CHAPTER 10

To Go Where No Man

Has Gone Before

The "Flos Virginis," so much coveted by the Europeans, is never valued by these savages.
—John Lawson

In the natural course of events the Queen is of an age where she should in reason and as is woman's way, be eager to marry and be provided for," wrote Baron Pollweiler, a negotiator visiting the court of the twenty-six-year-old Queen Elizabeth I in 1559. Pollweiler was in England attempting to broker a marriage agreement between Elizabeth and the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Archduke Charles of Austria. "The natural and necessary inference from all this is," he continued, "either that she has married secretly, or that she has already made up her mind to marry someone in England or out of it and ... is postponing matters under the cloak of Your Imperial Majesty's son, my gracious master. For that she should wish to remain a maid and never marry is inconceivable."

For all intents and purposes, the Baron was right. In a country whose monasteries and convents had been abolished by Elizabeth's father Henry VIII in 1539, and in which she herself had firmly reestablished Protestantism as the state religion, it was indeed inconceivable that a woman should wish never to marry. Yet, as we know, Elizabeth remained unmarried to the end. By dint of savvy political maneuvering, a blend of sincere and Machiavellian religiosity, and simply being beyond the reach of too much secular or religious strong-arming, she reigned for forty-five years as that most inconceivable thing—a public, powerful, and thoroughly secular virgin.

Despite the legion biographies, films, and fictions about her, the documentable facts of Elizabeth's anomalous life make her a difficult subject for the historian of virginity. We do not know and cannot say, for example, whether she was "really" a virgin in the sense of never having sexual relations with any partner at any time. There were as many rumors that she was in some way physically deformed and unable to engage in intercourse as there were that she had borne bastards by her longtime confidant Robert Dudley, Master of the Queen's Horse and later Earl of
Leicester. No evidence of any of this has been found; indeed there is no documentary evidence of her sexual existence at all. What there is to work with is her enormous and often self-conscious legacy. It is more than slightly ironic that, despite the gallons of ink that have been spilled on the subject, what is known about the virginity of the Virgin Queen is little more than what she herself said in 1559: "in the end this shalbe for me sufficient that a marble stone shall declare that a Queene, having reyned such a time, lyved and dyed a virgin."

Elizabeth's odd-woman-out example does, however, shed some useful light on what the culture of Western virginity was like from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries: a tumultuous time, rife with discovery and reform. Recall that Vesalius had only finally isolated the hymen in the mid-sixteenth century, and scientific approaches to virginity were undergoing a general renovation. In the realm of religion, Reformationists and Counterreformationists, with Protestant and Catholic versions of sexual law, grappled for the minds and bodies of believers. Even the globe was changing, as explorers traversed the world and discovered "virgin" continents where the maps had formerly said "here there be dragons." Those engaged with the iconography, the ideology, and the physical reality of virginity were all alike obliged to go where no one had gone before.

Perhaps more than any other single force, Protestantism had changed the face of virginity in Europe. Putting marriage first and abandoning monasticism and celibate clergy, Protestantism flipped the Roman Catholic Church's emphasis on virginity neatly on its head. Where Roman Catholic doctrine had stated that virgins received 100 percent of heaven's rewards, while the married could expect only 30, Protestant theology set forth the principle that all godly believers would partake equally in heaven regardless of their sexual or marital status. Martin Luther was particularly vociferous on the subject of marriage, pointing out that neither lifelong virginity nor clerical celibacy was called for in the Bible, claiming that few people were naturally inclined toward either one, and contending that the result of requiring celibacy of people who were not inherently given to it was to encourage illicit sexual relations. Even the Pope, Luther claimed, had "as many concubines as Solomon." Himself a former Augustinian monk married to a former nun, Katharina von Bora, and the father of six children, Luther practiced what he preached when it came to placing a high priority on marriage and family.

Protestant enthusiasm for marriage and family was contagious among all Christian rank and file, 'including Catholics, the lion's share of whom were, of course, married. Unsurprisingly, this met with stern disapproval from Rome. As part of the Council of Trent (1545–1563), the Roman Catholic
Church’s Counterreformation assembly called in response to the emergence of Protestantism, the Church issued the treatise *De sancti matrimonii*. *De sancti matrimonii* stood as the central Catholic document on marriage and sexuality until the Vatican II assembly of the mid-twentieth century. Among its other doctrinal points, it threatened with excommunication any Catholic who claimed, a la Luther, Calvin, and other Protestant thinkers, the heresy that marriage was preferable to virginity.

