
EXPLICATING A VIRTUE: ON THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CONCEPT OF “CHASTITY”

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Abstract

This article explicates the eighteenth-century English concept of “chastity” through analyzing the noun *chastity*, the adjective *chaste* and the adverb *chastely* in the *Corpus of Late Modern English Texts* 3.1. Nine prominent characteristics of “chastity” are examined to arrive at an explication of “sexual chastity”. Firstly, chastity was considered (1) a virtue. Secondly, it often meant (2) virginity or complete abstinence from sex. However, it also referred to (3) marital love. Eighteenth-century authors were more prone to discuss (4) women’s than men’s chastity. Metaphorically, chastity was considered a (5) valuable commodity, and it was discussed in terms of (6) attack and defence, and of (7) purity. Chastity was supposed to characterize a person’s (8) acts, behaviour, and comportment. The understanding of these characteristics had (9) religious underpinnings.¹

Keywords: 18th-century English, celibacy, chastity, marriage, virginity, virtue, natural semantic metalanguage (NSM)

1. Introduction

This paper discusses the eighteenth-century concept of “chastity” through analyzing the words *chastity*, *chaste*, and *chastely*. The idea is to capture the essence of “chastity” by applying the framework of natural semantic metalanguage (henceforth NSM), which consists of 65 so-called semantic primes that occur in all languages of the world. These can be used to explicate all the rest of the words and concepts in any language (the NSM homepage, 2022).²

¹ I thank the editors and two anonymous reviewers for many valuable comments and suggestions. I am naturally responsible for all the remaining weaknesses in the article.

² Accessed 3 February 2022.

The reason why NSM was chosen as the method for understanding a virtue such as chastity is that NSM lends itself particularly well to the study of abstract concepts. NSM has, among other things, allowed Wierzbicka (e.g. 1992a, 1999) to make fine-grained distinctions between various emotion concepts both within and across languages. She has also used it to study moral concepts such as the Latin *pietas*, the Russian *smirenie*, and the English *humility* (Wierzbicka 1992b). This is how Wierzbicka (1992b:185) explicates *pietas*:

pietas

- a. X thinks something like this:
- b. Y did something good for me
- c. I couldn't do something like this for Y
- d. if Y wants me to do something, I should do it
- e. because of this, X feels something good toward Y
- f. X wants to do good things for Y
- g. [I think this is good]

It is interesting that emotions and virtues overlap, for example, in the case of love (Farese 2020), and “virtuous emotions” in Japanese (Hasada 2008). This suggests that an explication of a virtue could share some characteristics with explications of emotions. Virtues tend to tell us something about how a person thinks and feels. To give another example of a virtue, Goddard (2001) has studied and compared some Malay and English words for virtues, and his explications of Malay *sabar* and *setia* indeed say something about how a person thinks and feels, just like Wierzbicka's (1992b:185) explication of *pietas*. Here is Goddard's (2001:664) explication of *sabar* ‘calm, forbearing’:

X is *sabar* [at this time] =

- at this time, X felt something bad
- because of this, X could have thought:
 - I don't want this, I want to do something now
- X did not think this, because X didn't want to think anything like this
- it is good if a person can be like this

As to historical semantics, there is some previous literature using the NSM method. Above all, Wierzbicka (2006) has studied the history of the English words *right* and *wrong*, *reasonable* and *fair*, contending that they have no exact equivalents in other languages, and Bromhead (2009) has studied epistemic expressions in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English. If we consider other languages, Hamann and Levisen (2017) have written about the Danish word *livet* ‘the life’ in the Danish Golden Age (1800–1850). All these studies suggest that one can successfully approach historical data and explicate concepts that are no longer current. More particularly, one can select and explicate concepts that used to be central to a culture but may no longer be so. This is precisely the case of “chastity”.

It has been claimed that the eighteenth century was the age of virtue in England, because people discussed virtues so much (Morse 2000). Several virtues could have been chosen as the topic of an article, among them “charity”, “diligence”, “humility”, “kindness”, “patience”, and “temperance”. “Chastity”, however, was chosen for this case study, as an example of a concept that is no longer idealized or thought of as a value by most people in contemporary society.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth OED) entries for *chaste* and *chastity* emphasize sexual and moral purity and moderation in behaviour. The adverb *chastely* is defined through the adjective *chaste*, “in a chaste manner”, “in a chaste style or taste” (s.v. OED *chastely* adv.). This article looks at data from the *Corpus of Late Modern English Texts 3.1* (henceforth CLMET; De Smet et al. 2015) to determine what “chastity” means in eighteenth-century texts.

