Virgin Territory: Configuring Female Virginity in Early Christianity

by

Julia Kelto Lillis

Graduate Program in Religion
Duke University

Date:_____

Approved:

_____
Elizabeth A. Clark, Co-Supervisor

_____
J. Warren Smith, Co-Supervisor

_____
Mark Goodacre

_____
Robyn Wiegman

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation examines ancient conceptualizations of female virginity. Giving particular attention to early Christian sources, I challenge the common assumption that virginity was a uniform concept in antiquity. In contrast to scholars' tendency to treat virginity as a familiar and static concept in early Christian texts, I show that different writers construe it in different ways, often without including notions that modern readers have treated as universal—such as the idea that virginal women have intact hymen tissue or the idea that virginity can be verified by medical inspection.

The early chapters of this dissertation emphasize the diversity of conceptualizations that can be found among ancient groups and thinkers. Surveying a wide range of pre- and non-Christian sources from various ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern regions, I show that these societies distinguished between female "virgins" and "women" but did so in a number of different ways, using "virginity" as a category for age, marital status, and more. Christians thus could work with a variety of ideas and assumptions when they wrote at length on virginity. An examination of second- and third-century writings about Jesus' mother Mary reveals that the Christian authors of these texts held divergent opinions about what virginity is; they not only give different verdicts about whether Mary could be considered a virgin after giving birth, but employ different definitions of virginity in their answers to this question. A long central chapter identifies commonalities and significant differences between four fourth-century authors who wrote in Greek, Syriac, or Latin (Basil of Ancrya, Gregory of Nyssa, Ephrem the Syrian, and Ambrose of Milan). This comparison demonstrates that writers who utilized

similar terminology and themes could construct surprisingly different configurations for the concept of virginity, especially the idea of "bodily" virginity.

The later chapters of this dissertation focus on developments in virginity discourse at the turn from the fourth to the fifth century C.E. and afterward. Unlike earlier sources, texts of this time indicate a widespread belief that virginity can be perceived in anatomical features of the female body. I draw on Christian, Jewish, medical, and encyclopedic sources to chart the shift, and I consider the relationship between belief in anatomical virginity and the social institutions of marriage, the sex trade, the slave trade, and Christian consecrated virginity. Turning to a Christian author who became especially influential in later periods (Augustine of Hippo), I provide a new reading of his discussions of virginity and chastity in the work *City of God*, exploring the tensions that the notion of anatomical virginity produces within his thinking. My analysis underscores the difficulties that emerged in Christian thought on virginity when writers both viewed virginity as an anatomical state and sought to promote it as a moral and spiritual state. I conclude that early Christians and their neighbors in the Mediterranean world held a variety of views on what female virginity is, and that the ideas of hymenal intactness and gynecological virginity testing did not become common until very late antiquity. In my concluding chapter, I offer brief observations about the connections between ancient conceptualizations of virginity and virginity's meanings and value in present-day societies.

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List of Abbreviations (critical edition series and reference works)

ACO	Acta conciliorum oecomenicorum
ANF	Ante-Nicene Fathers
BHS	*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Kittel et al.; Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft)
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina
CGOO	Claudii Galeni Opera Omnia
CMG	Corpus Medicorum Graecorum
CSD	*A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*. Edited by J. Payne Smith. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
DJBA	*A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods*. Edited by Michael Sokoloff. Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002
DJD	Discoveries in the Judean Desert
FC	Fontes Christiani
FOTC	Fathers of the Church
GCS	Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der Ersten Jahrhunderte
GEL	*A Greek-English Lexicon*. Compiled by Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, Revised and Augmented throughout by Sir Henry Stuart Jones, with the assistance of Roderick McKenzie; with a revised supplement. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996
GNO	Gregorii Nysseni Opera
HEEBT	*Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud* (Epstein; Soncino)
LCL	Loeb Classical Library

LD	*A Latin Dictionary*. Edited by Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879 (reprinted 1969)
NBA	Nuova Biblioteca Agostiniana
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version of the New Testament
NTG	*Novum Testamentum Graece* (Nestle-Aland; Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft)
OCD	*The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Edited by Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth. 3rd edition. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999
OCP	Orientalia Christiana Periodica
OED	*The Oxford English Dictionary*. Prepared by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner. 2nd edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989
OLD	*Oxford Latin Dictionary*. Edited by P. G. W. Glare. 2nd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012
PG	Patrologia Graeca (Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Graeca. Migne)
PL	Patrologia Latina (Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina. Migne)
PTSDSSP	Princeton Theological Seminary Dead Sea Scrolls Project
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
Scr. Syr.	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium. Scriptores Syri
SL	*A Syriac Lexicon*. Edited by Michael Sokoloff. Winona Lake, IN; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009

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1. Introduction: A History for Ancient Virginity

1.1. The topic and purpose of this study

Virginity holds a privileged place in the history of Christian thought. The idea of sexual virginity and the ideal of female virginity, whether as a prelude to marriage or as a long-term commitment, have been prized by many societies across the world and across the span of surviving historical sources. In Western societies, this valuing of virginity has frequently had a special relationship to Christian ethical and theological reflection. Theologians have taken up images of virginal purity and exclusive fidelity from biblical passages (such as the Church being a chaste, unblemished fiancee and bride of Christ in 2 Corinthians 11:2-3 and Ephesians 5:25-32) to inform and underscore expectations for female sexual purity, rooting social ideals in the cosmic relationship between humanity and the divine. Both women and men, not only in past periods but even today, have been urged to express their devotion to the Christian God by following specific codes of chaste behavior.

Christians living in the first few centuries of the Common Era produced a variety of sources that manifest their strong interest in virginity. Some famously rejected marriage altogether and preached permanent sexual abstinence for all Christians.[1] Even

[1] Some extant authors condemn the rejection of marriage among their contemporaries, labeling them "Encratites" and depicting the stance as heretical. Examples include Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 1.28.1 (associating Encratites with the heretical figures Saturninus, Marcion, and Tatian); Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 1.15.71.5 (cf. *Miscellanies* book 3); Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 8.20 (8.13 in ANF). Ascetic positions like these (often labeled "encratism") are portrayed by ancient and scholarly authors as the practice of self-control taken to an extreme. Certain groups and literary works have been especially prominent in scholars' debates about early Christian encratism, including the earliest

the majority, who approved of marriage, expected young women to remain virginal until marriage. Moreover, ancient Christians increasingly encouraged virginity as a permanent lifestyle. They forged a new identity for virgins, different from the (mostly temporary) forms of celibacy practiced by Vestal Virgins in Rome, prophets of the Hebrew Bible, oracular priestesses in Greece, or Cynic philosophers.[2]

This dissertation challenges the assumption that virginity was a singular concept. Rather, ancient Christians defined virginity in a variety of ways. Despite widespread scholarly acknowledgment that norms and notions regarding gender and sexuality are historically contingent and socially constructed, scholars have not yet recognized these diverse definitions in their studies of early Christianity or of sexuality in the early Common Era. They routinely import modern assumptions into their work on ancient

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Syriac Christians and the so-called Apocryphal Acts associated with John, Paul, Andrew, Peter, and Thomas. On Syriac encratism see the differing positions (each influential for many subsequent studies) of Arthur Vööbus, *Celibacy, A Requirement for Admission to Baptism in the Early Syrian Church* (Stockholm: Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1951) and Sidney H. Griffith, "Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism," in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 220-245. The question of encratism in the Apocryphal Acts is bound up with debates over the role of celibate women in producing or reproducing the stories. Key studies include Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980); Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983); Virginia Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy: Women in the Stories of the Apocryphal Acts* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen, 1987); Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); and influential critiques of reading the entire group of Acts as encratic: Yves Tissot, "Encratisme et actes apocryphes," in *Les Actes Apocryphes des Apotres: Christianisme et monde païen*, ed. François Bovon et al. (Paris: Editions Labor et Fides, 1981), 109-119, and now "Encratism and the Apocryphal Acts," in *Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Apocrypha*, ed. Andrew Gregory, Tobias Nicklas, Christopher M. Tuckett, and Joseph Verheyden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 407-423.

[2] See Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 5-9, 31-32; pertinent essays in *Asceticism*, ed. Wimbush and Valantasis; and the diverse texts gathered in *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

texts, particularly concerning female virginity. Scholars take female virginity to refer to sexual inexperience, associate it with the idea of hymen tissue barring the vagina prior to sexual intercourse, and assume that a genital examination would show whether a girl or woman is still a virgin. Such ideas, though widely held today, have a history: they did not exist at all times and places, but arose at particular times and places. In various periods of the Common Era, people produced evidence of believing these ideas while others in their societies contested or rejected these ideas.

This study follows a "new intellectual history" approach, in which a historical investigation of ideas and thinkers takes some of its shape from the observations and questions of social scientists, social historians, and literary-critical theorists.[3] A crucial characteristic of this approach is the embrace of poststructuralist critiques, which question humans' ability to access reality independently from language.[4] From this perspective, virginity is not an independent entity that is simply "out there" waiting to be discovered. Rather, virginity is a human-made concept. It names a state and quality that can serve as—among other things—a social, medical/scientific, and/or theologically laden category. As such, it does not automatically or necessarily refer to sexual inexperience. In fact, as we shall see in chapter 2, studies of classical antiquity and the Hebrew Bible have shown that ancient terms we frequently translate as "virginity" or

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[3] See especially Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 106-185. My approach is discussed below (1.2, 1.3).
[4] For brief summaries of the concerns, see Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism*, 2nd ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 1-3; Georges Van Den Abbeele, "Postmodernism and Critical Theory," in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Stuart Sim, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 15-24; see also Laura Lee Downs, *Writing Gender History* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), chapter 7.

"virgin" are used in multiple ways. While sometimes encompassing claims about whether women have engaged in sexual activity, the terms often demarcate groups and status in a different way (for example, by designating unmarried women as opposed to married ones, or teenage girls as opposed to older women).[5] "Virginity" can refer to any one or combination of these meanings.

Even when "virginity" is used to name sexual inexperience, the ideas that accompany this meaning are far from monolithic. Ancient sources often lack the notions that virgins have intact hymen tissue and that it is possible to prove virginity by gynecological inspection. It is easy to understand why scholars have failed to see this absence: truths about bodies tend to seem self-evident. Since modern societies view hymen tissue as an empirically observable, discrete body part, we all too easily assume that people of other times and places have seen it the same way (after all, hymen tissue and the bleeding or pain that often accompany its rupture seem to be clearly "there," waiting to be noticed and interpreted). Ancient texts overturn this assumption. Most sources that discuss virginity are silent about hymens, while some, such as ancient Greek medical texts, envision female genital anatomy as hymenless, with no membrane obstructing the vagina in an ordinary virgin. Thus "bodily" virginity, like virginity in general, cannot be assumed to mean a single and familiar thing across all ancient sources or in early Christian texts.

In exploring alternative ways to view female anatomy, it is helpful to bear in mind what current Western medicine teaches about the hymen. According to the 2008 edition

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[5] Relevant studies and examples will be discussed in chapter section 2.1 of this dissertation.

of *Gray's Anatomy*, the hymen is "a thin fold of mucous membrane situated just within the vaginal orifice" that "varies greatly in shape and dimensions" and, in most cases, only partially obscures the vaginal opening.[6] It has no established function, and seems to be a byproduct of growing a vagina during embryonic development.[7] The tissue's shape, thickness, and resilience vary between girls and usually change with shifts in estrogen during the years after birth and during purberty.[8] In occasional cases, an imperforate hymen (a true vaginal seal) completely blocks the end of the vaginal canal, leading to health problems when menstruation begins.[9] Highly elastic hymen tissue might remain in place despite frequent tampon use, and in some cases, hymens even withstand penile-vaginal intercourse and pregnancy.[10] Because of this variability and the difficulty of

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[6] *Gray's Anatomy: The Anatomical Basis of Clinical Practice*, ed. Susan Standring, 40th ed. (Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone/Elsevier, 2008), 1281.

[7] Ibid.; Ethel Sloane, *Biology of Women* (New York: Wiley, 1980), 29-30; and see the observations about medical descriptions and social meanings of the hymen in Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, "Virginity Now and Then: A Response to *Medieval Virginities*," in *Medieval Virginities*, ed. Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans, and Sarah Salih (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 234-253, at 242-248. In some mammals, a somewhat similar membrane provides protection against bacterial infection, but it is unclear whether the human hymen could have evolved to serve this purpose. A relatively recent consideration of the theories reveals the difficulties of determining a function: A. J. Hobday, L. Haury, and P. K. Dayton, "Function of the Human Hymen," *Medical Hypotheses* 49 (1997): 171-173. Noting the absence of the hymen in juvenile-aged great apes, the authors suggest that hymen tissue may have become a standard leftover as bipedalism required our hominid ancestors to give birth after shorter gestation periods to smaller, less fully developed babies; subsequently, the feature may have been exapted (co-opted for another purpose) as partial protection against bacterial infection in the vagina. In other words, according to these authors, hymen tissue evolved not for a particular purpose but as a byproduct of increasingly "premature" births for hominids (172), lingering past infancy into the juvenile stage and beyond, with its evolutionary selection perhaps enhanced by the small advantages it might provide for protection from infection.