In the Council of Trent’s reminder of virginity’s supremacy we see a Christian laity whose world view had been thoroughly scrambled by the sudden appearance of Protestantism, and a Catholic establishment that was struggling to cope with the blow. It is difficult, from our vantage point in a world where Protestant denominations are as numerous as ice cream flavors, to empathize with the degree to which the Reformation transformed Christianity. With a nod to the preceding chapter, however, it may help to consider the nature and the magnitude of the differences between Protestantism and Catholicism, at least in regard to virginity.

*The Fall of the Sacred Virgin*

Protestantism had no place for consecrated virginity and thus no place for nuns or convents. Some priests, monks, and nuns abandoned their positions, their celibacy, and their Catholicism as Protestantism gained presence and power, but neither Luther nor his early followers had anything close to the clout it required to actually close down monasteries or convents. Some later closed their doors due to attrition or the Protestantization of the territory in which they stood, and the presence of nuns and convents shrank dramatically in the parts of Europe that became majority Protestant. Only in England, where Henry VIII single-handedly forced the conversion of the entire country to an Anglican church not beholden to Rome, were monastic institutions abolished outright.

But even in places where convents still stood, and in some cases even before Luther posted his ninety-five theses in 1517, various reform-minded Catholics had already begun to embrace marriage. In some ways this was the result of economic and social change more than religious reform. As feudal and manorial arrangements declined, individual wage-earning, goods-producing households became the new lowest common denominator of the burgeoning new capitalist cash economy. With nonaristocratic families gaining visibility as self-supporting entities, marriage among non-nobles started to have economic meaning that it had not possessed under intensive feudal or manorial systems. Marriage and reproduction gradually became as tightly yoked to the economic, social, and political interests of the non-noble family as they had always been for
the dynastic clans of the nobility.

As economic autonomy became strongly linked to marriage, it led to a new way of conceptualizing the family and household. In Protestant and particularly Calvinist circles, the married household came to be seen as a closed system, each family replicating within its own members the kind of relationship that existed between governor and countrymen, a microcosmic version of the larger "family" of the secular state with the paterfamilias as ruler. By 1622 William Gouge, minister of Blackfriars Church, London, could write in his *Of Domesday Duties* that "A famille is a little Church, and a little commonwealth, at least a lively representation thereof, whereby triall may be made of such as are fit for any place of authoritie, or of subjection in Church or commonwealth. Or rather it is as a schoole wherein the first principles and grounds of government and subjection are learned: whereby men are fitted to greater matters in Church or commonwealth."

This pocket-sized vision of society positioned marriage as a vital tool that produced and trained men and women who would be fit to participate in the modern, secular state.

What this meant to virginity was that it became, almost by definition, brief and transitional. In the Protestant mind, there was no place for the convent, nor for any behavior that smacked of it. The cultural category of the spinster or old maid became prominent in English culture around this time, for there was no longer a functional niche in the society for women who either did not wish to marry or could not find husbands. Indeed, the assumption in regard to women was that, as a 1632 pamphlet entitled *The Laws Resolution of Women's Rights* put it, "all of them are understood either married or to be married."

Just as it was considered "natural" for women to marry and have children, it was considered "natural" that they be virgins before they did. Virginity was a brief moment through which women passed on their way from being children to being wives. This naturalizing and trivializing of virginity had the effect of homogenizing the various forms of female chastity, as demonstrated in these lines from Diana Primrose's 1630 *A Chaine of Pearle, Or, A Memoriall of the peerles Graces, and heroick Venues of Queene Eliabeth, of Glorious Memory*:

For whether it be termed Virginall
In virgins, or in Wives stil'd Conjugall,
Or viduall in Widdowes, God respects
All equally, and all a-like affects.

