

A Virtuous Woman, Who Can Find?

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**Abstract**

The contemporary theatre world lacks prominent, virtuous female roles, which are needed to inspire both the actors who play them and the audience members who witness them to emulate their virtuous characteristics. Virtuous characters encourage society to strive for excellence, as well as provide excellent role models for the next generation of young women. From a Christian perspective, a virtuous female role strives to exemplify the traits in Proverbs 31: trustworthy, kind, industrious, selfless, strong, honorable, and God-fearing. The critically-acclaimed plays *The Humans* and *Good People* feature prominent female characters who do not exhibit these virtues. Although each play contains one virtuous character, she plays an insignificant role. These plays exemplify the need for prominent virtuous females in contemporary theatre.

## **A Virtuous Woman, Who Can Find?**

### **Introduction: The Value of Virtue**

In a world where relativism threatens to stamp out all traces of morality and purpose, Christians must strive for virtue more than ever before to promote a lifestyle grounded in ethics and truth. In *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*, Prior states that the philosophy of virtue is tied to the idea of human purpose (18). Just as one must understand the purpose of a bicycle to determine its excellence as a vehicle, we must understand humanity's purpose to understand human excellence, or virtue. Christians know the ultimate purpose of mankind, which is to glorify God. With this knowledge, Christians ought to value virtue as an end in itself, rather than a means to an end, because the act of living a virtuous life glorifies God. In a post-Enlightenment, contemporary society, however, culture no longer agrees on humanity's ultimate purpose. Without an understanding of purpose, virtue is reduced to mere emotivism: moral decisions based in an individual's subjective preferences, driven by emotions (19). This relativistic mindset is incredibly dangerous, for a lack of morals leads to a chaotic, lawless society. In "The Danger of Relativism in Reason," philosophers McCormick and Kuchuris warn of this danger, saying: "A dangerous side-effect of [cultural relativism] is that it distorts the humanity of others making it possible to justify all manner of atrocities" (400). It is imperative, then, that Christians fight against this danger by exemplifying and promoting virtue at every opportunity, since they know the purpose of life and therefore the value of virtue.

Virtue is also valuable for society at large, not only to those who wish to please God. Virtues are valuable in themselves, severed from any religious connotation. In *After Virtue*, philosopher and ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre describes the tragedy of any life lived without virtues, going as far as to say that a life without them is considered defective, and not the best

kind of life for a person to strive to live (201). Carter Crockett and Alistair Anderson—director and professor of the Gordon College Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership, respectively—note that “virtues are not merely means to other ends, but sufficient qualities in their own right. They are valuable in and of themselves...following Aristotelian thought, the possession of courage, for instance, is a worthy aspiration” (10-11). On a practical level, Crockett and Anderson discuss the value of virtues from a business perspective in entrepreneurship and marketing endeavors, saying the following:

Virtues...are meant to represent an idealistic standard; one which will always remain beyond reach, yet will result in the perfecting of those seeking it. Such a perspective holds explanatory power for understanding what Machan has described as “authentic” and sustainable entrepreneurship. It suggests a framework for the longterm viability of any given enterprise, its employees, and even the greater community. (11)

Virtues are essential, even for nonbelievers, because they inspire society to strive for excellence, which benefits individuals, businesses, and society.

### **The Need for Virtue in Entertainment**

Society’s preference-based attitude is reflected in contemporary culture’s approach to evaluating entertainment. In *Culture Counts*, philosopher and public commentator Roger Scruton, describes this, saying: “We have entered a time when aesthetic judgments are routinely avoided. People have tastes, certainly, but these tastes are no different from their tastes in food—desires for gratification of the kind that we can witness as easily in an animal as in a rational being. What was distinctive of the aesthetic experience—namely, that it was founded in the perception of value—has dropped from the picture, and desire alone remains” (72). Since this preference-led attitude toward entertainment reigns supreme in contemporary culture, box-office numbers alone

are the measure of a successful and valuable film or show (72). Therefore, anyone who objects to excessive or explicit violent or sexual content is merely expressing a preference and cannot call a piece of art problematic when box office numbers soar. As C.S. Lewis says in *Mere Christianity*, Christians believe that sexual desire is healthy within the bounds of marriage, but it should not be acted on outside of marriage (105). Society, however, does not believe that desires have their time and place, rather that all desires should be indulged without restraint, which leads to entertainment rife with pornographic, violent, hedonistic content (Scruton 73).

David Ives' Broadway play *Venus in Fur* gives an example of immorality in entertainment, particularly in the way the play objectifies and glorifies the female protagonist. In 2012, Nina Arianda won the Tony Award for Best Actress for her portrayal of Vanda, a vulgar, crass, brazen actress who shows up at an audition for a stage adaptation of the sadomasochistic book *Venus in Fur* (Ives). Thomas, the director as well as the playwright of the piece, reads the play along with Vanda, and both get caught up in the sexual, sadomasochistic scenes. Vanda's sexuality is emphasized throughout the show, as she begins the play by stripping down to little more than lingerie, giving the excuse that she wanted to dress the part (3). The play implies Vanda's promiscuousness, as she casually details a sexual encounter with a man on the train (2). During the play reading, she seduces Thomas as they act out various sexual scenes, despite him having a fiancé (38). Throughout *Venus in Fur*, Vanda is characterized by promiscuity, vulgarity, and irreverence.

Why does it matter if entertainment is filled with immorality rather than virtue? The answer is that entertainment has a stronghold over modern culture. Psychotherapist and anthropologist Jonathan Kaufman asserts that the entertainment industry "has provided the mode to not only define trends, shape culture but influence our identities in the most profound ways"

(“Mindset Matters”). Entertainment has influenced society to embrace preferences as morality, creating a society that is confused, insecure, and searching for meaning and purpose. Because of the astounding power that entertainment holds over society, it should instead be used to promote positive, excellent lifestyles. If entertainment has the power to “define trends,” let it be a trend of virtue and excellence, rather than one of immorality and confusion.