[8] Anne Smith, "The Prepubertal Hymen," *Australian Family Physician* 40.11 (2011): 873-875; Felicity A. Goodyear-Smith and Tannis M. Laidlaw, "What Is an 'Intact' Hymen? A Critique of the Literature," *Medicine, Science, and the Law* 38.4 (1998): 289-300, at 292; and see the sources gathered in Hanne Blank, *Virgin: The Untouched History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), 261.

[9] Ann S. Botash and Florence Jean-Louis, "Imperforate Hymen: Congenital or Acquired from Sexual Abuse?" *Pediatrics* 108.3 (2001): 756.

[10] A medical notice from the end of the nineteenth century states that "scarcely a volume of the yearly indices to medical literature which are published can be referred to without finding a case or cases in which delivery of a child was obstructed" by a hymenal membrane ("The Physical Signs of Virginity," *The British Medical Journal* 1.1775 [1895]: 27). Such scenarios are taken as a given in Sloane, *Biology of Women*, 29-

detecting changes in a girl's or woman's hymen tissue without a prior image or record with which to compare the results, many medical authorities have cautioned against using the presence/absence of the tissue or its features as evidence of past sexual experience or sexual abuse.[11] While it is well-known that hymens can be ruptured by non-penetrative activities like athletics,[12] it is not widely acknowledged that hymens can be resilient and can vary in shape and other qualities. This makes gynecological virginity inspections far less reliable than they are thought to be in many cultures. Meanwhile, it has been hard for scientists to shake the conviction that hymen tissue must have *some* function or evolutionary rationale to complement its remarkable cultural significance. As an extreme (and rather absurd) example, some twentieth-century studies suggested that sexual

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30. A particularly surprising case is reported in Chao-Hsi Lee and Ching-Chung Liang, "Hymen Re-Formation after Hymenotomy Associated with Pregnancy," *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Gynecology* 42.5 (2002): 559-560. Regarding the effects (or lack thereof) of sexual activity on teenage girls' hymens, see S. Jean Emans, Elizabeth R. Woods, Elizabeth N. Allred, and Estherann Grace, "Hymenal Findings in Adolescent Women: Impact of Tampon Use and Consensual Sexual Activity," *Journal of Pediatrics* 125 (1994): 153-160.

[11] This has become a crucial question in cases of possible abuse or assault of children and teens. See Astrid H. Heger, Lynne Ticson, Lisa Guerra, Julie Lister, Toni Zaragoza, Gina McConnell, and Mary Morahan, "Appearance of the Genitalia in Girls Selected for Nonabuse: Review of Hymenal Morphology and Nonspecific Findings," *Journal of Pediatric Adolescent Gynecology* 15 (2002): 27-35; Diane F. Merritt, "Vulvar and Genital Trauma in Pediatric and Adolescent Gynecology," *Current Opinion in Obstetrics and Gynecology* 16.5 (2004): 371-381; Jim Anderst, Nancy Kellogg, and Inkyung Jung, "Reports of Repetitive Penile-Genital Penetration Often Have No Definitive Evidence of Penetration," *Pediatrics* 124.3 (2009): 403-409; Smith, "Prepubertal Hymen." Note the contrast of most of these publications with a 1998 article that provides cautions about the hymen's variability while continuing to provide criteria for an "intact" hymen (Goodyear-Smith and Laidlaw, "What Is an 'Intact' Hymen?"). Concerning attempts to verify women's sexual history, see Herant A. Katchadourian, *Biological Aspects of Human Sexuality*, 4th ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1990), 26, 28; A. A. Hegazy and M. O. Al-Rukban, "Hymen: Facts and Conceptions," *theHealth* 3.4 (2012): 109-115.

[12] See Blank's observations about a recurring "mantra" in sex education resources that names "bicycling, horseback riding, and gymnastics" as activities that can tear or dilate the hymen (*Virgin*, 222).

selection could be responsible for the evolutionary appearance of hymens, due to how highly males have valued female virginity in a mate.[13]

On the one hand, then, modern Western scientists' belief that hymens are an empirically-established part of the female body makes it difficult for us to understand how an earlier society could look at virgins' genitals and not see hymens. On the other hand, this tissue's lack of function, variable shapes, and unpredictable behaviors can help explain why observers could count, name, and understand the characteristics of body parts in a way that diverges from ours.[14] In this dissertation, we will see that hymens and medical verification of virginity were newly embraced, and yet surrounded with

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[13] This view is ascribed to "Dickeman (1978), among others" in a study from the 1980s: Robert L. Smith, "Human Sperm Competition," in *Sperm Competition and the Evolution of Animal Mating Systems*, ed. Smith (Orlando: Academic Press, 1984), 601-659, at 642. Smith himself states, "I offer no hypothesis for the initial evolution of the hymen, but concede that the structure may have been maintained and even further developed in human females by intersexual selection in the context of male defense against sperm competition" (642). In discussing this passage from Smith, authors Hobday, Haury, and Dayton ("Function of the Human Hymen," 172) likewise critique the idea that a male preference for virginal female mates could account for the appearance and increasing frequency of the trait, though they agree that sexual selection could "increase the fitness [i.e., survival and reproductive success] of those females with hymens"; the authors in turn speculate that "in societies which value an intact hymen, it may be more developed than in societies with little or no interest in the structure" (172). For a brief reference to a controversial early-twentieth-century theory that linked evolution of the hymen to the role of pain in sexual pleasure, see the discussion of the hymen's origins in Deanna Holtzman and Nancy Kulish, *Nevermore: The Hymen and the Loss of Virginity* (Northvale, NJ and London: Jason Aronson, 1997), 4-6; a recent study that attempts to give pain during virginity loss an evolutionary rationale is A. Maul, "An Evolutionary Interpretation of the Significance of Physical Pain Experienced by Human Females: Defloration and Childbirth Pains," *Medical Hypotheses* 69 (2007): 403-409.

[14] Even viewers of the body within the same culture can see things differently from one another. Hanna Cinthio, writing in 2015, observes that despite much research and widespread discussion in Swedish politics on "myths" of hymen tissue and its cultural meanings, "it is still hard to get any uncontested, scientifically based answer as to what really is and is not the case… there is no real consensus within the medical domain itself"; noting that midwives surveyed in studies hold diverse views about hymens, she comments, "It is intriguing that professionals of the same occupation, with similar educational background and clinical experience, can perceive the same reality in so different ways" (Hanna Cinthio, "'You Go Home and Tell That to My Dad!' Conflicting Claims and Understandings on Hymen and Virginity," *Sexuality & Culture* 19 [2015]: 172-189, at 175).

controversy, in early centuries of the Common Era.[15] In historical study of the ways in which people have understood anatomy and sexual status, the burden of proof should be shifted so that scholars' own preconceptions are not anachronistically attributed to ancient texts. We cannot assume that all societies believed that virgins have hymens; we should assume they did not unless we find evidence for the belief in ancient texts. In past decades and recent studies alike, scholars have commonly taken hymens and gynecological virginity tests as givens; they have treated alternative ideas about anatomy and virginity verification as surprising divergences that require explanation, or as innovative challenges to long-held knowledge about virginity.[16] I argue that we should view the appearance of such ideas, not their absence, as noteworthy and innovative.

Conceptualizations of virginity must also be discerned on the basis of evidence, case by case, rather than flatly imposed in our readings. In early Christian texts, the concept of virginity frequently carries meanings about a woman's sexual history, but it can also encompass such expansive themes as virtue, in/fertility, immortality, and likeness to God. Female virgins could be configured in various ways and for various purposes. Christian discourse on virginity drew from and often combined preexisting ideas about what virginity is and why it matters, sometimes with paradoxical and tension-filled results.

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[15] Despite greater entrenchment in later periods, both matters remained contested into the modern period. See my concluding chapter.

[16] See chapter section 5.4.1 of this dissertation.

1.2. The back-history of this study

Virginity has become a topic of inquiry across academic fields, and studies from a range of fields have influenced my approach in this dissertation. Some scholars have sought to explain why virginity carries such high social and economic value in diverse cultures.[17] The number of medievalists' publications on virginity rose dramatically enough in the 1990s and early 2000s to constitute a "mini-discipline."[18] Studies spanning broad periods often draw on a select collection of ancient sources.[19] In 2007, three newly published books offered historical surveys of virginity, each using a different

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[17] Sherry B. Ortner, "The Virgin and the State," *Feminist Studies* 4.3 (1978): 19-35; Luce Irigaray, "Women on the Market," available in her *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 170-191; Alice Schlegel, "Status, Property, and the Value on Virginity," *American Ethnologist* 18.4 (1991): 719-734. See also Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Virginity in the Bible," in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Victor H. Matthews, Bernard M. Levison, and Frymer-Kensky (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 79-96; Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, "Virginity Now and Then"; Françoise Meltzer, "Der Diskurs der Jungfräulichkeit oder von der Geschlechtlichkeit des Heiligen," in *Die ungewisse Evidenz: für eine Kulturgeschichte des Bewieses*, ed. Gary Smith and Matthias Kross (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1998), 69-93.

[18] Sarah Salih, Anke Bernau, and Ruth Evans, "Introduction: Virginities and Virginity Studies," in *Medieval Virginities*, ed. Bernau, Evans, and Salih, 1-13, at 1. Examples include the essay collections *Medieval Virginities*, *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*, ed. Cindy L. Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), and *Menacing Virgins: Representing Virginity in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Marina Leslie (Newark: University of Delaware Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1999); Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture, c. 1150-1300: Virginity and Its Authorisations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001); Sarah Margaret Ritchey, *Holy Matter: Changing Perceptions of the Material World in Late Medieval Christianity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

[19] Howard R. Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500-1100* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); Maud Burnett McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc* (New York: Palgrave Press, 2003); Joy A. Schroeder, *Dinah's Lament: The Biblical Legacy of Sexual Violence in Christian Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); Dyan Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell: Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women, 200-1500* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

combination of disciplinary vantage points.[20] Scholars in film studies, feminist cultural studies, law, and anthropology interrogate the concept and its use.[21] These various works by scholars helpfully call attention to the multiplicity of virginity, the need to examine its particular configurations within particular contexts, the impossibility of conclusively proving its presence and the perpetual wish to do so, the urgency with which it has been embraced as a mechanism of social order or symbol of communal identity, and the ways its instability and malleability undermine or subvert these agendas and make other ones possible. Those who turn to antiquity, however, usually treat early Christian texts as a unified corpus with a shared perspective or trace only the broadest differences that divide antiquity's most famous writers.

Unsurprisingly, several studies of antiquity inform my own project. First and foremost is a set of publications by Giulia Sissa, especially the volume *Le corps virginal: la virginité féminine en Grèce ancienne* (translated into English under the title *Greek Virginity*) and the article "Une virginité sans hymen: le corps féminin en Grèce ancienne" (translated in English as "Maidenhood without Maidenhead: The Female Body in

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[20] A volume edited by classical studies scholars offers essays on configurations of virginity across ancient and later periods: *Virginity Revisited: Configurations of the Unpossessed Body*, ed. Bonnie MacLachlan and Judith Fletcher (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007). Medievalist Anke Bernau aims a far-ranging cultural-historical study at a broad audience in *Virgins: A Cultural History* (London: Granta, 2007). Historian Hanne Blanke distills research from several fields for a popular audience in *Virgin*.

[21] For example, *Virgin Territory: Representing Sexual Inexperience in Film*, ed. Tamar Jeffers McDonald (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010); Kathryn Schwartz, "The Wrong Question: Thinking through Virginity," *differences* 13.2 (2002): 1-34; Nina Puren, "Defining the Hymen in the Model Criminal Code," *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 9 (1997): 96-99; Anette Wickström, "Virginity Testing as a Local Public Health Initiative: A 'Preventive Ritual' More than a 'Diagnostic Measure,'" *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16.3 (2010): 532-550. My concluding chapter references further studies of early modernity and the present day.