This scrap of verse serves as an eloquent summary of the fall of virginity in Protestant Europe. If all forms of chastity are equal in God's eyes, then there was no reason to draw distinctions between them. The virginity a
woman took to the altar was of a piece with the monogamy she was expected to embody after she left it. Virginity itself, to the Protestant mind-set, no longer signified anything particularly special. It was something that could be expected of any reasonable, respectable unmarried woman. This way of thinking, argues literary historian Theodora Jankowski, created a subtle but important association: while chastity was a virtue of which a Protestant could be proud, the word "virginity" acquired specifically Catholic overtones.

Probably the single most striking way in which the Catholic mode of virginity was effaced from Protestantism was in regard to the praise and veneration of the Virgin Mary. While no Protestant ever denied Mary's virginity or that it was perpetual, all of them agreed that the way she was worshipped within Catholicism was not what they felt was appropriate for Christians. The Protestant Mary is no longer the quasi-goddess intercessor who reigns as queen of heaven, but instead a wholly human woman who happened to have had the honor of being Jesus' mother. The demotion was tangible: icons and statues of Mary do not exist in Protestant houses of worship in the way that they do in Catholic churches, nor are there Protestant equivalents of anthems like the Catholic Salve Regina or Sub Tuum Praesidium specifically praising Mary above all other women. Protestant insistence on the authority of scripture, and not the accumulated centuries of extracanonical literature, removed all but the essentials of Mary's identity.

The Virgin Mary's demotion within Protestantism led to some dramatic and curious historical moments. During the systematic restoration of Anglicanism that attended Elizabeth I's early reign (she had had to reinstitute it following her half-sister Mary's abortive attempt to restore Catholicism), among the striking anti-Catholic measures taken by the state were search-and-destroy missions aimed at finding and eradicating icons and statues of the Virgin Mary. Various scholars, including the incisive Helen Hackett, have looked at these anti-Marian campaigns as being part of a complex rearrangement of virginal power. It is difficult not to see the destruction of icons and statues of Mary as a way of destroying the old Catholic virgin so that she could be replaced with a new Protestant model—the queen herself.

*The Making of the Virgin Queen*

Elizabeth Tudor, daughter of Henry VIII and his second wife, Anne Boleyn, was never literally compared to the Virgin Mary during her lifetime. It would have been sacrilegious from the scripture-centered Anglican viewpoint. Also, it would not have made sense from the perspective of the Virgin Mary's role within the Gospels: according to the terms of the
Thirty-nine Articles of Religion of 1563, the bearer of the crown also stood as head of the Church of England. It is difficult to imagine a role less congruent with the Virgin Mary’s timeless and much-vaulted passivity to God’s will than running a nation and a state religion. Nonetheless, Elizabeth’s reign was nothing if not a lengthy process of creating a virginal persona that has proven to be very nearly on a par, in terms of its iconic popularity, with the Virgin Mary’s own.

How much of this was deliberate, and how much the coincidental accretion of attention that accompanies a long-reigning and beloved monarch, is hard to say. Elizabeth’s savvy in regard to managing and manipulating public opinion was substantial. She spent lavishly on gowns, jewels, portraits, and royal progresses, whistle-stop horseback tours of her domain that let her see and be seen. Her skill with rhetoric, both visual and verbal, was undisputed, as in the legendary speech delivered to her troops on the eve of the Spanish Armada. The queen, dressed in an Athenian-like white gown and silver breastplate, told her men, "I have the body of a weak, feeble woman, but the heart and stomach of a king—and of a King of England too."

Elizabeth’s kingly attitude toward her role as ruler played a significant part in her controversial, wily virginity. Twenty-five years old when she was crowned, Elizabeth had already declared a preference for virginity, having asked for permission to remain unmarried during the time that her younger half-brother, Edward VI, briefly occupied the throne. She had reiterated her desire "to remayne in that estate I was, which of all others best lyked me or pleased me" again, during the period when her half-sister Mary was queen, when several continental potentates made offers of marriage to the young princess. But what had been acceptable, if eccentric, behavior coming from a third-place princess whose (hypothetical) children might constitute potential competitors for any children her half-siblings had become unthinkable once Elizabeth was queen.