Not only is entertainment instrumental in shaping society, but it is also one of the best tools to teach one how to live a virtuous life. Scruton cites Aristotle in saying that virtue is best taught by imitation, but Scruton then acknowledges that this saying is too simple for real life (34). Although each day is filled with opportunities to practice basic justice or self-control, no one can practice to learn virtue for more complex or challenging circumstances until he or she is in the thick of a devastating or tragic situation. Scruton suggests a solution: “by practicing virtue in our small corner of the world, we will be more ready to practice it in the great field of human conflict. Even if that is not so, we can nevertheless gain the knowledge of what to feel, in those testing circumstances. We cannot be sure, when the time comes, that we shall feel as we ought, but we can rehearse in imagination the knowledge that we might one day require” (34). Scruton says that narratives and pictures and homilies gift us with the stories of those who have come before, allowing us to sympathize with them and, if not imitate them, understand their motives and gain emotional knowledge of the trials that will soon befall us (34). In other words, before experiencing a trial ourselves, it is best to learn how to conduct ourselves by observing another person’s journey, and this is best achieved by watching fictional stories through entertainment.

Because observing another’s journey through trials is the best way to prepare for encountering trials, theatre is a powerful tool to teach audiences how to live a virtuous life. In “Theatre, Society, Education,” Academy Award-winning screenwriter and director Dudley

Nichols states that theatre will cause behavioral patterns in society, explaining, “for man imitates what he admires, and as drama imitates life, so life will imitate the drama which is presented to it as patterns of living which it has not yet experienced. We see this in children who mimic the cops and robbers, Indians and cowboys, of the movies; and in adults who unconsciously copy the romantic behavior and attitudes of their film heroes and heroines” (182). Through theatre, audience members can observe and learn from fictional (or sometimes historical) characters going through trials and challenging circumstances. If a character in a play overcomes trials and lives his or her life striving for excellence and virtue, audience members will be inspired to do the same. If the character responds poorly to challenges and reacts with apathy and defeatism, audience members may be influenced to respond to difficulties in kind. While a character in a play cannot be held solely responsible for audience members’ life choices, it can certainly be deeply influential. Because an audience is so prone to imitate what it sees on stage or screen, it is imperative that characters in theatre promote virtue.

Characters in theatre have the potential for influence not only over audience members but also over the actors who play them. Mark Seton, a researcher in the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Sydney, created the term “post-dramatic-stress disorder,” asserting that “actors may often prolong addictive, codependent and, potentially, destructive habits of the characters they have embodied” (Jarrett, “Acting Changes the Brain”). Jarrett says that although people have historically disagreed over whether or not acting actually has a detrimental effect to an actor’s brain, concrete research has since been conducted and yields results suggesting that an actor’s sense of self is changed significantly by the characters they play.

Jarrett relates a study published in *The Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* by a group from Dartmouth College and Princeton University led by Megan Meyer, where researchers



asked volunteers to rate themselves: their personalities, memories, or physical attributes, then to rate them again from the perspective of another person. For example, volunteers might rate how strongly certain character traits apply to themselves, and then rate themselves again as if they were a different person, say, a friend, taking the survey. The volunteers then rated themselves a third time, this time as themselves. The consistent finding was that their initial self-ratings had changed to be more similar to the ratings they gave themselves as if they were another person. For example, if volunteers had originally rated themselves as moderately confident, but they rated themselves as highly confident when taking the test as someone else, they tended to see themselves as more confident when they rated themselves a third time. This change in self-evaluation was still apparent even 24 hours after the survey. Meyer and her colleagues said that “[B]y simply thinking about another person, we may adapt our self to take the shape of that person” (Jarrett, “Acting Changes the Brain”). Jarrett says that, in light of these findings, it is little wonder that actors, who sometimes spend weeks, months or even years fully immersed in the role of another person, might experience a drastic alteration to their sense of self. Meyer says that “by roleplaying or acting out the kind of person we would like to become, or merely by thinking about and spending time with people who embody the kind of attributes we would like to see in ourselves, we can find that our sense of self changes in desirable ways” (Jarrett, “Acting Changes the Brain”). This research suggests that virtuous, excellent roles will cultivate virtuous, excellent character traits in the actors who play them. Conversely, vulgar, hopeless, and negative roles may tend to cultivate these same undesirable and damaging character traits in the actors who play them.

### **The Virtuous Female**

Virtuous female characters must be represented in theatre because of the enormous impact that the theatre has on young female audience members. Playwright Melissa Bell emphasizes the powerful influence of theatre on young girls, stating, “theatre can play a key role in empowering adolescent girls and aiding them in maintaining their ‘voice’...when pursued in a careful manner, the theatrical arts can greatly enhance the adolescent girl’s sense of self-worth” (ii). However, when playwright Suzan Zeder conducted an analysis of 42 children’s plays, she discovered that the plays’ female protagonists “tended to be far more passive, to make fewer decisions, and to have far less influence on events than male characters did” (186). These plays that Zeder analyzed had huge influence, meeting the criteria of being “currently popular, with that popularity determined by the number of productions which the play has received in the past three years” (7). This problem of limited, uninfluential characters is not limited to popular children’s theatre. According to director and playwright Grace Barnes, “Roles for women are becoming increasingly one-dimensional...and women onstage are frequently denied their own identity or any complexity” (12). And as the quality of female roles decreases, the number of children attending the theatre increases. The 2017-18 Broadway season sported record attendances of kids and teens under 18, at 2.1 million, for the second year in a row (Haring). Unprecedented numbers of young, impressionable girls are attending theatre to watch shows with weak, passive, and confused female characters. It is more important than ever before that the female roles portrayed onstage are strong women of virtue, to inspire the next generation of women to be the same.

