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"Erudite and witty."

—*Chicago Sun-Times*

VIRGIN

The Untouched History

HANNE BLANK

BLOOMSBURY

CHAPTER II

The Erotic Virgin

A virginity taken by a street boy of sixteen is a pearl cast to a swine.

—Walter, anonymous author of *My Secret Life*

REGARDING ONLY WHAT IS BELOW THE GIRDLE, it is impossible of two Women to know an old from a young one. And as in the dark all Cats are grey, the Pleasure of corporal Enjoyment with an Old Woman is at least equal, and frequently superior, every Knack being by Practice capable of Improvement," Benjamin Franklin wrote in a 1745 letter to a friend. In this famous missive, he pointed out that from the male perspective, sex with older and more experienced women had a great deal to recommend it. Recognizing that "the debauching of a Virgin may be her Ruin, and make her for Life unhappy," and "having made a young Girl miserable may give you frequent bitter Reflections," Franklin concludes that any man is likely to be better served by a woman of some experience than he is by a virgin.

Franklin's opinions on the subject were doubtless a matter of considerable reflection and experience: he was well known as a lifelong ladies' man. For much of Western history, though, those sharing Franklin's sentiments have been in the distinct minority. For several hundred years—and possibly longer, although it is difficult to document these things in the West prior to the late-Renaissance

flowering of pornography—the virgin has been touted as the ultimate erotic experience, a sort of sexual Holy Grail.

In this case as in so many other instances where we appear to be talking about virgins, what we're really discussing isn't virgins at all but what other people believe is true about them. (The erotic experiences and attitudes of actual virgins are virtually never taken into account for the simple, if inaccurate, reason that virgins are assumed not to have erotic experiences or attitudes to discuss.) When we talk about "the erotic virgin," we are not talking about virgins' subjective experiences but about how virgins have been experienced and imagined as erotic objects.

Pleasure, Power, and Projection

Why should virginity ever be perceived as sexy? A woman who has not been sexually active is a valuable commodity for genetic, and thus socioeconomic, reasons. In cultures where paternity is the underlying principle of social and economic organization, this is critical. But verifiable paternity itself is much too abstract to be sexy. One might argue that virginity is perceived as sexy because virgins are sexually appealing. But everyone alive, whether ugly or lovely, graceful or lumpen, is at some point a virgin. Nor can we make a reasonable claim that all virgins possess some physical quality that makes them more gratifying sex partners. This is particularly untrue in regard to virginal genitalia, which vary every bit as much as the nonvirginal variety except insofar as the specifics of their experience are concerned.

We come a bit closer to understanding what makes virginity sexy when we consider that virgins are often referred to as being "untouched." What is sexy about virgins is, in a very real way, their unknownness. Any virgin's body can be *believed* to possess specific appealing qualities. There is, after all, no evidence to the contrary. A virgin is a blank screen upon which to project one's fantasies of sex and of virginity itself. No matter how much we intellectually grasp that virgins and virginities are far from uniform, the fact that no one has yet proven *this* virgin to be one thing or the other means that we can fantasize that she is the way virgins are "supposed to be," whatever *that* may be in our minds.

A number of the things we believe virgins are supposed to be sexually are

the very same things that are used as evidence in virginity tests. The Talmud, romance novelists, theologians, and pornographers all wax obsessive about the portentous and supposedly invariable tightness of the virgin vagina; it makes perfect sense that medical texts and sex toy catalogues alike offer means of generating said vaginal tightness through methods as diverse as exercises, irritants, and surgery. It is no coincidence that the demurely downcast eyes, chaste demeanor, and earnest ignorance that "prove" a virgin to Tertullian, Albertus Magnus, or William Acton are the very things that arouse the narrator of the nineteenth-century sex memoir *My Secret Life* to bribery, blackmail, and even self-acknowledged, outright rape. The bloody bedclothes demanded in the book of Deuteronomy are a critical part of the attraction for Mr. Norbert, the jaded *Fanny Hill* brothel patron who purchases Fanny's elaborately artificial "virginity" for an extravagant sum.

In fetishizing virginity just as in "proving" it, what counts most is whatever can be made outward and visible, because the thing itself remains eternally elusive. The elusiveness and evanescence of virginity, too, is part of the attraction for some virgin chasers. After all, how much more thrilling the hunt when the quarry is so tricky and fragile? Virginity has long been invested with magic powers. Faith in traditional virginity magic having become at least as rare, these days, as unicorns, it is little wonder that we are inclined to believe that virginity has magic powers in one of the only realms of human experience in which we still acknowledge transcendent experiences: eroticism.

The erotic specialness of virginity is not unlike the emperor's famous clothes. Few people have both the perspective and the temerity to question the nature, much less the existence, of something virtually everyone has agreed not only exists but is fabulously special. Therefore it does exist, and to the victor belong the spoils. And "spoils" is precisely the right word. Virgins as a class are a renewable resource—recall Jerome's comment that he could praise marriage because it produced virgins—but it was also Jerome who noted that not even God could raise up a virgin who had fallen. At the same time, because the body itself is notoriously silent on such matters, no one but God can accurately know whether a virgin has "fallen" or not. For the rest of us, and for virginity fetishists as for virginity testers, there is a constant search for tangible signs and the perpetual reiteration, in story after story, of what those signs mean.

The virginity fetishist's bounty consists of stories. Particularly popular among these stories is the tale of the skilled "conversion" of resistant virgin

into willing wench. In these conversion stories, vanquished virginity is the key to sexual "realness" and mastery: it takes a "real man" to convert a virginal "little girl" into a sexually eager "real woman," and she is appropriately grateful. By being the first to have sex with her, the man literally makes the woman. A woman who does not like sex or who is lesbian is often snidely said to have "never had the right man," implying that if she had, she, too, would naturally have been converted—*abracadabra!*—by the magic of the "right" male wand.

Men also are "made" when they lose their virginity, but in a very different way. A woman who loses her virginity loses her mastery over access to her own person: she has been had. A man who loses his virginity, on the other hand, gains mastery. Our slang reflects it: a man "pops her cherry," but a woman "gives it up to him," a man "breaks her in," a woman "gets her hymen busted." Sex makes both men and women "real," but the subtext that the real male masters, while the real woman *is* mastered, remains.

