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VIRGIN ENVY

THE CULTURAL (IN)SIGNIFICANCE OF THE HYMEN

Jonathan A. Allan, Cristina Santos,
and Adriana Spahr, eds.



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INTRODUCTION

“OUR TANTALIZING DOUBLE”: ENVOUS VIRGINS, ENVYING VIRGINS, VIRGIN ENVY

Jonathan A. Allan, Cristina Santos, and Adriana Spahr

In their 2006 collection *Defiant Deviance: The Irreality of Reality in the Cultural Imaginary*, Cristina Santos and Adriana Spahr attempted, as editors, to imagine a variety of ways in which deviance could be defiant; they were not yet thinking about virginity, certainly not about the ways in which it is developed here in *Virgin Envy: The Cultural (In)Significance of the Hymen*, and back then Jonathan Allan was still a graduate student. Today the three of us return to some of the questions first posed in *Defiant Deviance*, but now we are interested in the utter messiness of virginity—since it often appears at once as enviable and undesirable, as valuable and detrimental, as normative and deviant. We are interested too in the queering of virginity and in the questioning of the significance of the hymen when it comes to virginity in order to understand virginity in all of its different formulations.

The title that we have chosen for this collection obviously calls on and plays with the Freudian (and therefore often maligned) concept of “penis envy.” As editors, we discussed the different perspectives and ideas that circulate around that concept, and that is

why *Virgin Envy* seemed to be an appropriate title for this volume. The complexity, confusion, and persistence of Freud's penis envy, we agreed, are akin in many ways to how our culture thinks, talks, and writes about virginity. Definitely, our ideas about virginity—the hymen in particular—and the phallus are “cultural fantasies” that continue to inspire, provoke, and unsettle us.

In many ways, virginity also brings us to what Roland Barthes calls the “muck of language,” when a concept—love in his case—is both/and. That is, when it is both “too much” and “too little.”¹ On a related note, Adam Phillips, writing about sexuality and envy, notes that

when it comes to the excesses of sexuality we can't always tell whether our morality is a cover story for our envy, or simply a rationalization of fear; we would like to be that excited, that promiscuous, that abandoned, but it is too much risk for us. . . . We don't, on the whole, tend to envy other people's appetite for food, but other people's appetite for sex—especially in a society in which sex represents health, vitality, and youth—gets to us. People are even more excessive when they talk about sexual excesses. The person who haunts us is the person who is having more pleasure than us. Our tantalizing double.²

As the chapters in this collection show, virginity flirts with both this “muck of language” and this “tantalizing double”; we are all haunted, it seems, by the virginity that we once had and lost or the virginity that we wish we could rid ourselves of. When we imagine our virginity loss stories, we might think back to the disappointment or the excitement of that first time; we might think back with regret, sadness, or joy. Virginity is seemingly caught forever in this double bind, in which it is something revered and wanted, yet ridiculed and unwanted. We can think here of the vestal virgins, the Virgin Mary, at the same time as we think of the sad, pathetic virgin of Steve Carrell's character in the popular film *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*.³

In thinking about “virgin envy” in particular, we are struck by how Phillips imagines envy as an “essential ingredient of our failures

and successes."⁴ Envy is never just one thing; it is always caught in the double lining of our affective lives, how we imagine that the virgin has access to something that we've lost, or how the virgin imagines that the non-virgin has gained a hitherto unattained but desired knowledge. How do we imagine virginity as either a success or a failure? Does one succeed if one fails to lose one's virginity, or does one fail if one succeeds in losing one's virginity? Many of the writers in this volume tangle with these questions of what it means to be successful in terms of one's virginity. Does it mean that one is like Joan of Arc? Or does it mean that one was virginal for long enough, lost virginity in an appropriate manner, and then moved on? Although we are all familiar with virginity—we were all once virgins or might still be virgins—questions of virginity are confusing, complicated, and curious.

Virgin Envy thus provides a unique space in which to think about the tensions between the "normal" and the "deviant." For instance, at a certain age, being a virgin is "enviable" and "normal," yet, at another age, it seems to be "deviant," "embarrassing," and "unenviable." The problem with virginity is that it can be lost too early, too late, or never—and these states of virginity then typically become deemed "abnormal." So how, then, and perhaps especially *when*, does one (or should one) lose her or his virginity? It appears as if there is but a short time when it is socially acceptable to lose one's virginity or to make one's sexual debut. And how is virginity in fact lost? And what of those who might not be sure if they are or are not virgins?