Ancient Greece").[22] Sissa explores the complex combination of meanings, assumptions, and expectations that marked virginity in Greek literature and society, arguing that ancient Greeks lacked the concept of a vaginal hymen. Sissa's observations have been invaluable not only for classicists' analysis of gender and sexuality, but also for scholars of later periods who draw on her research in their considerations of the hymen's elusive and culturally contingent presence within the literary record.[23] This dissertation was largely inspired by reading her work alongside diverse early Christian writings that deal with virginity. Neither Sissa nor scholars of early Christianity have followed through on the implications of her findings for early Christian texts.[24] Instead, we have assumed that all treatises and narratives share a conceptual apparatus concerning the features of "physical" virginity and diverge only minimally in describing what virginity is.[25]

My work has proceeded in implicit conversation with other projects from the fields of classical studies and ancient Jewish studies. Earlier essays on virginity in

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[22] *Le corps virginal: la virginité féminine en Grèce ancienne* (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1987); *Greek Virginity*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1990); "Une virginité sans hymen: le corps féminin en Grèce ancienne," *Annales (ESC)* 39 (1984): 1119-1139; "Maidenhood without Maidenhead: The Female Body in Ancient Greece," in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, ed. David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 339-364; "The Hymen Is a Problem, Still. Virginity, Imperforation, and Contraception, from Greece to Rome," *Eugesta* 3 (2013): 67-123.

[23] These include Kelly, *Performing Virginity*; Marie H. Loughlin, *Hymeneutics: Interpreting Virginity on the Early Modern Stage* (London: Associated University Presses, 1997); Margaret Ferguson, "Hymeneal Instruction," in *Masculinities, Violence, Childhood: Attending to Early Modern Women—and Men*, ed. Amy E. Leonard and Karen L. Nelson (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011), 97-129.

[24] Sissa speaks of Christian texts as a uniform tradition and implies that early Christian views of virginity are uniformly hymenal: *Greek Virginity*, 165-177; "Maidenhood without Maidenhead," 361-363.

[25] Essays focused on early Christian texts about virginity tend to stress similarities and organize material from a range of texts under shared themes and concerns; for example, Thomas Camelot, "Les traités 'de virginitate' au IVe siècle," in *Mystique et continence. Travaux scientifiques du VIIe congrès international d'Avon* (Bruges: Desclée De Brouwer, 1952), 273-292; Teresa M. Shaw, "*Askesis* and the Appearance of Holiness," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6.3 (1998): 485-500; Alain Houziaux, "L'idéal de chasteté dès les débuts du christianisme: pourquoi?" *Études théologiques et religieuses* 83.1 (2008): 73-103. Assumptions about the meaning of "physical" virginity are ubiquitous in twentieth- and twenty-first-century discussions of Mary, virginity literature, or female asceticism in early Christianity.

antiquity have paved the way for fuller considerations of particular contexts.[26] Such work is aided by analysis of constructions of female bodies and logics of sexual difference, as Page DuBois has done with Classical Greek materials and Charlotte Fonrobert has done with rabbinic materials.[27] I join several recent scholars in exploring the complexity of specific terms from ancient discussions of sexual status and ethics.[28] Terminology for chaste behaviors, sexual propriety, moral dignity or honor, and ascetic self-control poses difficulties for translation and explication. These common but weighty terms are flexible and expansive in usage and frequently overlap, leaving a careful reader with only a vague sense of the constellation of meanings and connotations that attach to them. (When, for example, is "chastity" synonymous with complete abstinence or "continence," and when does it include self-controlled sexual activity in a faithful marriage? What kind of sexual "purity" makes for "holiness"?). Other work in these

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[26] Elena Cassin, "Le Proche-Orient ancient: virginité et stratégie du sexe," in *La Première fois, ou, Le roman de la virginité perdue à travers les siècles et les continents*, ed. Jean-Pierre Bardet (Paris: Ramsay, 1981), 239-258; Pierre Grimal, "L'antiquité grecque et latine," in *La Première fois*, ed. Bardet, 203-238.
[27] Page DuBois, *Sowing the Body: Psychoanalysis and Ancient Representations of Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).
[28] I have found Rebecca Langland's study of the Latin term *pudicitia* especially helpful: Rebecca Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Her study focuses on High Imperial Roman meanings for the term, which is "loosely translatable as 'sexual virtue'" (2). On the Greek term σωφροσύνη (often understood as temperance, prudence, or chaste self-control), see Adriaan Rademaker, *Sophrosyne and the Rhetoric of Self-Restraint: Polysemy and Persuasive Use of an Ancient Greek Value Term* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005). In Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness: Ancient Jewish and Christian Notions of Sexuality and Religious Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), the author traces differing delineations of holiness, purity, and sexual restraint in ancient Jewish and Syriac Christian literature. In essays on Methodius of Olympus, Ilaria Ramelli and Benedetta Zorzi put their fingers on the problem of terminological ambiguity and overlap for early Christian discourse on chastity, virginity, and continence: Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, "L'Inno a Cristo-Logos alla fine del *Simposio* di Metodio: alle origini della poesia filosofica cristiana," in *Motivi e forme della poesia cristiana antica tra scrittura e tradizione classica. XXXVI Incontro di studiosi dell'antichità cristiana, Roma 3-5 maggio 2007* (Rome: Institutum patristicum Augustinianum, 2008), 257-280; M. Benedetta Zorzi, "The Use of the Terms ἁγνεία, παρθενία, σωφροσύνη, and ἐγκράτεια in the *Symposium* of Methodius of Olympus," *Vigiliae Christianae* 63 (2009): 138-168.

adjacent fields demonstrates how useful virginity can be in the study of ancient thought and culture. For instance, Naomi Seidman finds virginity a potent topic for her analysis of the relationship between ancient translation work and the production of Jewish-Christian difference, observing that "the concept of virginity… disorders meaning *within* a language as well as destabilizing the fixed relations between languages," making evident "the workings of difference in language."[29] As another example, Simon Goldhill situates ancient novels and ancient Christian writings in a shared climate of cultural change, with virginity (and controversies about who can have it and how it can be lost or proven) serving as a nexus for new perceptions of the body and the self.[30]

This dissertation is, of course, indebted to a wealth of previous projects on early Christianity. Social, rhetorical, and theological dimensions of early Christian writings on virgins and virginity have been explored in publications by Peter Brown,[31] Averil Cameron,[32] Elizabeth Clark,[33] Gillian Clark,[34] Aline Rousselle,[35] Elizabeth Castelli,[36]

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[29] Naomi Seidman, *Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 42.
[30] Simon Goldhill, *Foucault's Virginity: Ancient Erotic Fiction and the History of Sexuality* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
[31] See especially Peter Brown, "The Notion of Virginity in the Early Church," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 427-443 and *Body and Society*.
[32] Averil Cameron, "Redrawing the Map: Early Christian Territory after Foucault," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 76 (1986): 266-271; "Virginity as Metaphor," chapter 8 in Averil Cameron, *History as Text: The Writing of Ancient History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 184-205; *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); "Early Christianity and the Discourse of Female Desire," in *Women in Ancient Societies: An Illusion of the Night*, ed. Léonie J. Archer, Susan Fischler, and Maria Wyke (New York: Routledge, 1994), 152-168; "Ascetic Closure and the End of Antiquity," in *Asceticism*, ed. Wimbush and Valantasis, 147-161.
[33] Several relevant essays appear in Elizabeth A. Clark, *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen, 1986); and see *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends: Essays and Translations* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1979); *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); "The Celibate Bridegroom and His

Virginia Burrus,[37] Verna Harrison,[38] Patricia Cox Miller,[39] Susan Ashbrook Harvey,[40] Maureen Tilley,[41] David Brakke,[42] and Daniel Boyarin,[43] among others. Efforts to illuminate the lives of late ancient celibate women on the basis of surviving texts have

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Virginal Brides: Metaphor and the Marriage of Jesus in Early Christian Ascetic Exegesis," *Church History* 77.1 (2008): 1-25.

[34] Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Life-styles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and see her collected essays in *Body and Gender, Soul and Reason in Late Antiquity* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011).

[35] Aline Rousselle, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*, trans. Felicia Pheasant (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

[36] Including Elizabeth Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2.1 (1986): 61-88; "Mortifying the Body, Curing the Soul: Beyond Ascetic Dualism in *The Life of Saint Syncletica*," *differences* 4.2 (1992): 134-153.

[37] Such as Virginia Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*; "Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10.1 (1994): 27-51; *Begotten, Not Made: Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

[38] Verna Harrison, "Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 41.2 (1990): 441-471; "Gender, Generation, and Virginity in Cappadocian Theology," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 47.1 (1996): 38-68.

[39] Especially Patricia Cox Miller, "The Blazing Body: Ascetic Desire in Jerome's Letter to Eustochium," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1.1 (1993): 21-45; "Is There a Harlot in This Text? Hagiography and the Grotesque," in *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography*, ed. Dale B. Martin and Miller (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 87-102; *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

[40] Including works that bring Syriac sources about virgins to a wider audience, such as Susan Ashbrook Harvey and Sebastian P. Brock, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "The Odes of Solomon," in *Searching the Scriptures, Volume 2: A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 86-98; and see "Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant: Women's Choirs and Sacred Song in Ancient Syriac Christianity," *Hugoye* 8 (2005): 125-149.

[41] For instance, Maureen A. Tilley, "African Asceticism: The Donatist Heritage," in *The Uniquely African Controversy: Studies on Donatist Christianity*, ed. Anthony Dupont, Matthew Alan Gaumer, and Mathijs Lamberigts (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 127-139; "An Anonymous Letter to a Woman Named Susanna," trans. Maureen A. Tilley, in *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice*, ed. Richard Valantasis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 218-229.

[42] David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); *Pseudo-Athanasius on Virginity*, ed. David Brakke, CSCO 592-593 Scr. Syr. 232-233 (Louvain: Peeters, 2002); "The Lady Appears: Materializations of 'Woman' in Early Monastic Literature," in *Cultural Turn*, ed. Martin and Miller, 26-39.

[43] See especially "Thinking with Virgins: Engendering Judaeo-Christian Difference," chapter 3 in Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 67-92.

given way to the study of how those texts represent women, and for what purposes.[44] Studies that shed further light on social and institutional dimensions of female virginity among early Christians include Susanna Elm's *Virgins of God*,[45] publications on the history of monasticism,[46] and Teresa Shaw's work with lesser-read treatises.[47] While these writers have addressed a wide range of questions about the meaningfulness of virginity for patristic authors and for early Christian women, they rarely ask whether the fundamental meaning of virginity can vary, and they generally assume that authors took the notion of verifiable hymenal integrity as a given.[48] Despite recognizing with Burrus

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[44] See Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Mothers of the Church: Ascetic Women in the Late Patristic Age," in *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 71-98; Jo Ann McNamara, "Muffled Voices: The Lives of Consecrated Women in the Fourth Century," in *Medieval Religious Women, Volume One: Distant Echoes*, ed. John A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1984), 11-29; Clark, *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith*; Jan Willem-Drijvers, "Virginity and Asceticism in Late Roman Western Elites," in *Sexual Asymmetry: Studies in Ancient Society*, ed. Josine Blok and Peter Mason (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1987), 241-273; Cameron, "Virginity as Metaphor"; Cooper, *Virgin and the Bride*; Elizabeth Castelli, "Heteroglossia, Hermeneutics, and History: A Review Essay of Recent Feminist Studies of Early Christianity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10.2 (1994): 73-98 and "Virginity and Its Meaning"; Clark, "Ideology, History, and the Construction of 'Woman' in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2.2 (1994): 155-184 and "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the 'Linguistic Turn,'" *Church History* 67.1 (1998): 1-31.

[45] Susanna Elm, *"Virgins of God": The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

[46] For example, Ewa Wipszycka, "L'Ascétisme féminin dans l'Égypte de l'Antiquité tardive: *topoi* littéraires et formes d'ascèse," in *Le rôle et le statut de femme en Égypte hellénistique, romaine et byzantine: actes du colloque international, Bruxelles-Leuven, 27-29 novembre 1997*, ed. Henri Melaerts and Leon Mooren (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 355-396 and Caroline T. Schroeder, "Women in Anchoritic and Semi-Anchoritic Monasticism in Egypt: Rethinking the Landscape," *Church History* 83.1 (2014): 1-17; Philip Rousseau, "The Pious Household and the Virgin Chorus: Reflections on Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 13.2 (2005): 165-186.

[47] "Homily: On Virginity," trans. Teresa M. Shaw, in *Ascetic Behavior*, ed. Wimbush, 29-44; "Pseudo-Athanasius: *Discourse on Salvation to a Virgin*," trans. Teresa M. Shaw, in *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice*, ed. Valantasis, 82-99; Teresa M. Shaw, "*Askesis* and the Appearance of Holiness" and *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

[48] Virginity as a concept is interrogated more thoroughly in scholars' discussions of what Gregory of Nyssa means by the term (see chapter 4.2), but the meaning of bodily virginity goes unquestioned. Statements by Gillian Clark capture the situation well: after discussing arguments against the idea of virginal hymens made by the ancient physician Soranus, Clark writes that "midwives who had not read their Soranus went on doing tests for virginity" (*Women in Late Antiquity*, 74; cf. *Body and Gender*, 224).

and Brown that Christians focused newly intense attention on virginal bodies in late antiquity—that female genital intactness "functions symbolically in the rhetoric of the fourth century to reinforce social and ideological boundaries"[49] and that the "intact body of the virgin woman" came to serve as "the organizing image of the whole notion [of virginity]"[50]—scholars have nevertheless treated the notion of hymenal intactness as a resource for meaning-making that had always been available, present in ancient societies from time immemorial.

