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My Body, My Virtue
Vestal Virgins, Brides of Christ, and a Legacy of Purity Culture

“I am on a honeymoon with Jesus.”¹ If I were to ask you to name the church father credited with that line, you might point to St. Jerome, Gregory of Nyssa, St. Ambrose, or any number of other ascetics, bishops, and learned Christian men writing on virginity in or near the fourth century. But you would be wrong. The quote was actually pulled from an early 21st century book entitled *Lady in Waiting* by Jackie Kendall, a discourse on the value of cultivating Christian virtues “while waiting for Mr. Right.”

A product of contemporary Purity Culture, a predominantly American, sexual abstinence movement that reached its peak in the early 2000s, *Lady in Waiting* emphasizes physical chastity, religious devotion, and the value of being “set apart” in order to avoid the temptations of worldly pleasures, particularly those that may lead to premarital sex. Purity Culture’s rigid enforcement of virginity in particular – which, within the patriarchal religious culture from which it developed, centered primarily around young women’s bodies – had far-reaching effects on young Evangelical Christians of the millennial generation. A range of think pieces and anecdotal reports speak of shame, depression, suicide attempts, marital problems, sexual dysfunction, and even the covering up of sexual abuse, all propagated by an explicit claim that once a young woman’s “gift” of virginity has been “unwrapped,” she has somehow lost her value, and given up her place of honor as a chaste religious woman.²

¹ Jackie Kendall and Debby Jones. *Lady in Waiting*. (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, 2005), 21.

² Jill Filipovic. “Purity culture: bad for women, worse for survivors of sexual assault.” (*The Guardian*, May 9, 2013).

While it is doubtful that contemporary authors like Jackie Kendall were reading the church fathers, their legacy is evident in Purity Culture, a testament to the enduring impacts of early Christian theological and community development. In particular, the works of St. Jerome, St. Ambrose, and Gregory of Nyssa on virginity articulate the ideal habits, behaviors, and virtues of the Christian virgin. Like this generation's abstinence-until-marriage adherents, the fourth century virgins were often girls or young women who made their vows in late childhood or early adolescence, with an understanding that what they embarked on was in service of pleasing God.

While Purity Culture as such is not the topic of this essay, framing early conceptions of the Christian virgin through the lens of Purity Culture illuminates its ideological continuity in contemporary practice, namely its emphasis on physical chastity and its priority on developing religious virtues. But, if we anachronistically put the church fathers in direct conversation with Purity Culture, we also see that fourth century Christian virginity was generally opposed to *temporary* abstinence, the kind most often seen in Purity Culture; instead, it strongly favored a lifetime commitment to asceticism, and even martyrdom if the virgin's purity was at risk. In reality, this intensification of religious virginity toward lifelong practice is most often – at least in the texts I will be assessing – a critique of Greco-Roman temple virginity, particularly of the Vestal Virgins.

And so, we must put fourth century Christian practices of virginity in conversation with the Vestals in order to engage meaningfully with the church fathers. Drawing on St. Jerome's *Letter to Eustochium*, Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of St. Macrina*, and St. Ambrose's *Concerning Virginity*, this paper will first provide an historical overview of the Vestals' role in Greco-Roman religious and civic life before comparing three particularities of early common-era female virginity, in order to illuminate the ways in which the church fathers coopted Vestal practice for

use in a steadily growing “Christian Empire.” Finally, by establishing threads of continuity and critique, I will argue that contemporary religious chastity – in continuity with both Greco-Roman pagan practice and early Christian practice – can be transformed as a tool of empowerment for women living under patriarchal structures even as it creates new limitations on their agency.

