her house and her bed, and had then promptly informed neighbours and arranged for the banns to be read. That, at least, was his version of events. In other cases, the woman’s attempt to shame her faithless partner was reinforced by the possibility of a serious criminal charge. After Mary Strode of Compton Dunden (Som.) had accused her neighbour of ravishing her in 1658, a magistrate eventually concluded that it was ‘a very trepand in the wench and her father to get [him] to marry with her’, and noted that it had indeed succeeded. But efforts to force a man into marriage following consensual sex, whether by litigation or informal pressure, offered only a limited chance of success, unless the woman was pregnant, when she could hope to trigger the support of the local community. Though it is likely that behind Mrs Fann, the baker’s wife, there were others whose success, ipso facto, has left no trace in the historical record, their numbers are unlikely to be large.

When persuasion and pressure failed, a jilted woman might still make use of male sexual reputation as a means of retaliation, by spreading damaging stories about the man. When Joan Clarke of Littleport (Cambs.) was abandoned by a faithless suitor in 1633, she and her family took revenge by spreading obscene stories about him, so successfully that they forced the postponement of his marriage; he fought back by suing them for defamation. Daniel Defoe later described a woman of much higher social status waging a genteel but equally bitter campaign over the tea tables against a suitor who had jilted her to seek a richer prize; she made him odious to other women by depicting him as a disease-ridden rake, and invented heavy debts which so alarmed

27 Cambridge University Library, Ely Diocesan Records (hereafter CUL, EDR), D/2/7, fo. 79v, Examinations and Responses, 1565–72.
29 For other successes, see nn. 19, 28 above; Amussen, ‘Part of a Christian Man’, 218–19.
30 CUL, EDR, K/5/139, K/6/173.
his creditors that he was driven almost to bankruptcy. Elizabeth Lording, who discovered her intended husband skulking in the dark, half-dressed, in the house of a married neighbour in 1575, took a different form of revenge by reporting him to the Bridewell governors, who had him whipped. She promptly married another man.32

II

Marriage was not necessarily a woman’s primary consideration when she named the father of her child. Very often her most pressing concern was maintenance and security: how to subsist during pregnancy and lying-in; how to support her child; and how to escape punishment. Marriage to the father might not even be an option if he was already married or had fled or died. In all of these circumstances, and others, the woman might be tempted to name some other man as father of her child. While many of the men who launched defamation suits in paternity disputes were probably trying to lie their way out of trouble and responsibility, there is abundant evidence in court records that women did quite often name innocent men. Churchwardens were often reluctant to present men whose guilt they doubted. It was common practice to make a single mother reaffirm the father’s identity during labour, under the explicit threat of withdrawing medical help when she was facing the possibility of imminent death.33

Many women who named innocent men did so following threats or promises (often both) by the true father, but others had an agenda of their own. When Honour Twyne, a victualler’s servant, fell pregnant by a waterman’s servant in 1604, she initially named her employer’s brother, on the plausible assumption that the family connection would make her master more lenient.34 Usually, however, the primary consideration was financial. Where the employer of a pregnant servant was also her master, he was often willing to offer support and a temporary refuge in return for the promise of anonymity. While such offers may have reflected some

32 GL, BCB 2, fos. 201v, 202v–203r.
33 Ingram, Church Courts, Sex and Marriage, 262–3.
34 GL, BCB 4, fo. 433v.
genuine concern for the woman’s welfare, it is clear that the
driving force was usually a combination of fear and shame. This
situation, with a ‘respectable’ man desperate to protect his good
name, provided a far more promising context in which women
might utilize male concern over sexual reputation to alleviate
their own circumstances, by demanding a price for their silence
in order to cover their immediate needs.

In the case of a pregnant maidservant, the initiative generally
remained firmly with the employer, who would simply indicate
what he was prepared to offer. Employers were usually older and
of higher status, and many servants were too frightened and
distressed to grasp their own bargaining power in such a situation.
When Elizabeth Averill told her master, a skinner, that she was
pregnant by him in 1600, he simply ‘willed her to laye it on some
body els, and he woulde doe for her the best he coulde’, advising
her to name his apprentice.35 When Jane Squier became pregnant
eyl in 1562, her master, a farthingale-maker named Gunstone,
‘fearinge shame to come to him thereby’, took steps to avert
trouble by helping her select a suitable ‘father’ and giving her
very precise instructions:

Yea marye said the said Gunstone Mr Rose [a previous employer] is a
man mete for such a purpose, yf thou wilte be ruled by me thoue shalte
do well inouge but thoue arte but a fole and wilte not speke go thy
wayne I saie to the gate of Sr Marten Bowes and make an outcrye of Mr
Rose and I warrante the he will make Mr Rose to give the at the least
halfe a Crowne a weke perchance a Crowne and force him also for to
kepe the Childe and yf Sr Marten Bowes do refuse to here the go to the
Bisshoppe of London and he will so handle Mr Rose small to his contenta-
cion and well for thy purpose.36

Not all servants were so pliable. In a significant number of cases
a pregnant maidservant did recognize the leverage she possessed
through her ability to damage her master’s reputation. If she had
the strength of character and, even more important, the support
of family or friends, she might then demand her own price for
concealment and co-operation. Covert negotiations would ensue,
with the outcome depending on circumstance and the precise
balance between the servant’s desperation and the employer’s
fear of exposure and shame. In 1577, Andrew Knight, a London
tawyer (leather-maker), accused by a servant of fathering her

35 Ibid., fo. 187r.
36 GL, BCB 1, fos. 195r–196r. For Sir Martin Bowes, an alderman and former
mayor, see Dictionary of National Biography, ii.
child, told the messenger that though he was innocent (probably a lie) he did not want to be troubled with the matter and ‘wolde rather give her a pece of money then to have her make exclama-

When Agnes Strange, a carpenter’s maidser-

Some cases involved still more protracted negotiations. Henry Lord, gentleman, of the Exchequer in Warwick Lane, sent his servant Elizabeth Wilson home to Woodford when she became pregnant by him in the autumn of 1577, offering 20s. towards her expenses. Her father and brother refused the terms and brought the affair to the attention of the Bridewell governors; six months later the court approved a far better package, by which Lord agreed to pay her £6 in all, in return for her pledge ‘never hereafter to troble him nor exclame of him’. One of her fellow-servants seized the opportunity to press similar charges against Lord, who declared himself also ‘content’ to pay her £12 over four years and to keep her child.