Then there are questions about how we represent and define virginity. Given that we all have had—or might still have—*it*, why does *it* prove to be difficult to define? How do we think about and respond to the ways in which virginity is lived, represented, and experienced? Most interesting is that, in trying to define virginity, many tensions are revealed between the subjective understanding of being a virgin (declaring an identity for oneself) and the limits of the word when defined by those who surround the virgin. We might have a notion of what virginity is for ourselves, but does that definition extend to others? Do we—as a culture, a subculture, a group of people, and so on—agree with *the* definition of a virgin?

For Anke Bernau, the answer seems to be fairly straightforward; she opens her book *Virgins: A Cultural History* by noting that, “although people hesitate initially when asked how one can tell whether a woman is a virgin or not, they usually end up remembering *the hymen* with a relieved smile.”⁵

Undoubtedly, many have seemingly accepted that “female virginity becomes a universally accepted condition . . . that need not be thought about further.”⁶ Even though debates on the hymen and its location have spanned centuries, and even though Bernau spends pages in her book thinking further about female virginity, she herself admits that “the question of the hymen or other unquestionable physical proofs of virginity has remained uncontested until the present day.”⁷ Bernau confirms that we continue to be committed to the hymen as *the* signifier of virginity. But what happens when the hymen is not the measure by which a virgin is evaluated?

In *Virgin Envy*, we have gone beyond, in varying ways, the hymen: that is, we’re more interested in virginity as a concept than in the archetypal narrative that so many cultural texts propagate (i.e., that girls protect virginity until marriage by keeping their hymens intact). In thinking about the archetypal narrative of virginity, we are struck by the idea that somehow we all have—or should have—a story about the loss of virginity and that these stories are easily recognizable—as if we can imagine sharing these stories and that everyone is in the know about what it means to be a virgin and to lose one’s virginity. We are particularly interested in the ways that virginity has become a kind of incontestable reality that we all live with and that most of us will lose. As we began to discuss virginity, however, we realized that many of these common virginal narratives are not true. Virginity extends well beyond the girl who protects herself and her hymen until marriage. In fact, our virginal narratives—those that we tell ourselves—are often remarkably different from that archetypal narrative.

Indeed, insistence on the hymen erases all kinds of bodies save the most normative, cisgendered body of the female. Therefore, it is imperative that we go beyond the hymen and think about virginity without it. Truth be told, boys are virgins, queers are virgins, some people reclaim their virginites, and others reject virginity from

the get go. Virginity is never one thing. How many virgins are not represented in popular media, let alone in scholarship? Each contributor to this volume was tasked with thinking about virginity in new ways. Specifically, we urged the contributors to think about the following question: what would happen to the study of virginity if we moved the discussion away from the hymen altogether?

Most of us would generally agree that virginity is about an "untouched" state, however complicated our definitions of touched and untouched might be. We would generally agree that it is the time *before* the first time. Virgins are in a state of sexual inexperience, by which we mean a relational sexuality (for certainly masturbation is sexual even though it might not affect one's claim to virginity). Virgins might be innocent or pure in a physical sense but not necessarily in a psychic or imaginative sense. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes in *Epistemology of the Closet*, "many people have their richest mental/emotional involvement with sexual acts that they don't do, or even don't *want* to do."⁸ The more we complicated our questions, and the more the contributors responded to them, the more we realized the hermeneutic instability of terms such as "untouched," "pure," "innocent," "sexual inexperience," "celibacy," "abstinence," and "virginity." And more questions quickly emerged. Does a gay man lose his virginity the same way that a straight man does? How does a bisexual person lose virginity? Twice?

And what happens after virginity? Do non-virgins feel a sense of loss after virginity loss? If so, then what does that loss look like, feel like? Is it physical, psychic, emotional, affective? Do non-virgins *mourn* their virginities, becoming envious of those who still have theirs? We know that many have framed virginity loss as a monumental, earth-shattering event, but is this always the case? And what if the virgin's loss is disappointing, underwhelming, or entirely uninteresting? How do we think about and theorize the complexities of virginity, especially when we admit that we have a hard time defining even the most basic terms—"virginity" and its "loss"? Ultimately, virginity is a site around which some of our most basic questions about sexuality are confronted and from which we have much to learn about our central anxieties, paranoias, desires, and fears.

Divided into four parts and containing eight chapters in total, *Virgin Envy* looks at different ways that virginity is represented and used in literary texts and popular culture through different historical periods and cultures. The volume's opening section—"Too Much Pain for Such Little Reward"—contains two chapters discussing the representation of virginity in literary texts from the medieval period to the present. The first chapter, Amy Burge's "‘I Will Cut Myself and Smear Blood on the Sheet’: Testing Virginity in Medieval and Modern Orientalist Romance," focuses on representations of the virginity test. Burge explores six sheikh popular romance novels, all featuring virgin heroines. She positions these texts alongside two popular English medieval romances, *Bevis of Hampton* (c. 1300) and *Floris and Blancheflur* (c. 1250). She analyzes the persistent reference in all of these texts to the virginity test used to prove women's virginity. Pointing out that these tests are easily manipulated, thereby highlighting their unreliability, Burge reminds us that the sole purpose of testing female virginity is to secure male ownership of women in a heteronormatively gendered society.