To give a taste of what the data from the CLMET is like, I will introduce an example from Henry Fielding’s well-known novel *The history of Tom Jones, a foundling*. Its protagonist is famously unchaste. This passage is from a conversation between him and a Mr Nightingale:

- (1) “Lookee, Mr Nightingale,” said Jones, “I am no canting hypocrite, nor do I pretend to the gift of **chastity**, more than my neighbours. I have been guilty with women, I own it; but am not conscious that I have ever injured any.”

I will return to this passage later. Next, I will discuss my data and method. An analysis of the meaning of *chastity* words in the CLMET

data will then follow, which will be the basis for the NSM explication that will be presented in the discussion section. The explication emerges from the corpus data and the culturo-historical background to the concept of “chastity” that will be explored.

2. Data and method

The CLMET corpus is a circa 35-million-word corpus that is divided into three sections based on time periods, 1710–1780, 1780–1850, and 1850–1920 (*Manual for CLMET* 3.1. 2015:2,9). I focused on data from the eighteenth century, therefore representing the years 1700–1799. This part of the corpus totals 12,578,845 words.

My data consisted of all the occurrences of the nouns *chastity* and *chasteness*, the adjective *chaste*, and the adverb *chastely*, which also occurred in the form *chastly*. The nouns *chastity* and *chasteness* occurred 248 times, different forms of the adjective *chaste* 181 times, and the adverb *chastely* or *chastly* 4 times. Thus, the noun comprised 57%, the adjective 4%, and the adverb 1% of the data.

Table 1 shows the numbers of tokens of each type in the data and their frequencies per million words. Such normalized frequencies can be used in comparisons with other sets of data. For example, the type *chastity* occurs 1.27 times per million words in the 100-million-word *British National Corpus* from the 1990s. It is thus much less frequent there than in the CLMET; it indeed seems that chastity was discussed much more in eighteenth- than twentieth-century English.

Type	Number of tokens	N/1,000,000
<i>chaste</i>	169	13
<i>chaster</i>	6	0.48
<i>chastest</i>	6	0.48
<i>chastely</i>	3	0.24
<i>chastly</i>	1	0.08
<i>chastity</i>	247	20
<i>chasteness</i>	1	0.08
Total	433	34

Table 1. The data.

Moreover, the corpus itself confirms that the eighteenth century is likely to be of most interest as regards the meaning of “chastity”. Words beginning with *chast** were by far the most frequent in 1710–

1780, when their frequency was 58.59 per million words. They were only about half as frequent in 1780–1850, when their frequency was 24.19 per million words. In the last section, 1850–1920, their frequency receded into 17.19 per million words.³

Although the analysis concerns three different word classes, the aim of the article is not to define the meaning of each of the words separately, as is common in the NSM research community (e.g. Wierzbicka 1992a, 1992b). Instead, the aim is to explicate a more general concept of “chastity”: the idea is that understanding what (the noun) *chastity* means is very closely connected to understanding what being *chaste* (adjective) means and how to behave *chastely* (adverb). In Szagun’s (1983:160) words, it was assumed that all of these words shared the same “conceptual core”. This relates to the psychology of meaning, the “content of concepts”, rather than meaning as conveyed by grammar. When studying children’s understanding of moral words, Szagun (1983:160) suggested that *courage* and *courageous* have an “identical conceptual core”.⁴ To put it differently, we could also talk about explicating the cultural model of “chastity” (Holland & Quinn 1987; Hamann & Levisen 2017).

The data was analyzed in three rounds. In the first round, I read the 200 first concordance lines produced by a search for words beginning with *chast**, removing irrelevant data and simultaneously paying attention to what kind of vocabulary the *chastity* words occurred with. I thus collected 254 keywords, expressions, and associations that occurred with the *chastity* words, such as the key words *tears* and *merit*. Similarly, key expressions were expressions (multiword units) that appeared in the discourse on chastity, such as *chaste love* and *fortress on a rock*. I also made notes on associations that occurred in the data. For example, I noted that “chastity has to do with generation/child-bearing” (example (2)).

- (2) Hence the laws of **chastity** are much stricter over the one sex than over the other. These rules have all a reference to generation; and yet women past child-bearing are no more

³ A search for words beginning with *chast** also produced instances of the verbs *chastise* and *chasten* which are etymologically related to the *chastity* words (OED, s.v. *chastise*, verb and *chasten*, verb). I thank Hendrik de Smet for helping me with the CLMET corpus.

⁴ Wierzbicka (1992b:201–211) discusses the English concept of noun *courage* through explicating related words such as the adjectives *courageous* and *brave*.

supposed to be exempted from them than those in the flower of their youth and beauty. (David Hume, *An enquiry concerning the principles of morals*)

The purpose of the first round of analysis was to get an idea of what kind of elements the concept of “chastity” consisted of. For the second round, I organised such elements into bigger “chunks” that I called “characteristics”. Most of these subsumed several words, expressions, and associations—the point was to make generalisations that could then be used to formulate explications. To give an example, I named one characteristic “virginity and/or abstinence”. It comprised lines in the data that discussed chastity as abstinence from sex, including saving one’s virginity, but also cases when people decided to abstain from sex after they had lost their virginity.