Some women showed remarkable determination in pressing their cases, even without the support of friends or family. Elizabeth Foxegale, pregnant after being raped by Francis Carew, gentleman, proved highly tenacious in her campaign for comp-

Eventually, in April 1576, Carew turned in exas-

But such perseverance demanded both courage and luck, and others fared less well. When another of Carew’s victims, his maid, Alice Rawlyns, fell pregnant in 1579, he gave

37 GL, BCB 3, fo. 181f.
38 GL, BCB 4, fo. 78v.
40 GL, BCB 2, fos. 256v–257v.
her 20s. to find a place for her delivery, promising further help if she concealed his identity; but he also threatened to abandon her if she named him in public and made her swear before a Deputy that he was not the father. The safe lodgings failed to materialize and, as her time drew near, Alice was forced to lie in the street, wailing outside his door. The egregious Carew allegedly advised her ‘to take a knyfe and slytt the childe out of her bellye’, remarking to a neighbour who reproached him that he had had a hundred harlots and could hardly be expected to maintain all their progeny.41 Any wronged woman who pressed her claims too insistently, without friends to protect her, ran the risk of being pushed away, or even of violent retaliation. The story of Richard Forster, one of the Lord Mayor’s officers, illustrates the precarious balance in all negotiations between single mothers and the men they had accused. Forster was arrested in August 1577 in the company of a heavily pregnant woman who was bleeding from head wounds he had inflicted with a bunch of keys. He explained that he had given her ‘a blowe or two’ because ‘he could not be ridde of her’. It emerged that after being seduced by his promises of marriage she had tracked him home to discover his identity and had subsequently challenged him at the Mayor’s house and other places. Forster gave her money and a passport to go to Southampton, but she later returned to London and renewed her demands. The violence occurred as he was taking her to Greenwich ‘to provide her a place to lye in child bed in (sic) because he would be ridde of her’. Her persistence had almost secured her a safe place for the delivery when his resentment and irritation overwhelmed any sense of shame.42

These dramatic cases illustrate both the potential gains and the risks when women pressed for compensation and support. No doubt many women were too frightened to try, and others failed. It is clear, none the less, that with determination, luck and friends even a pregnant maidservant might hope to secure some financial support and a safe place for her delivery, where she could escape the attention of parish officials. Surreptitious arrangements of this kind were common throughout the country. As in London, the man generally formulated the terms, but he knew that the woman might withdraw her co-operation at any point; if he broke his word, she could reveal his name to the local authorities, both for

42 Ibid., fos. 233r–234v.
revenge and to secure provision for her child.\textsuperscript{43} It is likely that court proceedings in paternity cases, whether initiated by an alleged father claiming defamation, or by the mother seeking maintenance and justice at quarter sessions, often reveal only one part of a much longer and mainly informal process of pressure and bargaining, with one party turning to the courts only when efforts to reach a private settlement had broken down.\textsuperscript{44} Thus, Margaret Wall, appearing before the London Bridewell in 1606, described how she had become pregnant by her wealthy master, a Mr Millington in the Strand, and how he had first tried — with a sweetener of £200 — to marry her to one of his servants. When that plan failed, he pledged that ‘he would doe any thing for her’ if she would conceal his identity, but presumably he broke his word, for when the baby was born, Margaret ‘laid the Childe at her Masters doore’, literally as well as metaphorically.\textsuperscript{45} By triggering the intervention of the court she was guaranteeing her own punishment, but she also had the satisfaction of exposing the father to public disgrace and securing a court order against him which would ensure maintenance for her infant.

Prostitutes and mistresses were likely to take a far more calculating and assertive attitude in such circumstances. The single mother using the threat of public exposure to extort money was indeed a sufficiently familiar figure in early Stuart London to be noticed on the contemporary stage. Thomas Middleton’s \textit{A Chaste Maid in Cheapside} (1630) contains a vivid scene between a decayed gentleman, Touchwood, and his former mistress, who confronts him with her illegitimate infant:

Do you see your workmanship?
Nay turn not from it, nor offer to escape, for if you do,
I’ll cry it through the streets and follow you.\textsuperscript{46}

Despite his financial straits, the threat of public shame drives Touchwood to hand over his purse — whereupon the ‘wench’ quickly finds a device to abandon her infant in the street. The Bridewell records offer several remarkably close parallels to

\textsuperscript{43} See LRO, BR II/18/9, fo. 219', Hall Papers, 1606–8, for the pregnant servant, Amy Ingram, coached by the father to name another man, who ignored his instructions when all three appeared before a magistrate.

\textsuperscript{44} For examples, see CUL, EDR K/6/213; \textit{Quarter Sessions Records . . . for the County Palatine of Cheshire, 1559–1760}, ed. J. H. E. Bennett and J. C. Dewhurst (Record Soc. of Lancs. and Cheshire, xciv, Chester, 1940), 93, 127.

\textsuperscript{45} GL, BCB 5, fo. 147'.