In the second chapter, "Between Pleasure and Pain: The Textual Politics of the Hymen," Jodi McAlister explores the history of the representation of the hymen in Western literature romances. Her analysis ranges from the thirteenth century, with *Le roman de la rose*; to the seventeenth century, with the ballad *A Remedy for Green Sickness* (1682) and *A Dialogue between a Married Woman and a Maid* (1655); through to excerpts from "Sub-Umbra, or Sport among the She-Noodles" and "Lady Pokingham, or They All Do It" from *Pearl* (a magazine published in 1879–80); and up to examples taken from the twentieth century and twenty-first century, using *Beyond Heaving Bosoms* and recent autobiographical stories of virginity loss. By examining blood, pain, and (im)perforability—common motifs associated with the hymen—in all of these texts across such a vast array of periods, McAlister reveals the discourse over the female body across time. In doing so, she discovers that the perception of virginity loss (the rupture of the hymen) brings about a profound transformative change in women: it is the journey toward adulthood, sexual maturity, and pleasure. More so, from the earliest to the latest of these romances, McAlister argues that the role of women has

greatly improved: the transformative change moves from being that imposed externally by the man to that becoming internal to the woman. Finally, and tellingly, McAlister's analysis, by moving from early literary texts to current autobiographical stories (a point of friction in her chapter between literary texts and real lives), shows that in the latter texts the hymen is less concrete: the broken hymen does not and cannot fulfill the expectation of the transformative changes long promised by our cultural imaginary.

The second part of *Virgin Envy*—"Blood, Blood, Blood . . . and More Blood"—is made up of two chapters, the first written by Jonathan A. Allan and Cristina Santos, the second written by Janice Zehentbauer and Cristina Santos.⁹ Each chapter studies virginity through vampiric characters in television series, films, and literary texts, especially in the past two decades. In "The Politics of Abstinence and Virginity in the *Twilight* Saga," Allan and Santos explore vampiric and virginal characters in the popular *Twilight* series written by Stephenie Meyer. Specifically, they explore female and male virginity, particularly with respect to the two main characters: the mortal Bella and the immortal vampire Edward. The authors argue that the *Twilight* saga mirrors cultural anxieties about abstinence, purity, chastity, and virginity in both characters. Allan and Santos suggest that Bella's sexuality and desire deal not only with ideas around purity but also with ideas around erotophobia—the fear of sexuality. Abstinence, they point out, thus becomes not just a "choice" but also an ideological construct in American culture.

In "Lady of Perpetual Virginity: Jessica's Presence in *True Blood*," Janice Zehentbauer and Cristina Santos focus on the character of Jessica Hamby in HBO's cult hit *True Blood*. Jessica is a seventeen-year-old virgin who has been turned into a vampire. Through historical, sociological, and cultural approaches, the authors study Jessica alongside the phenomena of the abstinence movement, purity clubs, and (re)definition of virginity in contemporary America. The United States has witnessed the growth of what Jessica Valenti has called "the purity myth," a movement that encourages young women to remain "pure" until marriage.¹⁰ Being a virgin in contemporary American culture is seemingly demanded by popular culture, yet the same popular culture celebrates hypersexualized femininity (and

this speaks, of course, to a series of cultural anxieties about female sexuality: slut shaming, rape culture, virginity, and the demand for purity). As a vampire, Jessica can maintain the same physical condition that she had as a human; thus, she becomes an emblem of American society since she represents a forever young virgin. Her body is able to heal each and every wound quickly, which means that after sex her hymen is healed—over and over again. As the authors indicate, this situation satirizes the abstinence movement and traditional patriarchal values in regard to female sexuality, and the character's position as an eternal virgin mirrors a society that simultaneously hypersexualizes young women and demands their sexual abstinence.

The two chapters in the third part—"Men Be Virgins Too: Queering Virginity"—focus on male virginities and the ways in which they are seemingly excluded from critical thought about virginity. Both chapters draw on queer studies to account for male virginity, almost as elusive as the G-spot: we all know that it is there, but we have a hard time finding it. The authors in this part build upon a small but growing body of scholarship on male virginity and work to demonstrate that male virginity is in need of (re)consideration.