### **The New Woman**

Unfortunately, contemporary theatre in America can feature female characters who are characterized by vulgarity, promiscuity, and irreverence. Lee writes that this trend in theatre

started at beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the opening of a Broadway show entitled *Sapho*. The play tells the story of Fanny Le Grand, a woman who lives with a younger man, Jean Gaussin, and acts as his wife, without marrying him (193). When Jean learns of Fanny's illegitimate son, he feels betrayed and leaves her. The father of Fanny's child is released from prison, and he begs Fanny for a second chance at a life together, which Fanny accepts for the sake of her child. The public was enraged by this play, denouncing the show as displaying "morally lax standards" and as "an insult to decent women and girls" (Lee 193). Critics were especially enraged by the ending scene of Act 1, in which Jean takes Fanny upstairs to his bedroom in a passionate and romantic gesture (193-194). Lee states that this show, which opened on Broadway in the year 1900, was instrumental in shattering the morality and sexual suppression that had characterized female theatrical roles of times past (194). Lee says that "certainly Sapho's depiction of a sexually promiscuous, unapologetic woman charting her own way in the world offended conservative sensibilities and undermined the delicate moral code that dominated the previous century, one predicated on the domestication of female activity and the erasure of female desire (194). But more than that, this play reflected a cultural shift in the perception of a woman's role that took place in the later decades of the Nineteenth century, culminating in the "New Woman" (Lee 194). Lee describes the "New Woman" as follows:

The New Woman emerged in the later decades of the nineteenth century as a reaction to the conservative social and political milieu that strictly prescribed female behavior. The New Woman challenged gender paradigms and experimented with "new" ways of living as a woman in the world. She desired not only 195 professional opportunities but personal and sexual fulfillment. Generally, she was unmarried, defining herself by her rejection of traditional domestic roles

and the stipulation that women's biology was women's destiny. She had ambitions and goals, and insisted on the intellectual, political, and cultural freedom to pursue her interests. She agitated for equality in employment and education. And, above all, she demanded the vote. (194-195)

While this cultural shift had countless positive implications that led to massive strides in the fight for women's rights, it did so at the cost of virtue and morality. Theatre promoted promiscuousness and vulgarity alongside ambition and equality. In an effort to pull away from being sexualized by the male gaze, females began to objectify themselves, to claim ownership over their sexuality. Ironically, this only made the female character more of a sexualized figure and put more sexuality on display for the male gaze, even though it was "claimed" and presented by females themselves.

### **Defining a Virtuous Woman**

What defines a virtuous woman, and therefore a virtuous female role? From a Christian perspective, the answer is found in the book of Proverbs, chapter 31, which lays out a series of traits that characterize a virtuous woman (*King James Version*). The chapter includes a poem written in twenty-two stanzas—each of which begin with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet—that lay out a series of traits that characterize a virtuous woman (Claassens 10). Bestselling author and speaker Elizabeth George says that the Proverbs 31 woman "models for all women—young or seasoned, married or single—all that is beautiful in God's eyes" (9). Proverbs 31 lays out a series of traits that characterize a virtuous woman. Because of a sin nature, humans are not capable of always achieving the traits of a virtuous woman (Rom. 3.10). Therefore, from a Christian perspective, a virtuous woman (and consequently a virtuous female role) *strives* to exemplify the character traits found in Proverbs 31 to the best of her ability, no matter the circumstances.

Proverbs 31 begins the description of a virtuous woman as follows: “Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil. She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life” (10-12). According to these verses, a virtuous woman is trusted by her husband, and she is good to him for her entire life. This translates to the virtues of *trustworthiness* and *kindness*.

Proverbs 31 continues: “She seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands. She is like the merchants' ships; she bringeth her food from afar. She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household, and a portion to her maidens. She considereth a field, and buyeth it: with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard” (13-16). These verses describe a virtuous woman as someone who works hard, someone who takes care of her household, and someone who gives selflessly to others. This can be condensed into the virtues of *industriousness* and *selflessness*. Proverbs 31 goes on to say the following:

She girdeth her loins with strength, and strengtheneth her arms. She perceiveth that her merchandise is good: her candle goeth not out by night. She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff. She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy. Her husband is known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land. She maketh fine linen, and selleth it; and delivereth girdles unto the merchant. (17-24)

These verses continue to describe the industriousness of a virtuous woman, depicting how she labors late into the night and makes a profit with the work of her hands. This passage also reiterates her kindness, showing that she gives willingly to those in need. The chapter continues: “Strength and honour are her clothing; and she shall rejoice in time to come. She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness. She looketh well to the ways of her

household, and eateth not the bread of idleness. Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her” (Prov. 31.25-28). This passage describes the virtuous woman as being clothed in the virtue of *strength*. The passage also says she is clothed with honor and describes her children and her husband praising her. While honor isn’t a virtue itself, the passage emphasizes that a virtuous life is an honorable thing, worthy of praise. The chapter mentions that the virtuous woman opens her mouth with the virtue of *wisdom* (Prov. 31.26). The passage once again emphasizes the virtuous woman’s industriousness, describing how she works hard to care for her household (Prov. 31.27). The passage continues: “Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all. Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the LORD, she shall be praised” (Prov. 31.29-30). Verse 29 states that a virtuous woman is one who excels in virtue, not one who half-heartedly exhibits these characteristics from time to time. Verse 30 describes a virtuous woman as *God-fearing*, which is the motivation for living a virtuous life—a woman lives a virtuous life because she fears God and wants to glorify Him. In summary, Proverbs 31 defines a virtuous woman as one who is *trustworthy, kind, industrious, selfless, strong, wise, and God-fearing*.