Beyond mastery lies connoisseurship. Virginity, or so numerous sources assure us, is a proper object of such an approach. Indeed, some writers have insisted that sex with a virgin is quite lost on the average uneducated slob. "Few of the tens of thousands of whores in London gave their virginities either to gentlemen, or to young or old men—or to men at all," writes the upper-class narrator of the remarkable four-thousand-page sexual diary *My Secret Life*. "Their own low class lads had them. The street boys' dirty pricks went up their little cunts first. This is greatly to be regretted, for street boys cannot appreciate the treasures they destroy. A virginity taken by a street boy of sixteen is a pearl cast to a swine. Any cunt is good enough for such inexperience. To such an animal, a matron of fifty or sixty would give him as much, if not more pleasure than a virgin." This is an erotic outlook that depends in every way on a strict ideology of class and merit among men, and an even stricter ideology of the erotic value of virgin women.

All this begs the question: why? What's the attraction? What, for instance, is the sex tourist negotiating for the services of a child prostitute in a Patpong bar—or an Atlanta back room—really buying? What are the people who purchase a membership to Sexhymen.com getting for their money that they couldn't get from any other pornographic Web site? Is there something that can be gotten from virgins that genuinely cannot be obtained from a nonvirginal source? Medicine, science, sociology, and a not inconsiderable body of anecdotal evidence argue that there isn't. But perhaps all we need to know is

that the most important sexual organ of all is found not between our legs but between our ears. To look for external proof of the erotic superiority of virgins is to put the cart before the horse: all we really need to know is whether one believes that it is true.

Épater le Bourgeois?

The end of virginity is no simple, tidy ending. It cannot be. Virginity drags too much history behind it. To interact sexually with a virgin is to interact sexually in a larger sense with parents, the law, maybe even God. It creates tension and changes social roles. It invokes vulnerability, breakage, and injury as well as validation, transformation, and completion. At the same time, it is often an occasion of demystification and disillusion. Holiness and sin are bound up in it, as are purity and pollution, fetish and taboo, anxiety and fear. Transgression seems inevitable, and unsurprisingly it is one of the primary fuels on which the erotic virgin mythos runs. Of all the motifs that flourish in virginity-related pornography, the most popular are invasion, possession, and destruction. But ultimately, such transgression is not truly transgressive at all. It is in fact terrifically socially conservative, and serves only to reinforce the system that holds virginity up as something that can be transgressed against in the first place.

The erotics of virginity are the priorities of patriarchal sexuality writ large. In eroticizing virginity, youth, physical nubility, ignorance, inexperience, fragility, and vulnerability are objectified from the perspective of someone who, by definition, is none of these things. The erotic charge of sex with a virgin rests on the interplay of the sexual aggression of an experienced partner and the sexual submission of a virginal one. It champions sex as a vehicle for completion and transformation, and it insists that a person who has sexual access to a woman automatically claims or colonizes her, body and soul. It likewise demands that no woman may be considered sexually real by herself, that it is only through the sexual action of a male partner that her sexuality is truly summoned into being.

Virginity porn imagery underscores these patriarchal priorities. It does so in a very specific way, intensely focused on giving the impression of newness, artlessness, and natural beauty. The women whose images make up so much of virginity porn have skin that is youthfully flawless and fair. Their makeup is subtle or nonexistent. There is a particular avoidance of the exaggerated lipstick

and mouth gestures so common to the rest of the porn industry. A darkly painted, O-shaped mouth is too overtly a sexual performance, and this is a context where it is crucial that we be allowed to believe that there is no artifice, that whatever sexuality we see is the real McCoy.

There is a definite tendency, in this pornography, to visually recall early puberty. There is an emphasis on small breasts, slim hips, and pert buttocks. Models' hair is usually worn long but in styles typical of childhood, either left hanging and unadorned or, in what has become a virgin-porn cliché, school-girl styles like pigtails, ponytails, or braids. When virgin men are involved—which they are both in male-on-male pornography and in scenarios depicting mutual heterosexual virginity loss—they are likewise visibly young and fair, with little or no facial or body hair, and slim and lightly muscled, with dewy, plump skin. Their hair also may be tousled or slightly clumsy in cut, again a bid to showcase the supposed artlessness of youth.

These trends are extended with impeccable thoroughness to the genitals. Pubic hair is generally trimmed or shaven, both by porn industry standard and because there appears to be an expectation, well reflected in the prose pornography featuring virgins, that the virgin, perhaps because she is not a “real woman” yet, will have only a sparse growth of the stuff. The genitals themselves have the same attributes as the bodies overall. Plump, pink, and healthy, they never show any sign of droopiness. Labia majora are pert and smooth, labia minora small and symmetrical. Scrotums and breasts alike are firm, high, and taut, never pendulous. It is rare for genitals to display normal variation in skin texture or color, and typically they are pale.

In the extreme gynecological close-up, which is a staple of virginity porn whether in prose or picture, vaginas are inevitably depicted as both tight and tiny. Paradoxically, vaginal size is one of the things written pornography can describe more convincingly than photographs can show, because so little of the vagina is visible from the outside. But to ensure that a “tight” impression is given in photos, virginity-porn vaginas generally appear in isolation, disabling size comparisons. Some photographic close-ups purporting to show a “tiny virgin vagina” do not show the vagina at all, but rather the significantly smaller opening of the urethra. This sleight-of-hand goes completely unnoticed by the average porn consumer, who lacks the background to know the difference and who has, for that matter, already willingly suspended his disbelief in regard to what he is being shown.

Suspension of disbelief works in pornographers' favor not just in regard to urethral imposture, but in relation to the hymens of virginity porn. A popular focus object for virginity porn photos, they often appear retouched or perhaps even prosthetic, with strange skin tones and textures. But whether these hymens are fakes—and many of them transparently are—is only tangentially important. After all, how many viewers are in a position to be able to judge the authenticity of what they see, or will even care? They're much more concerned with the fact that they get to see it at all, whatever "it" is. What is important is not that the hymen is real but that it is really obvious. For the purposes of pornography, a hymen can be many things, even many improbable things, such as easily visible from across a room or an incongruous shade of Day-Glo pink. What it cannot be is ambiguous.