These previous studies have shown that the situations and living arrangements of early Christian virgins were highly diverse. Complexity of social context, however, has not prompted much reconsideration of the diversity of ideas within texts. Many scholars would likely agree with Thomas Camelot's assessment that surviving fourth-century virginity treatises are essentially similar to one another.[51] Meanwhile, the proliferation of virginal lifestyles and writings about virginity in the fourth century opens avenues for study beyond what I pursue here; despite my wide chronological scope (discussed in 1.4 below), I examine only a small portion of the texts and issues that a dissertation on early Christian female virginity could include.[52]

Those of us working with early Christian texts show our lingering preconceptions about virginity in a number of ways. One is our tendency to dismiss the ambiguities and

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[49] Burrus, "Word and Flesh," 31.
[50] Brown, "Notion of Virginity," 434.
[51] Camelot, "Les traités 'de virginitate,'" 278.
[52] For example, I give comparatively little attention to the extensive writings of John Chrysostom or Jerome of Stridon; I omit discussion of the preeminent early virginal saint, Thecla, and of the interesting contents of anonymous virginity treatises from late antiquity; I do not discuss the category "virgins" as an ecclesiastical office, as could be done with respect to the canons of Basil of Caesarea and others.

different uses of terms by claiming that writers are employing euphemism to discuss sexual matters. We expect authors to sound imprecise out of modesty or politeness (for example, by discussing bodily "integrity" rather than a hymenal "membrane") and assume that behind their ambiguous expressions are referents we would recognize. Instead, we should notice the capaciousness and flexibility of common terms like "integrity" or "bodily virginity." We also expect concepts and symbols to be drawn from concrete features of the body, rather than expecting socially and theologically significant concepts to become naturalized in views about the body. Thus we expect hymens to inspire ideas about veiling, closure, or purity instead of asking if ideas about veiling, closure, and purity inspired late ancient Christians to see female bodies as innately sealed with a hymen.[53] Postmodern readings of ancient texts locate hymenal imagery in various places and take for granted that language about seals, integrity, corruption, and opened or closed wombs can refer or allude to the hymen.[54] As we shall see, these common terms and expressions are used in a variety of ways in early Christian texts, and some of the

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[53] As Schwartz puts it, "Rather than seeing chastity as an abstraction grounded, however remotely, in bodily virginity, we might understand the virginal body itself as a figment of an urgent social imagination" ("The Wrong Question," 15). While I thus emphasize that metaphors and meanings can flow from society onto material bodies, a number of feminist scholars have recently conducted new explorations of the ways materiality informs human conceptualization. See, for instance, two authors' different forms of engagement with materiality in Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Corporeal Turn: An Interdisciplinary Reader* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2009; cf. *The Roots of Thinking* [Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990]) and Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). See also the review essay of Iris van der Tuin, "New Feminist Materialisms," *Women's Studies International Forum* 34 (2011): 271-277.

[54] For example, Burrus, *Begotten, Not Made*, 95; Andrew S. Jacobs, "Sordid Bodies: Christ's Circumcision and Sacrifice in Origen's Fourteenth Homily on Luke," in *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Ascetic Discourses*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Weidemann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 219-234, at 226. Of course, in one sense these texts can "refer," "allude," or "mean" in any number of ways as meaning is generated between text and reader. On the other hand, early Christianity scholars usually frame interpretations as at least plausible for illuminating the intellectual world of the ancient author and their earliest audiences. In this historical sense, our preconceptions about virginity are problematic.

ideas we most readily associate with them seem not to have arisen in the cultural milieux of the texts' composition and early circulation.

1.3. The terms and problems of this study

The title of this dissertation contains several words implying distinct approaches, limits, and preoccupations for the project. These terms, and others I will use, not only convey scope and imply a disciplinary stance; some also evince problems inherent to my areas of study. Here I briefly explain my approaches, terminological decisions, and backdrop of theoretical challenges for "Virgin Territory: Configuring Female Virginity in Early Christianity."

1.3.1. Virgin "territory"

The phrase "virgin territory," beyond exemplifying the pervasiveness of virginity motifs in modern English, signals two important things about this study. First, the ancient sources we will examine treat virginity in a way I mentioned above—as something simply "there" that a person might have, not have, struggle to attain, or be able to make evident. The difference between this vantage point and my own is aptly captured by a distinction between "territory" and "maps" that became common in academic parlance during the twentieth century. Popularized within religious studies by Jonathan Z. Smith's essay "Map Is Not Territory," the classic formulation comes from Alfred

Korzybski's work on semantics: "a map *is not* the territory that it represents."[55] Words of a language, Korzybski explains, are not identical with the objects they represent; our conceptualizations of a thing are not identical with the thing itself. Early Christian writers purport to describe the "territory" or reality of virginity. A study like mine, in contrast, seeks to describe the "maps" they drew to represent it, with special attention to the variety of these maps. For reasons I will explain below, my approach confirms Smith's concluding reminder that "maps are all we possess."[56]

"Territory" is a fitting word for a second reason. Whereas Korzybski's distinction between "map" and "territory" suggests that the latter term is a neutral name for the terrain the map represents, one can also hear "territory" as a charged term that speaks to the relationship between the cartographer (or a reader of the map) and the terrain. The phrase "virgin territory" has a politically charged history. Those colonizing the Americas compared them to a virginal woman and circulated the idea that the land was virginally uncultivated and ripe for the taking; Native American claims on land could be dismissed if it were conceptualized as "virgin territory" waiting to be possessed through European colonial expansion.[57] By implying that early Christian writers treat virginity as territory, I draw attention to the complex interests at stake. Several writers treat virginity as a timeless reality but claim to reveal new truths about it, or portray it as newly gifted to humanity with the coming of Christ. By correcting supposed misconceptions or charting

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[55] Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*, 5th ed. (Brooklyn: Institute of General Semantics, 1994), 58.
[56] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 309.
[57] Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 21-74; Nathan Probasco, "Virgin America for Barren England: English Colonial History and Literature, 1575–1635," *Literature Compass* 9.6 (2012): 406-419.

new terrain in theological reasoning about virginity, Christian leaders also craft symbolic portraits of the Christian community and guidelines for its members. The investments and intentions an ancient author has in writing about female virginity cannot be simplistically characterized as purely benign or purely nefarious; they are in some respects political and personal, sometimes become highly consequential for others, and undoubtedly yield all manner of resources for self-fashioning and social status that we might judge helpful or harmful within a particular context. What they are *not* is neutral.

1.3.2. "Configuring" virginity ("discourse")

This dissertation explores the ways ancient authors "configure" female virginity. We find their configurations within what I call their "virginity discourse," or their "discourses" about female virginity. By choosing these terms, I am both highlighting my focus on ideas found in texts (What do ancient written sources say about virginity?) and invoking a number of basic premises concerning language, experience, the exercise of power within societies, and the nature of historical work.[58] I assume that the past people, groups, settings, and institutions that I describe can be accessed by historians only in the forms in which surviving texts and material culture represent and construct them, filtered through the thought and language of both the ancient producers of sources and their current interpreters. We do not discover and uncover the past, but narrate histories for antiquity built from ancient representations (of people, experiences, ideas, events, and so

[58] My premises are shared by many other early Christianity scholars. See Clark, *History, Theory, Text*; Dale B. Martin, "Introduction," in *Cultural Turn*, ed. Martin and Miller, 1-21.

forth) that we attempt to understand and make intelligible to one another. By using the term "discourse," I flag the contingent nature of our sources and our narrating.

Projects on antiquity that analyze "discourse" owe much to the work of Michel Foucault. For Foucault, "discourse" names not just the speech or writing that shows what someone thinks about a particular object of knowledge (in my own study, virginity), but the full range of social and political processes that shape objects of knowledge (our social practices, sense of self, and power relations that help bring that object into being and generate perceived truths about it).[59] In an influential study of early Christian discourse, Averil Cameron notes, "Finding suitable terminology is difficult. Rather than a single Christian discourse, there was rather a series of overlapping discourses always in a state of adaptation and adjustment, and always ready to absorb in a highly opportunistic manner whatever might be useful from secular rhetoric and vocabulary."[60] Virginity is manifestly an object of knowledge that emerges from how it is discussed and enacted. I seek to show the plurality of early Christian authors' meanings for it, as well as the diversity of ideas that they take up as resources from everyday language, previous authors, or scripture and turn to their advantage.

I attempt to work from a historiographical stance that yields useful results for scholars of diverse approaches, whether they be philologists, theologians, historians with a positivist framework, feminist historians, and/or those who engage deeply with the

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[59] His early works *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and "The Order of Discourse" have been especially influential for later scholars. Both are available in English in Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge; and, The Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972); a different translation and introduction for the latter are available in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (Boston, London, and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 48-78.
[60] Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 5.

methods and challenges of critical theorists. As I write about ancient sources, I avoid making claims about ultimate truths or unmediated realities of the ancient world, but—rather than fixing the focus on the problems and limits of our work with texts, or on the reader who interacts with the text to produce its meaning—I treat my sources as products that reflect a sociocultural world and speak about some things and not others, with more and less plausible meanings for ancient audiences. How do these texts help us grasp—if loosely—the ways an author or group thought about their world and their relationships? My contribution, then, is to provide a history for a concept that turns out to be multiple concepts, a term or idea that is constructed or configured afresh each time an ancient author discusses it.

1.3.3. "Female virginity" and terminological problems

It is difficult to draw firm parameters around the objects of a study on ancient "virginity." On the one hand, as chapter 2 will demonstrate, ancient terms customarily translated as "virgin" and "virginity" do not always map neatly onto common modern definitions for virginity (which themselves are not entirely uniform).[61] On the other hand, a number of other terms and concepts contribute to our understanding of how an ancient writer views "virginity"—hence my interest throughout the project in the various uses of the terms "integrity" and "corruption" and in the wider vocabulary pertaining to chastity. By focusing primarily on "virgin" and "virginity" terms while attending to the

[61] My conclusion (chapter 7) cites some of the studies that reveal present-day diversity in definitions and criteria for virginity.

wider webs that help to define them, I show that the concept of virginity is an extraordinarily roomy one, or better yet, a plural rather than a singular. In instances where virginity discourse includes notions about sexual inexperience, I frequently employ the unfortunate terms "defloration" and "deflower" in representing ancient writers' thought. Many sources imply that a man destroys or removes a woman's virginity by having sex with her, thus "corrupting," "defiling," or "deflowering" her; in English, "defloration" is a succinct term for the event of virginity loss, and has gained a technical or quasi-scientific tone in a variety of fields (sometimes as a term for hymenal rupture, sometimes for the destruction of virginity more generally). With certain authors and contexts, I retain these archaic terms to suit the problematic ideas those thinkers or societies hold about men's aggressive role in sex and women's loss of value or charm upon the loss of their sexual virginity, even when hymenal rupture is not an operative notion. In broader discussions and overviews, I favor alternatives like "virginity loss."[62]

In this study, I am principally interested in "female" virginity. The term "female" delineates the scope of my materials, but requires some caveats about the study of gender in antiquity. Regarding scope, colleagues often ask how early Christian ideas about female virginity and male virginity compare. The visibility of male virgins in late ancient sources makes it possible to do such comparing, but this falls beyond the aims of the present study.[63] Although some authors—Gregory of Nyssa, for instance—tend to elide

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[62] For a helpful consideration of the challenges, risks, and opportunities of using sexual terms from distant contexts in historiographical work, see the chapter entitled "Talking Sex" in Valerie Traub, *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 171-226.

[63] One question I plan to explore in future work is why fourth-century Christian authors so frequently hold up male biblical virgins as models for female virgins of their own day. For an example of useful analysis

gender difference in their virginity discourse, the majority of my sources focus on female virgins or treat female virginity as paradigmatic. Because of this, my uses of the term "virginity" without a gendered modifier frequently refer to female virginity in particular. Modern readers often intuitively understand that female virginity is more pervasively valued, guarded, discussed, or tested in the literature I examine, but it should be noted that this has not prevented many past or present people from investing male virginity with great significance or—occasionally—envisioning ways to test or prove its presence in a man's body.[64]

A larger problem attends terms like "female" in historical projects. Historians of premodern periods have questioned the applicability of various modern terms and categories in study of the past. Creating histories of "women" has been complicated by the unraveling of previous explanations for what "women" are and how we can recognize them in our sources.[65] This has led many scholars to look instead for systems of gender,

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on men's potential to be "brides of Christ" in much the same way as virgin women, see Clark, "The Celibate Bridegroom," 17-18.