### **Analyzing Contemporary Plays**

The next portion of this thesis will evaluate the presence of virtuous female roles in current theatre by taking two contemporary, critically acclaimed plays—*The Humans* and *Good People*—and analyzing each of the female characters through the lens of the Proverbs 31 woman. These plays were selected by the following process: first, the winners of the Tony Award for Best Play from 2010 to 2020 were examined. Of these ten plays, only three took place in a contemporary setting, and only two of these plays featured prominent female characters, one of which was *The Humans*. To expand the selection of plays with prominent female characters, plays

that featured winners of the Tony Award for Best Actress from 2010 to 2020 were studied. Of this list, only two plays were additionally nominated for the Tony Award for Best Play, one of which was the play *Good People*. This next part of the thesis will analyze the plays *The Humans* and *Good People*, evaluating each female character based on their words, actions, and what others say about them. The characters will be analyzed to determine if their characters are trustworthy, kind, industrious, selfless, strong, wise, and God-fearing, to see if they qualify as a virtuous female role.

### **The Humans**

*The Humans*, by Stephen Karam, tells of a family thanksgiving dinner where conflicts, tensions, and secrets surface. This critically acclaimed play was nominated for six Tony Awards and won four, including the 2016 Tony Award for Best Play. *The New York Times* described *The Humans* as a “blisteringly funny, bruisingly sad and altogether wonderful play” (Isherwood). The show begins shortly after the arrival of Deirdre and Erik at their daughter, Brigid’s apartment. Brigid lives in a New York City apartment with her several-years-older boyfriend, Richard. Brigid’s sister, Aimee, is visiting as well as their declining grandmother with dementia, Momo. As the evening progresses, the family struggles to navigate loss, distrust, and uncertainty.

In *The Humans*, the character of Brigid exhibits the virtues of industriousness. Brigid demonstrates her industriousness when she tells her parents she has been bartending at two different places every night to pay off her student debt (26). Her boyfriend praises her work ethic, saying that she has also been desperately applying for artist grants and residencies on top of her demanding work schedule (83). Brigid clearly has been working diligently and responsibly, demonstrating the virtue of industriousness.

While Brigid demonstrates love for her family, she is not characterized overall by the virtues of kindness or selflessness. Brigid displays love for her declining grandmother, Momo,

when she hugs her and tells her that she loves her after making a good-natured joke at her expense (37). Brigid also expresses her love for her family as they toast one another (38). She supports Aimee, telling her that she's a catch and will still be able to date after a recent breakup (63-64). But throughout the play, Brigid demonstrates rudeness, especially towards her mother. When her mother makes a joke, Brigid disrespectfully tells her she's had enough wine and shouldn't try to be a comedian (44). Erik tells Brigid to be nicer to her mother, and, after Brigid leaves, Deirdre says that everything she says seems to annoy Brigid (44). Later, Brigid rudely cuts off Deirdre when she begins to describe her volunteer job (77). When Deirdre is overcome with emotion at the dinner table, Brigid mouths "get a grip" to herself, which is implied to be a comment toward her mother, demonstrating that Brigid is harboring bitterness and annoyance toward Deirdre (Karam 78). When Brigid learns of her parents' marital and financial struggles, Brigid lashes out at Erik saying, "you're not sleeping and Mom's eating her feelings, /it's freaking me out" (104). Deirdre overhears this and is clearly hurt by Brigid's words (104). Although Brigid gives a half-hearted, rough apology, it is laced with criticism of Deirdre rather than focusing on what Brigid did wrong (105). Brigid's unkind interactions expose her self-centered attitude; she doesn't think about how her words may affect others. Her words are mainly characterized by sarcasm, not by wisdom and kindness. Throughout *The Humans*, while Brigid says a sweet thing from time to time, her role is mainly characterized by unkindness, especially towards her mother.

In *The Humans*, the character of Aimee displays the virtues of selflessness and kindness. Aimee demonstrates selflessness by quickly jumping to her family's aid, like when she offers to clean up the kitchen after Momo almost burns herself on the stove and knocks over pots and pans, making a mess (69). Aimee also offers to help take Momo in her wheelchair downstairs so that Brigid and Erik can help Richard (27). This action also reveals Aimee's kindness, because she



mentions wanting to spend more time with Momo (27). Aimee also demonstrates kindness in her interactions with Deirdre. She checks in on Deirdre, asking her how she's doing, and when Brigid berates Deirdre for sending them negative emails, Aimee defends her mom, saying that she understands that Deirdre means well (38-39). When Brigid snaps at Deirdre for not knowing what Rich means when he refers to Cape Cod as "the Cape," Aimee leaps to Deirdre's defense, telling Brigid that it wasn't a dumb question (Karam 76). When Brigid then interrupts Deirdre's description of her volunteer job, Aimee calls out her rudeness, demanding to know why she's acting so disrespectfully (77). Deirdre is shortly afterwards overcome with emotion at the dinner table (78). While Brigid responds with annoyance, Aimee asks if Deirdre is okay, showing concern and love for her mom (78). Overall, Aimee demonstrates the virtues of kindness and selflessness.

Although she is characterized by selflessness and kindness, Aimee does not possess the virtue of strength. She portrays weakness and insecurity in the way that she speaks negatively about her appearance (20-21). When Brigid gifts each member of her family an old, framed, family photo, Aimee immediately begins criticizing herself, saying, "I'm an elephant in this photo" and "I'm holding a funnel cake...I can't even blame genetics...I am a *planet* in this photo" (Karam 20). Aimee further demonstrates insecurity when she tells Brigid that she's afraid her ulcerative colitis prevent anyone from wanting to date her (64). Aimee's weak character is further revealed in the way she acts in the aftermath of her recent breakup. Even though Aimee and her girlfriend are no longer together, Aimee calls her on Thanksgiving, and, although the audience doesn't hear her girlfriend on the other line, Aimee's side of the conversation implies that she knows that she's not supposed to call but just wanted to hear her girlfriend's voice (50). Aimee's words also imply that the girlfriend doesn't want to keep in touch after the breakup (51). After the

phone call, Aimee collapses into Erik's arms, sobbing, saying that she misses her girlfriend horribly (51). When Erik reassures her that the situation will make her stronger, Aimee replies "Stop, Dad, stop lying to me...Don't *actually* stop, keep saying things to me" (Karam 54). This interaction reveals that Aimee is absolutely crushed by losing her partner and can't move on from the situation, even when her girlfriend clearly no longer wants to continue. Rather than facing the reality that her girlfriend no longer wants to keep in touch, Aimee continues to call her in a delusional way. The way Aimee asks her father to continue to lie to her further emphasizes her refusal to face reality. Aimee's delusional approach to dealing with difficult circumstances and her deep insecurities demonstrate her weak character.