The third and last of Henry VIII’s children to be crowned, Elizabeth was, in light of her brother and sister’s ultimate failure to leave any heirs, also the last Tudor standing. Elizabeth could either marry and have children or let the Tudor line die with her. Domestic and international politics added to the marriage pressure. England was a small and isolated country in need of allies on the Continent, and the person next in line for the throne was the staunchly Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots, the granddaughter of Henry VIII’s sister Margaret. Mary had the backing of France and other powerful Catholic countries on the Continent (her son, James VI, ultimately succeeded Elizabeth upon her death in 1603). But the notion of another Catholic queen on the throne, particularly in the wake of Bloody Mary's
gruesome persecutions during the Catholic interregnum, sat exceedingly poorly with English Protestants for whom those persecutions were a still-ragged wound. When Elizabeth's first Parliament convened in 1559, they lost little time in formally petitioning the queen to marry.

Elizabeth responded with a statement on 10 February, in which she very carefully failed to refuse the prospect of marriage outright, but failed to welcome it either. The newly crowned queen said that if it pleased God to continue to maintain her in her sentiment that it was best she continue to remain unmarried, she would do so with pleasure. On the other hand, she said that she hoped that God would provide "in convenient tyme wherby the realme shal not remayne destitute of an heir that may be fitt to governe and peradventure more beneficall to the realme then such an offspring as may come of me." Leaving the whole issue in God's hands was the most politic way of refusing to say either yes or no.

This was the first of two parliamentary petitions that exhorted Elizabeth to marry, and the first of three corresponding statements from the queen. Over the course of the two petitions and the three responses—1559, 1563, and 1569—we can trace a fascinating evolution in Elizabeth's apparent attitudes toward marriage. The brash young queen ducking the will of the Parliament in 1559 had become a bit wiser and cagier by the time her second Parliament issued a similar petition to the now thirty-year-old queen in 1563. Somewhat more forthcoming now, although having in the interim rejected the suits not only of her own subject (and probable love of her life) Robert Dudley, but also of some of the most powerful men in Europe, including Archduke Charles of Austria, King Erik XIV of Sweden, and even her own half-sister Mary's widower, Philip II of Spain.” Elizabeth appeared to take the question of an heir at least somewhat seriously.

In the first of two responses to this petition, she reminded Parliament of the story of the biblical Elizabeth, whom God had blessed with a miraculous late-life pregnancy. Drawing the parallel between herself and her New Testament namesake, she told Parliament that she had heard and understood their request, even if she might appear to be waiting for divine intervention on the matter. The second response to this petition, in November 1566, shows further softening of Elizabeth's antimarriage stance. For the first time, the thirty-three-year-old queen avowed that she would marry as soon as she could conveniently do so, "yf God take not hym awaye with whom I mynde to marrye." Her reasons for wanting to do so were clear: "I hope to have chylderne, othereyse I wolde never marrie." But she was equally clear, and absolutely unabashed, about the fact that the people who most encouraged the marriage would be the first to declare their disapproval of anyone she chose as a husband. Furthermore, she
revealed with arch disdain that there had been some who had told her that "they never requyred more then that theye myght ones here me saye I wold marrie," condemning such facile sentiments with a scathing "there was never so great a treason but myght be cov-eryde under as fayre a pretence."

This was, perhaps, not so much genuine reconciliation to the idea of marriage as it was sheer strategy. Having eluded marriage as long as she had, there was little chance, barring some unprecedented unanimous agreement on the parts of Parliament and the Privy Council as to an appropriate choice of husband, that she would be required to marry. Elizabeth may also have felt that she could finally allow herself to verbally placate Parliament because her subjects were increasingly likely, for political reasons, to back her desire to remain unattached. The queen had many powerful friends among her subjects who treasured her deep commitment to Protestantism. Some of them had begun to realize that given the options available to her in terms of suitable husbands, a married queen might ironically be even less advantageous to the Protestant cause than a virgin queen without an heir.

This was dramatically demonstrated during Elizabeth's last courtship. It would have been a most unusual pairing even by today's standards, let alone by those of the time: in 1579 Elizabeth was forty-six; the Duke of Alençon twenty-five. The intent was clearly political, since a marriage between Elizabeth and Alençon would have destroyed the looming potential of an anti-English alliance between France and Spain. But the English were having none of it. They had become accustomed to their spinster queen, had little love for the French, and, with Mary and Philip still very much in the collective memory, remained disinclined to entertain the idea of another marriage between any English queen and a foreigner.