From hairdos to hymens, the message transmitted by the bodies of virginity porn is that of nubility and inexperience. They appear *ready* for experience, but they dare not show signs of having already had it. Breasts can never be allowed to sag. Elaborate hairstyles show too much sophistication and forethought. Stretch marks are out of the question. The bodies virginity porn offers to us are pristine, unmarked, and ready to be inscribed by the experience of being sexually claimed. Such carefully "natural" casualness, combined with the genre's standard stockpile of imagery of middle-class normalcy and iconic teen kitsch, bears an insistent, specific message. Magazines like *Hustler* subsidiary *Barely Legal* and its many porn-industry siblings depict their youthful beauties in contexts like suburban bedrooms, college dorms, locker rooms, school gym showers. The women are described as cheerleaders, students, babysitters, and sorority girls. Adult they may be, in the "all models are over eighteen" sense, but the immaturity symbolism is insistent.

The ultimate destination of virginity porn is defloration. Whether it is explicitly shown in a given piece of porn or is left for the reader or viewer to finish off in fantasy, the trajectory is unmistakable. When it is depicted, it must contain either penetration in action, one or more of the classic signs of lost virginity, or some combination. The hands-down favorite talisman of virginity-loss porn is blood. The Web site Ifitbleeds.com not only boasts an appropriately sanguinary name, but takes as its tagline not the journalistic truism "If it bleeds, it leads" (perhaps rejected as being too literary) but instead "If it bleeds, we can fuck it!" Virginity porn Web sites, films, and pictorials entice would-be viewers with copy like "Break their hymens!" and "You'll see their panties,

their bedsheets, and more," and "You can see her bloody cherry." Never mind that much of the blood that is visible in photographic virginity porn is suspiciously copious and often appears artificial. This, too, has a long and honorable tradition.

Two other signature motifs of virginity porn are "proof" of the woman's enjoyment and the trope of transformation. There is often a special emphasis on the "realness" of the transformation inherent in first-time penetrative sex. Newvirginseveryday.com promises that the subscriber will see "the cocks that turned these little girls into real women," and furthermore tells us that "you can't afford to miss a second of their journey into REAL womanhood" (emphasis in the original). The "instant nymphomaniac," the virgin who becomes sexually voracious upon losing her virginity, is another of the images on offer. We also frequently find the virgin voyeur, who witnesses others having sex and thus becomes eager to have sex herself, or the virgin who is "sexually awakened" so that she will desire sex and willingly give up her virginity.

The motifs are often combined for greater effect. In the nineteenth-century *The Amatory Experiences of a Surgeon*, the surgeon of the title not only gradually awakens the inherent lust of a bedridden young patient to the point where she asks him to deflower her, but the defloration has "such a salubrious effect on my young patient that she eventually quite got the better of her spinal complaint, and was married at the age of eighteen." In virginity pornography, sex is a panacea. It cures immaturity by converting girls into women, transforms the ignorant into the knowledgeable, and turns the unwilling into the eager. It takes incapacitated girls and bestows upon them the capacity for wifehood. These fantasies transgress nothing. They are fantasies of male mastery and female conformity.

Bad Behavior and the Modern Man

The tendency to frame defloration as rebellion is in many ways only to be expected, given the time period in which eroticized virginity first came to the fore. Sexually explicit art and writing have been with us in various forms and modes since before the ancient Greeks, but the virgin as an erotic object really only comes into view beginning in what historians call the modern era, roughly from the sixteenth century forward.

Prior to the sixteenth century, pornography as we know it today did not truly exist. This was not because the sixteenth century represented a second Fall from some porn-free Eden, but because prior to the sixteenth century, the goal of obscenity was unlikely to be entirely prurient. Instead, obscenity might have ritual or mythological significance, as with the legions of phalluses that decorated ancient Rome. It could be an aspect of public entertainment (a lewd painting, joke, or song) or an advertisement for a brothel. It might sharpen the bite of satire, as in *Lysistrata*, the *Satyricon*, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, *The Canterbury Tales*, or the paintings of Hieronymous Bosch. A lack of what we would now recognize as pornography did not mean a lack of obscenity or sexual content in the cultural waters of those times. Graphic sexual content has always been with us. It simply hasn't always been directed toward the same ends.

As a result of all this earthy art and prose, however, we have a reasonably good idea of what previous generations found smutty or sexy, and virginity seems not to have been much on their minds. In late-medieval Rabelais and Chaucer, for example, the classic erotically objectified woman is not a virgin but a young and lovely wife, like the saucy Alisoun of "The Miller's Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales*. Nor do we find the virgin in the book that arguably began the genre of modern, smut-for-smut's-sake pornography, Pietro Aretino's lavishly illustrated *Sonetti lussuriosi* of 1524. When we find her in Aretino's later *Ragionamenti* (two volumes, 1534–1536), she is not eroticized. Rather, she is a nun, established as one of the three types of women in Aretino's world: nun, wife, and whore.

When virginity does begin to appear in eroticized contexts in the High Renaissance, it is not particularly sexy. Classicized virgins, among them rather a lot of Artemises and Athenas (Queen Elizabeth I was frequently compared to Athena), were depicted as sexually attractive but also as inaccessible, and in fact opposed to carnality. As any reasonably well-educated member of the upper classes knew, those who tried to treat the virgin goddesses as erotic objects paid a hefty price: Actaeon was turned into a stag, Tiriasias was blinded. Conceptualizing well-born virgins as Athenas suited elite models of courtship. It supported the abstracted modes of public flirtation, such as the composition and performance of poems and songs, with which marriageable young people amused themselves while dynastic and political marriage negotiations were hammered out behind closed doors by their older relatives. Being an Athena was, to be sure, a limited-time offer, as virtually all of these young goddesses

were destined for marriage. But as an archetype the Athena flourished, her virginity formally immune to sexual objectification.

Virgins of the lower classes, who began to emerge in literature and imagery shortly after the Athenas, had no such immunity. Like the Athena, the Servant Girl was also seen as sexually attractive and desirable. But where the Athena was protected by her rank and its corresponding veneer of classical otherworldliness, the Servant Girl's virginity was eminently worldly and vulnerable. Because it was vulnerable, it also became wily. If the Athena's virginity was notable because it was so lofty as to be untouchable, the Servant Girl's virginity was notable precisely because it was so accessible. Servant Girls, on the one hand, were held to be remarkable for the feistiness and skill with which they resisted would-be seducers. On the other, their poverty and lack of education was seen as making them unusually vulnerable to sexual predators.

