

# Structures and performances of virginity in medieval and early modern medical texts

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**Corpus:** The Trotula 13<sup>th</sup> C., Womens Secrets 15<sup>th</sup> C., and Aristotles Masterpiece 17<sup>th</sup> C.,  
**Question:** How was the performance of virginity influenced by medicine in medieval and early modern Europe?  
 Virginity is a performance of gender that occurs at the entrance into the social role of a wife. Within medical discourses virginity is naturalized in order to justify gender roles and support the male ownership of women

- Virginity
- Medical definition
    - The state in which a woman has not yet had sex characterized by an intact hymen, tightness or other 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

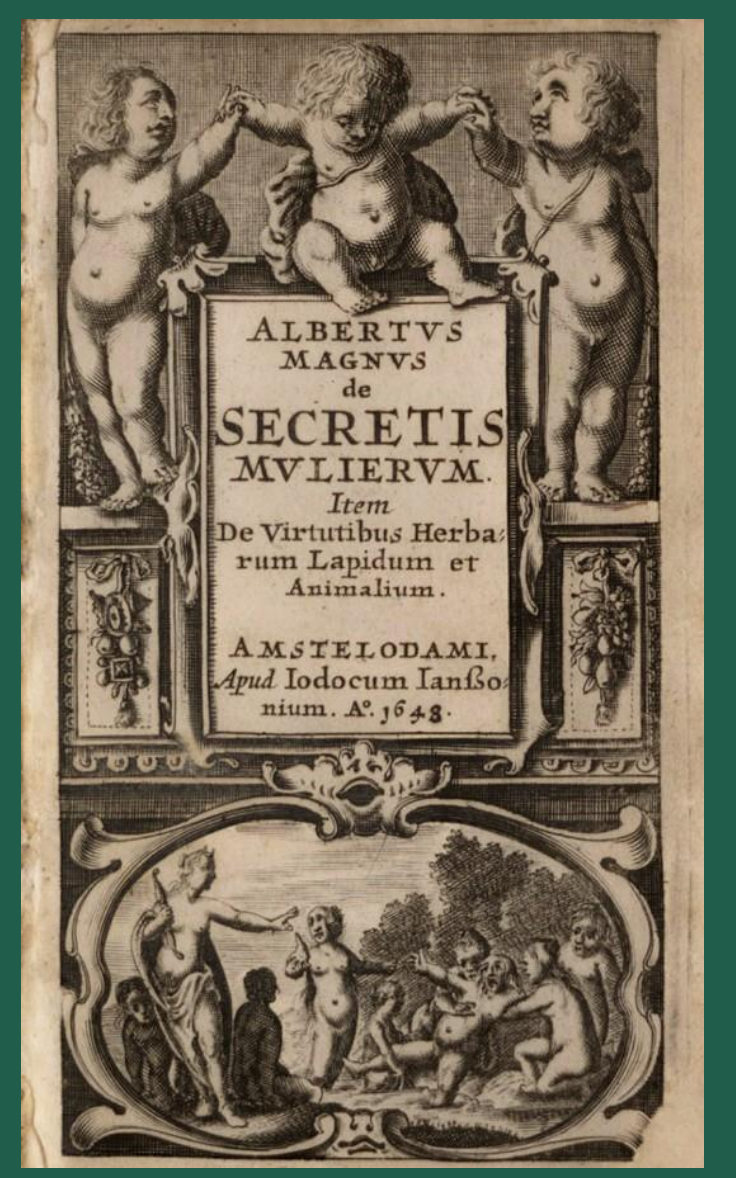


Figure 3. Womens Secrets title page

**Performance**

- The acts in which a person partakes in order display themselves as a certain gender.