John Stubbs, an anti-Alençon writer whose tract Discoverie of a gaping Gulf where into England is like to be Swallowed by an other French manage appeared in September 1579, earned swift Royal retribution. For his temerity in questioning the queen's right to decide her own affairs, and not at all coincidentally for having been sufficiently impolitic to raise the question of Elizabeth's ability to bear a child in her forties, Stubbs and his publisher were both permanently relieved of their right hands.

The rapidly abandoned Alençon courtship was the turning point for Elizabeth's career as virgin queen. Before it, there had been the lingering possibility, however slight, that she might at long last marry. After it, the idea was no longer seriously raised: Elizabeth was past the point where she could reasonably be assumed to be fertile. From that point on, writes Helen Hackett, "the Queen would be unequivocally celebrated as ever-virgin."

From 1582 until her death in 1603, Elizabeth's virginity became
superhuman. Portrayed as Cynthia, Solene, Diana, Vesta, or Athena, Elizabeth and her virginity were poeticized, glorified, and abstracted. Her virginity was no longer a matter affecting a mundane human body and its reproductive functioning but a metaphysical aura attached to a larger-than-life persona. The doctrine of the King's Two Bodies, which held that the king (or queen, if she ruled independently) had a "body naturall" of flesh and blood and a metaphorical "body politicke" the abilities and role of which transcended whatever infirmities might inhere to the physical body, had been invoked at the beginning of Elizabeth's reign to argue that the intrinsic instability and lesser worth of her female "body naturall" were not as important as the intrinsic stability and value of kingship. During the last twenty years of her reign, though, the public image of Elizabeth's, and England's, "body politicke" had become enhanced by the overlay of her hard-won and ultimately mythicized virginity. Prior to Elizabeth's reign, this attribute could have been understood only as belonging to the feminine and frangible physical body that temporarily occupied the throne. Now it stood for something far larger, grander, and much more formidable: virginity as bulwark, standard, and shield.

"Her Treasures Having Never Been Opened"

During Elizabeth's reign, new vistas opened in more areas than just the queen's reputation. For over a century, voyagers and explorers had been returning from fantastic sea journeys with tales of unthinkably profitable lands far beyond Europe's shores. Elizabeth herself, well aware of the trading opportunities such remote locales represented, chartered the East India Company into existence in late 1600 to help her country take advantage of what lay beyond the horizon. Aside from her political and economic interest in efforts of discovery, exploration, and settlement, the queen also shared an unexpected similarity with these exotic locales: a reputation for opulent and well-endowed virginity. Indeed Virginia Colony, the first English settlement in North America, founded in 1607, was named for the recently deceased queen via her most celebrated attribute.

To many, the effulgent virginity rhetoric of the European expansion—Sir Walter Raleigh's characterization of Guiana as "a country that hath yet her maidenhead, never sackt, turned, nor wrought," for example—comes as a bit of a shock. Elizabeth's virginity may have been the elegant stuff of classical allusion, but the virginity of the New World was usually the nudge-nudge-wink-wink of the brothel. The soil of the New World was seen as being, as Robert Johnson's Nova Britannia (1609) put it, "strong and lustie of its own natur." Even the rocky, difficult shores of the New England coast were praised as "Paradise with all her Virgin Beauties." Indeed, as Thomas Morton wrote in 1632, it seemed to the
colonization-minded explorers as if these new territories yearned for the touch of European, Christian settlement "like a faire virgin, longing to be sped / and meete her lover in a Nuptiall bed."

This seductively idyllic vision of eager, fecund virginity was a powerful motif. In illustrations of the era of colonial expansion, the New World is often depicted as a naked or at least bare-breasted woman, her hair loose, her posture unashamed. These female embodiments of the land beckon, sometimes even from a relaxing hammock, just another specimen of the tame-looking game that gambols in lushly fruited forests. The Americas, and by implication the indigenous peoples who lived there, were clearly understood as desirable, forthcoming, and, most important, unspoiled partners who not only failed to resist but indeed received with interest the advances of European men.