After naming 24 characteristics, I analyzed all the data, marking which characteristic best typified each occurrence of a *chastity* word in it. I also made notes about other characteristics that occurred with each instance of a *chastity* word. I eventually counted how many times I had associated each of the characteristics with relevant examples, but since the data was very rich, I decided not to report a quantitative analysis but to talk about prevalent or central characteristics.⁵ I have listed the 24 characteristics in the appendix. In the third round, I once more reconsidered my reading of the data and decided to combine some characteristics and put more weight to “religion”.⁶

To give an example from the data, let us continue with Fielding’s *Tom Jones*. The book includes a promise that the text will not offend its readers in terms of religion, virtue, or decency. The author adds that his text will not “offend even the *chastest* eye” (emphasis added). The passage also includes the further characteristics “goodness” and “innocence”. All these expressions belong to the eighteenth-century discourse on chastity:

⁵ Section 3.4. Gender is an exception.

⁶ I combined the characteristics 21 and 22, because they were so similar (“Virtue: the word virtue is mentioned” and “Virtue: appears in a list of virtues”, respectively). I also combined characteristics 1 (Act, behaviour: a person does something in a chaste way) and 4 (Appearance: a person looks chaste) by adding the word *comportment* to characteristic 1.

- (3) From the name of my patron, indeed, I hope my reader will be convinced, at his very entrance on this work, that he will find in the whole course of it nothing prejudicial to the cause of religion and virtue, nothing inconsistent with the strictest rules of decency, nor which can offend even the **chastest** eye in the perusal. On the contrary, I declare, that to recommend goodness and innocence hath been my sincere endeavour in this history.

Of all the characteristics occurring in example (3), “virtue” and “religion” made it to the top of the list of characteristics by being so central to the understanding of “chastity”. Three other characteristics, “goodness”, “innocence”, and “part of the body” (*chastest eye*) were less prevalent. As to *decency*, it was first included in the keywords and then under the category “morality”.⁷

Apart from the sense referring to sexuality, *chastity* also had a sense that referred to writing or artistic representation, which occurred 39 times in the data. The OED provides us with the relevant definition of *chaste*, “[p]ure in artistic or literary style; without meretricious ornament; chastened, subdued” (s.v. adjective 8). It corresponds to the noun sense “[e]xclusion of meretricious ornament; purity of style, modesty, chasteness” (s.v. *chastity*, 4). These senses are not included in the present analysis, although, interestingly, all the OED examples of these senses come from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

This analysis follows on from Tissari, Vanhatalo and Siirinen (2019), which investigated agreement among analysts. The finding was that it was difficult to agree on NSM explications based on large sets of data. A solution to this was to discuss lines that could form part of NSM explications and then proceed to formulating fuller explications. We called those lines “features”. For example, one could discuss the “virtue” component of “chastity” by considering the presence or absence of the line “it is good if a person can be like this” in an explication of ‘chastity’ (Goddard 2001:664; cf. Section 4. Discussion). For the present study, I modified the procedure, allowing the characteristics to consist of “normal” language and turning them into NSM at the end of the process. I did not aim at each characteristic

⁷ *Goodness*, *innocence*, *virtue*, and *religion* were also first identified as keywords and then chosen to name characteristics.

corresponding to a single line in an explication, so the characteristics do not precisely correspond to the features in the previous study.

3. An analysis of the meaning of *chastity*, *chaste*, and *chastely*

The nine sections below correspond to the most prevalent characteristics of “chastity” in the data, each section corresponding to one characteristic. The chapter begins with discussing the idea of chastity as a (1) virtue and continues with chastity as (2) virginity and/or abstinence, which will then be contrasted with chastity as (3) marital love. Next, it will be suggested that chastity had to do with (4) gender and that it was considered a (5) valuable commodity. It was so valuable that it could be (6) attacked and defended. Chastity was also understood as (7) purity;⁸ it was expressed in people’s (8) acts, behaviour and comportment. All these notions were understood in terms of (9) religion.

3.1. Virtue

Virtue is mentioned in the OED entries for *chaste* and *chastity*. The entry on the adjective *chaste* begins with sense 1a, “Pure from unlawful sexual intercourse; continent, *virtuous*” (emphasis added). The entry on *chastity* includes a quote from J. Morley’s book *Voltaire* (iii.140): “Chastity was the supreme *virtue* in the eyes of the church.” (emphasis added).⁹

In the data from CLMET, the adjective *chaste* and the noun *chastity* often occur in the same context as the words *virtuous* and *virtue*. In example (4), the protagonist of the play *Marina* prays to the *chaste* god Diana to defend her *virtue*, that is, her chastity.