*The Humans* makes it clear that both Brigid and Aimee are not God-fearing women. In fact, neither of them believes in religion at all. Deirdre, who the show implies is a devout Catholic, confirms their unbelief by offering Brigid a statue of the Virgin Mary as a gift, saying, "I know you guys don't believe...just keep it for my sake, in the kitchen or even if you put it in a drawer somewhere, okay?" (Karam 42). Brigid responds sarcastically by replying, "Mom, I will absolutely put this in a drawer somewhere" (42). When Brigid later mentions that she isn't scared of coincidences, Deirdre responds by saying that "they're not scary if you believe in some kinda God, /God doesn't make mistakes..." (70). Brigid seems annoyed that Deirdre seems bound to convert her to Catholicism, responding: "That, yeah, that wasn't my point, Sneaky—" (70). Although Brigid and Aimee pray with the family at dinner, they all participate in a memorized and oft-repeated prayer, reciting a tradition rather than making a heartfelt address to God (72). At dinner, Erik implies that Richard's clinical depression could have been avoided if Richard had grown up believing in religion, to which Aimee curtly responds, "no religion at the table" (Karam 81). Deirdre protests, saying that her mouth is shut; the family knows where she stands (81).

Brigid retorts: “Mom...you brought a statue of the Virgin Mary into our house—how is your mouth shut?” (Karam 82). These interactions reveal the bitterness that Brigid and Aimee hold against their parents, who continually try to press religion into their lives. Another exchange between Brigid and Deirdre also echoes this dynamic: Deirdre expresses her disapproval of Brigid living with her boyfriend before marriage, likely influenced by her religious background, and Brigid responds in exasperation (53). These interactions demonstrate that Brigid and Aimee do not fear God, nor do they have any interest in learning more about Him.

Although Deirdre’s character does fear God, she is not characterized by the virtues of kindness or selflessness. While Deirdre does love her family and her intentions are arguably in the right place, her words are often out of place, disrespectful, and unkind. She is frequently sarcastic with her children and curses at them (Karam 34). She has a practice of texting news stories of homosexuals committing suicide to her lesbian daughter, Aimee (38-39). Although Aimee protests that she appreciates Deirdre’s intentions, this situation highlights how Deirdre is unwise in her interactions; she does not consider how sharing news stories like this with her lesbian daughter might hurt or upset her (38-39). Deirdre also frequently offers unsolicited criticism concerning Brigid’s marriage, selfishly giving no thought to how her words may be insulting or out of place (53). Although Deirdre may not mean to hurt or offend her children, she does not demonstrate selflessness, wisdom, or kindness in her words and actions.

Although the main three female characters in *The Humans* exhibit some virtuous characteristics, they do not qualify as virtuous women overall. While Brigid exhibits the virtue of industriousness, her interactions throughout the play are frequently rude and selfish, hurting those around her. Aimee demonstrates kindness and selflessness to her family but reveals crippling weakness in the way that she deals with trying circumstances and insecurity, opting to live in a

false reality rather than face the world around her. Neither Brigid or Aimee fear God, expressing that they want nothing to do with Him or religion. Deirdre does fear God and is devoutly religious, but her words and actions are unkind, unwise, and selfish. While these characters demonstrate a couple virtues each, none of them overall qualify as a virtuous woman who strives to exemplify the characteristics found in Proverbs 31.

Although Momo, Brigid and Aimee's grandmother, is not a prominent character in *The Humans*, she exemplifies a virtuous woman in the play. Momo fights a losing battle against Alzheimer's disease. She frequently mutters repetitive nonsense words and phrases, and sometimes wanders off and unintentionally puts herself in danger, like when she drifts into the kitchen and knocks over pots and pans, almost burning herself on the stove (69). Clearly, Momo does not understand the words that are coming out of her mouth and is not aware of her actions, so her actions in the play cannot be measured against Proverbs 31's standard of virtue. However, at dinner, Deirdre reads an email that Momo wrote to Brigid and Aimee four years prior, before her health took a significant turn for the worse, that reveals the true traits of Momo's character (95). In the email, Momo shares some final thoughts with the girls, understanding that she will soon completely lose her memory (95). Momo tells Brigid and Aimee not to worry about her, as she is not afraid of death, and she shares her realization that "most of the stuff I did spend my life worrying about wasn't so bad...nothing about this life was worth getting worked up about" (Karam 95). Momo references her fear of dancing at weddings, saying that it wasn't a big deal after all (95). Momo concludes the email with the following charge: "Dance more than I did. Drink less than I did. Go to church. Be good to everyone you love" (95). She adds, "I love you more than you'll ever know" (95). This email, albeit brief, reveals Momo's selflessness and kindness as she reassures her family not to worry about her after she passes away and shares her

deep and lasting love for them. The email also demonstrates Momo's wisdom, as she realizes that she has wasted time in life worrying about things that, when put in perspective, didn't matter at all. Momo also shares wise parting advice, urging her granddaughters to "dance more" and "drink less" (95). Momo has a God-fearing attitude, telling her daughters to attend church. Momo's fearlessness in the face of death—as well as implying the strength that she possesses—also suggests a faith in God, perhaps even assurance that she will soon be in heaven. Overall, based on Momo's email, her character possesses the traits of a Proverbs 31 woman: she is kind, selfless, strong, wise, and God-fearing. Although not enough information is given to determine if Momo is trustworthy or industrious, the majority of the traits described are consistent with the description of a virtuous woman found in Scripture.

