



Envious Virgins and Adolescent Sexuality: The (Un)Importance of the Hymen in Virginitude Studies —Deanna England

Allan, Jonathan A., Cristina Santos, and Adriana Spahr, editors. *Virgin Envy: The Cultural (in)Significance of the Hymen*. U of Regina P, 2016. 247 pp. \$27.95 pb. ISBN 9780889774230. The Exquisite Corpse Series.
Flynn, Laurie Elizabeth. *Firsts: A Novel*. St. Martin's Griffin,

2015. 336 pp. \$10.99 pb. ISBN 9781250075963.
Rosin, Lindsey. *Cherry*. Simon Pulse, 2016. 400 pp. \$10.99 pb. ISBN 9781481459082.
Silvera, Adam. *History Is All You Left Me*. Soho Teen, 2017. 294 pp. \$10.99 pb. ISBN 9781616956929.

After reading *Virgin Envy: The Cultural (In)significance of the Hymen*, I found myself reflecting back to my own “first time” as a cisgender, heterosexual girl, and my decidedly tepid reaction to the experience. I distinctly remember thinking, “well I got that over with” in response to what amounted something of a non-event in my young adult life. While debriefing with my girlfriends about the pain (the only moment when the notion of the hymen touched my consciousness in the experience), I remember one friend asking how it was otherwise—and my response was: “what do I have to compare it to?” I think I was more relieved that it was done, as I could then move on to the trickier aspects

of navigating my first real romance with a much more experienced teenage boy.

This idea is reflected in the title of part 1 of *Virgin Envy*, “Too Much Pain for Such Little Reward,” and is in keeping with one of the questions the volume explores: “what would happen to the study of virginity if we moved the discussion away from the hymen altogether?” (5). *Virgin Envy* acknowledges the complex relationship that society has with the concepts of purity and virginity, how it imposes unrealistic value on both without acknowledging the very real experiences of youth who are navigating their own experiences in this arena.

Published in November 2016, *Virgin Envy* is edited by Jonathan A. Allan, Canada Research Chair in Queer Theory, in collaboration with Cristina Santos and Adriana Spahr. It consists of eight chapters that examine virginity through a variety of lenses. These include chapters on virginity tests (Amy Burge); cultural representations of the hymen (Jodi McAlister); virginity in popular vampire series such as *Twilight* (Jonathan A. Allan and Cristina Santos) and *True Blood* (Janice Zehentbauer and Cristina Santos); male virginity, the trope of death and homosexuality (Kevin McGuiness), and “effeminophobia” (Gibson Ncube); female purity in Bollywood (Asma Sayed); and the performativity and politics of virginity (Tracy Crowe Morey and Adriana Spahr).

The collection complicates the question of what it means to be a “success” in the context of one’s virginity, and whether or not the so-called loss is in fact a victory. As the editors ask, just how important is the hymen to this discussion anyway, as it refers only to “the most normative, cisgendered body of the female” (4)? What about cisgender heterosexual males who are virgins? The three editors explain that as they began to explore these questions, even more began to emerge. “Does a gay man lose his virginity the same way that a straight man does? How does a bisexual person lose virginity? Twice?” (5) Throughout the eight chapters of this book, we come to recognize that virginity itself resists definition, as each subsequent discussion forces one to imagine how the tensions between “virgin” and “non-virgin” actually interact.

Virgin Envy is the second title in the “Exquisite Corpse” series, following Allan’s earlier volume, *Reading from Behind: A Cultural Analysis of the Anus*. *Virgin Envy* is structured in four parts, taking the reader on a journey beginning with a discussion of the physical aspects of virginity, including part 1’s “Too Much Pain for Such Little Reward” and part 2’s “Blood, Blood, Blood . . . and More Blood,” toward a more social and political consideration of the topic in part 3’s “Men Be Virgins Too: Queering Virginity” and part 4’s “F*ck: They Entrapped Us in Social Issues and Politics.”