\textsuperscript{46} Thomas Middleton, \textit{A Chaste Maid in Cheapside} (London, 1630, STC 17877), II:i.
Middleton’s story. In 1634, for example, Joan Haddock explained how she had gone into Staffordshire after becoming pregnant by one Mr Edwards. She returned to London after a miscarriage determined to put her misfortunes to good use; acquiring a suitable infant for cash from a pauper in Drury Lane, she confronted Edwards with it and (as she later confessed) ‘told him it was his child which he begot, which she did hoping to get money from him’. Edwards gave her 20s. and a pint of sack.47

It may be that Joan Haddock felt morally justified in making the father offer some modest recompense for her sufferings. Other cases could reveal a very different scenario, however, with the relationship tilting from compensation to blackmail, as a single mother exploited her predicament to extort money from a man she knew to be wholly innocent. The motivation was usually a compound of desperation and greed, in varying proportions, with the real father sometimes playing a part as well. It was a risky strategy, of course, for the intended victim was likely to dispute the charge and might inform the authorities, and it is unlikely that many maidservants had the bravado to embark on such a course alone. But older and more experienced figures (‘lewd women’) would sometimes emerge from the shadows offering help and advice, and it was often by their means that the wheels were set in motion.48 Anne Wetherall, a servant who became pregnant in 1576 by the man she was shortly to marry, laid the child to a wealthier man, ‘allured by a woman who counselled her to do it And said Mr Phillipes [the victim] had abilitie to kepe it And to give her money’.49

The Bridewell records provide abundant evidence of a little-known subculture of semi-professional sexual extortion in early modern London, a subculture in which women played a prominent part. Some operated singly. In 1606, several respectable women in Stepney complained that their neighbour, Joan Lawrence, probably a prostitute, was ‘a common Cozeninge queane laying children to divers men. And likewise affirmed that she was at Staple Inn to seek a father for her Childe. And also went to Justice Vaughan[’s] Clarke and charged him with the begetting of the said child and had money two severall tymes of

47 GL, BCB 8, fo. 5r.
48 GL, BCB 6, 18 May 1622.
49 GL, BCB 3, fo. 81v.
him for the same Childe.'\(^{50}\) In other cases action was clearly concerted by a group of experienced conspirators, with the 'wronged' woman a relatively minor player in the game. In 1598, Susan Hatton falsely accused the constable of North Enfield of having an affair with her for six months, admitting later that she had been prompted and coached by one Margaret Askew, a well-known prostitute and bawd. Askew had promised her a share of the proceeds and some new clothes, including a red petticoat with a scallop shell. She had also guaranteed her that the constable would be unable to do her even 'a pinnes worth of harme'.\(^{51}\) As this case indicates, it was not even necessary for the 'victim' to be pregnant or, indeed, wronged in any way; all that was required was a woman willing to swear as directed. Elizabeth Morton, who in 1609 accused a man of getting her with child, was found on medical examination not to be pregnant, and thereupon confessed that she had been 'counselled so to accuse him'.\(^{52}\) Similarly, in 1626, Joan Axe and another woman were accused of plotting to extort money from a young man by claiming he had got Axe with child, 'whereas in truth she is not with child at all neither ever had any use of her body'. The pair 'confessed they did it for money'.\(^{53}\)

The basis on which extortioners selected their victims varied. Prostitutes probably concentrated on former clients, preferably gentlemen or men of means. In 1574, a deponent told the Bridewell Governors 'of a gentellman which had to do with a Harlotte, And the Harlotte cossened the gentellman and tolde him that she was with childe, and so gott an other womans Child' to carry off the scam.\(^{54}\) When Jane Dover became pregnant in 1579, her friend and probably her bawd asked to be notified when she was delivered: 'she shoulde use such meane that she shoulde be kept like a gentlwoman and goe in her silkes and have men to wayte on her And that she shoulde be soe kept by a stranger'.\(^{55}\) In 1600, Katherine Floyd secured considerable sums of money from a gentleman of Gray's Inn, named Hughes, on whom she fathered her child. Sometimes she used her landlady, Goodwife Morrice, as go-between; at others she dealt with him

\(^{50}\) GL, BCB 5, fo. 148\(^{r}\).
\(^{51}\) GL, BCB 4, fo. 42\(^{v}\).
\(^{52}\) GL, BCB 5, fo. 390\(^{r}\).
\(^{53}\) GL, BCB 6, 9 Apr. 1626.
\(^{54}\) GL, BCB 2, fo. 20\(^{r}\).
\(^{55}\) GL, BCB 3, 12, 17 June 1579.
directly, even appearing at his door holding her infant and threatening to report him to the Governors of the Inn. Another of Morrice’s associates, Frances Fisher, did still better by fathering her child on several gentlemen at different Inns of Court, demanding money from each. Wealthy foreign merchants residing in London offered another tempting target. Ecclesiastical proceedings against Rodolph Inglestode, a merchant stranger, were dropped in 1608 when Alderman Sir Lewis Lewkenor notified the court that the accusations against him by one Margaret Haicock were ‘a mere practize of her and other like ill and lewde disposed persons . . . to have drawne some money from the said Inglested (sic) being a welthy man and of honest name and fame’. In the 1620s an enterprising landlady in St Clement Danes made her maidservants swear to fictitious sexual liaisons with a former gentleman of the royal bedchamber, a prosperous merchant, the poet Michael Drayton and one of her lodgers. A serving girl was most likely to confront her former master, a fellow servant or a male friend who might on that account be suspected by neighbours if named publicly. The more professional the blackmailer, the more calculating the selection. Margaret Askew had fastened on the constable of North Enfield after hearing that he ‘hath had Three Lordshippes come into his hands of late whereby [she] might make him pay well for it’. Provincial examples of such cynical calculation are rarer, but not unknown. Joan Bassell, a Worcestershire prostitute, was accused in 1604 of fathering her bastard on several men and receiving maintenance from them all. Similarly, Margaret Knox of Newcastle, finding that her husband denied paternity of her child in 1634, promptly fathered it on three other men, choosing one simply because he was rich. As she later admitted, he ‘had no dealing with her, howbeit, she would father it of him for his meanes’. Some of his friends offered her 40s. to drop the allegation, without consulting him. An innocent man, or even the friends of an innocent man, might