Partly this was wishful thinking: Europe and the British Isles had become crowded, arable land was pushed to its limits, and the reward of incessant backbreaking work was often poverty, disease, and, in bad years, famine. The idea of a place where one scarcely had to lift a finger to provide for one's self was understandably tantalizing. What better symbol for such an environment than a welcoming, sexually ready woman?

Indeed the New World did contain vast unsettled land as well as other resources that appeared to be wholly unexploited and ripe for the picking, so the vision was not an empty promise. Not only that, but as explorers began to return from the New World and publish tales of their adventures on the other side of the ocean, they produced a steady stream of stories of sexual encounters with virgin women who, it seemed, yielded to the Europeans as willingly as did the land. In accounts like Carolina explorer John Lawson's, published in 1709, we find goathish and doubtless hyperbolic descriptions of sexual interludes not just with indigenous women and girls, but eager, "naturally" promiscuous indigenous women and girls, who began their sexual lives "as soon as Nature prompts them." Even better, Lawson claimed, these were females whose reputations or lives could not possibly be ruined if a horny colonist happened to indulge his desires, "A Multiplicity of Gallants never being a Stain to a Female's Reputation, or the least Hindrance of her Advancement, but the more Whorish, the more Honourable."

There is a strong stench of what we might now call "sex tourism" in some of these descriptions. Virginia planter and chronicler Robert Beverley described a sort of prodigal aboriginal harem of which visiting "Strangers of Condition" were invited by their hosts to partake. "A Brace of young Beautiful Virgins" would be chosen for the European visitor to the native camp, to serve him, undress him, and be his bedmates, one woman to
either side of him. It was, Beverley promised, no platonic gesture, for the women would "esteem it a breach of Hospitality not to submit to everything he [the visitor] desires of them."

Accounts like these stirred multiple reactions both on the ground in North America and back home in Europe. On the one hand, they strengthened the resolve of the religious to send missionaries to try to civilize and Christianize the New World's apparently habitually wanton indigenes. On the other, they represented an alluring prospect for the numerous single men who went to the North American colonies (Virginia, Maryland, and the Carolinas particularly) to seek their fortunes. These tales were so influential that when some white Europeans, like Virginian planter-statesman William Byrd, visited with Amerind tribes and did not find themselves the recipients of the sort of hot two-girl action promised by accounts like Beverley's, they reacted quite poeishly at not receiving what they obviously thought was their due.

To what extent such stories and claims might have been true is almost impossible to assess at this historical remove. It is likely that at least some of the indigenous peoples intended the sharing of their women to forge reciprocal alliances between the European newcomers and the people already living there. Barriers of language, culture, and custom, on the other hand, assured that such intent would easily (and perhaps sometimes willfully) have gone unperceived by the Europeans. In any event, most European men would not have considered such "savages" as serious partners, despite the fact that numerous early male settlers depended on their indigenous common-law wives to translate, navigate, and help them feed themselves in an unfamiliar land. But as the titillated response to John Rolfe's 1614 marriage to Pocahontas (and their subsequent celebrity when they traveled, sponsored by the Virginia Company, to England) proved, a fully recognized marriage between a European and an indigenous American was a curiosity with few parallels.

The Puritans

In the United States, the iconic image of settlers in the New World is that of the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay Colony. Resolve members of a profoundly Calvinist version of Protestantism, their resistance to the state religion, their passionate devotion to their own version of moral and spiritual purity, and their militancy created tension and eventually contributed to the outbreak of outright war (the English Civil War) in England. Before the war and especially after it, Puritan believers, and particularly the more hard-line, often sought refuge in places either more congenial to their beliefs or at least less likely to oppose them.

One of these places was the East Coast of North America. Both the
Virginia Colony and the Massachusetts Bay Colony were founded by Puritans on the principle that they would attempt to establish in the New World the Holy Commonwealth they had failed to institute in England. In Massachusetts, this plan prospered. In 1648, four Massachusetts communities adopted the Cambridge Platform, instituting a form of government where authority was centered in the "elect," the most upstanding and pious male members of Puritan congregations. The elect served as paterfamilias to their communities just as they did to their own households. The "little Commonwealth" of the Calvinist Protestant family was therefore the essential building block of the larger commonwealth then being carved from Massachusetts's stony soil.