[64] Examples of the desire to prove male virginity surface in different periods. An ancient novelist named Heliodorus subjects both heroine and hero to an ordeal that verifies virginal purity (*Ethiopian Story* 10.7-9). Ordeals that detect whether a man's body is virginal recur in later literature, such as in John Fletcher's play *The Faithful Shepherdess* (see Loughlin, *Hymeneutics*, 61-62). Some medieval scholars demarcate between construals of feminine virginity as something to be investigated and construals of masculine virginity as something tested by temptation, yet the line can be blurred: see John H. Arnold, "The Labour of Continence: Masculinity and Clerical Virginity," in *Medieval Virginities*, ed. Bernau, Evans, and Salih, 102-118. On nineteenth-century detection of pederasty, see Sissa, "Hymen Is a Problem," 101-102. A brief BBC News report on virginity-testing practices for Zulu women in South Africa includes comments from an elder who plans to extend the testing to include boys: Antony Kaminju, "South Africa's Virginity Testing" (May 22, 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6677745.stm, accessed January 19, 2017).

[65] Denise Riley's 1988 monograph demonstrates that even within the modern period, we find variety for what it means to be a "woman" and who counts as one: Denise Riley, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). Riley advocates not histories of ideas *about* women, which assume an "underlying continuity of real women," but histories of

understood as systems of power relations "based on perceived differences between the sexes."[66] Some caution that even this way of characterizing gender already assumes too much about what we will find.[67] If we seek to study how an ancient group understood sexual difference or organized roles for "women" but recognize that gender systems vary tremendously from culture to culture, how can we be sure that what we are finding is gender and that our own categories are not distorting our conclusions? How will we cast a wide enough net to find everything that might pertain? Among scholars of the medieval period, some have suggested that virgins who would otherwise be women could be counted as a gender of their own, distinct from women and men.[68] Debates among sexuality scholars raise related problems. For some, "sexuality" is an entirely modern category that stands in sharp contrast to the social arrangements and erotic acts of earlier periods.[69] Others find warrant to utilize modern categories of sexuality in historical

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how "women" are configured in connection with categories like the soul, nature, bodies, and humanity (*Am I That Name?*, 7). The difficulty of fashioning an encompassing category to unite present-day "women" has been amplified by intersectional analysis, transgender politics, and evolving conceptualizations of sex and gender in the biological sciences.

[66] As formulated in Joan Wallach Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," as it appears in her *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988): "gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifiying relations of power" (42). A helpful guide to the larger picture of gender history and its development is Sonya O. Rose, *What Is Gender History?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010).

[67] See especially Jeanne Boydston, "Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis," *Gender & History* 20.3 (2008): 558-583. For one consideration of the use of modern categories for premodern religious studies in particular, see Amy Hollywood, "Gender, Agency, and the Divine in Religious Historiography," *Journal of Religion* 84.4 (2004): 514-528.

[68] See Salih, *Versions of Virginity*; Salih, Bernau, and Evans, "Introduction," 3.

[69] Much of the debate clusters around Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, in which he characterizes the concept of a homosexual man—as a classifiable identity, often a deviant one—as strictly modern. For many scholars, perhaps especially those working in modern periods, this has amounted to a distinction between premodern perceptions of deviant sexual *acts* and the new possibility in modernity of perceiving certain *types of persons* as sexually deviant. David Halperin's early work is often taken as representative:

investigation.[70] The debate has often centered on the question of whether to treat the premodern past as fundamentally "other" from "us" (emphasizing alterity because of the radically new developments that mark modernity) or as similar enough to justify use of familiar categories for studying the past (emphasizing identity or identification).

For my interests in antiquity, a useful strand of thinking within these debates comes from a scholar of the early modern period, Valerie Traub, who engages with the questions in relation to historiographical work on lesbianism.[71] Traub suggests that we can expect to find similarities between and across time periods without utterly neglecting difference. Recurring "explanatory meta-logics" provide "a sense of consistency and, at times, uncanny familiarity" in our historical investigations; she calls the moments when these familiar logics surface "cycles of salience."[72] This softens the boundary between premodern and modern, making it possible to undertake large-scale projects in the study of sexuality that break free of the confines of traditional periodization.

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see David M. Halperin, "Is There a History of Sexuality?" *History and Theory* 28.3 (1989): 257-274 and the essay volume *Before Sexuality*, ed. Halperin, Winkler, and Zeitlin. From this standpoint, rubrics of "sexuality" from modern discourses (both in the sense of sexual orientation and in a more general sense) fail to fit ancient discourses.

[70] This is true of historians of many different stripes. For example, those historians of homosexuality who bring an explicit political agenda to their work recognize the importance of giving today's gay and lesbian people a history. In the wake of epistemological critiques of such work by critical theorists and historians who emphasize modernity's distinctiveness, some theorize creative ways to approach time itself, expressing suspicion about scholarly "othering" of the past by those stressing alterity or pointing out the impossibility of constructing a singular "modern" model for homosexuality. Some view the queering of time or of historiography as a step beyond the acts/identities debate. See *Premodern Sexualities*, ed. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (New York: Routledge, 1996); Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon, "Queering History," *Publication of the Modern Language Association* 120.5 (2005): 1608-1617; *The Lesbian Premodern*, ed. Noreen Giffney, Michelle M. Sauer, and Diane Watt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). See also some critical engagement with such approaches in Traub, *Thinking Sex*, 57-81.

[71] Valerie Traub, "The Present Future of Lesbian Historiography," in *Lesbian Premodern*, ed. Giffney, Sauer, and Watt, 21-34. This material is now integrated into her *Thinking Sex*, 82-100.

[72] "Lesbian Historiography," 23.

While my study, focused on ancient periods, does not directly answer Traub's call for large-scale investigations,[73] I find her model of "cycles of salience" pertinent to the historiographical problems described above. This view of recurring logics, concerns, and tensions across time makes it possible to search for and talk about ancient "female virginity" in a meaningful way while always keeping a loose hold on our conceptualization of what we are seeking. It leaves room for rises and falls of particular themes in virginity discourse, and of particular strategies for working out other theological and social problems through defining what it means to be a female virgin; it allows for enormous variety in definitions while recognizing writers' tendencies to view their own and previous discussions of virginity as discussions about the same thing. I thus retain labels like "female" and "sexual" while realizing that our ways of classifying persons, behaviors, or relationships are somewhat ill-fitting for antiquity and must remain provisional—that is, we must remain able to be surprised by what we find and willing to adapt our categories and the meanings for their names as our sources demand. Through most of the project, I call virgins "women" or "women and girls," but at some points I rely instead on ancient dichotomizations between "virgins" and (non-virginal) "women." (I leave the question of virginity as a gender—or of virginity reshaping existing systems of gender—tabled for future work.) I distinguish between "sexual" and other kinds of

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[73] See "Lesbian Historiography," 27-28 (but cf. *Thinking Sex*, 98-100); my concluding chapter very briefly brings ancient preoccupations into conversation with present-day virginity discourse. Traub asks whether some of our grandest claims about diachronic change—such as the rise of "sexuality" amidst the immense transformations that mark "modernity"—might in fact point to something a bit more mundane, "a manifestation of ongoing synchronic tensions in conceptualizations about bodies and desires" (31). In contrast, within my smaller frame of ancient periods, I attend not only to synchronic variety but also to forms of tension *and* conformity manifested in a particular diachronic shift (see 1.4 below).

virginity to remind readers that the term "virgin" does not always say something about the acts we group within our own category "sexuality." Although same-sex eroticism is part of the sociocultural landscape of my sources, early Christian writers generally limit acceptable sexual relations to male-female intercourse, and discussions of female virginity almost exclusively concern women's relationships with men. In this dissertation, as in so many historical discussions of women's virginity, sexual relations will appear rigidly heterosexual, with other possibilities neglected.[74]

1.3.4. "Early Christianity"

Finally, while this study draws on a wide range of Christian and non-Christian sources, it foregrounds "early Christianity." My location as a scholar of religion and of patristic texts—texts written by the so-called "Church Fathers," influential authors and leaders later designated as sufficiently orthodox and edifying to merit preservation and emulation—is visible in my organizing and comparing of sources. I acknowledge and flag here that repeatedly talking about early "Christianity" risks reifying the term: categorizing religious groups with a familiar label implies that there was a clear-cut, empirically present thing called "Christianity" in antiquity that both stood apart from other religions and stands in close continuity with other forms of Christianity across

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[74] As Kelly has noted, the frame of reference for the idea of virginity has historically tended to be a heterosexual one (*Performing Virginity*, 122). Among my sources, Basil of Ancyra stands out in mentioning that a virgin's physical proximity to other women's bodies could arouse feelings that threaten virginity, but his framework is still that of male-female intercourse (*True Incorruption in Virginity* 62). At times, gender fluidity upholds the rigidity of hetero-eroticism, such as when male writers identify with a feminine figure in order to relate to Christ as a lover. Concerning recent changes in present-day perspectives on virginity with respect to sexual orientation, see the studies cited in my concluding chapter.

history. This label can cloud our view of how Christians understood themselves, related to others, and produced discourses within their particular communities. Because this risk seems inevitable, I follow the common practice of retaining simplistic categories for ancient religious groups, simultaneously taking it as a given that early Christian identity was constantly (and variously) under construction and that the boundaries between being "Christian," "Jewish," and neither "Christian" nor "Jewish" were porous. Scholars continue to deliberate over what to call those traditionally labeled "pagans," and in this study I will retain quotation marks around the label to signal the problems of this widely used term.[75]

With the aforementioned analytic categories in hand and a host of epistemological limitations in mind, I seek to contribute to our historical picture of early Christians, their neighbors, and the multiplicitous, multifaceted concept of virginity in antiquity. Feminist interests have guided my research and shaped the questions I choose to address, but I attempt to frame my findings in ways that show their relevance for scholars using other approaches, as well. Some feminist work paints Christian or monotheistic traditions with a broad brush when discussing the place of female virginity within them.[76] My attention to differences in discourse among early Christians brings a more nuanced and textured picture into focus. At the same time, treating Christians in greater depth than other

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[75] For a recent discussion of the options and their problems, see Christopher P. Jones, *Between Pagan and Christian* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 1-8.

[76] Sissa perpetuates this broad-brush approach in comments from her recent essay: "Narratives about virginity lost, in ancient Greece, are not compatible with an ideological, religious or medical focus on defloration, understood as the irremediable, irreparable fracture of a membranous tissue… the Greeks failed to obsess about the phallus making irruption through a closed door… For all their sexism and exclusionary political theory, they decided not to cultivate the threatening pathos of Christian and other monotheistic sexualities" ("The Hymen Is a Problem," 88).

groups can easily make Christian groups seem exceptional and uniquely responsible for historical change (whether change for the better or for the worse). I hope that my own limited investigation of ancient discourses will provide specific data and useful questions for a larger scholarly picture of the roles that religious identity, religious institutions, and theological reasoning can play, alongside other aspects of life in societies, in the ever-shifting discourse of female virginity.

1.4. The structure of this study

This project has both synchronic and diachronic components. Most chapters demonstrate synchronic diversity: in a given period, different groups or authors—or even different passages by the same author—often diverge widely in what they say virginity is. Chapter 2 surveys a range of pre- and non-Christian sources from various ancient periods, showing that these sources offer strikingly different pictures of how "virgins" differ from "women" and how one might test or prove female virginity. Chapter 3 deals with second- and third-century Christian texts in which Jesus' mother Mary is described either as a virgin or as a non-virginal woman after giving birth to her son. I argue that these writers bring not only different answers, but also different definitions to this indirect debate over whether Mary remains a virgin when she gives birth. Chapter 4 juxtaposes four fourth-century Christian authors and church leaders—the Greek writers Basil of Ancyra and Gregory of Nyssa, the Syriac writer Ephrem, and the Latin writer Ambrose of Milan—whose configurations of virginity, though superficially similar in many shared terms and themes, are in fact remarkably diverse. In their discussions of virginity, all

these authors employ distinctions between "virginity of the body" and "virginity of the soul," emphasize the importance of one's soul and spiritual state in the life of virginity, and utilize imagery involving water and the language of "seals" or "sealing." Upon a closer look, however, we find that their meanings, emphases, and models for speaking about the nature of virginity are distinct. Most notably, each author seems to mean something quite different from the others by the phrase "virginity of the body."