Then as now, men's attempts on working-class women's virginity often became the site of pitched battles, such as the ones described in the popular early-eighteenth-century song "My Thing Is My Own."

A master of music came with intent
To give me a lesson on my instrument.
I thanked him for nothing, and bid him be gone,
For my little fiddle must not be played on.

Chorus: My thing is my own, and I'll keep it so still,
Other young lasses may do as they will,
My thing is my own, and I'll keep it apart
And no man shall have it 'til I have his heart.

A cunning clockmaker did court me as well,
And promised me riches if I'd ring his bell.
So I looked at his clockwork, and said with a shock,
"Your pendulum's far too small for my clock."

Written down by Thomas d'Urfey in his 1719 *Pills to Purge Melancholy*, this song speaks volumes about the nature of the working-class battle between the sexes. Conflict over material resources, relationship security, social acceptability, bodily safety, love, and men's right to expect women to fulfill their sexual desires are all in

the mix. Not coincidentally, so is the matter of female erotic pleasure, with unabashed comments about penis size. Neither classical allusion nor religious scruple matters much here. Urban caginess, on the other hand, matters a great deal.

Town and Country

The eroticization of virginity is tied to the rise of capitalism and the growth of cities. Beginning in the sixteenth century, the rise of capitalist economies and the eventual prominence of an industrial, rather than an agricultural, economy transformed both geography and culture. Over time, currency replaced land as the primary vehicle for wealth. Working for wages, and commerce via currency, became the mode by which labor was done and trading carried out. Cities, particularly those strategically sited for good transportation and shipping, grew at exponential rates over a very short time. London was the biggest of all, its population handily outstripping that of its nearest rival, Paris, to become the first Western city to hit the one million mark around 1835.

As cities grew ever larger and denser, and jobs within this new urban-industrial world grew increasingly specific and specialized, there was inevitable social fallout. All the daily needs of the people living in these huge cities had to be handled: clothing, food, fuel, sanitation. Ever-larger numbers of support staff, like cooks, maids, grooms, seamstresses, laundresses, peddlers, tailors, porters, valets, and delivery boys, were required to fill these and other needs. The moneymaking opportunities the big cities offered lured countless thousands of rural men, women, and children. They arrived by the wide-eyed cartload, and suddenly discovered that the big city had its own rules of engagement about which they knew virtually nothing.

Which brings us back to our virginal Servant Girl. It is possible, were she city born and bred, and a particularly quick and lucky study as well, that she might have been the chary urbanite of "My Thing Is My Own." But far more commonly she was a great deal more along the lines of the babe in the woods we meet in the first chapter of *Fanny Hill*. Raised with the social expectations of the village or rural community, where geographic stability and community interdependence provided for a certain degree of honesty or at least accountability in regard to standards of behavior, these girls lost their safety nets when they arrived in the cities.

Friendless and penniless, new arrivals had few options. And while these country girls might succeed in protecting their virginity through the rocky acclimation period, they also might not. There were, notoriously, brothel-keepers who might trick new arrivals into becoming new hires, and predatory employers who would prey sexually on recently arrived rural women who didn't have anywhere else to go. But a young woman also had to contend with her own perfectly normal desires for affection, comfort, and pleasure. The poverty, hard work, and social isolation of migrant life left women vulnerable. Such vulnerabilities were well known and well exploited. As another tune in d'Urfey's *Pills* counsels, "would ye have a young Virgin of fifteen Years," one must merely "wittily, prettily talk her down . . . and all's your own."

Sophisticated, naive, or somewhere in between, the Servant Girl inevitably had to contend with the issue of sex. Reflecting this, stories of menaced virginity became signature narratives of the eighteenth century. The opening chapters of *Fanny Hill* are one famous example of this (as they are of so many other things), but there are many more. The earlier of Samuel Richardson's two titanic morality-play novels on the theme, *Pamela* (1740), is an operatically proportioned version of this tale. *Pamela* ends victoriously with marriage, but Richardson's later *Clarissa* (1748) ends with its heroine falling victim to rape. The legendary Marquis de Sade wrote his own dramatically darker versions of the story, *Juliette* and *Justine*. Whether comic or tragic, the story of the menaced lower-class virgin serving in a sexually threatening upper-class milieu remained a constant in books and plays partly because of the accuracy with which art imitated life.

Print, Protestants, and the Pox

Of the various things that contributed to the creation of a climate in which virginity became a pronounced sexual obsession, one of the most influential was the emergence of a popular press. Books were crucial to the formation and dissemination of the idea that virginity was something that could be objectified as a thing in and of itself, without real reference to the women who nominally possessed it. Popular books like Nicholas Venette's enormously influential *The Mysteries of Conjugal Love Revealed* and the anonymously authored *Aristotle's*

*Master-Piece** helped to transmit the idea of virginity as a physical object to a readership that was growing by leaps and bounds.

What readers learned about virginity from these books was that it was, as the anatomical description of the hymen in *Aristotle's Master-Piece* made clear, an object. To be sure, it was an object that gave rise to a great deal of anxiety: medical books like Venette's, as well as novels like *Fanny Hill* and *Moll Flanders*, exposed their readers not just to an objectified version of virginity but revealed the existence of age-old practices of "sophistication." The spiritual, moral, and psychological aspects of virginity preeminent in the minds of Augustine or Hildegard or even Aquinas had been shoved brusquely onto the back burner. Virginity was an object now, a thing in itself, something that could be discussed in isolation, as if it had no connection to the body of a living, thinking, feeling human being. This was a version of virginity that required no metaphysics whatsoever and indeed admitted none. Conquering the maiden could be considered a separate problem from the more straightforward task of conquering the maidenhead.

Maidenheads were there to be had, and at a disadvantage to boot. Whether a woman was a young girl arrived fresh from the countryside, a daughter of the working classes, or a spinster who had to make ends meet somehow, unmarried women were economically and personally vulnerable. The sexual exploitation of domestic workers was sufficiently widespread that Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, the elegantly acerbic literary lions of the French nineteenth century, defined a housemaid as "a girl who was ruined by the young man of a household." For really, what was to stop him? Differences of wealth, social status, and gender put the power on the male side. Most men felt little or no responsibility for whatever consequences might befall a woman with whom they had had a sexual liaison.