56 GL, BCB 4, fos. 196r-v, 197r–198r.
57 GL, MS 9064/16, fo. 148r.
59 GL, BCB 4, fo. 42r.
60 Worcestershire County Records: Calendar of the Quarter Sessions Papers, 1591–1643, ed. J. W. Willis Bund (Worcester, 1900), 68. Some or all of them may of course have been former sexual partners.
decide that composition was much less troublesome and damaging than gossip and the possibility of vexatious litigation.

As will now be clear, the victims of sexual blackmail stretched from humble serving-men to gentlemen and, indeed, beyond. Two notorious Elizabethan cases reached to the very highest ranks of society. In 1579, Sir John Smythe, soldier and diplomat, was the target of a carefully laid extortion attempt by one Susan Makenas, a pregnant servant, her employers Henry Wynborne and his wife, who lived within the Palace of Westminster, and Smythe's own housekeeper, one Mrs Blunt. The real father appears to have been a serving-man of Sir Christopher Hatton's, but the conspirators regarded Smythe as a far more attractive target. Two of his servants, also targeted, succumbed to pressure, but Smythe himself proved defiant and the affair unravelled under close examination by Recorder Fleetwood, who reported his findings to Lord Burghley.62 Archbishop Sandys of York, another target, was made of lesser stuff. Late one evening in May 1582, William Sysson, innkeeper of the Bull Inn at Doncaster, 'discovered' his wife, semi-dressed, in the Archbishop's chamber, where Sandys was in bed. Whether Sysson's wife was truthful in claiming that he had been importuning her for some time, she and her husband had deliberately trapped him and, after listening at the door, Sysson and his friends burst in at what they thought was a suitable moment. Sandys offered the husband £500 to hush up the affair, and a further large sum to Sir Robert Stapleton, a local landowner and rival, who claimed to be an accidental 'looker on' at the discovery but, according to Sandys, was party to the conspiracy. When the story eventually leaked out, Burghley ordered the Lord Chief Justice to investigate and the matter was later transferred to Star Chamber. Though Burghley offered support and the Queen was sympathetic, the Archbishop found that his credit and reputation had been seriously damaged by the allegations.63

The sexual blackmail of men was also a familiar part of the London underworld. In *A Notable Discovery of Cozenage* (1591), Robert Greene vividly described the lucrative art of 'crossbiting', in which a prostitute would lure a client to her room and bed so that male confederates could burst in and demand money by

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threatening to expose him.\textsuperscript{64} Though Elizabethan rogue literature is often unreliable, in this instance Greene’s account is fully confirmed by court records. In 1574, for example, Thomas Robinson of Westminster was charged with sending out his wife Ursula at night ‘to play the harlot and he in the meane tyme cometh and taketh them together and so getteth monnye of others’.\textsuperscript{65} Similarly, in 1576 the ill-named Goodlife White lured a hosier to her bed, where they were duly ‘discovered’ by her associates; terrified, the victim paid 40s. to buy their silence.\textsuperscript{66} Two years later an unfortunate Birmingham gentleman, visiting London, was ‘discovered’ in a chamber with a maidservant by men who burst in, claiming to be Bridewell officers, and ‘arrested’ him until he bought his release.\textsuperscript{67} In other cases the sexual encounter was itself contrived or fabricated. In 1579, John Baker, waterman, and an accomplice ‘dogged’ one Thomas Brookes, a feltmaker, who happened to be walking behind Baker’s sister, and pounced as they passed through an alley in Shoreditch, accusing him of ‘abusing’ her. Brookes, frightened, offered them 20s. and (rather engagingly) a new hat each to escape.\textsuperscript{68} Likewise, in 1618 William Vincent was prosecuted along with his wife Joan, a well-known prostitute, and charged with ‘plotting to cozen men of money, upon pretence that they had the use of his wife’s body, as himself confessed’.\textsuperscript{69} Martin Ingram cites a rural parallel from Wiltshire in 1614, where a husband forced his victim to sign a bond to pay him 40s. annually for five years.\textsuperscript{70}

In the plots against Smythe and Sandys, and in Greene’s account of London prostitution and extortion, women functioned mainly as decoys and accomplices. The Bridewell records, however, show that women might also play the leading role, or act independently. For some prostitutes, indeed, regular and notorious offenders, extortion appears to have formed a significant part of their activities. Katherine Stanton, or Standish, perhaps the most notorious of all, first appeared before Bridewell in 1606 accused of fighting with one Johane Ashewell and her daughter. The quarrel had

\textsuperscript{65} GL, BCB 2, fo. 48\textdegree; cf., fo. 88\textdegree.
\textsuperscript{66} GL, BCB 3, fo. 8\textdegree.
\textsuperscript{67} \textit{Ibid}., 22 Dec. 1578.
\textsuperscript{68} \textit{Ibid}., 3 Oct. 1579.
\textsuperscript{69} GL, BCB 6, 29 May 1618.
\textsuperscript{70} Ingram, \textit{Church Courts, Sex and Marriage}, 252.
begun, it emerged, after they had all ‘cozened a great one Mr Mosley of Westminster’ of £3 5s. by claiming (falsely) that Johane was with child by him; Stanton and her husband had kept £2 5s. of this, which the Ashewells regarded as unfair. Subsequently, Stanton appeared alone. In 1607, she was charged with ‘practising to have cozened one Thomas Clayton and John Greene his man to have laid a child unto them’. Telling the latter that he had been charged with fathering a child, she produced a suitable woman and baby to confront him, and then accosted his master, claiming the local churchwardens had sent her ‘to will him to keep it’ and so take responsibility for his servant’s lapse. Stanton later admitted receiving 18d. from the servant ‘to hold her peace’, but in putting pressure on his master she had overreached herself. She was presented again in 1610, when her victim turned the tables by summoning a constable, and yet again in 1618, when she was whipped and discharged, on the grounds of having small children and being infected with the pox. Stanton’s career as a sexual blackmailer was hardly a brilliant success, but is remarkable none the less in extending over a period of at least twelve years.