A few recently published young adult novels explore these questions in their own way, and *Virgin Envy* offers an additional perspective on how we might take up these texts. While examining each chapter in *Virgin Envy*, I draw upon examples from these three novels. Lindsey Rosin’s *Cherry*, published in 2016, is an American Pie-like twist on the notion of a sex pact made by a group of girlfriends who decide to lose their “V-cards” by the end of high school. *Firsts*, a 2015 novel by Laurie Elizabeth Flynn, takes up the trope of a more experienced (young) woman who “helps” boys get over their awkward first times to offer better experiences (than she had) for their girlfriends. In *History Is All You Left Me*, published in 2017, Adam Silvera explores the story of a young man who, after the death of his ex-boyfriend, reflects on their love story, breakup, and journey toward healing.

In the first chapter of *Virgin Envy*, Amy Burge examines the practice of virginity testing, pointing out that “virginity



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is a paradoxical condition . . . defined by both absence and presence" (Salih, Bernau, and Evans, qtd. in Burge 26) and "counts only when it is thought lost" (Kelly, qtd. in Burge 26). *Virgin Envy* and the accompanying YA novels unpack the basic question of whether the possession of one's virginity can (or should) be considered either a loss or a victory, something that can be taken from a person or something freely offered. In *Firsts: A Novel*, Mercedes (the novel's protagonist) and her best friend Angela explore the relative importance of virginity, with differing views on the matter. Angela claims that "[v]irginity is a big deal. I don't just want to lose mine and regret it" (Flynn 93), while Mercedes feels that "virginity isn't something you just lose, like a spare key or a homework assignment. It's something you give away. Or something that gets taken away from you" (94). In her *Virgin Envy* chapter, Burge reminds us of the paradoxical nature of virginity, which is open to interpretation, since "[a]ny proof of virginity identified by penetration during a sex act can only be retrospective, for at the moment that virginity is identified it can simultaneously be disavowed. . . . virginity is something that exists only as it is lost" (28).

Burge points out that the notion of virginity testing, which is traditionally associated with the late Middle Ages, is today more readily connected to "cultures in Africa, and the Middle East, and Asia, where vigorous debates about virginity examinations have attracted national and international attention" (17). As is debated in more detail in the chapters on vampire virgins, these tests force one to imagine the notion of "purity" in relation to breaking hymens and blood. Further to this, Jessica Valenti's 2010 book, *The Purity Myth*, another text that unpacks the notion of what she calls "the cult of virginity," reveals that a recent phenomenon in Western

culture is “rejuvenation” in the form of hymenoplasty (73). Valenti explains that this practice is inherently tied up with the pathologization of aging, and that virginity is implicated in the impression of youth and desirability. Valenti describes a discussion on an online forum where a woman confesses that she “underwent a hymen replacement so that her husband could ‘take her virginity again’” (75). According to Valenti, “[t]his goes to show just how silly the notion of virginity really is. After all, these women aren’t *actually* becoming virgins” (75).

As *Virgin Envy* continues to scrutinize the impact that virginity has on the physical body, in chapter 1 Jodi McAlister reminds us that “[v]irginity loss is figured in Western literature and culture as intrinsically transformative: that is, breaking the hymen should have a tangible effect on the woman, and her virginity loss should be written not only on her body (usually via bleeding) but also on her psyche” (46). A similar theme can be found in Susan Bordo’s work *Unbearable Weight*, as she reminds us that the body is “a *practical*, direct locus of social control” (165). Similar to Janice Zehentbauer and Cristina Santos’s analysis in chapter 4 of Jessica, a character in the HBO television series *True Blood*, while this social control may regulate all gendered bodies, the value placed on virginity is traditionally conflated with society’s perceptions of the female body, particularly conceptions of femininity. Bordo explains that “the woman’s body may be viewed as a surface on which conventional constructions of femininity

are exposed starkly to view, through their inscription in extreme or hyperliteral form. They are written, of course, in languages of horrible suffering” (174-75).