For men, the benefits of recreational sex easily outweighed its potential risks. Socially, it was often seen as proof of virility, an asset. As for venereal disease, the frequent affliction of the roué, it was merely another factor in favor of seeking sex with virgins. Both gonorrhea and syphilis were rampant in early

*Venette's book was reprinted in multiple editions and pressings from the time of the 1696 French original to the last British edition, which came out sometime after 1774; versions of *Aristotle's Master-Piece* appeared from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries and were in circulation well into the twentieth.

modern Europe, treatable but not yet curable. The cautious lothario would thus often seek virgins out on that basis alone. In his 1724 *A Modest Defence of Publick Stews* ("stew" being a term for "brothel"), Bernard Mandeville wrote of "epicures in ventry," men who pursued sex exclusively with virgins. This erotic fixation on virginity is, however, defensible in Mandeville's eyes, for it is "chiefly for their own personal Safety." Escaping a "taint" or "the pox," Mandeville felt, was a good reason to prefer virginal women, for, as he wrote, "some Men are afraid of venturing even after themselves."

Overall there was a sensibility, among the early modern men who pursued sex with virgins, that the only damage they were really doing was mechanical and short-term. It was both natural and inevitable that a woman be penetrated by a man; every young woman would lose her virginity eventually. Men and procuresses might even congratulate themselves on having done the deflowered woman a favor, on the theory that the indignity were less if a woman were deflowered by a man of station than some member of the great unwashed. Combine these attitudes with a world in which cash had become king, cities swarmed with economic migrants, and the extended agricultural family gave way to fragmented groups of poor people dependent on whatever coin they could bring in, and the presence of a growing bourgeoisie with a well-established fascination for sex and a tendency to spend large sums on luxuries, and the development of a sizeable virginal sex industry should come as no surprise whatsoever.

Virtue and Vice

The sale of virginites as a commonplace branch of prostitution begins to appear in the historical record around the beginning of the eighteenth century. Mandeville's *Defence* makes the availability of virgins-for-hire clear, and there are occasional references in seventeenth-century brothel and entertainment guides to cities like London and Venice intended for wealthy travelers. Brussels was anecdotally claimed to be a hotbed of brothel deflorations as late as the turn of the twentieth century. Cleland's *Fanny Hill*, of course, is often pointed to as evidence of the trade in maidenheads, and it seems reasonable to take it as being at least representative if not documentary. The bulk of the evidence we have to work with on the question of the prostitution of virginity, however, comes from nineteenth-century England.

This was the time of the great surge of middle-class philanthropy, the era when urban poverty and its attendant problems had finally begun to draw attention from organized groups of private citizens. We know relatively little about the prostitution of virgins in the nineteenth century, and what we do know is available to us primarily because of the work done by those who were attempting to eradicate the practice. But using these records creates some problems for the historian.

The gulf between the philanthropists and the women they wanted to reform was huge. The world of prostitutes and the poor, as described in the accounts of these philanthropists, is routinely filtered through the pens of people who were neither and often looked down on both. There was continual, uneasy, mutual distrust between those who had realized that virtue alone rarely put bread in their mouths or clothes on their backs and those who, having no shortage of bread or clothes, had no reason to empathize with a shortage of virtue either.

For these reformers, the only conceivable reasons that a woman might enter into prostitution were either that she had been seduced or raped and abandoned, that she were facing starvation, or both. Anything else was scarcely imaginable to them. Prostitutes who seemed glad of the ability to keep a roof over their heads, dress themselves suitably for their needs, and eat regularly were characterized as dissolute and sinfully devoted to fashion and luxury. Women who openly enjoyed male company and sex were seen as wanton and essentially irredeemable. The very existence of unapologetic sex workers, particularly those who brought other women into the life or worked as brothel-keepers, abjectly contradicted the popular notion that there was an inborn female essence of purity, nurture, and virtue. In such perverted creatures, womanhood itself disappeared: no less an eminence than Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell wrote that such women became "human tigers who delight in destruction and torture." Indeed, prostitution was believed to make women disappear. There was a notion widely repeated among reformers (despite ample evidence in their own writings of women who had been involved with prostitution for decades) that three years of prostitution were enough to kill any woman.

The truth of the matter is that then as now, women of virtually every type and temperament existed within the sex industry. Many were genuinely victimized and hapless, and those stories are heartbreaking and horrible. But it is no more true that every prostitute was a victim of sexual predation than it is that career prostitutes dropped dead promptly upon spending three years in the

business. Nor is it true, despite the vivid claims of many reformers, that every woman who fell into prostitution even once stayed there for good. Occasional casual prostitution was a relatively common means for poor women to supplement the skimpy wages they received for their regular work, and was sometimes done with the knowledge of husbands or parents.

In considering the prostitution of virgins, it's important to keep all this in mind, and also to remember that what the reformers were willing to show of the trade in maidenheads is as driven by its own agendas as any pornographic version. In fact, reformers' writings about virgin prostitution often sound dramatically like pornography on the same subject, except that where the pornographer writes in order to induce lust, the reformer writes to generate shock and disgust. The object of reform literature was never accuracy. It was emotion—in the interest of spurring political and social action.

What can be pried from philanthropists' writings about the sale of virginites reveals that while it was an acknowledged market, it was also considered a relatively risky one and existed mostly on the quiet. Along with sadism, masochism, bondage, and various less-exotic perversions like anal intercourse, a taste for virgins was just another of the variegated sexual tastes that could be catered to in the brothels if one knew the right people and had sufficiently deep pockets.

We also know some of what a virgin-hunter looked for, knowing as he did that brothelkeepers might try to pass off nonvirgins as the genuine article. There were a number of characteristics that were considered hallmarks of a genuine virgin, generally some combination of a rural background, naïveté, and youth. Rural life was seen as wholesome and clean, both literally and metaphorically, by comparison to the filth of the cities. Naïveté, such as a lack of awareness of what a "seduction" actually entailed or what was meant when a procuress offered money if a girl would go "play a game with a gentleman," was considered a sure sign that the young woman was not only physically inexperienced, but was too ignorant to recognize the value of her own virginity. Youth, of course, was the *sine qua non*.