### **Good People**

The play *Good People* by David Lindsay-Abaire examines tensions between societal class in a lighthearted yet poignant drama. Opening on Broadway in 2011, the show was well received by critics and was a Tony Award nominee for Best Play. Frances McDormand, who played the protagonist Margie, won the Tony Award for Best Leading Actress in a Play. *Good People* tells the story of Margie Walsh, a single mother from the lower-class neighborhood of Southie, who struggles to make ends meet as she takes care of her disabled adult daughter. When Margie is fired from her job at the dollar store, she turns to Mike Dillon—an old high school boyfriend who has become a wealthy doctor—for help. When Mike invites her to a party but later cancels due to his daughter falling ill, Margie assumes he is lying to keep her from attending and decides to come anyway. When she arrives, she discovers that Mike and his wife, Kate, were actually telling the truth. As Margie's desperation for a job grows, she begins to tell Kate several unflattering stories about Mike, including accusing Mike of being her disabled daughter's true father. Margie

ultimately admits that she's lying, and she leaves Mike and his family. When she arrives at home, she realizes that Stevie has paid her rent for her. The play ends with the implication that Mike was truly the father after all.

Margie is not characterized by the virtue of trustworthiness. The play opens on Stevie, Margie's boss, confronting Margie about the fact that she arrives late every day to her job at the dollar store (Lindsay-Abaire 8). Instead of taking responsibility for her actions, Margie continually makes excuses and blames other people. Because the play never reveals if all of Margie's excuses are valid, the audience never knows if Margie is telling the truth. But the way that she immediately shifts the blame to others clearly demonstrates irresponsibility and untrustworthiness. When confronted by Stevie, Margie protests that she is always late because of the caretakers that watch her disabled daughter (8). When Stevie continues to press Margie about her lateness, Margie tries to draw his attention to her coworker's lateness and irresponsibility, attempting to distract Stevie by informing him that the coworker has been spreading rumors about him (9). When this doesn't work, Margie then tries to convince Stevie that the new employee recently hired by the dollar store won't be able to adequately replace her, untruthfully saying that the employee constantly makes mistakes at the cash register (13). Margie pretends to not understand that Stevie intends to fire her, pretending to think that he's just giving her a warning (11). But Stevie insists that Margie cannot stay at the dollar store, saying, "you're not reliable...they don't want unreliable employees" (Lindsay-Abaire 13). These interactions between Margie and Stevie demonstrate Margie's untrustworthy character.

Margie is also not characterized by the virtue of industriousness. When Margie reunites with Mike, he claims that Margie never applied herself, "not at school or/anywhere else" (Lindsay-Abaire 175). Margie does not deny the truth of this statement, although she excuses

herself by saying that her mother was too busy working to hold her accountable to finish her school (175). Mike also points out that Margie dropped out of school, but Margie protests this was because she had gotten pregnant (175). Mike then points out that Margie has lost most of the jobs she's had in the past, but Margaret once again excuses this by saying she was fired because of lateness due to her daughter, as well as unreliable transportation (176). Whether or not Margie's excuses are legitimate, she clearly is not esteemed by her employers or friends as a hard worker, and her quickness to make excuses indicates a character that is quick to give up, rather than press through difficult circumstances.

In *Good People*, Margie is not characterized by kindness. Although Margie's childhood friend, Jean, says that Margie is "too nice," Margie's actions throughout the rest of the play demonstrate that she has lost any kindness she may have had as a child (Lindsay-Abaire 27). When describing the new dollar store employee to Stevie at the beginning of the play, she disrespectfully assumes the girl is Chinese and rudely calls her "Chow Fun," revealing her racist character (12, 15). When Margie leaves the meeting with Stevie, she leaves him a parting insult by telling him that his mother would not approve of him dating a Chinese girl (18). When Margie realizes she has nowhere to go and decides to approach Mike for a job, he tells her he has no job openings for her (56). Disappointed and hurt, Margie insults Mike, calling him "lace-curtain," meaning he thinks he's too good for everyone (Lindsay-Abaire 58-61). Mike asks her, "did you get mean, Margie?" echoing Jean's statement that Margie used to be nice but noting that her character has changed drastically since childhood (Lindsay-Abaire 66). Even Mike's wife, Kate, accuses Margie of an unkind character, exclaiming, "I can tell you one thing—you are not nice. You are *not*" (187).

Margie is also characterized by selfishness, emotionally manipulating people around her to get what she wants. When Margie suspects Stevie plans to fire her, she tells him stories of his mother, implying that she had a close relationship with his mother before she passed away (Lindsay-Abaire 5-7). But Stevie calls her out on her emotional manipulation, revealing that Margie was the one who called the cops on his mother when she was poor and starving and stole a turkey from the store, which resulted in his mother spending Christmas in prison (17). When Margie meets with Mike and learns he will be throwing a party, she tries to guilt him into inviting her, implying that he won't invite her because she comes from a lower class (68). But when Mike finally does invite her, Margie makes excuses as to why she can't come, causing Mike to realize that Margie was emotionally manipulating him (70). Mike confronts her, saying, "You don't actually want to come. You just want me to feel bad" (70). Later, when Margie shows up at Mike's house and Kate offers her a job babysitting their daughter, Margie realizes that Mike is uncomfortable with her babysitting (173). Margie reveals several unflattering stories about Mike's childhood to Kate, which she knows Mike wouldn't want her to do (173). Mike is appalled and accuses Margie: "I don't let you babysit, so you're stirring the [pot]. You're punishing me for not giving you what you want" (173). Margie frequently manipulates people when things don't go her way, demonstrating a lack of consideration for others' feelings or circumstances.