The body’s location as a subject and an aesthetic object, particularly in the context of sexuality, is also taken up in the YA novel *Cherry*, in which the characters are acutely aware of both the psychic and physical impression the act of sex places on them. After Zoe, one of the novel’s main characters, has sex for the first time, she describes the experience to her friends, trying to unpack her feelings around it. Afterwards we find that:

[a] few hours later Zoe found herself standing in front of her bathroom mirror. She was wrapped in a towel, freshly showered, staring at her reflection. She’d seen this same reflection a million times before, but tonight she wondered if she looked any different. Would anyone be able to tell that she wasn’t a virgin anymore? (Rosin 218)

Zoe concludes that while she does not look any different physically, she feels “like she knew *less* now than she did before she had sex, or maybe now she just understood that there was still so much more to know” (218). McAlister takes up virginity loss in the romance genre, noting that for the heroine in virginity loss scenes, “[t]he most notable transformation is from pain to pleasure . . . and as such the transformation

from virgin to non-virgin becomes both painful and pleasurable. This is the guarantee of the literary hymen" (57).

But what does this mean for unchanging bodies that actively resist inscription and traditional interpretations of female and male sexuality? Chapters 3 and 4 of *Virgin Envy* take on this question in the exploration of vampiric bodies and how virginity translates in their particular circumstances. Curiously, in this context, blood becomes a factor regardless of the hymen's presence. Edward, the male protagonist in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series, has been a virgin for over a century, and he consistently rejects Bella's requests for sex in a gesture of self-denial parallel to his refusal to drink human blood. Under the guise of protecting Bella from physical harm during the act (in the form of his supernatural strength), he is also attempting to keep himself pure. As Jonathan A. Allan and Cristina Santos explain, "Edward is terrified by the possibility of losing his virginity and what it would mean for his identity. . . . His refusal to partake in sexuality and blood can be interpreted as part of the erotophobic culture in which he finds himself" (79).

Of course there is also a certain element of "slut-shaming"¹ in Edward's denial of Bella, as his puritanical views on sexuality, while complex in terms of identity and contemporary cultural mores, also serve as a condescending decree on the "patrimonious notion . . . that female virginity is 'breakable'" (Zehentbauer and Santos 82). Zehentbauer and Santos explore this

further in their chapter on *True Blood*, as they consider the character of Jessica (a virgin who becomes a vampire), asking "[h]ow does one approach the construction of Jessica's perpetual virginity in conjunction with her hypersexualized state as a vampire?" (99). Moreover, while Edward's moralizing could be interpreted as him *imposing* a virgin status onto both himself and Bella, resisting the blood inherent in the act, Jessica is forced to endure the symbolic "revirginization" of her body as it heals itself over and over again against her will immediately after she has sex. Zehentbauer and Santos explain that:

Jessica's perpetual vampiric virginity accentuates the idea of female "goodness" as being predominantly regulated externally, eschewing an authentic expression of a liberated female sexual identity, experience or desire. Instead, there is a negation of an independent female sexuality in favour of the male fantasy of a "virgin ideal" . . . (101)

They go on to explain that this "healing" sustains Jessica's value in the social marketplace by forcing a patriarchal ideology that removes a woman's agency and skews her perception of self. In Jessica's case, rather than socially "gifting" the one-time presence of blood in virginity loss to a person of her choosing (in an ideal, socially acceptable scenario), she is forced to experience this blood ritual in perpetuity as a consequence of both her body's healing and her immortality.