Diachronic development is considered most fully in chapters 5 and 6. As many sections in chapter 2 demonstrate, most ways of understanding female virginity in ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures appear not to have included the notion that female sex organs are barred by hymen tissue prior to sexual initiation. Widespread medical theories on female health and anatomy, popular stories about virginity tests, and various other sources suggest that virginity was not generally thought to be immediately perceptible within or upon the body. This changes in late antiquity. Beginning in the very late fourth century, sources from various regions and traditions testify to a prevalent belief that new sex partners or medical experts can perceive whether a woman is a virgin, based on features of her genitals. Only isolated or unclear instances of belief in hymens or the medical verifiability of virginity appear in earlier centuries, and most of these come from Roman and Roman North African sources from the second and third centuries C.E. In chapter 5, I gather evidence for the rise of anatomical definitions for female virginity, offer a historical sketch of this emergence, and consider the social institutions that may have especially contributed to or been impacted by a shift toward understanding virginity as physically assessable. Chapter 6 turns to a single Christian author, Augustine

of Hippo, to explore the difficulties that arise when Christians who claim that virginity is primarily a state of the soul or mind also subscribe to beliefs that virginity of the body is verifiable, valuable, and irrevocable once lost.

A brief conclusion summarizes my findings and provides glimpses into the persisting meaningfulness of virginity in present-day societies. Societies in which virginity appears to have become an obsolete category give evidence that it still matters, if for varying reasons. Religious and secular cultural forces continue to make female virginity valuable or even imperative for many people around the globe. There is a large worldwide market for vaginal products and procedures that restore or replicate virginity so that women can feel or seem virginal. Today as in antiquity, virginity—even sexual virginity in particular—has diverse meanings and diverse forms of significance. It is my hope that exploring the varied history of this concept will create new space for reflection on what virginity has been, why it is significant, and how its conceptualization impinges upon the well-being of women today.

2. Virginity in Pre- and Non-Christian Mediterranean Sources

This chapter surveys the varying and sometimes surprising ways that virginity is understood in non-Christian texts before and during the early centuries of Christianity. The terms, assumptions, and meanings attached to virginity in these ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern sources form a variegated backdrop for the development of Christian discourses on virginity, which could draw from any number of the elements supplied by earlier and contemporaneous cultural groups. When Christians took up the language of virginity to classify lifestyles, produce moral instruction, debate theological questions, or delineate faith communities and their relationship to God, they did not invoke one concept, but many. Diverse meanings and conceptual associations were available in the societies of the ancient Mediterranean.

As we saw in the introduction, an analysis of ancient thought on virginity must cast a conceptually wide net, incorporating both the terminology that has traditionally been translated with "virginity" language (which can have more definitions than those we expect to find) and related terms and themes that fill out a larger picture of the ways people understood the special status of being "virginal." Common present-day definitions for female virginity, such as hymenal integrity or lack of experience with vaginal-penile intercourse, do not capture the range of possible meanings nor provide reliable guidance for understanding ancient definitions. While neither a particular ancient term nor a present-day definition is an adequate option for grouping the entirety of the perspectives discussed below, we do find a constant across the sources: a distinction is drawn between female virgins, on the one hand, and women who have entered true

womanhood, on the other. The key question of this chapter is: What makes a woman different from a virgin, or a virgin different from a woman? Answers are sometimes present and sometimes significantly absent in the areas described below—in the terms usually translated into English as "virgin" and "virginity," in ancient descriptions of female bodies and of sexual intercourse and virginity loss, and in imagined methods for demonstrating, testing, or proving virginity. We who approach these sources today tend to expect a familiar configuration where virginity centers on sexual acts but also has its own anatomical features such as hymen tissue or a tight vagina, which are permanently changed by beginning sexual activity. We will see that the meaning, locating, and proving of virginity in ancient sources rarely conform to our expectations, and they vary greatly among themselves.

2.1. Translating virginity: terms translated as "virgin" or "virginity" and their wide ranges of meaning

Surviving sources in the diverse languages of the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds show that the line between a "virgin" and a "woman" could be drawn in a number of different places. This holds true not only between different linguistic and cultural groups or time periods, but also within particular groups and periods. Virgins' stage in life or status in society can center on age, marriage, personal or moral qualities, or experiences with transitions like sexual initiation and childbearing.

The most famous instance of terminological ambiguity for virginity language is that of the terms for a "virgin" or "maiden" in the books of the Hebrew Bible (עלמה, to some extent נערה, and especially בתולה). Early Christian and Jewish writers noted the

complexities of these terms' usage in scripture and debated what could be concluded from their appearance in passages like the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14, where the figure who conceives and gives birth might be taken to be a "young woman" or (sexually) a "virgin" (for Christians, Mary).[1] Studies confirm that בתולה, the term most consistently taken to mean "virgin," can imply that a woman has never had sex, but often refers to a young unmarried woman in general, and sometimes to a young married woman.[2] A number of Near Eastern sources suggest that parallels in semantic range and ambiguity existed across many groups and languages from very early periods.[3] Much later Aramaic sources sometimes label as a "virgin" a young wife or woman who has not yet given birth.[4]

Greek terms (παρθενία or παρθενεία for "virginity," παρθένοι for "virgins") have similarly diverse uses in ancient texts. Virginity language is often used for young women to say that they are unmarried and can be used of women who may have had sex already.[5]

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[1] See Adam Kamesar, "The Virgin of Isaiah 7:14: The Philological Argument from the Second to the Fifth Century," *Journal of Theological Studies* 41.1 (1990): 51-75; cf. chapter 1 of Naomi Seidman, *Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

[2] See the helpful summary in Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Virginity in the Bible," in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Victor H. Matthews, Bernard M. Levison and Frymer-Kensky (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 79-96 and the discussions in Gordon J. Wenham, "*Betûlāh:* 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" *Vetus Testamentum* 22.3 (1972): 326-348; see also J. Massingberd Ford, "The Meaning of 'Virgin,'" *New Testament Studies* 12.3 (1966): 293-299.

[3] Elena Cassin, "Le Proche-Orient ancient: virginité et stratégie du sexe," in *La Première fois, ou, Le roman de la virginité perdue à travers les siècles et les continents*, ed. Jean-Pierre Bardet (Paris: Ramsay, 1981), 239-258; Jerrold S. Cooper, "Virginity in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2-6, 2001*, ed. Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), 91-112; Wenham, "*Betûlāh*," 326-329.

[4] See the example from a late ancient Aramaic incantation bowl in James A. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia University Museum, 1913), 178 and 181, and the definition and examples given for the entry בתולתא in DJBA (Sokoloff, 2002), 251.

[5] Pierre Grimal, "L'antiquité grecque et latine," in *La Première fois*, ed. Bardet, 203-238; Giulia Sissa discusses several sources and some previous secondary literature in *Greek Virginity*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1990). Sissa's own position on the social and sexual aspects of "virginity" language among ancient Greeks is complex; see her more recent

Classical-period sources show that the passage from virginity to full womanhood was marked with symbols and rites acknowledging the importance of procreation and the civilizing influence of marriage upon girls who were previously "untamed" in their youthful innocence; here virgins are frequently associated with animals and untilled land, dangerously free of male control or investment in state interests.[6] In many instances, being a "woman" instead of a "virgin" seems to require childbearing.[7] A study of Greek inscriptions from Asia Minor during the Hellenistic and Imperial periods reveals that the term "virgin" can designate any one or combination of the meanings "young girl" (an age category), "unmarried girl" (a social category of marital status), and "sexual virgin" (a category reflecting sexual experience), with age range emerging as the dominant focus.[8] On the grave of a woman named Prosodos, the language of virginity designates her single status prior to marrying at age nineteen, while it expresses the lamentably young age of

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essay, "The Hymen is a Problem, Still. Virginity, Imperforation, and Contraception, from Greece to Rome," *Eugesta* 3 (2013): 67-123.

[6] See the patterns and sources discussed by Pauline Schmitt, "Athéna Apatouria et la ceinture: Les aspects féminins des Apatouries à Athènes," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 32.6 (1977): 1059-1073; Claude Calame, *The Poetics of Eros in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 121-129, 143-145; Eleanor Irwin, "The Invention of Virginity on Olympus," in *Virginity Revisited: Configurations of the Unpossessed Body*, ed. Bonnie MacLachlan and Judith Fletcher (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 13-23; Judith Fletcher, "The Virgin Choruses of Aeschylus," in *Virginity Revisited*, ed. MacLachlan and Fletcher, 24-39; Andrew Stewart, "Imag(in)ing the Other: Amazons and Ethnicity in Fifth-Century Athens," *Poetics Today* 16.4 (1995): 571-597.

[7] Helen King, *The Disease of Virgins: Green Sickness, Chlorosis, and the Problems of Puberty* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 42-48; Page DuBois, *Sowing the Body: Psychoanalysis and Ancient Representations of Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 33.

[8] Angelos Chaniotis, "The Age of a *parthenos*: A New Epitaph from Aphrodisias," in *Vir doctus Anatolicus: Studies in Memory of Sençer Sahin*, ed. Burak Takmer, Ebru N. Akdoğu Arca, and Nura Gökalp Özdil (Istanbul: Kabalcı Yayınevi, 2016), 246-251.

the deceased on the graves of the fourteen-year-old wife Domitilla and of a girl named Melition "who died at the age of a virgin."[9]

Latin terms, too, distinguish virgins from women in a variety of ways. Sometimes a *virgo* or possessor of *virginitas* is a sexually inexperienced girl or woman, and a man who has sexual intercourse with her is said to deprive her of her virginity.[10] At other times these are treated as more general terms that need modifiers in order to indicate sexual virginity—hence Vergil's addition of adjectives like *intacta* and *incorrupta* to specify that a *virgo* is sexually virginal.[11] By calling a girl a "virgin," one might convey primarily that she is single, or simply that she is young, as seen in its occasional application to young, unmarried women who have given birth or to young brides; the term often carries a connotation of respectability and, in some contexts, implies that the girl in question is a freeborn Roman citizen.[12] Multiple meanings may even be found in a single work, whereas some authors favor one particular meaning. In Terence's comedy *Brothers*, "virgin" can denote sexual virginity from one character's standpoint while also being used of the pregnant but unmarried Pamphila.[13] Marital singleness is central when

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[9] In Chaniotis' own translation, "Age of a *parthenos*," 246, 248. The latter inscriptions come from the third and second centuries C.E., respectively.

[10] See Patricia Watson, "Puella and Virgo," *Glotta* 61.1-2 (1983): 119-143 on this meaning's occasional appearance in early Latin sources and its increasing presence over time. Several examples from legal texts and declamation are included in Laura E. Caldwell, *Roman Girlhood and the Fashioning of Femininity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 45-78. Some expressions for sexual loss of virginity are collected in J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 195-196.

[11] Robin Mitchell, "The Violence of Virginity in the *Aeneid*," *Arethusa* 24.2 (1991): 219-238, at 220.

[12] Watson, "Puella and Virgo"; Grimal, "L'antiquité grecque et latine." Watson suggests that the common definition for *virgo* as "a sexually inexperienced young girl" should usually be replaced with the definition "an unmarried girl of respectable morals" for ancient Latin sources ("Puella and Virgo," 122).

[13] See Watson, "Puella and Virgo," 122. In early comedies, social status and respectability are prominent aspects of the meaning of *virgo*.

Varro and Curtius describe the alleged sexual behaviors of foreign peoples' "virgins," while Ovid's works provide many instances where virginity is a sexual matter.[14] According to one recent study, passages in Roman law attributed to second- and third-century jurists tend to take three of the most common meanings—virgins being sexually inexperienced, unmarried, and young in age—jointly in their discourse, though the usual application of the term to nubile adolescents is occasionally stretched to include girls of an even younger age.[15]

In many cases, ancient terms that are usually translated as "virgin" are thus better translated with other words. By referring to someone as a "virgin," an ancient text might be conveying that she is a "maiden," "teenager," "young single woman," or even "young wife." A number of different transitions or qualities serve as the dividing line between a "virgin" and a "woman."