Throughout *Good People*, Margie is characterized by weakness and insecurity, rather than strength. Although her brash, persistent personality may seem like a strong one on the surface, her words and actions are truly motivated by insecurity rather than confidence (Lindsay-Abaire 49-50). For example, when Margie realizes that Mike has become wealthy (or "comfortable," as he calls it), she betrays her insecurity by snapping, "you're comfortable. Okay. I guess that makes



me *un-comfortable* then. Is that what you call us lowly folk? *Un-comfortable?*” (63). She continues to make biting, insulting remarks comparing Mike to her and her lower-class friends, causing Mike to accuse her of being passive-aggressive (66). When Margie agrees to come to Mike’s party and he calls to tell her the party has been canceled due to his daughter falling ill, Margie assumes that he is lying because he is ashamed of her (101-102). She decides to come to the party anyway (102). While on the surface this may appear to be a strong decision, it is a decision rooted in Margie’s weakness and insecurity.

In *Good People*, Dottie, Margie’s landlady, is not characterized by the virtue of kindness. When Margie loses her job at the dollar store, Dottie is not concerned about Margie’s welfare but instead worries how Margie will pay her for taking care of Margie’s daughter (Lindsay-Abaire 31). Dottie quickly prepares to replace Margie if she cannot pay the rent, planning on kicking Margie and her daughter out with nowhere to go (96). Jean says that Dottie doesn’t care about Margie and only pretends to be her friend (28, 97). Jean says that, if Margie and Dottie’s positions were switched and Margie was watching Dottie’s child, Dottie would threaten not to pay Margie the babysitting money unless she started showing up on time, because of Dottie’s cold hardheartedness (28). When Margie buys a new outfit to make a good impression on potential employers, Dottie puts her down, telling her that she’s wasting her time and won’t get hired (79). Jean accuses Dottie of being negative all the time (79). These interactions indicate Dottie’s unkind, inconsiderate, rude personality throughout the play.

Dottie is also not characterized by the virtue of trustworthiness. Dottie frequently doesn’t show up to watch Margie’s disabled daughter, which ultimately costs Margie her job (Lindsay-Abaire 25). When confronted about it, Dottie protests that she “works nights,” as if she is obligated to report to an employer, but the excuse falls flat as she is running her own business and

simply prefers to work late at night (Lindsay-Abaire 25). Dottie's irresponsibility and unreliability demonstrate her untrustworthy character.

Jean, Margie's childhood friend, is not a kind character in *Good People*. Although she encourages Margie when she loses her job, her character throughout the play is largely characterized by rudeness (97). When Dottie says that she's busy working at making her crafts, Jean retorts, "Gimme a break, those stupid rabbit things—" (Lindsay-Abaire 26). When Dottie protests that people like them, Jean shoots back, "then they're morons... five bucks for forty cents of crap" (26). This rude exchange is characteristic of Jean's behavior throughout the play. When Margie mentions Jean to Mike, Mike recalls her sharp tongue, calling her "mouthy from Southie" and mentioning that Jean was a mean girl who could beat him up (66). When Dottie expresses confusion about where Margie works, Jean explodes with annoyance and curses in her face (93). Overall, Jean's behavior and words are rude and crass.

Jean is not a trustworthy character. When Margie loses her job, Jean says that, if she were in Margie's place, she would take Margie's disabled daughter to Mike Dillon and lie, saying that he is the father (82). Margaret affirms that this reflects Jean's untrustworthy character, laughing: "You *would*, too" (Lindsay-Abaire 82). Jean points out that he could pay the child support that Margie's other boyfriend refuses to pay (82). This brief interaction reveals how quickly Jean suggests lying as a solution, revealing her untrustworthy nature.

In *Good People*, Kate, Mike's wife, is full of kindness. When Margie arrives unannounced, Kate mistakes her for a catering employee (Lindsay-Abaire 110). Realizing her mistake, Kate apologizes profusely and invites her to stay (114). Kate offers her leftover cheese and wine and takes Margie's coat (114). Although Kate (who lives a wealthy lifestyle) notices the shabbiness of Margie's coat, she doesn't say anything so as not to hurt her feelings (116). When

Margie brings one of Dottie's rabbit crafts as a gift, Kate graciously accepts it and displays it in a prominent place in the room (136). When Kate learns that Margie is looking for a job, she tries to help come up with a solution, even suggesting that Margie babysit for her daughter, Ally (159). Although it may seem that Kate is merely being polite for the sake of propriety, when Margie tells Mike that Kate seems nice, Mike tells Margie that "she *is* nice...she's got a big heart," demonstrating that kindness is truly part of Kate's character (Lindsay-Abaire 151). When the conversation between Mike, Margie and Kate escalates into an argument, and Mike smashes Margie's rabbit gift on the floor, Ally wakes up (189). Kate rushes to Ally's room, hiding the truth of what was happening by telling Ally that Mike had dropped something (189). This shows the kind care and concern Kate has for her daughter. Margie later apologizes for starting an argument and waking Ally up, and Kate is quick to forgive her, even after the altercation (192).

Kate is also characterized by the virtue of strength. When Margie lies to her about her disabled daughter, Kate tells her that she doesn't understand why she would not have confronted Mike sooner (Lindsay-Abaire 185). Kate accuses Margie of coming in to wreck her marriage with Mike, which is already struggling (185). She defends her family, stating "this is *our* life. And I'm not gonna let you come in here and deliberately try to sabotage us" (187). This interaction reveals Kate's strong determination to protect her family. Kate then asks Margie again if Mike is really the father of Margie's daughter, saying "if it is [true], Michael will just have to man up/ and provide...We'll write you a check right now. If it's true" (187). This shows Kate's strong commitment to morality and her dedication to doing the right thing.