- (4) Jove’s virgin-best-loved daughter, bright Diana, Who shar’st with Sol the skies, **chaste** Queen of night, Defend my virtue, and direct my flight. (George Lillo, *Marina*)

It is typical for chastity and virtue to co-occur in passages that mention two or more virtues of people. Example (5) discusses modesty and chastity. Example (6) lists good characteristics of a

⁸ Purity could be seen to relate to virtue, but it is not central to every virtue. Think of diligence, for example.

⁹ Montoya (2020) suggests otherwise about the teachings of the church. According to her, the following seven virtues corresponded to the seven deadly sins: “the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, and the cardinal virtues of justice, prudence, temperance and fortitude” (Montoya 2020:96).

person, including the adjective *chaste*, and then talks about “his many **virtues**” (emphasis added).

- (5) The Women are very modest and **chaste**, and you can’t affront them more than by saying any thing to the contrary of either. (William Rufus Chetwood, *The voyages and adventures of captain Robert Boyle*)

- (6) He was learned in sea affairs, in politics, in mathematics, and in music: he had been on divers [sic] embassies, was of a sweet and obliging temper, sober, **chaste**, very ingenious, a true nobleman and ornament to the court and his prince; nor has he left any behind him who approach his many virtues. (Horace Walpole, *Letters*)

3.2. Virginitly and/or abstinence

There is a reason why the OED primarily defines *chastity* as “[p]urity from *unlawful* sexual intercourse” (s.v. *chastity*, noun, 1a; emphasis added) rather than virginitly. It is clear from the CLMET 3.1. data that married life could also be called *chaste* (Section 3.3). A major sense of *chaste* and *chastity* in the corpus is nevertheless what the OED defines as “[a]bstinence from all sexual intercourse; virginitly, celibacy” (s.v. *chastity*, noun, 2; cf. example (4)). Examples (7) and (8) further represent this sense. Example (7) talks about people who choose chastity to devote their lives to religion. Example (8) in its turn suggests that one can choose chastity because of a sense of honour.

- (7) It was with the utmost difficulty that ancient Rome could support the institution of six vestals; but the primitive church was filled with a great number of persons of either sex, who had devoted themselves to the profession of perpetual **chastity**. (Edward Gibbon, *The decline and fall of the Roman Empire*)

- (8) Albina had been **chaste** as cloister’d saints, Had all, like me, believe’d her honour sacred. (Hannah Cowley, *Albina, Countess Raimond*)

To continue on the theme of virginity, it was a potential scandal if a woman became pregnant before marriage. For example, the following passage from Fielding's *Tom Jones* suggests that an extramarital affair before a wedding was a delicate matter that the pregnant girl's mother might not want to mention.

- (9) She then explained the obligations she had to Jones; not that she was entirely explicit with regard to her daughter; for though she had the utmost confidence in Mr Allworthy, and though there could be no hopes of keeping an affair secret which was unhappily known to more than half a dozen, yet she could not prevail with herself to mention those circumstances which reflected most on the **chastity** of poor Nancy, but smothered that part of her evidence as cautiously as if she had been before a judge, and the girl was now on her trial for the murder of a bastard.

As to eighteenth-century sex education and people's actual behaviour, we know that norms and practices varied. While some people such as the early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft encouraged open discussion about sex, others such as the conservative Richard Polwhele were strictly against it (Jones 2005:145). However, it was customary to give a young couple a book about sex upon their engagement (Porter & Hall 1995:5–6). If a couple was expected to marry, sex could be considered permissible—a pregnancy would then hasten the marriage (Porter & Hall 1995:15).

3.3. Marital love

As has already been mentioned, faithful marital love was considered chaste. The following is a praise of it:

- (10) Wedded love, the **chaste**, the holy, the conjugal tie, will ensure as much happiness as is to be found in this sublunary world; and trust, O reader, in the goodness of God for the future. (Henry David, *An historical account of all the voyages round the world, performed by English navigators*)

In an eighteenth-century sermon on Christian chastity, a preacher called Ovington speaks for marriage between one man and one woman, contending the idea of polygamy. He begins with a quote from the Bible, 1 Corinthians 7: 2: “To avoid Fornication, let every

Man have his own Wife, and let every Woman have her own Husband.” (Ovington 1712:1).

The word *fornication* also occurs in the CLMET, together with the word *adultery*. Note also the adjective *virtuous* in example (11):

- (11) They are said to be a people of good Morals, Virtuous and **Chaste**, each man having only one wife, which he keeps for life; Fornication and Adultry [sic] is hardly known among them. (James Cook, *Captain Cook’s journal during the first voyage round the world*)

Not everyone was so focused on what was sinful, though. The eighteenth century was also a period when people started to think that Nature was good and that the pleasures it offered, for example, in terms of sex, were also good (Porter & Hall 1995:19).