The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon

Youth was also the *sine qua non* of the controversy over the prostitution of virgins, and of the special and concentrated efforts of reformers to end it. At stake

in this controversy was nothing less than a redefinition of what it meant, both culturally and legally, to be a child. Passage of the Criminal Law Amendment Act in 1885 raised the age of sexual consent in England from twelve (prior to 1875) and thirteen (during the decade 1875–1885) to sixteen. Because it was the law, and because those engaged in legally risky practices have a remarkable tendency to know the letter of the laws to which they might be held, these ages formed a more or less functional bottom line for both brothel owners and their clients. What to our modern eyes looks like pedophilia was legally nothing of the sort, prior to 1885. By law, at that point, thirteen-year-olds were not girls but women, and therefore prostituting them was no particularly special crime.

But this would not be the case for long. The culture was changing, and with it, views on both childhood and sexuality were changing, too. Beliefs that children should be sheltered from the harsh realities of the world, that exposure to sexual images and ideas is injurious to children, that children should not be required to work, and that children are naturally innocent are all notions that rose to cultural prominence along with the nineteenth-century middle class from whose ranks the philanthropists came.

The poor could scarcely afford to be so high-minded about children and childhood. Thirteen, however young it may have been for sex, was not at all young to be earning a living. Child labor was endemic to the nineteenth century, and the children of the poor worked as a matter of course. Children of the poor were rarely schooled beyond rudiments, if they got even that much, for formal education took money their families did not have to spare. Instead, as soon as they were judged to be capable, most poor children worked. In rural areas, children labored alongside their parents and relatives in the home, in the fields, and in small family businesses. In the cities, they might help their parents at work, but were just as frequently employed elsewhere. Children as young as four or five worked in factories, mines, and sweatshops. Children also worked in the streets in massive numbers, selling matches and newspapers, hawking various wares, touting entertainments, running errands, and so forth. This was not exceptional. For better than half the population, it was the norm.

When we consider the plight of the nineteenth-century adolescent who sold her virginity for cash, we cannot afford the luxury of thinking of her according to our own contemporary standards. She was expected to do what she could to earn money in order to help support her family or to provide for herself, and sexual labor was not necessarily out of the question. Indeed, her

parents themselves may well have viewed their daughter's virginity as a realizable asset. Trading a daughter's virginity for a spot of cash rather than a strategic marriage is merely a testament to the exigencies of living hand-to-mouth, not evidence of an attitude about women that was fundamentally different from that of the upper classes.

Furthermore, the daughters of the poor were already considered worldly, to a certain extent, in the eyes of others, and were commonly assumed to dispose of their virginites at the first possible opportunity. How, when exposed to the interactions and enticements of the classically male public realms of commerce and the street, could they possibly stay pure?

In reality, they were often purer—or at least remarkably more ignorant in some respects—than one might expect. The carnal culture of the nineteenth century was a firmly double one, as revealed by historian Peter Gay in his landmark study *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud*, in which an intimate familiarity with the grisly realities of life from the butchering of food animals to the squalor of urban poverty went hand in hand with a carefully maintained, strictly gendered, sexual ignorance. “Respectable” women were expected to have no awareness of matters sexual until such time as marriage forced the issue. In an 1843 letter to her half-brother, novelist George Sand summed up women's sexual lot in middle-class Victorian society: “We bring them up, as much as we can, as saints, and then we hand them over like fillies.”

The taboo on sexual matters was hardly limited to bourgeois and upper-class families. Although it is probable that poor children would have been exposed to more sexually explicit scenes and information simply because their living spaces were likely to be quite crowded, it does not follow that they were more sexually self-aware as a result. Nor does it follow that they would have been better educated in regard to what their sexual futures might hold. Procuresses and reformers alike understood what all this meant: poor young women were likely to be an easy mark. The proceeds of a virginity sale did not have to be more than one or two pounds sterling to represent a lump sum greater than most of them had ever had to work with. Most had a limited understanding of what sexual intercourse was or meant, and procurers and Johns were happy to reassure young women that everything would be fine. If such soothing failed, a young woman would simply be told that it was inevitable, that it happened to everyone sooner or later, and that she should simply keep a stiff upper lip.

Young women who sold their virginites did not have what we would today term a safety net. Their families could not offer them economic security. They did not have access to education or to jobs that paid well enough to make prostitution seem less appealing. Reformers struggled to find a way to help protect these young women. This meant finding a way to characterize them as a class deserving of state protection. To do so, they used the ingenious—if in some ways disingenuous—expedient of making virginity rhetorically synonymous with childhood.

This trump card was played to international effect in a series of thunderous, vividly sensational 1885 exposés collectively entitled “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon.” In them, *Pall Mall Gazette* editor William T. Stead used the image of the victimized child to crack the taboo that had kept the sale of virginity absent from respectable public discourse. Son of a Congregational minister, Stead was, in the fashion of many a pulpit-pounding preacher or favorite professor, an instinctive showman. On July 4, 1885, he set his stage, printing in his *Pall Mall Gazette* a “Notice to our Readers: A Frank Warning” that let the readers know that a “long, detailed report, dealing with those phases of sexual criminality which the Criminal Law Amendment Bill was framed to repress” was to appear in installments beginning the following day.

Titillated not only by the promise of “sexual criminality” but by allusions to “calculation in high quarters” by those who would prevent the Criminal Law Amendment Act from passing into law, readers could scarcely wait for the curtain to rise on what promised to be a cavalcade of scandal. They were not disappointed. In the name of “the most imperious sense of public duty,” Stead set forth a thunderous, sensational stream of reportage, centering upon a seemingly ceaseless supply of young women who had either been victimized or narrowly escaped being victimized, each more pathetic than the last. Name-checking the myth of the *jus primae noctis* along the way, Stead created a vision of a world in which the “shameful abuse of the power of wealth” resulted in a situation where “princes and dukes, and ministers and judges, and the rich of all classes, are purchasing for damnation, temporal if not eternal, the as yet uncorrupted daughters of the poor.”