Kate also possesses the virtue of selflessness. She tells Margie that she should have taken her daughter to Mike far earlier, even though it was an uncomfortable situation, saying that's what she would have done (185). Margaret retorts, "Well I'm not you" (Lindsay-Abaire 185). Kate

responds, “That’s right. You’re not. I could never put my pride ahead of my daughter...and I *have* had to make that choice...a *few* times. And my pride always lost. My daughter’s more important” (185). This exchange highlights Kate’s fierce, self-sacrificial love for her daughter, placing Ally’s needs ahead of her own.

In *Good People*, Margie, Dottie, and Jean are not virtuous characters. Margie is characterized by untrustworthiness, unkindness, laziness, and insecurity. Dottie and Jean both exhibit unreliability and rudeness throughout the play. Kate, however, exemplifies a virtuous woman who is kind, selfless, and strong throughout the show.

### Findings

In both *The Humans* and *Good People*, the one virtuous woman is far outnumbered by the three unvirtuous ones. In *The Humans*, Brigid, Aimee, and Deirdre do not qualify as virtuous women, but Momo does. In *Good People*, Margie, Jean, and Dottie are not virtuous women, while Kate is. Additionally, in both plays, the three unvirtuous women are prominent in the story, while the virtuous women play minor roles. In *The Humans*, Momo’s virtuous character can only be gleaned from a brief email, and she spends the rest of the play mumbling nonsense words due to her mental decline. Meanwhile, Brigid, Aimee, and Deirdre are heavily featured in the play as well-developed, three-dimensional characters. In *Good People*, the untrustworthy, unkind, and insecure character of Margie is the clear protagonist of the story, dominating stage time along with the equally rough and unkind Dottie and Jean. Kate, on the other hand, appears in only one scene and does very little to serve the plot other than to contrast Margie’s brash, uncouth character. Even though *The Humans* and *Good People* each include a virtuous woman, the characters play very small parts in the story as opposed to the other three prominent, unvirtuous female characters.

In *The Humans* and *Good People*, realism is substituted for virtue. Reviews of *The Humans* mention the authentic, flawed characters and realistic family dynamics within the play, saying “They feel as much like a real family with scars and tender spots and grudges and rages as any family I’ve ever met.” (Campion, “The Humans”) One reviewer noted, “I am intimately familiar with these relationships and see them play out with some frequency in my own life. *The Humans* captures a haunting reality” (Duncanson, “Review: Stephen Karam’s *The Humans*”). *Good People* receives similar reviews, one reviewer observing, “The playwright refrains from judging even the most abrasive behavior, instead depicting the characters’ rough edges as pragmatic realism” (Rooney, “Good People: Theater Review”). These reviews suggest that the unvirtuous behavior displayed by the prominent characters in *The Humans* and *Good People* contributes to creating realistic behaviors and atmospheres.

Conversely, according to Mallon and Gregory, virtuous characters are often considered annoying and boring (Can a Virtuous Character Be Interesting?). Mallon explains, “We expect fiction’s round characters to undergo change in the course of their book-length adventures, and the most important kind is usually an increase in self-awareness — a journey that leaves an unblemished character with no place to go. Self-awareness for the fully virtuous will necessarily be a matter of self-satisfaction, a state that can only render them insufferable.” Gregory adds:

We tend to pride ourselves on preferring abrasive, morally bankrupt protagonists to righteous ones. We act as if it’s an act of uncompromising authenticity, integrity even, to feel compassion toward those we supposedly shouldn’t, as though canonical literature has been anything other than a parade of authorial provocation, a centuries-long procession of characters seemingly unworthy of our empathy.” Gregory says that virtuous characters are

often considered to have no conflict—an essential component of storytelling—and are therefore considered boring. (Can a Virtuous Character Be Interesting?)

Virtue and conflict, however, are not mutually exclusive. Gregory observes that being good is often more in conflict with the world than being bad, saying, “[being good] is the cumulation of calculated social compromises, purposeful acts of communion, and meticulous emotional arithmetic...living virtuously is hard. It takes generative intellectual work that is far more interesting than the defensiveness of “being bad.” I would rather consider the challenges that go into a consciously lived life than the inevitably hurtful products of a cruel one.” Gregory asserts, “A truly radical 21st-century novelist wouldn’t ask us to see ourselves in made-up villains, and then, hopefully, revise our opinions of the real ones in our own lives. Rather, they would ask us to see the arduous and often acrobatic effort that goes into living a life of common decency. They would coerce us into believing that virtue is interesting and fun to think about and far more dazzling to encounter than malevolence.” According to Simone Weil, “Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring. Imaginary good is boring; real good is always new, marvelous, intoxicating” (Gravity and Grace 70). Virtuous characters, then, have the potential to have just as much conflict as unvirtuous ones, and to be just as interesting.

### **Conclusion**

Virtues inspire society to strive for excellence, which benefits individuals, businesses, and society, regardless of whether they believe in God. But because Christians understand the true purpose of life, which is to glorify God, it is that much more imperative that they exemplify and promote virtue at every opportunity. This is especially important in contemporary theatre, which holds a powerful influence over the next generation of young girls. Contemporary female roles

lack the characteristics of the Proverbs 31 woman, who is trustworthy, kind, industrious, selfless, strong, wise, and God-fearing. Instead, modern theatre presents young girls with vulgar, selfish, rude role models. The award-winning plays *The Humans* and *Good People* exemplify this, prominently featuring a majority of unvirtuous female characters. Although each play contains an example of a virtuous female character, they both play minor, relatively insignificant roles in the show. It is crucial, now more than ever before, that playwrights begin to write plays featuring and promoting virtuous female characters, especially protagonists. More virtuous female characters will encourage audience members to strive for excellence in their words and actions. Furthermore, virtuous female characters will inspire countless young girls to emulate the virtue portrayed onstage and to face trials with virtue and morality, raising a generation of young women whose price is “far above rubies” (Prov. 31.10).

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