2.2. Marking virginity: bodily signs of sexual virginity or non-virginity we expect to find, and what we find instead

Many present-day readers of ancient texts assume that the hymen, a membrane partially occluding the vagina, has always and everywhere been the virginal marker *par excellence*. For modern readers, the bleeding and pain traditionally associated with female virginity loss find their origin in this hymenal tissue, and the difference between a

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[14] See Watson, "Puella and Virgo," 126 and 129.
[15] Caldwell, *Roman Girlhood*, 50-55. She notes: "*Virgo* appears as a notional, rather than formal or institutional, category in Roman law, associated with youth, sexual purity, and, for free females, marriageability" (51).

virgin and a woman could hypothetically be located in the tissue's presence or absence.[16] For many ancient writers, the situation appears to be entirely different. Hymens are almost never named or described in ancient Mediterranean sources, especially before very late antiquity; while some discussions of virginity may implicitly include the hymen, in others it simply does not exist. The images and terms gathered below, which describe female anatomy and the nature of vaginal-penile sexual intercourse, seem at first glance to provide bodily markers for sexual virginity and virginity loss, particularly through hints about the "closed" or "opened" state of the female body and about the bleeding associated with first coitus. Upon a closer look, it becomes clear that these sources do *not* associate virginity (or its loss) with distinctive anatomical features (i.e., bodily structures such as hymen tissue). The changes that sexual intercourse is thought to bring upon female bodies are not usually immediate or readily perceivable.[17]

2.2.1. Features of virgins' and women's bodies in medical and other sources

A wealth of medical writings survives from antiquity. Common issues for female health appear in texts spanning many times and places, and extant medical works include detailed descriptions of the anatomy of sex organs, gynecological care, and theories and practices concerning conception and childbirth, as well as comments on whether virginity is a healthful or harmful state beyond puberty. Male and female physicians and female

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[16] See chapters 1 and 7 of this dissertation for bibliography on the significance of the hymen today and current information regarding its variability, lack of biological function, and inutility for medical assessments of virginity or past sexual history. There is also growing awareness of reasons that sex might initially be painful, beyond the notion that hymenal rupture can cause pain.

[17] Some rare exceptions of (non-hymenal) bodily markers for virginity loss are discussed in 2.3 below.

midwives interacted with female patients who sought expert healthcare (or whose family members sought it for them), and these practitioners often examined girls' and women's bodies firsthand. Thanks to the accumulation of knowledge about the body in medical tradition through centuries of observation and treatment (and at some stages even dissection), physicians were able to produce and consume literature that offered varying pictures of and therapeutic approaches for women's sexual and reproductive anatomy.[18]

In these many and various pictures, the virginal hymen is consistently absent.[19] The forms of tissue medical authors encountered belonged to a genital landscape that, as they saw it, ordinarily did not include any barrier specific to virgins; whatever tissue-lined openings they found were interpreted as open vaginas, not obstructed ones. The

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[18] On ancient gynecological knowledge and doctors' and midwives' tasks, tools, and access to women's and girls' bodies, see Helen King, *Hippocrates' Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998); Rebecca Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women: Gender, Nature, and Authority from Celsus to Galen* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); G. E. R. Lloyd, *Science, Folklore and Ideology: Studies in the Life Sciences in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 62-86; Jennifer Kosak, "Interpretations of the Healer's Touch in the Hippocratic Corpus," in *Homo Patiens: Approaches to the Patient in the Ancient World*, ed. Georgia Petridou and Chiara Thumiger (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016), 247-264; Lesley Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies in Classical Greek Science* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994); Ann Ellis Hanson, "A Division of Labor: Roles for Men in Greek and Roman Births," *Thamyris* 1.2 (1994): 157-202; Ralph Jackson, "Roman Doctors and Their Instruments: Recent Research into Ancient Practice," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 3 (1990): 5-27; Valerie French, "Midwives and Maternity Care in the Roman World," *Helios* n.s. 13.2 (1986): 69-84; *Julius Preuss' Biblical and Talmudic Medicine*, ed. and trans. Fred Rosner (New York: Sanhedrin Press, 1978); Heinrich Von Staden, *Herophilus: The Art of Medicine in Early Alexandria; Edition, Translation, and Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). On the question of whether lifelong virginity is healthful or harmful for women, see Jody Rubin Pinault, "The Medical Case for Virginity in the Early Second Century C.E.: Soranus of Ephesus, *Gynecology* 1.32," *Helios* 19.1 (1992): 123-139.

[19] Sources (and this remarkable absence) are discussed in Sissa, *Greek Virginity* (see especially pp. 105-123) and "Maidenhood without Maidenhead: The Female Body in Ancient Greece," in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, ed. David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 339-64; Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies*, 47-55; Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London and New York**:** Routledge, 2000), 22-28.

highly influential Hippocratic works of the Classical period[20] extensively discuss the health of both women and virgins with reference to their sex organs while omitting any mention that virgins normally have a vaginal membrane. Aristotle and the much later doctor and author Galen of Pergamum (late second century C.E.) each offer detailed descriptions of genital and reproductive anatomy, but never discuss a vaginal hymen; less famous authors are similarly silent.[21] Soranus of Ephesus, working and writing in Rome early in the second century C.E., testifies that the idea of the hymen exists among some others (among whom, we do not know)[22]—yet he rejects the idea with a series of proofs:

> It is a mistake to assume that a thin membrane (ὑμένα) grows across the vagina, dividing it, and that this membrane causes pain when it bursts in defloration or if menstruation occurs too quickly... For first, this membrane is not found in dissection. Second, in virgins, the probe ought to meet with resistance (whereas the probe penetrates to the deepest point). Third, if this membrane, bursting in defloration, were the cause of pain, then in virgins before defloration excessive pain ought necessarily to follow upon the appearance of menstruation and no more in defloration.[23]

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[20] Most treatises belong to the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E., while a few come from subsequent centuries (Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies*, 5-6).

[21] Other medical authors whose works offer some insight into ancient gynecology (but who are also silent on the question of hymens) include the Roman encyclopedist Celsus, who wrote early in the first century C.E., and Vindicianus, whose work on gynecology survives from the late fourth century C.E.

[22] Some scholars speculate that the theory of the vaginal hymen was promoted by the midwives with whom Soranus interacted and to whom he addressed his *Gynecology*, or by Roman doctors, or that it was characteristic of popular thought in Rome. See Gillian Clark, *Body and Gender, Soul and Reason in Late Antiquity* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 224; Aline Rousselle, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*, trans. Felicia Pheasant (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 27, 33; Giulia Sissa, *Sex and Sensuality in the Ancient World*, trans. George Staunton (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 90-91, *Greek Virginity*, 114, 165-77, "Maidenhood without Maidenhead," 361-63, and "The Hymen Is a Problem," 96-97, 103-117 (cf. 76-77).

[23] *Gynecology* 1.3.17, as translated in *Soranus: Gynecology*, trans. Owsei Temkin, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 15; the Greek text can now be found in *Soranos d'Ephèse: Maladies des femmes*, ed. Paul Burguière, Danielle Gourevitch, and Yves Malinas, 4 vols. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1988-2000), 1.14-15 (with a different numbering system for sections).

For Soranus, the vagina is unobstructed from the start.[24] Other medical authors hold similar assumptions, and when they describe congenital membranes within the reproductive organs, they view the situation as exceptional and pathological, posing a risk to menstruation or other processes required for female health.[25] Soranus' testimony is the sole indication that anyone in the ancient Mediterranean world of his time, or beforehand, believed virgins possess hymen tissue.

Medical authors acknowledge that first coitus can cause bleeding, and they sometimes speak of female bodies being "open" or "closed," language which summons hymens to the minds of many readers today. Contrary to what we may expect, the authors provide a range of non-hymenal explanations for this bleeding and refer to non-hymenal sites of female anatomy with their "open/closed" terminology. Soranus accounts for pain and blood as results of the initial stretching-out of "furrows" and blood

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[24] He goes on in 1.3.17 to explain that the hypothesis of the vaginal hymen cannot account for the varying location of membranes in patients with atresia (a condition where a hardened membrane blocks the vagina or uterus, which would normally be accessible). Another passage by Soranus, *Gynecology* 1.9.34-35, is mistakenly taken by some scholars to encourage examinations of virgins by health experts in a way that would verify whether they are sexually virginal. The passage actually describes the desirable physical qualities of a potential wife (particularly her potential for fertile childbearing) without specifying whether the woman herself, a midwife, or a physician would provide information about these qualities, and the logic requires that her reproductive system be an open one, not one that is sealed off by hymen tissue: Soranus assumes that an observer will be able to evaluate the qualities and position of her uterus and its orifice, presumably by touching or seeing them.

[25] See the early sources discussed in Ann Ellis Hanson, "The Logic of the Gynecological Prescriptions," in *Tratados hipocráticos: estudios acerca de su contenido, forma e influencia: actas del VIIe Colloque international hippocratique, Madrid, 24-29 de septiembre de 1990*, ed. J. A. López Férez, (Madrid: Universidad Nacional de Educacion a Distancia, 1992), 235-250, at 243-244. Problematic genital membranes are discussed by several writers of different periods, including Aristotle (*Generation of Animals* 4.4.773a), Celsus (*Medicine* 7.28), and the sixth-century author Aetius of Amida (*Tetrabiblion* 16.51 and 96, also known as *Gynecology* 51 and 96, according to the numbering of *Aetios of Amida: The Gynaecology and Obstetrics of the VIth century, A.D.*, trans. James V. Ricci [Philadelphia: Blakiston, 1950]). Hanson argues that the uterus was considered "sealed" before sexual initiation in popular Greek thought, but this sealing barricade is at the mouth of the uterus, not the vagina: "The Medical Writers' Woman," in *Before Sexuality*, ed. Halperin, Winkler, and Zeitlin, 309-337.

vessels that line the vagina.[26] The Hippocratics assume that menstrual blood has collected internally, waiting for an exit.[27] For them, pent-up blood begins to emerge once the virgin's body changes to a more "open" state through the helpful intervention of sexual intercourse and pregnancy.

The closure and opening of virgins' or women's bodies in medical literature refers not to hymenal enclosure of the vagina or womb, but to the texture of female flesh, the situation of veins or other internal pathways, and the state of the uterine mouth.[28] According to the writers of the Hippocratic corpus, the virgin's whole body initially consists in compact tissue reminiscent of a child or a male; in mature women, these tissues have become spongier, with more space for the flow of fluids. Interior pathways are gradually widened and straightened out, especially the hollow path that runs from the mouth and throat above through the uterus and vagina below. Sexual intercourse, pregnancy, and childbirth are a natural aid and at times a prescribed remedy for the problematically "closed" state of some virgins' bodies; these processes break down the compactness of the flesh and help dilate veins or widen and straighten other pathways. The warming and moistening effects of intercourse are also thought to act upon the mouth of the womb. Medical authors across ancient periods observe that the womb's

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[26] *Gynecology* 1.3.16.
[27] Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies*, 47-55.
[28] For sources and discussions of the medical ideas summarized here, see King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, chapter 1 (especially 27-35) and 71-72; Ann Ellis Hanson, "Conception, Gestation and the Origin of Female Nature in the *Corpus Hippocraticum*," *Helios* 19 (1992): 31-71 and "The Hippocratic *Parthenos* in Sickness and Health," in *Virginity Revisited*, ed. MacLachlan and Fletcher, 40-65. For further discussion of these and related features and processes in both the Hippocratics and Aristotle, see Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies*, 47-109 and 125-129.

mouth (probably a reference to the cervical os)[29] opens and shuts at various times—opening to allow menstrual blood to evacuate, semen to enter, or a child to be born, and closing during pregnancy, illness, and at ordinary points in the fertility cycle when the womb does not receive seed for conception. While the Hippocratic authors are key sources for understanding the range of things that need to be "opened" within virginal bodies, the notion of a cyclically opening and closing mouth of the womb is ubiquitous throughout early periods, both in the ongoing transmission of the Hippocratic texts themselves and in other medical and non-medical literature.[30]

In the Hippocratic corpus, medical therapies to promote fertility frequently focus on softening and opening up the womb: if a sexually active wife fails to become pregnant, her womb may need to be coaxed into a more "open" state by the application of medical substances in various forms.[31] (Methods for fertility and pregnancy testing, here and in other traditions such as much earlier Egyptian medicine, sometimes rely on similar principles concerning the need for an open pathway upward through the torso of the female body in order for conception to occur, and this probably includes the idea that a

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[29] A few references to a mouth or opening of the uterus may refer not to the cervical os, but to places where the uterus connects to the rest of the body and should readily receive blood or seed from other parts of the body; for instance, see Dean-Jones' interpretations in *Women's Bodies*, 65-73.

[30] For example, see the ideas about wombs opening and shutting in Celsus, *Medicine* 7.29; Soranus, *Gynecology* 1.12.43-44; Galen, *Natural Faculties* 3.3 and *Use of Parts* 14.3; Aetius, *Gynecology* (or *Tetrabiblion* 16), throughout. Non-medical texts testify to the continuation of this idea in wider Hellenistic thought (as in Clement of Alexandria, *Instructor* 2.10.92-93). The general picture of the opening and closing womb is not entirely unlike the understanding of cervical changes during fertility cycles, pregnancy, and delivery found in Western medicine today.