Invariably, Stead describes these “as yet uncorrupted daughters” in infantilizing terms. They are “daughters,” “girls,” “maids,” “maidens,” “dainty morsels,” and “little girls.” A young woman may be described as “a frightened lamb,” or simply as a child, as in the infamous line with which Stead ends the

first lengthy section of his report: “For the child’s sob in the darkness curseth deeper than the strong man in his wrath.”

The possibility that any of the young women involved might genuinely be willing to participate in such a transaction is, both explicitly and implicitly, discarded out of hand. The actual age or degree of self-awareness or self-sufficiency of these young women seems to be of only incidental relevance to Stead. Young women of sixteen and eighteen, some with professional jobs (one is a cook in a first-class hotel), are discussed in terms identical to those used to describe penniless adolescents of thirteen or fourteen. A sixteen-year-old capable of stating articulately that given a choice between making a small sum of money and not giving up her virginity and giving up her virginity for a large amount of money, she would prefer the latter, is disregarded as incompetent: “Could any proof be more conclusive as to the absolute inability of this girl of sixteen to form an estimate of the value of the only commodity with which the law considers her amply able to deal the day after she is thirteen?” For Stead, any woman who willingly sells her virginity is a child, because only a child could be so ignorant as not to realize that virginity is beyond price.

Stead also takes repeated aim at the middlemen responsible for bringing together those with maidenheads to sell and those with means to buy them. On some levels, this was a wholly appropriate thing to do. But procuresses and their accomplices, no matter how satisfying a target their perverse maternalism made for Stead’s outrage, were not the whole of the picture. As with similar modern-day exposés of the trade in illegal drugs, blaming the dealers only obscured the problem of demand.

This demand, Stead claimed, was staggering. Citing procurers who boasted of producing literally dozens of virgins for sale, Stead conjured an image of a rapacious and insatiable market both in England and abroad. He encouraged the impression that this was all a mechanical business, a virtual assembly line in which the bodies of “little girls” were systematically abused for profit and then spit out again at the other end, a nightmarish factory involved in the unfeeling conversion of raw virgin resource into profit.

It is impossible to say to what extent this might have been true. It is quite possible, on the other hand, to detail the extent to which Stead went out of his way to be sure he had a sufficiently spectacular tale to tell. As part of the research that went into “The Maiden Tribute,” Stead himself purchased a thirteen-year-old named Eliza Armstrong, whom he called “Lily,” for a paltry

five pounds. With the help of retired procuress Rebecca Jarrett, whom Stead blackmailed out of retirement to do the dirty work of arranging his virgin-hunting caper, Stead took custody of the girl. He brought her to a midwife, who pronounced her *virgo intacta*. From there, Stead and Jarrett took "Lily" to a brothel in Poland Street, where Jarrett administered a dose of chloroform to the young woman, and after she passed out, left Stead alone with her. Stead waited with the young woman until she woke, then took her to be examined by a physician to certify that nothing sexual had transpired. Afterward, he packed young "Lily" off to Paris so that she was conveniently out of the way while Stead wrote and published "The Maiden Tribute." Without ever identifying himself, and alternately omitting and suggesting details, Stead described this salacious undertaking—although not his part in it or the exportation of its subject to France—to thunderous public furor.

It was a glorious moment for Stead. He was the talk of England, let alone London, unable to print copies of the *Gazette* fast enough. But Eliza Armstrong's mother had been reading the newspapers, too. She recognized her daughter in the descriptions Stead had given and went to the authorities. Aided by competing newspapers, she eventually brought a lawsuit against Stead. (Eliza herself was meanwhile quietly returned to England, none the worse for wear.) The eventual outcome, in November of 1885, was that Stead became the first man in England to be sentenced under the Criminal Law Amendment Act, the very piece of legislation for which his exposé had gathered such effective support. He served a three-month misdemeanor sentence. Cruelly, Rebecca Jarrett, though she had been blackmailed into participating in the scheme, was given a sentence twice as long, as was the midwife involved in the case.

Despite his conviction and prison sentence, and despite the fact that he was essentially ruined as a newspaperman once his journalistic fraud had been exposed, Stead remained convinced that he had not only done the right thing but that Eliza Armstrong, the "frightened lamb" of thirteen whom he had purchased, subjected to two gynecological examinations, drugged unconscious, and sent off to another country, had "experienced not the slightest inconvenience." Nor did Stead's conviction in any way hamper the cause of criminalizing sex with adolescents. "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" made an intense emotional and motivational impact in England and across the Atlantic as well. In the United States, numerous states revised their ages of consent as well as laws on prostitution and trafficking due to reform efforts prompted by

Stead's "Maiden Tribute" and the prominent "white slavery" activism that succeeded it. Illinois, for instance, raised its age of consent from ten to fourteen in 1887 (it was raised again in 1905, to sixteen). Likewise in 1887, New York's age of consent rose from ten to sixteen. Massachusetts made it illegal to have illicit (i.e., unmarried) intercourse with any person under the age of eighteen. Even notoriously laissez-faire Virginia changed its laws during this same time frame, criminalizing seduction and raising the age of consent from ten to twelve.

Stead's legacy, the canonization in law of the ideal of "female adolescence as a hiatus free from the burdens of adult sexual life," as historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg has aptly put it, probably would have pleased him a great deal. But much of what people took away from Stead's writing (and that of his imitators) is troublesome. In Stead's view, virgins were children not just at five or eleven but at sixteen and eighteen, and at any age they were hapless victims, completely unable to make sexual decisions for themselves. By failing to address the idea of virginity's erotic desirability itself, and harping on the numbers of men he claimed were willing to pay for it, he confirmed and indeed may have enhanced virginity's reputation as a transcendently desirable erotic object. Neither contention is necessarily true. But Stead made them so emotionally compelling that they were—and still frequently are—taken as writ.

The Virginity Void

This is not to say that Stead was necessarily wrong. As with most radical claims, there was certainly a core of truth to Stead's. Young women and children were, then as now, sold into prostitution, and then as now, it is difficult to imagine a more stomach-churning enterprise. Although it was all but lost in the wash of carefully cultivated sensationalism, Stead had a very worthwhile point: children and adolescents generally, and poor children and adolescents specifically, face a well-documented disproportionate risk of sexual exploitation.