Figure 1. Trotula Manuscript

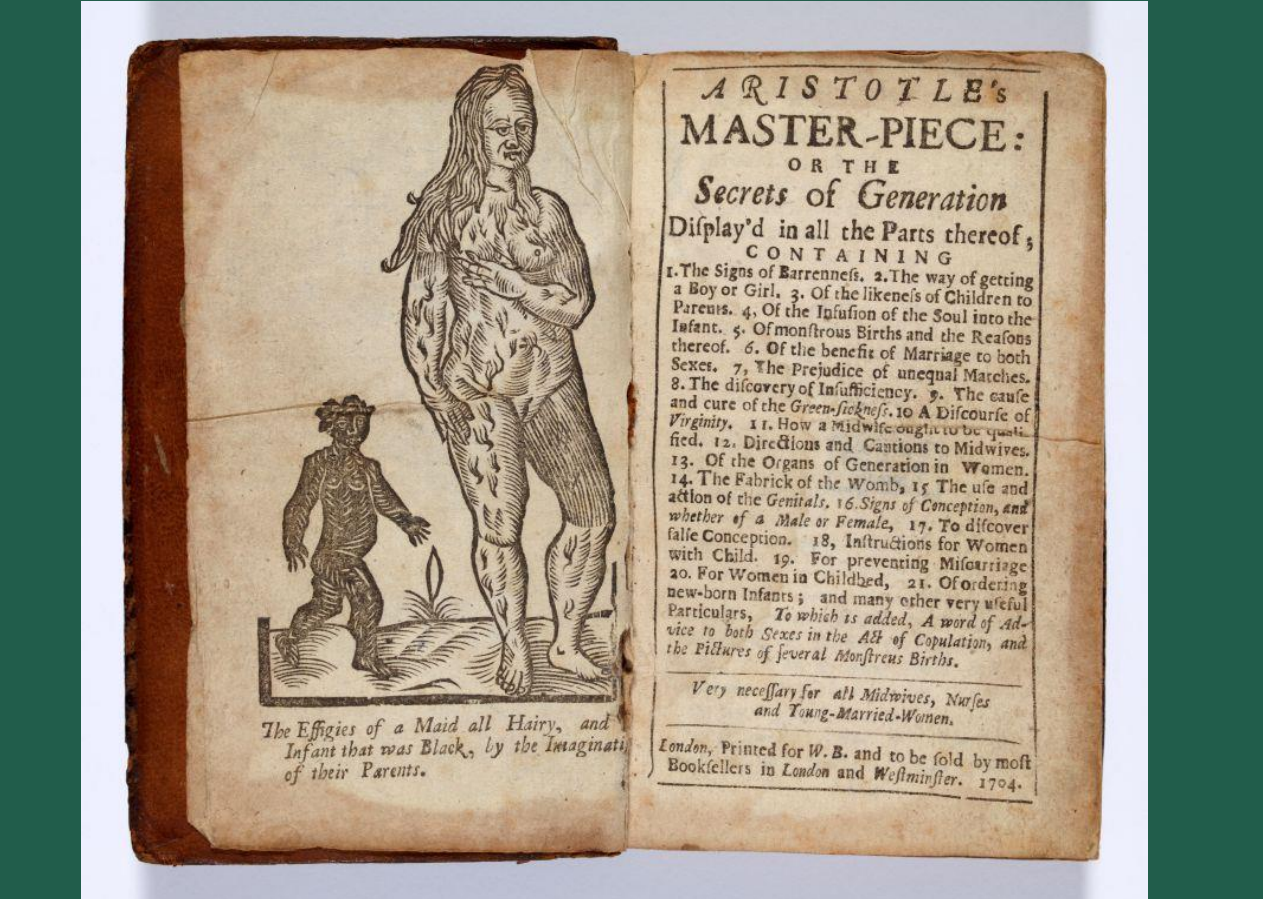


Figure 2. Aristotles Masterpiece manuscript

“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 text 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 corrupt, she will urinate immediately.” (Lemay and Albertus 1992, 127)

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



Figure 5. Medieval bedding ceremony

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.” (Lemay and Albertus 1992, 128)

“Parents well take care of their Daughters Chastity, and when they find them inclinable 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” (Aristotle, 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)

**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

## 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**



Figure 4. Image of female healer, possibly Trotula from Miscellanea medica XVIII

“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 *Claustum Virginalis*, 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.” (Aristotle, 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 societal 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

**Performativity of virginity**  
 Virginity is not based on the previous sexual experiences of a woman. Tests and physical signs like the hymen do not accurately determine if someone is no longer a virgin (Olson and Garc a-Moreno 2017, 7-8). Instead, a **woman must be able to conform to the physical and social expectations of the performance of virginity.** If she can do this, then she would be considered a virgin despite any past experiences.

**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 Garc a-Moreno 2017, 7). The construction of physical 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: PHGCOM/Wikipedia Commons/Public Domain  
 Figure 2: Pseudo-Aristotle/Public Domain  
 Figure 3: Hopsee/Public Domain  
 Figure 4: Miscellanea Medica XVIII/Public Domain  
 Figure 5: Public Domain  
 Full bibliography is accessible at the QR code or <https://perfecta.hypotheses.org/the-performance-of-virginity>