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Similarly, the notion of purity and slut-shaming is reflected both in *Cherry* and *Firsts* as the female characters recognize this double standard even as they assertively embark on their own sexual journeys with varying degrees of shame and self-doubt. In *Cherry*, the character of Alex reflects on this after the “sex pact”:

Maybe that’s why she approached making out with more of a “boy mentality”—or whatever that meant. The irony was that if she actually was a son, no one would’ve ever written “slut” on her locker. She probably would’ve been called a stud or a pimp, like Oliver. He hooked up with everyone all the time, and he was “the man.” She made out with guys semifrequently, admittedly more often than most girls but not all the time, and she was called a ho. And, ironically, everyone thought she was even more of a slut because she’d had sex before, which she actually hadn’t, so it was all just a jumbled mess. (Rosin 57)

In *Firsts*, Mercedes experiences a mob attack when some of the girls at school learn, via a vindictive boy who was determined to “destroy” (Flynn 199) her, that she had been with their boyfriends: “[t]he pack lets us go, calling out after us. I hear a slew of colorful names. SLUT. HOME WRECKER. WHORE. BOYFRIEND THIEF. TRAMP” (237). The focus of chapter 4 in *Virgin Envy* is a non-normative yet female-identified body. The authors note that “[v]irginity loss has been identified traditionally as the first time that a person experiences penile-vaginal intercourse; however this

heteronormative definition is being altered by youth who are gay, lesbian or bisexual" (Zehentbauer and Santos 101-102).

Further chapters in *Virgin Envy* examine the notion of male virginity, the tropes of homosexuality and death, and how to take up the definition of "queer virginity." In chapter 5, Kevin McGuiness continues the discussion on beauty in virginity by taking up Paul Humfress and Derek Jarman's 1976 film *Sebastiane*. According to McGuiness, Saint Sebastian, "a chaste religious zealot . . . who sublimates his [homosexual] sexual desires and redirects them toward God" (127), is positioned in the film as "the subject of his comrades' desires His virginal beauty is therefore a fixture of obsession . . ." (132). As is so often the case in narratives of obsession, Sebastian dies, and images of his execution are erotically charged. McGuiness points out that "Jarman likened the arrows that pierce Sebastian's flesh to caresses" (131). He elaborates: "The demise of Sebastian also implicitly conveys the relationship between death and orgasm . . . the process of 'reaching the point of orgasm is like passing over into death'" (137-38).

Curious parallels to this narrative are reflected in the character of Theo in *History Is All You Left Me*. In this YA novel, Theo is the object of desire of two young men before he dies tragically, leaving his two lovers angry and bereft. The story opens after his death. Throughout the course of the novel, Griffin continues to speak to Theo, acknowledging that Theo is still with him in

death, watching over both him and Jackson. Without overtly assigning saint-like qualities to Theo, both Griffin and Jackson debate whether or not his death has a greater meaning. Jackson "refuse[s] to believe he died pointlessly," while Griffin counters that "Theo didn't die so you could personally learn some big lesson on life" (Silvera 86). In both *Virgin Envy* and *History Is All You Left Me*, homosexual death elevates the object to the "realm of the spiritual" (McGuiness 138). The transcendence of both Theo and Sebastian into mythical figures, to borrow the words of McGuiness in relation to *Sebastiane*, exemplify the "relationship between desire and death" (McGuiness 139).

While seeking solace in each other's memories and shared experiences with Theo, Griffin and Jackson also acknowledge their competitive positions as a consequence of both having experienced their first time with Theo. Theo's implied dominant position with these young men could be taken up in conversation with chapter 7 of *Virgin Envy*, as Gibson Ncube examines the importance placed on playing an "active role" in the context of masculine queer virginity. Ncube points out that, according to Michel Foucault, in ancient Greece "[h]omosexuality was viewed in the active versus the passive dichotomy, . . . the more 'honorable and valorized' of the two entailed 'being active, in dominating, in penetrating, in asserting one's superiority'" (161). Ncube contextualizes this discussion in terms of queer identity politics. He acknowledges that a queer male

accepting to be penetrated . . . unwittingly agrees to have the derogatory tag of ‘zamel’ (passive homosexual) placed on him. As such, he has to accept the mortifying and debased consideration by his peers, who view him as an inferior, as a woman. (154)

Arguably, in *History Is All You Left Me*, Theo is positioned in the more masculine “active” role—as he both initiated sex with Griffin and was the more experienced partner with Jackson. One might ask, however, how to treat this concept within a lesbian context. Does it translate? If “woman” is relegated to the inferior role, then how does the notion of “active” or “passive” get placed onto one partner or the other in a relationship between women?