Vestal Virgins and Greco-Roman Women

In *Concerning Virginité*, St. Ambrose writes: “Who will allege to me the virgins of Vesta, and the priests of Pallas? What sort of chastity is that which is not of morals, but of years, which is appointed not forever, but for a term? Such purity is all the more wanton of which the corruption is put off for a later age.”³

Here he is referring to the Greco-Roman religion’s Vestal Virgin, a young woman chosen between the ages of six and ten to guard the sacred fire at the Temple of Vesta, Goddess of the Hearth. Vestals were committed to 30 years of temple service partitioned into three stages – apprenticeship, service, and teaching – before being released from their service and allowed to marry.⁴ Vestals enacted ritual duties on behalf of the temple and the state, including tending the flame, preparing sacrificial cakes, cleaning the temple, and participating in seasonal festivals, and “were the only female priests within the Roman religious system.”⁵ Considering the fact that Rome was a highly gender-stratified society, Vestals were held in high regard, occupying places of ritual significance in religious and political ceremonies throughout the Empire and given

³ St. Ambrose. *Concerning Virginité*. 377. 1.4.15

⁴ Very few of them, however, chose to marry.

Elda Biggi. "Rome's Vestal Virgins: protectors of the city's sacred flame." (National Geographic. December 18, 2018); Sarolta A. Takács. *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons: Women in Roman Religion*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).

⁵ Vestal Virgin, *New World Encyclopedia*; Mary Beard. The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins. (*The Journal of Roman Studies* 70 12-27, 1980).

special privileges to make their own wills and own property independent of a patriarch.⁶ In fact, even Rome's founding sons, Romulus and Remus, were said to have been born of Vestal Virgin, Rhea Silvia (Ilia), who was raped by the god, Mars.⁷

The Vestal as Mother of Empire reveals the character of ideal womanhood in Rome during the time the church fathers were writing. The organization of public life was reflective of the family unit, and thus the Vestals collectively occupied the role of *materfamilias*, or matriarch, as they symbolically tended to the hearth, prepared food, participated in fertility festivals, and served as bride/wife of the king.⁸ With Vestals as their example, women were expected to uphold a high moral standard, be diligent in their duties, and serve their families.⁹ Even married women understood the value of chastity, as it was believed that “sexual activity was polluting and thus disqualified the person from close contact with the deity,” which, in turn, created guidelines surrounding temple worship: “entry into a temple might be forbidden to a person for two or three days after intercourse.”¹⁰

Christian Virginité in Conversation with the Vestals

As we have established, associations of female virginité with purity and virtue – especially as they relate to the right worship of the Deity – are not distinctive characteristics of Christian virginité, but were instead widely accepted cultural assumptions. The church fathers, rather than working from a novel ideology, attempt in their writings to reorient the practice of virginité toward distinctly Christian theologies and narratives. For the sake of clarity, I will focus

⁶ Mary Beard, *The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins*, 13. Elda Biggi, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*.

⁷ Rhea Silvia was sentenced to being buried alive, which was the typical punishment for a vestal virgin who had “broken” her vow of chastity, but her cousin successfully argued for a reduced sentence of solitary imprisonment. (Sarolta A. Takács, *Vestal Virgins*, 7.)

⁸ Mary Beard, *The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins*, 13

⁹ Sarolta A. Takács, *Vestal Virgins*, 1.

¹⁰ Mary Beard, *The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins*, 12-13

on three juxtapositions: the threefold character of the religious virgin as maiden, matron, and male; the relationship between Rhea Silvia and Mary, Mother of Christ; and the early Christian critique against the temporary nature of Vestal Virginité.

A New Gender Identity

In “The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins,” Mary Beard makes the case for a threefold categorizing of the Vestals, writing: “the virginal, the matronal and the male (or, to be more skeptical, their dual role as virgin and matron), seems to me to be crucial to any understanding of their sexual identity; no explanation of their position or cult can be convincing if it rests exclusively on one of these aspects.”¹¹ The Christian virgin, too, defies traditional categories.