Even Ovington, in spite of his strict morals concerning sex outside wedlock, emphasizes that marriage itself is a good thing. He admits that a single life also has its advantages, but describes married life in a very positive way, even using the word *pleasure*: “tho’ it is more careful and busy, [it] is yet more apt to heighten the Joy, and alleviate the Grief, to double the **Pleasures**, and divide the Distractions of Human Life” (Ovington 1712:6; emphasis added.)

3.4. Gender

In theory, chastity in marriage concerned both the husband and wife. In practise, the CLMET data discusses wives’ chastity more often than husbands’ chastity—a search for the nouns *wife* and *husband* produces 32 hits for discussions about wives’ chastity and 9 mentions of husbands’ chastity. The following are examples of *chaste wife*:

- (12) Petronius Maximus, a wealthy senator of the Anician family, who had been twice consul, was possessed of a **chaste** and beautiful wife ... (Edward Gibbon, *The decline and fall of the Roman Empire*)
- (13) And then he will see the Difference between such a one, and a **chaste** Wife, whose Interests are bound up in his own, and will admire you more than ever he did ...

(Samuel Richardson, *Letters written to and for particular friends*)

This is in line with a description of the ideal English housewife that stems from the seventeenth century. She is described as attesting many virtues such as courage, patience and diligence, but above all, she is expected to be “of **chaste** thought” (Markham 1986 [1615]:8; emphasis added).

More generally, more attention in the CLMET is paid to women’s than men’s chastity. Nouns for “woman” (e.g. *lady*, *woman*, *maid*), expressions such as *the weaker sex*, and the adjectives *female* (*female chastity*) and *womanly* (*womanly grace*) occur 232 times with the *chastity* words, whereas nouns for “man” and the adjectives *male* and *manly* only occur 47 times with them.¹⁰ The following example discusses the chastity of daughters:

- (14) We must either submit to the Terms of our cruel and ensnaring Conqueror; or yield up our tender Infants, our Wives, and **chaste** Daughters to the bloody and brutal Lusts of the violating Soldiery. (Henry Brooke, *The fool of quality*)

A passage in the CLMET even explains why it is the case that more emphasis is laid on women’s than men’s chastity. Hume says that “the laws of chastity are much stricter over” the female sex because it is women who give birth to children (example (2)). Moreover, the data suggests that women’s chastity is one central basis of world order:

- (15) The **Chastity** of Woman is the only Basis upon which the Order, Honour, and Peace of the World can be built. (Henry Brooke, *The fool of quality*)

¹⁰ These figures are approximate since I used a simple heuristic in arriving at them. I first looked at all the instances of lines that I had decided were predominantly about gender, picked up the relevant words in them and then used these (e.g. *woman*, *male*) as search terms. This way I found more data, and I checked if it contained any further words that could be used as search terms.

3.5. Valuable commodity

It follows that chastity, and especially women's chastity, is something very valuable that should not be lost. This idea is labelled a "prevailing opinion" by Mary Wollstonecraft in her famous book *Vindication of the rights of women*:

- (16) [T]his remark gives force to the prevailing opinion, that with **chastity** all is lost that is respectable in woman.

The opposite of losing one's chastity is preserving one's chastity:

- (17) A Christian has still nobler motives to incite her to preserve her **chastity** and acquire modesty, for her body has been called the Temple of the living God; of that God who requires more than modesty of mien. (Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the rights of women*)

These metaphors are similar to those used in the contemporary American evangelical sexual abstinence campaigns. A couple of quotes regarding those campaigns will further illustrate why I decided to call chastity a (metaphorical) valuable commodity (Kövecses 1986:95). The movement "claims that virginity is a **gift** that teens have the agency to **lose, find, take, and give**" (Gardner 2011:24; emphasis added); in other words, virginity is a commodity that can be manipulated. The commodity has a value: "Choosing to be sexually abstinent as a teenager endows the gift of virginity with increased value, which is portrayed as a significant gift to one's future spouse." (Gardner 2011: 34). Note, however, that in the eighteenth-century data, chastity continued to be a valuable commodity after a person was married.

3.6. Attack and defence

A topos that occurs repeatedly in the CLMET data is that chastity can be attacked and defended. This topos is so typical of the period that one author has called his book about the eighteenth-century novel of sentiment, *Virtue in distress* (Brissenden 1974). He is referring, among other things, to Samuel Richardson's novels *Clarissa* and *Pamela*. In both books, a man behaves in a way that threatens the female protagonist's chastity, that is, her virginity before marriage.