Such questions are implicitly explored in *Cherry* when the girls discuss Emma’s first time with Savannah, complicating the definition of having sex with another girl:

“I’m trying to ask how exactly you would define having sex with another girl, but that might just be a stupid question.”

“Definitely *not* stupid. I think I still have that same question,” Emma said, laughing.

“Basically you’re saying it was good, but you’re not sure it was totally sex?” Layla said, trying to clarify the situation.

“I guess we have to define what ‘it’ actually is,” Emma said as her thoughts drifted back to the day after she’d first had sex with Nick. . . . With a boy “it” was

easy: penis in vagina. Ironically, the “good” was more elusive. With Savannah, it was exactly the opposite. The “good” was incredibly obvious while the “it” that was proving more difficult to wrap their heads around. (Rosin 322)

The girls continue to unpack the importance of orgasms for defining de-virginizing sex, whether or not Emma is still a virgin, and how relevant their partners’ experience is in making a decision about it all.

Ncube focuses on the issue of effeminacy, particularly in Arab Muslim societies, and the different kinds of homophobia and effeminophobia that the effeminate male characters experience. In a similar context, the experiences of “femme” vs. “butch” lesbians in the queer community parallel the experiences of effeminate queer men vs. those who present as more masculine. While homophobia is experienced by all segments of these populations, those who adhere to more traditional gender presentations may fare better in a patriarchal society. Ncube describes the transition from boyhood to adulthood, the way displays of effeminacy become more pronounced with age, and the consequential gender challenges. He explains further that the “term ‘queer virginity’ refers to identity, as in gay identity politics, . . . call[ing] attention [to] the unsettling of monolithic conceptions of virginity, gender, and sexual orientation” (150).

The next two chapters after Ncube’s examine the political role that virginity plays, not only in Western society

but also globally. Chapter 7 of *Virgin Envy* turns to India and womanhood, with Asma Sayed reminding us that “all cultural subgroups in India remain largely patriarchal; likewise, virginity—a concept rooted in patriarchal concepts of male ownership of women’s bodies—is sustained as a desirable trait even in the twenty-first century” (176). Sayed focuses particularly on Bollywood films, explaining how these “popular cultural texts . . . offer ideologies about the world that both shape and reflect a society and can thus be read as political texts” (178). These films celebrate abstinence, making an elaborate show of a woman finally offering herself to her husband on her wedding night in a ceremonial ritual of performative shyness and overt sexuality. The women in these films become emblematic of the nation’s political status and coherence as they perform India’s culturally acceptable narrative. Conversely, those who present in the more traditionally “Western” style (clothing, drinking, premarital sex) are exhibited as a warning and rarely meet a positive end until they return to a more acceptable Indian standard. The women in these films are forced to bear the labels of the Madonna/whore dichotomy that some of the young women in the novels I have been discussing also experience. The mob attack in *Firsts* and Allan and Santos’s chapter outlining Bella and Edward’s experiences in *Twilight* show the same tension. While Western society may be progressing toward more liberal attitudes with regard to sexuality and permissiveness, its “decadent” behaviour, frowned upon in Indian culture, is still culturally specific.

The final chapter of *Virgin Envy* moves to Latin America, as Tracy Crowe Morey and Adriana Spahr ask, “to what degree are gender performances as behavior or conduct



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permitted before social regulation and control are instituted?" (192) Significantly, their query proceeds from "the epistemological (or performed) rather than the ontological (or essentialized) question of virginity" (192). They look at the control of female sexuality through the frame of politically active women called *viragos*—women who perform as "male" in the public sphere. The bodies of these women are regulated and punished as this patriarchal society deemed necessary—raped by soldiers, then labelled whores once they were violated; given approval as lesbians, as this was viewed as a non-threatening performance of imitating men; and cast as non-competitive objects of desire on the battlefield as soldiers. While these *viragos* performed as men, the military neutralized them by recasting their performance as romantic objects rather than a threat to masculinity.