This is saddening, maddening, and indisputably true. Youth plus economic and social powerlessness is a pancultural, panmillennial recipe for sexual exploitation and abuse. This was true for the sexually vulnerable slaves of the ancient Mediterranean whose stolen virginity could be repaid by the transfer of a small sum to their master. Cases like those of the "Blood Countess" Erzsébet Báthory; infamous fifteenth-century molester and murderer of boys Gilles de

Rais; and the Abbé Claudius Nicholas des Rues, convicted of having raped 133 virgins in Paris prior to 1726, prove that the same held true thousand of years later.* We have seen the role it played for the many European young women who headed to big cities like London in search of jobs and found themselves prey either to virgin-hunters or to the sexually predatory wiles of their employers. The same combination of youth and poverty plays a large part in the contemporary child sex trade in Asia and even here at home in the First World, where such things are often supposed not to happen. The sexual exploitation of the young has never been limited by time or place. The question, for the purposes of this book, is not whether children and adolescents are sexually abused and exploited—they are. The question is whether or not the sexual exploitation and abuse of children and adolescents has anything to do with the eroticization of virginity.

The answer to this question is far less clear. We simply do not know to what extent those whose sexual desires run toward children and adolescents are motivated by the eroticization of virginity. Bizarrely and tellingly, given how easy it is to come by examples of the desire for virginity and virgins at work, the erotic fascination with virginity has never been identified as its own discrete phenomenon by sexologists, sociologists, or psychiatrists. There is no word for it, and neither the term “parthenophilia” nor the word “virgophilia” is recognized by sexology or medicine.

It is an odd omission. During the formative decades of the disciplines of sexology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis, terms were developed to describe erotic attractions to children (“pedophilia”) or adolescents (“hebephilia” or “ephebephilia”). These terms are still used to describe the attractions of those who sought sex with young adolescents; the term “ephebephilia” is obscure today, but “pedophilia” is a household word.

As W. T. Stead’s canny use of terms like “little girl” and “child” and “lamb” makes clear with such admirable economy, there is a significant degree of overlap between the population of virgins and the population of adolescents

and children. Indeed, we would not bat an eyelash if Stead had referred to “pedophiles” instead of “virgin-hunters.” Some portion of the men Stead wrote about may have been pedophiles. But this does not seem to have been the case for all of them. First, not all of the virgins about whom Stead wrote were children, and some were as old as eighteen or twenty. Additionally, some virgin-hunters were described as having a strong preference for postpubertal young women of fifteen, sixteen, or older—neither legally nor culturally children.

“Pedophilia” is not an accurate word to use to describe the erotic desire for virginity for the simple reason that not all virgin fanciers are interested in children and not all pedophiles particularly care about virginity. What I will call parthenophilia—a pronounced sexual interest in virginity or virgins—is a genuine, observable sexual predilection. The reason I propose we have for so long lacked a term for this particular erotic attraction is that unlike sexual interest in children, a sexual interest in virgins is something our culture considers entirely normal, acceptable, and ideologically correct.

No studies have been done on parthenophilia. We do not know how many people experience it. We do not know when the desire begins to be felt, whether those who feel it perceive it as an innate or learned preference. We have no idea how many people have pursued specific sexual encounters on account of this desire, or what kind of sexual encounters they have pursued. No research into its possible role in motivating sexual assault or abuse has been conducted. We do not know to what extent it does or does not play a role in child sexual abuse or child prostitution. Even Sigmund Freud did little more than glance at it.

This is the virginity void. Despite the strength and breadth of the erotic interest taken in virginity in our culture, the three centuries of virginity-related pornography, the China Shrink Creams and Lotus Blossum Pocket Pal masturbation sleeves for men (the package copy touts this particular pink plastic production as a “sleek, silky-soft pussy with intact hymen”), even in the face of all the young women’s virginities sold around the world, the erotic desire for virginity has been continually avoided as a subject of intellectual and clinical inquiry, as if there were no reason to ask and nothing that could possibly be learned by asking.

The virginity void exists on the other side of the fence as well. As little as we know about the erotic desire for virginity, we know even less about the erotic lives of virgins. Specifically, we know very little about how virgins themselves might understand themselves to exist as erotic objects or how they

*The case of the Abbé des Rues was so sensational and titillating that accounts of the trial were published and sold in several languages, demonstrating that the contemporary appetite for salacious true-crime stories as entertainment reading may not be so contemporary after all.

might themselves be erotically affected by the mythology of the erotic virgin that so permeates the culture. Virgins are not exempt from the mythologies of their own sexual status, after all. A virgin may well be every bit as erotically caught up in the implications of her own sexual status as the man who fantasizes about popping her cherry, but she is even less likely than he to be asked about it. How strange, in a culture so often obsessed by virginity, that we have chosen to be so blind.

Virginity is not the opposite of *sêx*. Rather, it is its own unique and uniquely troublesome sexual entity, and one we have largely avoided addressing. Our presumptions about virginity have been with us for a very long time and will require a great deal of time and effort to question, let alone change. If we are ever to fill the virginity void with something more realistic than propaganda and more accurate than pornographic fantasy, however, this work is a challenge we would do well to take up.

CHAPTER 12

The Day Virginity Died?

Virgin: teach your kids it's not a dirty word.
—billboard, Baltimore, Maryland, 2003

DID YOU HEAR about the virgin parade they were going to have in Hollywood?" asked a popular Jazz Age joke. "One girl got sick and the other didn't want to march all alone." As this 1920s joke demonstrates, the liberalization of sexual culture in America started well before the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s. During the twentieth century, our beliefs and expectations in regard to human nature, our economic lives, our experiences of the body and identity, and our relationships to religion have all undergone massive—and ongoing—change. It is small wonder that our ideals and expectations in regard to virginity have been shifting, too.

As often as magazine articles have lamented the "death of virginity" in the twentieth century, and as many jokes as have been made about virgins being an endangered species, virginity is hardly so fragile as all that. Still, it has been changing, its place in our lives and its role in our culture shifting with the tides of history. We can see the nature of this shift in a massive study conducted in the late 1980s among young adults in thirty-seven different countries around the globe. The study revealed that while for both males and females premarital chastity—virginity—still earned a place in a list of the eighteen characteristics