Similarly, in the CLMET, it is, again, a woman's chastity that is usually discussed. In the following example, the woman's chastity is considered a fortress and the attacker proceeds by digging:

- (18) She loved his person, she was dazzled by his rank; and he knew so well how to improve the opportunities and advantages he derived from her unhappy situation, that he gradually proceeded in sapping from one degree of intimacy to another, until all the bulwarks of her **chastity** were undermined, and she submitted to his desire; not with the reluctance of a vanquished people, but with all the transports of a joyful city, that opens its gates to receive a darling prince returned from conquest. (Tobias George Smollett, *The adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom*)

While both Clarissa and Pamela are virgins to begin with, the CLMET suggests that even a wife's chastity can be attacked. It describes a wife's chastity as a "fortress on a rock":

- (19) You are attacking a fortress on a rock; a **chastity** so strongly defended, as well by a happy natural disposition of mind as by the strongest principles of religion and virtue, implanted by education and nourished and improved by habit, that the woman must be invincible even without that firm and constant affection of her husband which would guard a much looser and worse-disposed heart. (Henry Fielding, *Amelia*)

Example (19) suggests several weapons that defend the woman's chastity: a "happy natural disposition", the "strongest principles of religion and virtue", education, and habit. To put it differently, the woman defends herself. However, example (19) also suggests that the husband guards her wife's virtue. Thus, the defender of chastity can be either the woman herself or someone else.

In example (20), the woman explains a situation where her self-defence, that is, her "shrieks and cries", did not convince the "people of the house" that her virtue was attacked. The reason was that the attacker pretended to be her husband:

- (20) You will wonder, doubtless, by what law either I should be confined for endeavouring to defend my **chastity**, or he, for generously assisting me; but the detested artful count had pretended himself my husband; and under the sanction of that name it was, that he met no opposition to his wicked will from the people of the house, and rendered them regardless of my shrieks and cries. (Eliza Fowler Haywood, *The fortunate foundlings*)

It has been suggested that gentlemen of the time “were everywhere still expected to enjoy their traditional freedoms” and that this could lead to considerable suffering for women (Brissenden 1974:84). However, Gregory (1774:100), a contemporary author, thought that few Englishmen wanted to waste their time attempting to conquer women (emphasis added):

Men employed in the pursuits of business, ambition, or pleasure, will not give themselves the trouble to engage a woman’s affections, merely from the vanity of **conquest**, and of **triumphing over** the heart of an innocent and **defenceless** girl.

3.7. Purity

To continue on the same book, Gregory (1774:35–36) instructed his daughters as follows as regards *virgin purity*, which I understand to mean “chastity before marriage” (emphasis added):

*Virgin purity is of that delicate nature, that it cannot bear certain things without **contamination**. It is always in your power to avoid these. No man, but a brute or a fool, will insult a woman with conversation which he sees gives her pain; nor will he dare to do it, if she resent the injury with a becoming spirit.—There is dignity in **conscious virtue** which is able to awe the most shameless and abandoned of men.*

Note that there are two sides to the metaphor of purity. On the one hand, one can discuss it positively by referring to things that are considered good, such as virtue or purity itself. On the other hand, one can discuss it through mentioning its opposites, such as *contamination*. Note also Gregory’s suggestion that virtue is something a person consciously performs. This very much relates to the next section, 3.8. Act, behaviour, and comportment.

In the CLMET, one finds both the ideas of purity and dirt. In the following example, the speaker praises the chaste ladies of the English court, describing them as *spotless*.

- (21) We have no jester at court, Monsieur le Count, said I; the last we had was in the licentious reign of Charles II.;— since which time our manners have been so gradually refining, that our court at present is so full of patriots, who wish for NOTHING but the honours and wealth of their country;—and our ladies are all so **chaste**, so spotless, so good, so devout, —there is nothing for a jester to make a jest of. (Laurence Sterne, *A sentimental journey through France and Italy*)

By contrast, example (22) talks about a *chaste bed* that has been *defiled*. The chaste bed in this case is the marriage bed, and it is a wife who accuses her husband:

- (22) Besides, if it had been out of doors I had not mattered it so much; but with my own servant, in my own house, under my own roof, to defile my own **chaste** bed, which to be sure he hath, with his beastly stinking whores. (Henry Fielding, *The history of Tom Jones, a foundling*)

The data also talks about the possibility that someone corrupts another person's chastity. In this case, a husband suspects a priest to have seduced his wife:

- (23) As the disease of being henpecked was epidemic in the parish, he durst not express the least hint of his uneasiness to her, but resolved to take vengeance on the libidinous priest, who he imagined had corrupted the **chastity** of his spouse. (Tobias George Smollett, *The adventures of Peregrine Pickle*)