Clergymen, the archetypal figures of parochial respectability, were especially vulnerable to slurs on their moral probity, a fact reflected in the disproportionate number of defamation cases they brought. Archbishop Sandys was only the most eminent of many clerics subjected to denunciation or blackmail, some cases pre-dating the Reformation. Though Sandys was framed by male adventurers, several other ministers were targeted by women. In 1559, a prostitute denounced Dr Thomas Darbishire, Bishop Bonner’s nephew and lately Chancellor of the Diocese of London, branding him a ‘common whoremonger’ who had slept with at least four women (including herself) within the last two years. Her motives are unclear. Her allegation (which may, of course, have been true) was possibly the sequel to a failed extortion attempt or, perhaps more likely, an attempt to save her own skin by exposing a prominent and now-hated figure who had fallen from office with the arrival of the new Protestant regime.

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71 GL, BCB 5, fo. 111r.
72 Ibid., fo. 236r.
73 Ibid., fo. 410r.; 6, 25 July 1618.
75 GL, BCB 1, fo. 25r–v. For Darbishire, see *Dictionary of National Biography*, v.
Several cases feature women who appear not to have been prostitutes, and whose motives were varied. In June 1621, one Elizabeth Pinfold confessed at the Middlesex quarter sessions that she had defamed John Squire, a minister (and probably her employer), and his wife, ‘of purpose to get money of him’. She had also initiated a suit against him in the spiritual courts, alleging breach of promise. Though whipped and ordered to beg their forgiveness, she renewed her allegations the following year and was punished again.76 Anne Salmon, also prosecuted in 1621 and playing for much higher stakes, was charged with ‘divers slanderous speeches spoken and letters written’ against Dr [Roger] Bates, a royal chaplain and Middlesex Justice. Inquiries suggested that she had been seeking revenge for something he had said against her from the pulpit. She had had a petition drawn up ‘to gett money of him’, which she had tried to deliver to the Archbishop of Canterbury. She had sent a confederate to confront Bates and demand the massive sum of £500. Salmon confessed the charge. The court heard that she appeared somewhat ‘crased in her witts’ and that she had also attempted to extort money from the preacher at St Andrew’s in Holborn.77 Though she may have been unbalanced, her story, like Pinfold’s, suggests that it was not only prostitutes who were aware of the vulnerability of respectable men to sexual defamation.

Evidence of sexual blackmail survives, of course, only when the attempt failed and backfired on its perpetrators. As with most criminal statistics, we have no way of gauging the size of the ‘dark figure’ of successful extortion. But it is clear that the courts regarded women such as Katherine Stanton as habitual offenders who had frequently succeeded in evading punishment. In 1618, Stanton and Joan Vincent were labelled ‘notorious cozeners and common plotters to cozen honest men by false accusations’. When Jane Somersall of Holborn was convicted in 1614 of extorting money from a gentleman, by claiming to be pregnant by him, the court found that ‘it was a common practice of the said Jane to accuse persons of ability in such sort to the end to draw money from them’. She was sentenced to be publicly whipped at a cart’s tail at Waltham Abbey, where she had first accused her victim.78

77 GL, BCB 6, 21, 28 July 1621.
78 Ibid., 25 July 1618.
Similar comments were made about some of the other accused. Some were evidently detected only when they ran out of luck. Elizabeth Willson perhaps overreached herself in 1625 in targeting the son of one of the Bridewell Governors. While denying this particular charge, she admitted ‘she hath done it to others, & gotten money’. Even the most sophisticated operator might occasionally miscalculate. During the Commonwealth, the crooked lawyer, Richard Farr, persuaded his mistress to swear before a magistrate that she was pregnant by a gentleman from whom Farr was trying to extract money, but their stratagem backfired when the Justice pointed out that as a married woman she would be swearing away her own life under the recent Adultery Act of 1650. Though blackmail always carried some risks, professionals developed a variety of strategies to minimize them. Very often they worked as a team, knowing that a solitary man suddenly confronted by a group of strangers all accusing and threatening him was far more likely to try to buy his way out of trouble. Joan Holt, for example, was described in 1633 as one of a gang of women ‘who do commonly abett others and sett upon men by themselves and accuse them of incontinency to drive them to composition’. Her run of successes ended only because the Bridewell Marshall happened to be present one day in the alehouse when they were making such a composition. Professional sexual extortion certainly continued to flourish long after the cases documented in the Bridewell court-books. In 1695, Elizabeth Dunbarr was fined and pilloried in Leicester Square for conspiring with another woman to extort £3 from an innocent man by naming him as father of her child. And in a rape trial at the Old Bailey in 1718, the prosecution case collapsed when a witness revealed how the alleged victim had ‘made it her business . . . to trap people, by pretending to be with child, be Ravish’d &c’. Another witness added that ‘by relation, she had ruin’d half a hundred families’. In the provinces, sexual extortion by women may well have increased in the eighteenth century, for under a statute passed in 1733 a single mother could have the

79 GL, BCB 6, 19 Mar. 1625.
81 GL, BCB 7, fo. 317r.
82 Middlesex County Records: Calendar of the Sessions Books 1689 to 1709, ed. W. J. Hardy (London, 1905), 139.
man she named as father arrested and held in prison if he was unable to find sureties. The act appears to have been exploited by some as a blackmailers’ charter, encouraging malicious accusations designed to force a composition. The evidence suggests a substantial ‘dark figure’ of undetected extortion.

