

Women and Men Faced with Virginity

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Abstract

The social and symbolic meaning ascribed to virginity has been profoundly reconfigured between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, with a decline in the importance of female virginity upon marriage, along with the de-Christianization of its conception, among others. While it partly lost its social meaning, the loss of virginity remains an important and intimate personal moment for both men and women, one that actively contributes to the social construction of gender identities.

Article

Being a virgin, which is to say never having had sexual relations, represents a supreme state of spiritual purity for Christianity for both men and women. Yet it was female virginity in particular that drew attention in nineteenth-century Europe, for at a time when the mechanisms of fertilization were not well understood and contraception was forbidden, it ensured the purity of lineage. Anatomical-clinical medicine emphasized this sexual dimorphism by affirming the existence of the hymen, a supposed proof of female virginity, thereby creating a double standard in which female virginity was protected while the loss of male virginity before marriage was encouraged, as it contributed to virility. The latter often involved a domestic servant or a brothel, as described by Stefan Zweig (1881-1942) in his autobiography *The World of Yesterday: Memories of a European*, published a year after his death. This situation endured during the twentieth century throughout Europe. In Spain for instance, it still involved 60% of men questioned during the 1960s. This male rite of passage was experienced with groups of young friends (*pandillas*) or with kin, as demonstrated by the film historian Roman Gubern, born in 1934, who was accompanied to the brothel by his grandfather. It was thought that channelling male sexuality made it possible to protect premarital female virginity, which had taken on substantial social importance.

This prestige was based on revived devotion to the Virgin Mary and female religiosity during the nineteenth century. For thousands of young women of all social backgrounds, the choice of perpetual virginity by joining a religious order offered freedom from paternal and conjugal supervision. While these feminine callings naturally involved only a minority of women, the ideal of virginity nevertheless spread throughout society. This is demonstrated by the success of the Association of the Children of Mary Immaculate, founded in 1837 by the Daughters of Charity, or by the election in the French countryside of *rosières*, young women from the village celebrated for their virtue, with a medical exam and certificate of virginity as supporting evidence. In the Catholic bourgeoisie, in which virginity was the social capital necessary for a good marriage, girls were educated as "*oies blanches*" [white geese] in convents and kept distant from boys until the engagement period. In the country, where company between adolescents was tolerated, female virginity was preserved by raising the spectre of the dishonoured "*fille-mère*" [unmarried mother], as French law forbade any search for paternity, thus leaving her without recourse. In historically Protestant countries, where education left more room for spontaneity and relations between girls and boys, the situation was different, as German and English law allowed women who had been seduced to pursue proceedings against their seducer and obtain compensation.

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, profound changes occurred in the conception of gender relations, along with a questioning of the double standard that marked the sentimental and sexual education of youth. In a context of feminist demands and anxiety surrounding syphilis, voices were raised against male initiation in brothels, which exposed innocent wives to a risk of contamination. In both London and Brussels, scandals erupted involving the prostitution of very young virgins, for example the investigation in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1885 entitled "Maiden Tribute to Modern Babylon," which helped raise the legal age for sex in Great Britain from 13 to 16 years old. The bourgeois wedding night, which delivered up an innocent wife to a husband deemed both brutal and indelicate, was broadly denounced and likened to "legal rape." To address this problem, numerous pseudo-doctors throughout Europe wrote small educational books intended for future wives, such as *The Wedding Night* by M. de Alba, which was published in Spain in 1920.

In France, the publication of such works can also be explained by demographic concerns, as books eroticizing the married couple increased after the defeat against Prussia in 1870, which was often explained by a low French birth rate. These books totally transformed the representation of female virginity in an effort to encourage births. While in the early nineteenth century the virgin woman was presented as radiantly healthy, in Dr. Eynon's *Manuel de l'amour conjugal* [Manual of Conjugal Love] from 1909 she became a "young girl [...] with shadows under the eyes, [...] resembling a wilted flower," who can capture "renewed freshness" only with her deflowering on her wedding night.

Elsewhere, the bourgeois model was countered for political reasons: in "The Emancipation of Woman Through Work" (1920), the militant communist feminist from Russia, Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952), asserted that female virginity only had importance in the bourgeois system attached to inheritance, and that its preservation no longer made sense in a worker's republic. Sexual norms gradually became looser in most European cities. Flirtation (from the French expression "*conter fleurette*" [to whisper sweet nothings], denoting the sweet words, glances, and touching, with the exclusion of coitus, practiced by unmarried youth), extended from the bourgeoisie to all social classes in Europe. Moral prohibitions nevertheless remained heavy, as loss of virginity outside of marriage generally took place secretly in back alleys or fields. The evolution of mores led to tension with regard to the moral meaning of virginity: were young girls who gave themselves over to all sexual practices except coitus not in fact "half virgins?" During the second half of the twentieth century, the importance ascribed to virginity became increasingly contrasted, as demonstrated for the Italian case in Pasolini's film *Love Meetings* (1964), in which city dwellers affirmed that deflowering was no longer a disaster, while those living in the countryside in Calabria continued to see female virginity as a treasure.

Did the "sexual revolutions" of the 1960s and 1970s sound the death knell for the importance ascribed to virginity? The sexual emancipation of women, along with the affirmation of gender equality and contraception, of course had effects on representations and practices connected with virginity. Deflowering and marriage were gradually dissociated, and the average age of sexual relations decreased sharply as a result, stabilizing around 16.5 years old on average in the European Union in 2007. While the gender gap has tended to shrink, this average conceals important disparities between young girls, who are more precocious in Northern as opposed to Southern or Western Europe. All of these evolutions reinforced certain anxieties relating to male virginity, as peer pressure and the cult of performance still make the loss of virginity a crucial stage in the construction of virility. Virginity thus continues to be a major personal issue in the construction of gender identities. Since the end of the twentieth century, female virginity has returned, to the extent that it is sometimes demanded up through marriage within European Muslim populations. The increased recourse to hymenoplasty reveals the relative importance that is still ascribed to this supposed trace of virginity, along with the capacity of young Muslim women to circumvent family norms. The media coverage of these practices, as well as the auctioning off of their own virginity by young English, Italian, or Romanian women, bears witness to the contradictory relations that contemporary European societies

have with respect to virginity and its loss.

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