The regulation of these women's roles could be compared to Hanne Blank's discussion of virginity as a "blank screen upon which to project one's fantasies" (qtd. in Crowe Morey and Spahr 210). The ability of these men to situate the women in the role of sexualized *guerillera* attributes them god-like powers, re-inscribing their superiority and righteousness. One can see a similar act in *Firsts* as a group of high-school boys, led by the boyfriend (Charlie) of Mercedes's best friend, Angela, work together to take away her power and agency. They see Mercedes as a threat, because she is a confident young woman with knowledge and sexual power over them. When her knowledge and sexual power become too much for

them, they move against her. In a disturbing bedroom scene we see Charlie enact his revenge on Mercedes for encouraging Angela to wait before having sex with him:

"I'm not sleeping with you, Charlie," I say steadily. "Blackmail isn't going to work on me." Somehow my voice comes out sounding much stronger than I feel. . . .

"I was afraid you'd say that," he says, and he's on me before I have time to react. When I try to wiggle out of the chair, he pushes it against the wall and traps me there. His knee is pressed against my chest, and he's groping my breasts roughly with his hand. . . .

"You know you want to," he says. "I see how you look at me. Stop fighting it."

My heart is pounding and I want to scream, to hit him again, to run away. . . . But I'm paralyzed, trapped in my own fear like a fly tangled in a web. I squeeze my eyes shut, waiting for it. Waiting for whatever he's going to do. (Flynn 198-99)

While a rape does not actually occur in this scene, the threat of rape and the threat of shaming Mercedes with a video of her exploits are enough to shatter her confidence throughout the remainder of the book. Like the *viragos*, she has been recast as a compliant and docile shadow of herself, one whose threat to masculinity has been effectively eradicated as she is reduced to an obedient male sexual fantasy figure. While Mercedes ultimately overcomes this setback, this work of fiction

reflects a darker reality that often is not followed by a happy ending.

Virgin Envy casts a wide net, examining a range of perspectives from which to take up the complicated definition of virginity, inviting readers to re-examine their preconceived understanding of what the concept actually means. It suggests that some of us may be “haunted” by our own virginity stories, offering an opportunity to reflect on whether or not to consider them victories. The editors of this anthology recognize that this text merely offers an opening to the nascent field of virginity studies. For example, they acknowledge a gap in the discussion around “lesbian or trans virginities” (11). Additionally, while this volume examines various (though still limited) political and geographical contexts, a noteworthy gap for a Canadian text is the absence of any mention of the Indigenous and/or Two-Spirit community. The range of voices in this book nevertheless allows the reader an opportunity to get dirty in the “muck of language” (2) in the field of virginity studies. As poststructuralist

Chris Weedon reminds us, “[l]anguage . . . constructs the individual’s subjectivity in ways which are socially specific” (321). The language of virginity is broad, political, social, and far-reaching, and this text succeeds in opening up a dialogue for both sexuality and youth literature scholars.

The authors of *Virgin Envy* themselves note that they “genuinely hope that future studies of virginity will continue to challenge ‘disciplinary coherence,’ precisely because the question of virginity—as a lived practice, as an ideology, as a religious tenet, and so on—surely cannot be contained” (11). This lack of containment is reflected in the timing of the publication of both this book and the three YA novels taken up in this essay. The publication of these texts, and others that take up the notion of virginity, demonstrates a burgeoning discourse that challenges traditional considerations of gender identity and sexuality. As scholarly discussion around the definitions of sex and gender continue to develop, so too does our thinking about what being a “virgin” really means.

Note

¹ As described by Jaclyn Friedman in her 2011 book, *What You Really Really Want: The Smart Girl’s Shame-Free Guide to Sex and Safety*, slut-

shaming is “an umbrella term for all kinds of language and behaviors that are intended to make women and girls feel bad about being sexual” (292).

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