3.8. Act, behaviour, and comportment

While it is self-evident that chastity is a matter of behaviour, it is important to notice that in texts from the eighteenth century, weight is laid not only on sexual intercourse, but also on a person's, especially a woman's, general comportment. Gregory (1774:28) advises his

daughters to be modest and quiet in company, suggesting that even their facial expressions count as sociability. He tells them that it is good to blush because it signals innocence (Gregory 1774:26–27). These thoughts match those from the CLMET data:

- (24) Her **chastity** is evident as truth; It glows, it animates each speaking line Of her enchanting face. (Hannah Cowley, *Albina, Countess Raimond*)
- (25) For a delicate Virtue is, like a delicate **Chastity**, that will blush to have been seen, or, even suspected to have been seen within the Suburbs of Drury. (Henry Brooke, *The fool of quality*)

Chastity is thus a way of being, but it is also a way of doing. The CLMET data mentions, for example, a *chaste embrace* and women who *chastely sit down*:

- (26) Forget not to pray, for me,—[Turning to Maria] would you, bright Excellence, permit me the Honour of a **chaste Embrace**,—the last Happiness this World cou'd give were mine, [She enclines towards him; they embrace.] (George Lillo, *The London merchant*)
- (27) Friendship and Virtue met together, and kiss'd each other in the street; the golden age returned, and hung over the town of Abdera -- every Abderite took his eaten pipe, and every Abderitish woman left her purple web, and **chastely** sat her down and listened to the song. (Laurence Sterne, *A sentimental journey through France and Italy*)

3.9. Religion

It has been claimed that the discussion on virtues took a secular turn in the eighteenth century (Fowler & Ganofsky 2020). Perhaps therefore much of the religious vocabulary in the CLMET data is not particularly confessional. The original list of characteristics included the item “Christianity: understood as a result of personal relationship to God”. It was targeted at data such as example (18), which explains that a *Christian* is *the Temple of the living God*. However, religion

was mostly present in the data in a more “subdued” manner, not in terms of explanations, but as something already familiar to people. It was present in such expressions as *hypocrite*¹¹ (example (1)); *religion* (example (3)); *cloister, sacred* (example (8)); *holy, goodness of God* (example 10); *the strongest principles of religion and virtue* (example (19)); *devout* (example (21)); and *pray* (example (26)). This category was therefore renamed “Religion”. This in fact agrees with the manner in which Gregory (1774:9–25) addresses “Religion” when giving advice to his daughters. He does not even use the word *God* let alone *Jesus* but talks about *the Supreme Being* (Gregory 1774:15). When he discusses what he calls “Religion”, he uses such words as *heart, feeling, delicacy, sensibility, devotion, pious, virtue, propriety* and *dignity* (Gregory 1774:9–25).

4. Discussion

The present article has now discussed the eighteenth-century concept of “chastity” from several angles. It is time to turn to explicating it in NSM. The explication of the core concept of “chastity” will first be presented and then explained. Here comes the explication:

Chastity

it can be like this:

Someone X thinks something like this:

“I am not Y’s husband_[m]/ wifer_[m]

because of this, I do not want Y to touch some parts of my body,

because of this, I do not want to touch some parts of Y’s body

I do not touch some parts of Y’s body”

it is good if a person can be like this,

God_[m] wants people to be like this

Let us begin from the second-last line. The analysis began from establishing that “chastity” was considered a virtue. To explicate virtue, the explication includes a line borrowed from Goddard (2001:664):

¹¹ I am thinking of the sense “One who falsely professes to be virtuously or religiously inclined”, as recorded by the OED (s.v. *hypocrite* adjective 1, my underlining).

it is good if a person can be like this

This line fits the notion that chastity is a valuable commodity—it is an asset to a person.

The explication also borrows a line from Wierzbicka (1992b:185) who, in her explications of words for virtues such as *pietas*, uses the first line:

X thinks something like this

It is similarly of interest in the case of “chastity” what a chaste person would think.

After discussing chastity as a virtue, the present study discussed chastity as virginity or abstinence from sex. However, this explication also takes into account that it was within the bounds of chastity for a married person to have sex. The explication takes as its starting point the negation of the possibility that a chaste person would have sex with someone else than their husband or wife. Line

“I am not Y’s husband_[m]/ wife_[m]”

is modelled after Goddard’s explication of the Malay virtue of *setia* (2001:675), which includes the line

X thinks: I am Y’s Z (wife, citizen, etc.)

However, it is updated to include molecules.¹²

The following lines then explicate abstinence from sex with a person who is not one’s spouse:

because of this, I do not want Y to touch some parts of my body,
because of this, I do not want to touch some parts of Y’s body
I do not touch some parts of Y’s body”

¹² Semantic molecules “are non-primitive meanings (hence, ultimately decomposable into semantic primes) that function as units in the semantic structure of other, yet more complex words” (the NSM home page, 2022). They are signalled by _[m].