III

Rape and other sexual assaults provide a final context in which some women (and their associates) might seek to take advantage of male concerns over sexual reputation. It was extremely difficult to secure a conviction for rape in early modern courts, except when the victim was a child or had been seriously injured. Courts were aware of the difficulty of establishing proof and were often sceptical of female testimony; moreover, there is no doubt that many offences went unreported and that many rapists sent for trial were wrongly acquitted. Any victim thus had to balance the slim possibility of success against the near certainty that the attendant publicity would seriously damage her own reputation and her relationship with her husband, family or employer. At the same time, no man would willingly face a charge of rape, bringing in its wake damaging gossip, the humiliation of a court appearance and a small, but very real, risk of hanging. That equation formed the context in which victims (and their families) often looked for an informal composition, rather than turning to the courts. For both parties it offered the possibility of a speedy and discreet resolution. Where the evidence was inconclusive, composition might seem the most sensible resolution, even to a magistrate. Allegations of rape also appear obliquely in church-court records, which include numerous defamation suits by men against women who had accused them of rape or sexual assault. In many cases there had probably been some sexual incident, and we should probably see both allegations and suits as part of a

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process of pressure and counter-pressure intended, on both sides, to lead to an informal settlement. Most of the defamation suits were eventually dropped and few of the allegations led on to a criminal prosecution, which suggests they had served to activate informal mechanisms of conciliation and arbitration.  

Demands for financial satisfaction in cases of alleged or attempted rape could grow out of a variety of situations. Some were attempts to secure a measure of redress; others appear to have been blackmail and extortion; and others probably lay at various intermediate points. Very often the facts remain deeply obscure. In July 1670, for example, a Portsmouth widow, Alice Harvey, told friends that one Nicholas Hammond had assaulted and tried to rape her. Instead of informing a magistrate, she had sent a message to her assailant demanding £10 as the price for her silence, adding that she would accept not a farthing less. Hammond retaliated by having her bound over to be of good behaviour, and the case proceeded no further. We can only guess whether Alice was a cheat or simply attempting to turn a frightening and humiliating experience to her own advantage, and on what terms the matter was privately settled.  

Establishing the facts in those rape cases which did reach the courts was notoriously difficult. Sir Matthew Hale thought that rapists deserved to die, but warned that rape was ‘an accusation easily to be made and hard to be proved, and harder to be defended by the party accused, tho’ never so innocent’, illustrating his point with several instances of malicious accusation where there had almost been a fatal miscarriage of justice. Over a century earlier, Sir Thomas More had complained that malicious accusations of rape against clerics were a ‘pageant’ played out in courts throughout the country. The most striking feature of the rape trials in the Old Bailey in the late seventeenth century is that defendants were likely to claim that the charge was founded on malice, conspiracy or extortion, and that juries considered such claims very carefully. Evidence that an alleged victim or her family had demanded money made juries highly suspicious of the accusation itself. Conversely, evidence that the accused himself

87 These points are based on a survey of the ecclesiastical records of Leicestershire, Ely and Chichester.
88 Portsmouth Borough Sessions Papers, ed. Hoad, 42, 44; cf., n. 31 above.
had urged a composition might be interpreted as circumstantial evidence of guilt. In a striking case in 1689, Ruth Turner, a London alewife allegedly raped by a customer, claimed that her assailant had offered 5s. to a witness to buy his silence, and had promised to spend a further 20s. in the alehouse ‘by way of a Treat’ to mollify the victim herself. She doubtless hoped that any jury would recoil from a rapist who had thought to escape scot-free by offering to buy a round of drinks.90

The practice of composition also appears in cases involving children. Many parents may well have seen this as preferable to putting a small child through the ordeal of a court examination, a distressing experience with a highly unpredictable outcome. Others appear more concerned to exploit the financial opportunities than to protect their children. In a case in 1680 involving an Irish Catholic priest charged with abusing a girl aged nine or ten, both the accused and the girl’s family appear to have looked for an informal settlement. The priest sent friends to offer £10 to compose the matter, but negotiations failed when the girl’s father, being drunk, demanded the impossible sum of £40.91 In some other child-rape cases the family had apparently sought to extort money from a wholly innocent party. A young gentleman charged with raping a ten-year-old girl at an alehouse was acquitted in 1680 after a servant deposed that the family had fabricated the allegations. The real offender, it emerged, was a man the girl’s older sister had brought home to lie with her. The family had then sought to exploit the disaster by demanding the large sum of £160 from the gentleman for a composition.92 William Row of Clerkenwell was similarly cleared in 1687 of the rape of Elizabeth Beaver, aged eight or ten. A surgeon testified that the child had indeed been sexually molested, but the jury reflected that her parents were ‘of no good Repute, and that no Complaint was made of it in a long time after it was done, and several Witnesses for the prisoner, made it out to be only a design to get money of the Prisoner’.93 Less clear was the case of Stephen Arrowsmith,
an apprentice charged in 1678 with raping his master’s eight-year-old daughter and thereafter having sex with her every Sunday while the family was at church. Protesting his innocence, he claimed that her parents had offered to drop charges in return for money; though the judge explained that the girl’s apparent consent and the wickedness of her parents could not alter the gravity of the offence, the jury initially returned an acquittal, which the judge then refused to accept.\textsuperscript{94}