St. Ambrose, retelling the story of St. Agnes’ martyrdom, articulates a multi-fold gender construct of Christian virgins: “But maidens of that age are unable to bear even the angry looks of parents, and are wont to cry at the pricks of a needle...She was fearless under the cruel hands of the executioners...Not yet fit for the age of punishment but already ripe for victory.”¹² St. Ambrose describes St. Agnes as a “spouse” of Christ – presumably a wife – but then subverts, and thus masculinizes, her role by claiming that “virginité is of Christ,” which makes Christ himself “the Virgin who espoused, the Virgin who bare us, Who fed us with her own milk...”¹³ In Gregory of Nyssa’s *Life of Macrina*, Macrina is described as the quintessential young virgin, so beautiful the suitors “swarmed” around her. Yet, after committing to a life of virginité, she is given culturally masculine traits of rationality, “steadfastness and imperturbability,” bolstering her mother during a period of grief. Then, on her deathbed, “she revealed to the bystanders that divine and pure love of the invisible bridegroom,” taking up the mantle of bride. Jerome further

¹¹ Mary Beard, *The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins*, 18

¹² St. Ambrose, *Concerning Virginité*, 1.2.7-8.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1.5.22.

illuminates the convergence of dichotomies in the figure of the virgin in his description of Mary: “[Christ]...regards you no longer as His mother, but as His bride.”¹⁴ In each case, Christian virginity creates a new category of woman, freed from dualistic conceptions of womanhood – as either unmarried or married – in the fusion of chastity, marriage, and martyrdom in service to Christ.¹⁵

To this last point, it should be noted that, whereas the Vestals receive masculine traits by nature of the incompatibility of the matron/virgin duality, the Christian virgins receive masculine traits primarily through the vehicle of martyrdom, which, through the deletion of their embodiment, releases them from their gendered reality. Ambrose’s narrative of the virgin of Antioch illustrates this point explicitly: the virgin escapes impurity by dressing in a soldier’s uniform and is ultimately martyred still dressed as a man.¹⁶ Literal martyrdom was not required, however, since asceticism was conceived of as a type of martyrdom. On this point, Gregory of Nyssa writes: “For just as souls freed from the body by death are saved from the cares of this life, so was their life far removed from all earthly follies...”¹⁷ Unlike the Vestals, for whom the punishment for impurity was being buried alive in a state-enacted ritual, the Christian virgins are asked to protect their own chastity through the vehicle of self-prescribed asceticism, and even martyrdom.

Rhea Silvia and Mary as Figures of Womanly Virtue

While the Rhea Silvia myth is not the only origin story of Rome – I will not attempt to do justice to the complexity of these stories – it is compelling because of the generative power it

¹⁴ St. Jerome. Letter 22. (384), 38.

¹⁵ Mary Beard, *The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins*, 15

¹⁶ St. Ambrose, *Concerning Virginity*, 2.4.29.

¹⁷ Gregory of Nyssa. *Life of St. Macrina*.

gives to a Vestal, and for the way it elevates the virgin to co-parent with the divine.¹⁸ It also serves to emphasize the relatively high social status of the Vestal in Roman society, and reiterates the Vestal as a symbol of womanly virtue.

In the church fathers, Mary, Mother of God, supplants Rhea Silvia in order to place virginity in a distinctly Christian context. St. Jerome writes: “Death came through Eve, but life has come through Mary. And thus the gift of virginity has been bestowed most richly upon women, seeing that it has had its beginning from a woman.”¹⁹ St. Ambrose expands this further, describing Mary as the quintessential virgin: “What more glorious than she whom Glory Itself chose? What more chaste than she who bore a body without contact with another body?”²⁰ In this example, we see both a direct corollary to Rhea Silvia – Mary is chosen by God to carry the founder of Christian faith – and an important theological departure – Mary is an eternal virgin, unstained by sexual intercourse.

Mary’s example is further expanded to denote the specific virtues of the Christian virgin. The virgin, like Mary, should be “humble in heart, grave in speech, prudent in mind, sparing of words, studious in reading, resting her hope not on uncertain riches, but on the prayer of the poor, intent on work, modest in discourse; wont to seek not man but God as the judge of her thoughts, to injure no one, to have goodwill towards all, to rise up before her elders, not to envy her equals, to avoid boastfulness, to follow reason, to love virtue.”²¹ Mary’s “perpetual virginity,” unstained by sexual intercourse, implies a kind of moral usurping of Rhea Silvia’s –

¹⁸ This story is deeply disturbing, because Rhea Silvia was raped – she is not “empowered” in a contemporary sense, but rather in terms of how this violence reorients her to Rome and to the god, Mars.

