The acts in which a woman has not yet had sex characterized by an intact hymen, testimony that the woman has not had sexual contact, or physical features which prove her lack of previous sexual contact. 

Social definition

The state of purity where women have not yet had sexual experiences that would make them morally corrupted or ruined.

The Virgin

The virgin is

• A girl around marriageable age
• Legally owned by the patriarch of her family
• Fits the medical and social definition of virginity
• Modest, shy, submissive

“Parents well take care of their Daughters Chastity, and when they find them inclined to marriage, not rigorously to restrain their affections, for nature will have its course, but rather to provide for them, if possible, such husbands as may be for their advantage” (Aristoteles, pseud. 1694, 5).

“The signs of chastity are as follows: shame, modesty, fear, a faultless gait and speech, casting eyes down before men and the acts of men” (Lemay and Albertus 1992, 128).

“This is precisely what virginity is for most people, a transitional state that bridges the end of childhood and the assumption of full social adulthood, a passage that has often been embodied by marriage.” (Blank 2007, 18).

“Take red dock and place it on the fire so that it burns in front of the woman; she will urinate whether she wants to or not” (Green and Karras 2002, 163).

“Another sign that is not noted in the test is that the vagina of a virgin is always closed, but a woman’s is always open, therefore a virgin voids her urine higher up than a woman does. If you want to determine if a virgin has been corrupted, grind up the flowers of a lily and the yellow particles that are in between the flowers, and give her this substance to eat. If she is corrupted, she will urinate immediately.” (Lemay and Albertus 1992, 127).

“it was upon mature deliberation resolved, that she should be searched by a skilful Chirurgery and two Midwives, who were to make their report upon their oaths, which after due examination they accordingly did affirm, that the membranes were inre and unfractured, and that it was their opinion, for that reason, that her body had not been penetrated” (Aristoteles, pseud. 1694, 94-95).

The Wedding Night

An active performance by the husband where he “takes” his new wife’s virginity and in the process proves that she was a virgin. This demonstrates his ownership over her and her body.

Her role is to submit to her husband. It can be active, for example experiencing pain or passive, for example the breaking of the hymen. It demonstrates her obedience and submission to her new husband.

She loses her virginity, both by the medical and social definition.

“What is better is if the following is done one night before she is married; let her place leeches in the vagina (but take care they do not go in too far) so that the blood comes out and is converted into a little clot. And thus the man will be deceived by the effusion of blood.” (Green and Karras 2002 145-147).

“The signs of chastity are as follows: shame, modesty, fear, a faultless gait and speech, casting eyes down before men and the acts of men. Some women are so clever, however, that they know how to resist detection by these signs” (Lemay and Albertus 1992, 128).

The Test

An active and public performance by a medical professional where they determine if the girl is a virgin or not. Her role is simply to submit to the test – a passive performance that demonstrates the ownership and control the patriarch holds over her and her body.

The public viewing of her body means she can no longer be considered pure, therefore the test is a metaphorical loss of virginity.

“This is the reason why when young women first lose their virginity they have pain in the vagina for a time, because it is being enlarged and disposed for coitus. Another reason for this pain is that there is a certain skin in the vagina and the bladder which is broken. But the more they have sex, the more they become accustomed to it.” (Lemay and Albertus 1992, 126-127).

“The Hymen or Claustrum Virginalae, is that which closes the Neck of the Womb, being as I have before cited in the chapter relating to Virginity, broken in the first copulation, its use being rather to stay the untimely courses in Virgins than to any other end, and commonly when it is broke in copulation or by any other accident, a small quantity of blood flows, with some small pain passing.” (Aristoteles, pseud. 1694, 127).

The Fake

An active performance by a woman who may or may not be a virgin which allows her to safely participate in the test or wedding night. This is still a form of submission to the society, standards of virginity.

This performance is by choice, but heavily influenced by fear of the outcome if she isn’t found to be a virgin.

The performance of virginity

The performance of virginity demonstrates ownership of the woman and her body. The same standards associated with virginity, like obedience and modesty, give a woman value to the patriarch of her family and her current or future husband as a form of property. By participating in the performance, she shows that she is a worthwhile commodity to own.

Commodification of virginity

The performance of virginity demonstrates ownership of the woman and her body. The same standards associated with virginity, like obedience and modesty, give a woman value to the patriarch of her family and her current or future husband as a form of property. By participating in the performance, she shows that she is a worthwhile commodity to own.

Naturalization

Medicine has naturalized the performance of virginity through constructed biological standards. For example, the hymen was originally believed by some to exist for the purpose of determining virginity. Modern medicine has determined that in fact the hymen is not an accurate test of virginity (Olson and García-Moreno 2017, 7). The construction of performance and gender standards like the hymen allow for the justification of virginity as well as the performances and social standards that accompany it. It also entrenches these standards into culture resulting in the persistent belief in virginity that can be seen to this day.

References

Figure 1: PHCCOM/Wikipedia Commons/Public Domain
Figure 2: Public Domain
Figure 3: Medea/Public Domain
Figure 4: Miscellaneous/XVIII/Public Domain