In all of these cases a serious offence had been committed, the issue being whether the accused was the perpetrator or an innocent target of blackmail. In a second category of rape-extortion cases no offence at all appears to have occurred. In 1633, Mary Crew described to the Bridewell governors how one Barnes and his confederates had persuaded her to charge Edward Tyles of Bishopsgate Street with raping her and giving her the pox. Barnes told her he had employed the stratagem before, using a different woman, when Tyles had meekly handed over £1 to hush up the matter. Thus encouraged, Mary made accusations against a man she later admitted she had never even met.\textsuperscript{95} The Old Bailey reports include several cases where juries decided that the allegations were fraudulent. In December 1681, Sarah Paine alleged that her mistress’s son had entered her bedroom one night and raped her, threatening to ‘knock her Brains out’ if she cried out, but after hearing testimony on both sides the jury decided that she had invented the story in ‘a design to get Money’.\textsuperscript{96} Another jury concluded that a woman in her mid-twenties, who had waited two years before pressing charges, was either attempting to extort money or motivated by malice.\textsuperscript{97}

Malice was indeed probably far more common than extortion

\textsuperscript{94} An Exact Account of the Trials . . . in the Old Bailey [11–12 Dec. 1678] (London, 1678), 14–16, 30. The jurors disbelieved the girl’s account. A maid testified that the girl had said ‘she took Pleasure’ in sexual relations, concluding that her venereal disease must have been caught from another man. The jury, ordered to reconsider their verdict, took the two girls into their withdrawing room to examine them further themselves, without authority. Arrowsmith was sentenced to death when the verdict was reversed.

\textsuperscript{95} GL, BCB 7, fos. 333r, 336v. Tyles’s name occurs in several forms.


\textsuperscript{97} A Narrative of the Proceedings at the Sessions-House in the Old-Bailey, April 21. 1680 (London, 1680), 2. For other examples, see nn. 83, 95 above. Garthine Walker notes that men accused of rape sometimes alleged malicious conspiracy against them, but does not explore these ‘tales’: Walker, ‘Rereading Rape’, 4, 15.
In triggering false accusations of rape. In early modern England, allegations of rape provided one of the very few means by which a woman could seriously damage a man, exposing him to public disgrace, prosecution and even hanging. It was not, however, an easy option. Neighbours, juries and magistrates were very conscious that a fabricated story could lead an innocent man to the gallows and scrutinized allegations closely. If neighbours regarded the woman as untrustworthy, she might well find herself on trial for defamation rather than bringing the alleged rapist before the courts.\(^98\) And if she had failed to report the alleged offence without delay, the court was very unlikely to believe her story. Mary Chard, who in 1685 accused her employer of raping her, acknowledged at his trial at the Old Bailey that she had laid the charge only when she found herself pregnant, and at the suggestion of a neighbour. Her story may have been true, but the jury, hearing that she was a former inmate of Bridewell and receiving testimony to her master's good character, suspected that she had invented it to cover her own promiscuity and threw it out.\(^99\)

Some complainants withdrew their allegations after being examined by the magistrate. John Thomas, accused at Bridewell in 1559 of 'defiling' a girl, was cleared when she retracted her allegations after close questioning.\(^100\) While it is quite possible that some genuine victims may have felt intimidated and retracted a truthful statement, the evidence suggests that others had indeed fabricated their stories out of malice. Several such cases involved maidservants who appear to have pursued a grudge against their employers by making damaging sexual allegations. When Margery Arnold claimed in 1598 that her master had tried to climb into her bed, he explained that he had recently beaten her for neglecting her duties, 'by reason whereof she made this evill reporte to disgrace her Master'.\(^101\) Even a daughter living at home, chafing under parental discipline, might clutch at this weapon. In an extraordinary case in 1623, a young girl, Elizabeth Dalton, claimed that her father Edward, a clergyman, 'had had the carnall use of her bodye'. She subsequently confessed to the Bridewell matron, and then to the Bridewell court, that she had

\(^98\) CUL, EDR, K/17/98; LRO, 1 D 41/4, box 47/61–2.
\(^100\) GL, BCB 1, fo. 9r.
\(^101\) GL, BCB 4, fo. 36v; cf., GL, BCB 5, fo. 225v, for a parallel case.
invented and spread this story 'by the instigation of Goodwife Voutes after her father had beaten her'. It was already too late to prevent a scandal, however, for Mary Voutes (or Vouche) had gleefully spread the story among their neighbours in Gutter Lane, adding some further lurid details. 'Watt you whatt,' she exclaimed, 'the preists rougerie is found out'. Vouche claimed that Dalton had raped his daughter while his wife pinned her down, and had 'spoyled' his four-year-old step-daughter too. She declared that she hoped to see him hanged and his wife carted as a bawd. Both Dalton and his wife subsequently brought defamation suits against her in an attempt to restore their good names.102 A resentful, imaginative child and a malicious, busy neighbour made a formidable combination. It was utterly humiliating for a minister to appear before the Bridewell governors to answer a charge of rape and incest, and if his daughter had stuck to her story, Dalton’s career might have ended in ignominy on the gallows.