¹⁹ St. Jerome, Letter 22, 21

²⁰ St. Ambrose, Concerning Virginity, 2.2.7.

²¹ Ibid.

and by association, all Vestal Virgins' – example in Roman society, and points toward the superior virtues of Christian virginity.²²

An Argument for “Perpetual Chastity”

While Christian virginity at this time was not directly tied to institutional or state religion – i.e. monasteries were fledgling if they existed at all and Christianity had been made legal under Constantine just over 100 years prior to cited writings – we have seen that it nevertheless took on attributes of the Empire's Vestals, including in its gender orientations and origin stories.

Ambrose makes a strong case for what may be Christian virginity's most significant departure from culturally recognized ritual virginity when he claims that virginity, rightly practiced, should be a permanent state. Continuing his critique of the Vestals, Ambrose writes: “What sort of religion is that in which modest maidens are bidden to be immodest old women?...How much stronger are our virgins, who overcome even those powers which they do not see.”²³ Jerome, likewise, advocates for virginity's permanency: “We must proceed by a different path, for our purpose is not the praise of virginity but its preservation. To know that it is a good thing is not enough: when we have chosen it we must guard it with jealous care.”²⁴

In order to maintain their perpetual chastity, virgins of Christ subvert the Vestals' performance of virginity by staying out of the public eye. For the church fathers, this serves several important purposes. First, it allows the virgin to maintain her purity and asceticism by avoiding the temptation of earthly pleasures.²⁵ On the subject of denying luxuries, Jerome writes: “Not that the Creator and Lord of all takes pleasure in a rumbling and empty stomach, or in fevered lungs; but that these are indispensable as means to the preservation of chastity.” A life

²² St. Jerome, Letter 22, 22

²³ St. Ambrose, Concerning Virginity, 1.4.15,19

²⁴ St. Jerome, Letter 22, 23

²⁵ “Let [the doors of your heart] be open to Christ but closed to the devil.” (St. Jerome, Letter 22, 11, 26)

spent at home also allows virgins to devote themselves to prayer. Ambrose uses the image of an enclosed garden, “because...the water of the pure fountain shines, reflecting the features of the image of God.”²⁶ For Macrina and her mother, “Nothing was left but the care of divine things and the unceasing round of prayer and endless hymnody.”²⁷ Jerome puts the virginal life of prayer in contrast to the alternative of marriage: “Either we pray always and are virgins, or we cease to pray that we may fulfil the claims of marriage.”²⁸

A “cloistered” life is also a protective measure in a society in which men may leer or commit sexual assault.²⁹ Macrina successfully avoids the unwanted attention of would-be suitors by staying by her mother’s side in her parents’ house after making her commitment to virginity at age 12.³⁰ Ambrose’s Virgin of Antioch is punished by men who desire to violate her chastity.³¹ And Jerome declares that “a man cannot use his eyes without danger.”³²

By advocating for lifelong virginity, the church fathers set Christian virginity apart from state-enforced temporary vocation, making virginity an ascetic tool for personal cultivation of virtues rather than a symbolic enactment of societally-enforced values.

Chastity: Liberation or Control?

The practice of the Vestal Virgins was outlawed by Theodosius I in 394, only ten to twenty years after the church fathers wrote their orations on Christian virginity. The Vestals disappeared in the same decade monastic communities were on the rise in parts of the Roman Empire. In terms of both chronology and ideology, then, Christian virginity can be understood

²⁶ St. Ambrose, Concerning Virginity, 1.9.45.

²⁷ Gregory of Nyssa. Life of St. Macrina.

²⁸ St. Jerome, Letter 22, 22

²⁹ I am aware that the word, cloistered, is a bit anachronistic since it derives from monastic communities.

³⁰ Gregory of Nyssa. Life of St. Macrina.