Virginity was a serious issue in both literal and figurative commonwealths. It was part of the proper life pattern for women, as well as a determining factor in the reputation a woman and her family had within these close-knit communities. If an unmarried woman lost her virginity it was a socioeconomic crisis, because it made it unlikely that she would marry. A female-headed household was anathema; only a man could master a household or represent his household within the congregation.

A lost virginity was also an ideological and dogmatic crisis. Puritans believed that just as a wrongdoing on the part of one member of a family might reflect poorly upon the rest, a sin on the part of any member of the commonwealth could draw down God's wrath upon the entire community. Punishment and repentance were necessary in order to escape this fate, for example to have the wrongdoer stand, possibly in stocks, in a public place while wearing a sign that identified the nature of his or her particular sin. Although Puritan punishments often seem unnecessarily humiliating to our modern eyes, the fact that they were public and shaming was precisely the point: justice had to be seen to be done in order to alleviate fears that adequate reparations might not have been made to God.

The very public ways Puritan women were prosecuted for sexual transgressions have led some historians to assume that premarital sex was epidemic in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The truth, however, appears to have been rather different. The work of historian Else Hambledon has revealed that the numbers of women representing known violations of premarital virginity taboos as either unwed mothers or pregnant brides were fairly small. Additionally, the numbers were, at least in the seventeenth century, typically about equal for unwed mothers and pregnant brides: in Essex County, Massachusetts, between 1641 and 1685, 135 married and 131 unmarried women were cited for fornication evinced by the birth of a child.

There were a few important differences between those who managed to
marry while pregnant with a child conceived out of wedlock and those who did not. It was not that some were prosecuted and others were not: unmarried women who bore children and married women whose babies were born within eight months of their weddings were prosecuted alike. Nor was it a difference in the nature of the penalty, since fines, whippings, and other punishments were dispensed without regard to marital status. The difference was also not age, since most women involved in fornication prosecutions were under the age of twenty-five and over half were between the ages of fifteen and twenty. Rather, the differences had to do with the ways in which the women had become pregnant in the first place and what this meant for their lives down the line.

Women who were married by the time their babies were born were much more likely to be fully reintegrated into the community, in part because they married the men with whom they shared their regrettable lapse of conduct. As many as three-quarters of unmarried women convicted of fornication, on the other hand, would never find husbands. In this marriage-centric culture, this left them stuck on the fringes socially, economically, and religiously for the rest of their lives. These unmarried mothers were highly likely to have borne children fathered by men who were already married to other women and were far higher in the social and economic hierarchy. They were also significantly older. Approximately 60 percent of the men fined in Essex County fornication proceedings involving unmarried young women were at least twenty-seven years old. These disparities of age and status, to Hambleton, are "evidence not of an affective bond but of a predatory relationship."

Only rarely were any of these men, by definition more important to the community than the girls they impregnated, punished for their behavior. This led to a subclass of women in Puritan New England who lost their virginities to older, more powerful, and, frequently, predatory men, then ended up paying for it for the rest of their lives. Despite the superficial egalitarianism of the way this moral offense was punished in the Holy Commonwealth, with unmarried and married fornicators punished equally under the law, genuine redemption of a virginity lost outside of marriage was reserved for parties of two.

Although Philip was eager to renew his strategic alliance with England, the marriage was not a prospect Elizabeth was prepared to entertain seriously for a host of reasons, not least of which were Philip's Catholicism and the legacy of British hatred for Mary's Spanish marriage. What this meant to virginity was that it became, almost by definition, brief and transitional. In the Protestant mind, there was no place for the convent, nor for any behavior that smacked of it. The cultural category of the spinster or old
maid became prominent in English culture around this time, for there was no longer a functional niche in the society for women who either did not wish to marry or could not find husbands. Indeed, the assumption in regard to women was that, as a 1632 pamphlet entitled *The Lawes Resolution of Women's Rights* put it, "all of them are understood either married or to be married."