Very often the disputants stuck firmly to their contradictory narratives and investigating magistrates sometimes found it impossible to disentangle the truth. Margery Harding, a hosier’s maidservant, described in horrific detail in 1576 how her master had forced himself on her, made her pregnant, and later beat her so that she had a miscarriage. But under further questioning she changed her story so often that even her own friends doubted whether she was the victim of a brutal assault or a devious liar, and the Bridewell governors, equally baffled, eventually abandoned their investigation.103 There was a similar outcome in 1599 when Anne Redwood accused her master of taking her by force. Denying it, he counter-charged her with theft and vowed to see her hanged. Terrified, she thereupon confessed that her accusation had been false, but later in court withdrew this confession and charged him with further sexual offences against her.104 Four centuries on it is quite impossible for the historian to establish the 'true facts' in such cases. Even so, they provide further evidence of the power sexual allegations might bestow on a


103 GL, BCB 2, fos. 234r–v, 237v–v.

104 GL, BCB 4, fo. 77v.
woman bold enough to make them. By revealing, exaggerating
or inventing a shameful sexual offence she had the potential
means to disgrace her employer or to cover up serious wrong-
doing of her own — or both. There are many cases where sexual
allegations, of various kinds, appear to have been simply a cynical
device introduced into an existing dispute to divert attention or
discredit a figure of local authority: the tactic could be very
effective in sowing confusion and persuading the opposing party
to accept an informal, mediated resolution.\textsuperscript{105}

IV

This article has attempted to refine our traditional model of
gendered morality, not to overturn it. There is no doubt that the
double standard was deeply embedded in the culture of the age
and that it placed women at a massive disadvantage. But the
evidence surveyed here suggests that the contrasts between male
and female honour have been exaggerated and that the importance
of male sexual reputation among the middling sort and ‘honest’
poor could give women (as well as other men) an effective lever
in a variety of situations. Much of the evidence here has been
drawn from some particularly rich London sources, which raises
the question of its typicality. The capital was unique in possessing
a class of professional criminals and prostitutes, and it is very
likely that sexual extortion on a semi-professional basis was con-
 fined to its environs. But the evidence from provincial ecclesias-
tical courts confirms the importance of sexual reputation to
‘respectable’ men; and the other female strategies outlined here
can be found throughout the country. To some extent, the pre-
ponderance of London data may simply reflect more vigorous
policing and more comprehensive archival sources.\textsuperscript{106}

Female leverage was based upon male sexual reputation and
relied upon a combination of shame and the fear of prosecution:
each reinforced the other. A village Lothario in Elizabethan
Leicestershire who foolishly contracted himself to several differ-
ent women discovered, when they realized his knavery, that he
would have to pay heavily for their silence. One of them, alert
to the potential of the situation, accepted £7 from him with an

\textsuperscript{105} The Notebook of Robert Doughty, 1662–1665, ed. J. M. Rosenheim (Norfolk
Record Soc., liv, 1989), 29–31; GL, BCB 2, fos. 228\textsuperscript{v}, 230\textsuperscript{v}, 231\textsuperscript{v}.

\textsuperscript{106} See further my When Gossips Meet.
ominous rider that 'she would hold herself content for a time but not for altogether'. His fear of disgrace and prosecution had enabled the victim to seize the initiative, turning the tables on a man who had wronged her.\textsuperscript{107} Other women, not necessarily victims at all, might take advantage of male sexual vulnerability in far more mundane circumstances. In the course of a quarrel they might dismiss an opponent as a common whoremonger or riddled with the pox. Women who were desperate, destitute or merely unscrupulous might harness male fears of disgrace and possible prosecution in a variety of other situations, in order to seek redress, apply pressure, exact revenge or extort money. Perhaps the most significant feature of the many cases surveyed here is the recognition, in both London and provincial sources, that such practices were all too familiar to contemporaries. For plebeian women, whether wronged and desperate, or cynically calculating, they were by far the most powerful weapons at their disposal. The exploitation of male sexual reputation should perhaps be added to arson and witchcraft among the weapons of the weak, in the 'infrapolitics of subordinate groups'.\textsuperscript{108}

Why, we may then ask, did women not utilize such a powerful weapon more often? Like other weapons of the weak it was, of course, double-edged, as contemporaries were well aware. It could offer no guarantee of success and any woman — whether victim or blackmailer — knew that once her allegations were in the public domain she faced an array of dangers. In any court of law a man’s word carried greater weight, especially in cases of alleged rape. Within the local community, neighbours and parish officers might well dismiss her claims, leaving her discredited and isolated. A servant’s allegation against her employer might easily backfire and end in a whipping. And a servant pregnant by her master and looking for maintenance was often in no position to hold out for a fair settlement. She needed somewhere to live and the support of family or friends before she could hope to bargain on anything approaching equal terms. Only the boldest women dared lay a child to a richer, more powerful man they knew to be innocent, and it is hardly surprising that many then panicked and confessed when brought face-to-face with the alleged father.

\textsuperscript{107} LRO, 1 D 41/4/363.
or examined by a magistrate.\textsuperscript{109} The story of the Cheshire minister’s servant, Margaret Knowsley, reconstructed by Steve Hindle, vividly illustrates both the importance of sexual reputation to respectable men and the potential dangers in challenging it. Knowsley’s allegations of sexual harassment against her employer were felt to pose such a threat to the legitimacy of the local élite structure as a whole that they led inexorably to her savage and humiliating punishment, despite the fact that her story was probably true.\textsuperscript{110} The episode underlines the ambiguities of the situation. The scale of the damage a woman might inflict through sexual allegations against a respectable man created the strong possibility that her claims would not only be denied and disbelieved, but might also rebound against her.

In the longer perspective, the female strategies reviewed here did little to help women as a group. While they might have benefited individuals, and perhaps made men think twice before turning away pregnant servants empty-handed, sexual allegations judged to be malicious would have simply confirmed the traditional distrust of female testimony. But to acknowledge that the weapons of the weak are always double-edged is not to deny their potency. The importance and fragility of sexual reputation, utilized by men for centuries to control or damage women, were qualities that might also be harnessed by women for their own ends against men.

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\textsuperscript{109} See, for example, GL, BCB 1, fos. 195\textsuperscript{v}–196\textsuperscript{r}; BCB 3, fo. 81\textsuperscript{v}.