³¹ St. Ambrose, Concerning Virginity, 2.3.22.

³² St. Jerome, Letter 22, 12

best as a continuation of Roman conceptions of ritual virginity – albeit reimagined for a new religious practice – rather than a significant departure from it. As the Vestals extinguished the temple flame, the Christian monastics became torchbearers.

To understand “Christian” virginity, then, requires familiarity with Greco-Roman virginity, and speaks to the reality that the ideologies we understand as scripturally or biblically rooted are simultaneously rooted in vestigial values from the cultures out of which they sprang. Nevertheless, as we have seen, early Christian writings on virginity did their best to articulate something distinctive, arguing that their orientation offered a better reward for women than Rome’s alternative.

But was it ultimately better for women in terms of their liberation? On the one hand, by taking ritual virginity out of state control, Christian virgins may have had more agency; it was a choice to become an ascetic and anyone with the financial means to do so was theoretically welcome. For both Vestals and Christian virgins, transformed, masculinized gender identities gave women more leverage in a patriarchal culture. Yet Christians, by requiring a lifelong commitment to virginity paired with possible martyrdom, placed more limitations on virgins than did the Vestal structure, even in spite of its distance from state enforcement. Similarly, while the church fathers’ choice to supplant the raped Vestal of Rhea Silvia with the perpetual virgin of Mary removed trauma from the equation, it also removed the reality of patriarchal violence, preferring a fantasy of the pure mother-virgin who managed to rise above social and physiological realities. In all cases, any sense of freedom gained must be mediated through the continuing reality of patriarchy, in which male voices and male whims inform women’s personhood.

This still matters. Putting the Vestals and Christian virgins in conversation with Purity Culture can provide the contemporary critic a window into the explicit values contemporary Christianity inherited; values that, while perhaps offering more agency to women than one would expect for the fourth century, nevertheless served to enforce rigid, gendered power dynamics while claiming the opposite. When the supposed “choice” to remain chaste is advocated either by the state or by theological reasoning, and enforced through a culture of fear, women are not free. Ambrose himself critiques this when he says “Nor is she modest who is bound by law...And so she is not chaste, who is constrained by fear.”³³

However, despite the lack of resolution regarding the status of women, there is a kind of internal logic in the church fathers’ writings on virginity not present in Vestal practice, namely the idea that chastity is not a temporary position but requires a life of orientation to Christ. Putting sexual purity aside for just a moment, I wonder what it would mean for contemporary practitioners of Christianity to take seriously a concept of chastity in service of cultivating virtues. Jerome, for instance, advises Eustochium to cultivate against certain behaviors, describing a woman who hoards fine things for herself “while Christ lies at the door naked and dying” and another who attempts to appear more religious by giving an inconsequential amount of her wealth to the poor.³⁴ When virginity is paired with virtue, it becomes the outward sign of a life lived in service to God, and not an end in itself. This is what Purity Culture often misses, and indeed what the church fathers may have themselves missed.

The church fathers inherited and reinforced a rigid and unimaginative view of women’s roles, as do today’s Purity Culture advocates. Yet to throw it out altogether comes at a cost. As a feminist and a Christian raised in Purity Culture, what would it look like for me to “reclaim”

³³ St. Ambrose, *Concerning Virginity*, 1.4.15

³⁴ St. Jerome, *Letter 22*, 32

chastity as a cultivation of those values Mary embodies, namely humility, self-control, wisdom, careful speech, care for the poor, and dedication to “doing the work” of Christ? Certainly, to do so would require a denial of certain luxuries in favor of asceticism, like Eustochium. It would require a life spent in prayer like Macrina, and a cultivation of courage like St. Agnes. It might even require the firm resolve of the martyred Virgin at Antioch, and a determination to shed societal and self-made “constraints of fear.” While views have changed on human sexual ethics in the last two thousand years, the value of Mary’s virtues endures. We, like the church fathers, inherit a set of cultural assumptions regarding women’s bodies and women’s roles. But, like them, we have the power to subvert them.

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