In his chapter, "The Queer Saint: Male Virginity in Derek Jarman's *Sebastiane*," Kevin McGuinness considers through the lens of psychoanalysis the 1976 film *Sebastiane*, directed by Derek Jarman. McGuinness explores how male virginity, religious ecstasy, and homoeroticism inform one another in the film. Against a lush Sardinian background, this beautifully photographed film recounts the fictionalized life of Saint Sebastian. The Christian soldier-saint, operating in the third century under the Roman Empire, was subsequently martyred for his religious beliefs. Referencing the visual vocabulary associated with the historic saint, Jarman reinvents the story of Sebastian and transforms him into a figure devoted to religious celibacy. Uncovering the latent homoerotic connotations contained within Jarman's work, McGuinness attends to the visual cues and symbolic imagery that play into virginal anxieties regarding the queer body.

In the next chapter, "Troping Boyishness, Effeminacy, and Masculine Queer Virginity: Abdellah Taïa and Eyet-Chékib Djaziri,"

Gibson Ncube pays attention to what he calls a "cavernous gap" in the research on male virginity, let alone on masculine queer virginites, in Arab Muslim societies of North Africa. Ncube posits that masculine queer virginity is a significant marker of dissidence and destabilization of the status quo on sexuality and identity construction. Drawing on Kathryn Bond Stockton's theoretical perspectives on the "proto-gay child," as well as on Lucas Hilderbrand's notion of "queer boyhood," Ncube argues that the juvenile queer protagonists of Djaziri and Taïa play important roles in mapping and negotiating gay sexuality in the Arab Muslim and patriarchal societies of North Africa. Queer virginity is intrinsically linked to the development of a sexual identity considered deviant and undesirable in these communities. In this way, traditional forms of gender and sexuality are undermined by the emergence of alternative modes of being.

The volume's fourth and final part—"F*ck: They Entrapped Us in Social Issues and Politics"—contains chapters that explore the intersection of virginity and sociocultural concerns. The authors here reveal how virginity becomes a tool for political concerns, especially at the level of political nationalism, by controlling female bodies.

In "Bollywood Virgins: Diachronic Flirtations with Indian Womanhood," Asma Sayed discusses the role of Bollywood films in perpetuating a nation's patriarchal values in a number of ways. Portraying women in submissive roles and happy households after marriage, the films perpetuate nationalist and populist views to the detriment of not only women but also marginalized peoples. Providing an overview of the representations of virginity in the context of female identity politics in Bollywood cinema, Sayed focuses primarily on the films of the past two decades. Some post-1990s films have made superficial attempts to present strong female characters. Although these films have showcased seemingly liberated female characters trying to make independent life choices, most still end with the characters concluding that they love the men to whom they lost their virginity. Thus, these films typically end with the female protagonist marrying her first lover—a perpetuation of the patriarchal status quo that has historically restricted women's opportunities. This chapter offers important observations on the ways in which national identities and virginites become enmeshed

in one another and once more demonstrate how female bodies are controlled by the patriarchy.

In the closing chapter, “The Policing of *Viragos* and Other ‘Fuckable’ Bodies: The Politics of Virginity in Latin American Women’s Testimony,” Tracy Crowe Morey and Adriana Spahr devote attention to female virginity and changing political contexts. Taking the recent case of virginity testing on politically active women in Tahrir Square, the authors ask about other “political” bodies and the ways in which virginity has been tested, performed, and challenged. They seek to demonstrate the conditions and repercussions of such strict controls of the vagina through an examination of particularized cases of “unruly” women, often defined as either *viragos* or the third sex in the Latin American context.¹¹ The *virago* creates a new space centred not on virginity or the lack of it but on her capacity to perform as a male—a *virago*—in the public sphere. Historically, *viragos* who dared to enter such areas were denigrated (raped), subjugated (not only physically but also psychologically), and often reconstituted in virginal roles defined by the heteronormative confines of their society. The figure of the *virago* seems to be intermittent and appears to have succumbed under the force of patriarchal society and much more within the Latin American context, the primary focus of this chapter. The reality is that, after being defeated, their stories have been modified by the official, state-sanctioned “history” in order to preserve the status quo. The intention of the authors is to demonstrate how these women refused to live under the shadow of virginity and the subsequent efforts of society to destroy them. The analysis includes, among others, Catalina de Erauso, *soldaderas* or female soldiers during the Mexican Revolution (1910–17), and guerrilla women from Chile and Argentina during the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s.

Taken together, the chapters in this volume highlight what Judith Halberstam calls “queer methodology,” a kind of “scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behaviour.”¹² This approach to the question of virginity immediately calls the reader’s attention to the complexity of the question itself: where is virginity