This part of the explication also covers “defence” in the unfortunate case of “attack”.

The last line of the explication of the concept of “chastity”

God_[m] wants people to be like this

conveys the notion that “chastity” was a religious ideal.¹³ This line also suggests that, eventually, the purity of chaste people was religious purity.

The characteristics that seem to be missing from this explication of “sexual chastity” then are (4) gender, and (8) acts, behaviour, and comportment. It would be relatively easy to change the explication so that it would only concern women’s chastity, but the ideal also applied to men. It has therefore been decided to include male chastity. As to acts, behaviour, and comportment, it has been suggested in the analysis that they had their origins in chaste thoughts, and they are the gist of the explication.

It is clear that the explication sketches an ideal. It would of course be quite possible, for example, that, in real life, a person might not have chaste thoughts but would manage to behave in an outwardly chaste manner. To put it differently, one might want to touch but not touch.

There is something about the explication of “chastity” given above that differs from the expectations: there is nothing about the feelings of the chaste person. The data did not clearly suggest a negative or positive emotion to go along with chastity. Or rather, “chastity” could be associated both with positive emotions, such as happiness in a marriage, and with negative emotions, such as being shocked by someone’s threatening one’s chastity. The question then is how central it is to a virtue that the virtuous person feels something. For example, when Goddard (2001) explicates three Malay words for virtues, two of the explications include the component *feel* but one does not.

5. Conclusion

This article has discussed the eighteenth-century concept of “chastity”, as emerging from the *Corpus of Late Modern English (CLMET)*, complemented by some culturo-historical background

¹³ “God” is explicated, for example, in Wierzbicka (2020:262).

including both eighteenth-century books and modern commentaries. It has identified nine prominent characteristics of “chastity” that have been considered in explicating the concept of “chastity” in NSM. These are: (1) “chastity” as a virtue; (2) “chastity” as virginity or abstinence from sex; (3) “chastity” as marital love; (4) “chastity” as a quality in a woman or, more seldom, a man; (5) “chastity” as a “valuable commodity”; (6) “chastity” as something that needs to be defended from attacks; (7) “chastity” as purity; (8) “chastity” as the quality of a person’s acts, behaviour and comportment; and (9) “chastity” as a religious ideal.

The “characteristics” approach allows us to see a concept from several angles before settling for an NSM explication. At the same time, it is one way of documenting one’s way to an explication. The final explication is as if “distilled” from the data through first identifying characteristics and then using them to arrive at an NSM explication. All along the way, information is condensed to a pithier form.

A main characteristic of “chastity” in the eighteenth century was that it was regarded as a virtue. That virtues were a common topic of discussion in the eighteenth century suggests that, to understand the period better, we should also analyze other virtues such as “diligence” or “temperance” in further studies.

The topic of virtues can also be approached from a more contemporary or a contrastive point of view. For example, Wierzbicka (1992b:191–195) has explicated the Christian concept of “humility”. It would be interesting to study eighteenth-century data on “humility” to see if it overlaps with Wierzbicka’s (1992b:193) explication, but it would also be interesting to study contemporary data to see how “humility” is understood nowadays. Furthermore, it would be of interest to compare languages.

A further question is what our contemporary virtues are and how they could be explicated. It would, moreover, be of interest to see which parts of an explication would be common to virtues and which parts would vary.

Although it may seem that “old” virtues like chastity are relatively irrelevant to contemporary life, they may suddenly become rather relevant. As I am writing this, there is much discussion about abortion, which is no longer a federal right in the United States. There

are people in the United States who speak for chastity as a way to avoid abortions. NSM scholars could tackle this relevant contemporary discussion by explicating key notions.

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Appendix: The list of 24 characteristics¹⁴

- 1. Act, behaviour: a person does something in a chaste way**
2. Age: connected with age
3. Antiquity: reference to Greek or Roman gods
- 4. Appearance: a person looks chaste**
- 5. Attack and defence**
6. Beauty
- 7. Christianity: understood as a result of personal relationship to God > Religion**
- 8. Gender: connected with gender**
9. Goodness
10. Honour
11. Innocence
- 12. Marital love**
13. Morality
14. Part of the body: e.g. ears, eyes
15. Passion, passions, sentiment
16. Person, e.g. lady, servants
- 17. Purity**
18. Truth

¹⁴ The twelve most important characteristics in bold. Note that in the final version of the article characteristics 1 and 4 have been combined, and likewise characteristics 21 and 22.

19. Valuable commodity to be kept and preserved

20. Virginity, abstinence

21. Virtue: the word virtue is mentioned

22. Virtue: appears in a list of virtues

23. Wisdom, learning

24. World order