[31] King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, 140-141; Laurence M. V. Totelin, *Hippocratic Recipes: Oral and Written Transmission of Pharmacological Knowledge in Fifth- and Fourth-Century Greece* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), 197-219. Therapies to soften and open the womb's mouth appear in a vast range of sources from remarkably different contexts and cultures, as seen, for example, in Ron Barkai, *A History of Medieval Jewish Gynaecological Texts* (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1998).

uterine orifice must be open.)[32] A virgin's uterine mouth may be helpfully opened by sexual intercourse and conception so that she can utilize her body's excess blood in gestation or release it in menstruation when she is not pregnant, restoring a healthful balance to her system.[33] It becomes clear that a young woman often remains too "closed" (with body parts that are problematically shut, cramped, crooked, or twisted) and needs assistance with getting her body open enough, while old women are more likely to have problems caused by the body being too "open."[34] In this tradition, female health relies on ensuring that the body can move from a relatively closed to a sufficiently open state, yet this transition from a virginal to a womanly body culminates in childbirth rather than sex.

Surviving medical literature, then, understands virgins' bodies to lie on a continuum with mature, reproductive women's bodies. Virginal bodies are thought to be constricted, but not sealed shut. References to opening or closure of wombs portray a reversible, cyclical process, not a one-time change from closure to an open state.

Non-medical sources of various kinds concur with the medical model of an unobstructed vagina and a womb that can both open and close. Extant amulets and spells, recovered from Egypt and elsewhere, seek to close, open, lock, or unlock a

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[32] Hanson, "Logic of the Gynecological Prescriptions," 239-240; Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies*, 69-77; John F. Nunn, *Ancient Egyptian Medicine* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 24-41 (on the nature of the sources) and 191-197 (on female fertility).

[33] See especially the short treatise concerning "virgins" or "young girls" (with accompanying explanations) available in Rebecca Flemming and Ann Ellis Hanson, "Hippocrates' *Peri Partheniôn* ('Diseases of Young Girls'): Text and Translation," *Early Science and Medicine* 3.3 (1998): 241-252. The precise role of "devirgination" in recovery from epilepsy remains unclear in an interesting passage attributed to the first-century Roman physician Scribonius Largus (see Caldwell, *Roman Girlhood*, 95-96).

[34] King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, 70-72. Physicians observe differences between the reproductive organs of young women who have never given birth and those of older mothers (for instance, Soranus, *Gynecology* 1.3 [throughout] or Celsus, *Medicine* 4.1), but they never suggest that particular features could be used to determine whether women have had sex.

woman's uterus to cause events such as pregnancy or miscarriage; they sometimes include images of wombs with locks or keys to represent the reversible states of opening and closure that correlate with different states of fertility.[35] Items like these continued to be popular centuries later, as seen in Byzantine examples of fertility amulets.[36] In very ancient Mesopotamian sources that blur the lines modern thinkers would create between medical and magical healthcare techniques, recitations and treatments concerning fertility exhibit a vocabulary about open and closed wombs that closely resembles that of later Hellenistic examples (both the magical and the medical, as we might classify them).[37]

Opening and closing wombs also appear in the Hebrew Bible and its ancient translations and interpretations. As I discuss in the next chapter, scriptural references to the opening or closure of a womb always designate fertility or sterility (and never sexual virginity).[38] God "opens" women's wombs when causing them to become fertile, or closes wombs so that they cannot conceive and bear; human and animal offspring "open" the wombs of mothers when they emerge in birth. Philo of Alexandria perpetuates these meanings in his first-century exegetical works, discussing ways that God, husbands, and the offspring of one's body or soul perform womb-opening in the senses of causing

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[35] Jean-Jacques Aubert, "Threatened Wombs: Aspects of Ancient Uterine Magic," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 30.3 (1989), 421-449, especially 425-443 and 446; Ann Ellis Hanson, "Uterine Amulets and Greek Uterine Medicine," *Medicina nei secoli* 7.2 (1995), 281-299; and see the fourth-century example discussed in Ralph Jackson, *Doctors and Diseases in the Roman Empire* (London: British Museum Publications, 1988), 106.

[36] Gary Vikan, "Art, Medicine and Magic in Early Byzantium," in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 38 (1984): 65-86; cf. Jeffrey Spier, "Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets and Their Tradition," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 56 (1993): 25-62, where more attention is given to the displacement or "wandering" of the womb that can impair health or fertility.

[37] JoAnn Scurlock, *Sourcebook for Ancient Mesopotamian Medicine* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 571-619.

[38] See the examples gathered in chapter section 3.3. It would be conceptually possible for an ancient writer to think of womb-opening as pertinent for virginity insofar as virginity sometimes means "not yet a mother," as we saw above.

conception or being born.[39] Early Jewish sources are otherwise ambiguous on the question of hymens, and offer a range of alternative ways of characterizing virginal female sex organs. In the legal passages found in biblical texts and the Mishnah, some indication of virginity or virginity loss is thought to be apparent to new husbands, but it is unclear in each case whether this involves post-coital bleeding, the presence of a hymen, the narrowness or wideness of a vagina, or other features. This is true for both the early biblical material[40] and Mishnaic passages that address the question of who counts as a virgin, where unspecific terms like "virginity-signs" (*betulim*) are used to discuss various scenarios that impinge upon a young woman's status and concomitant eligibility for marriage to a high priest or (more generally) for the higher-value *ketubah* payment that will be owed to her from her husband's property if she is divorced or widowed.[41] As the Mishnaic material is expanded upon in later Talmudic discussions and related literature, further layers of interpretation reveal multiple points of orientation for rabbinic reasoning about virgins' bodies: sometimes the focus is on bleeding as evidence of—or even constitutive of—virginity, while the description of a questionably virginal vagina as an "open door" can imply a criterion of vaginal narrowness; a few passages manifest the

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[39] For a list and discussion of the passages, see Julia Kelto Lillis, "Who Opens the Womb? Fertility and Virginity in Patristic Texts," *Studia Patristica* (forthcoming) or refer to chapter 5.2 of this dissertation.
[40] Deuteronomy 22:13-21 describes a procedure involving a cloth that can disprove a new husband's claim against his wife; his claim is that he did not find the usual indication(s) of virginity. For a summary of traditional interpretations and an alternative argument that this procedure concerns menstrual blood, pregnancy, and paternity rather than the blood of virginity loss, see Wenham, "*Betûlāh*." Even the latter, as we saw above, is sometimes believed to come from other body parts than a hymen.
[41] For instance, *Ketubot* 1:1-10; see Michael Rosenberg, "Signs of Virginity" (pre-publication book manuscript, 2015), chapter 3.

hymenal notions found in later Jewish literature.[42] It seems that for Jewish sources as well as for Christian, medical, and other kinds of traditions, hymens do not appear as a clear and widely embraced concept until very late antiquity or afterward.[43]

Some ancient genres present themselves as likely sources for ideas about bodily virginity signs like hymens, yet contain no such ideas. Classical Greek comedy, which is rich in slang, innuendo, and euphemistic metaphors for naming sexual organs and their functions, is a perfect example. A huge range of terms are used in extant comedies to refer to sex organs and sexual acts.[44] Few images or characteristics, however, are applied exclusively to virgins, and none appear to be hymenal. Many terms for sex organs are used of both female and male organs. The organs of women and virgins are compared with objects that are hollow in shape (holes, boxes, caves, seashell cavities, gates, shoes, ovens, and more), but without reference to anything innately closing them up. When female sex organs are likened to doors that open or shut, this refers to sexual access, not anatomical states: by double entendre Aristophanes suggests that the women in

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[42] See pertinent sources and diverse discussions in Rosenberg, "Signs of Virginity," chapters 4-5; Shulamit Valler, *Women and Womanhood in the Talmud*, trans. Betty Sigler Rozen (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 29-50; Joshua Kulp, "'Go Enjoy Your Acquisition': Virginity Claims in Rabbinic Literature Reexamined," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 77 (2006): 33-65; Susan Marks, *First Came Marriage: The Rabbinic Appropriation of Early Jewish Wedding Ritual* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2013), 159-161. A hymenal meaning is a likely possibility for some passages in *Ketubot* 1:1-1:3 (25a-25b) in the Palestinian Talmud and *Niddah* 45a in the Babylonian Talmud, while many other passages that are often read in a similar way probably rely on different notions. On conceptualizations of virginity and hymens in later periods, see Ruth Langer, "The *Birkat Betulim*: A Study of the Jewish Celebration of Bridal Virginity," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 61 (1995): 53-94.

[43] Evidence for this development will be discussed in chapter 5.

[44] Jeffrey Henderson, *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975). Compare also the Latin terms from a range of genres and periods in Adams, *Latin Sexual Vocabulary*.

Lysistrata have shut their genital "doors" just as they have shut the gates to the acropolis, or that the doors of both houses and women in *Thesmophoriazusae* open to illicit lovers.[45]

Another site where scholars expect (and sometimes mistakenly find) the notion of a hymen is in the image of the knot that commonly appears in Greek and Roman discourse on virginity, marriage, sexual initiation, and childbirth. This imagery, which includes phrases like "the knot of virginity" and symbolic rituals involving the untying of belts or girdles, seems to some scholars an oblique reference to the state of a virgin's genitals, which have not yet been untied at their hymenal knot by sexual intercourse.[46] Knots and untying are better understood as part of a larger sequence of symbolic binding and loosing that characterizes the female life cycle in ancient Greek and Roman societies. To call the consummation of a marriage "untying the belt" or to refer to "the knot of virginity" conveys that virginity is undone when a man has sex with a woman; the removal of her girdle stands for the larger event. Knots also appear in descriptions of sterility or problematic childbirth, and clothing and hair are ritualistically tied and untied at key moments of transition besides sexual initiation, including coming of age, betrothal, and preparation for childbirth.[47] In terms of conceptual correspondence between symbolic act and parts of the body, the most likely correlation for such binding and

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[45] See relevant passages cited in Henderson, *Maculate Muse*, 137 and *Thesmophoriazusae* 487-488.
[46] For example, Stelios Panayotakis, "The Knot and the Hymen: A Reconsideration of *nodus virginitatis* (*Hist. Apoll.* 1)," *Mnemosyne* 53 (2000): 599-608.
[47] See especially Maurizio Bettini, *Women and Weasels: Mythologies of Birth in Ancient Greece and Rome*, trans. Emlyn Eisenach (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013); cf. Schmitt, "Athena Apatouria et la ceinture" and, for related imagery and its meanings in a different cultural context, Willeke Wendrich, "Entangled, Connected or Protected? The Power of Knots and Knotting in Ancient Egypt," in *Through a Glass Darkly: Magic, Dreams and Prophecy in Ancient Egypt*, ed. Kasia Szpakowska (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2006), 243-269.

loosing is not with the hymen but with the womb's mouth, which must be open or closed in the right way at the necessary times for the sake of successful procreation.

These diverse sources, like the medical literature, suggest that ancient Mediterranean societies tended to envision female bodies as opening and shutting at the mouth of the womb rather than remaining virginally sealed prior to hymenal rupture. Some portrayals of virginal bodies remain vague about their distinctive features, and most that give any specifics do not sharply distinguish between the sexual or reproductive anatomy of virgins and that of women. Instead, female bodies usually share the potential to be either open or closed in fertility: the actions of opening, unlocking, and untying are often seen as reversible, for we also find companion processes of closing, locking, or tying back up. Anatomical evidence for virginity remains undiscussed in these various pictures of the female body.

2.2.2. Characterizations of sexual intercourse and virginity loss

In the present-day United States, losing one's sexual virginity continues to be conceptualized as a highly significant event in one's life, though women's experiences of it vary from the mundane to the traumatic.[48] As we have already seen, ancient societies diverged in the extent to which they treated sexual initiation as the determining factor for one's status as a "virgin" or "woman." On the other hand, a great many ancient texts do

[48] Karen Bouris, *The First Time: Women Speak out about 'Losing Their Virginity'* (Berkeley: Conari Press, 1993); Laura M. Carpenter, *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

treat sexual initiation as a significant event, and we would expect portrayals of it to shed some light on a group's beliefs about the effects of sexual intercourse on female bodies.

Again we find that the pictures vary, and that many sources exhibit common patterns but lack references to the notion of a hymen. At one end of the spectrum, first coitus is depicted without any sense that it can be physically traumatic: Sumerian and Akkadian literary works that depict first intromission mention a small and unstretched vagina in one instance, but do not mention pain, bleeding, or other bodily phenomena.[49] In contrast, a number of sources from further west suggest that sexual initiation is inherently violent. The trauma of sex, however, is not always restricted to virgins who are engaging in it for the first time, and even the forms of violence associated with virginity loss are vague; the exact nature and site of the injury are unclear.

Ancient discourse on the termination of virginity includes terms that can imply physical violence, but these sometimes have a subtler meaning. In Greek and Latin, terms that more broadly mean "corruption," "destruction," or "defilement" are often used to name the effect of penetrative sex upon a virgin, while the opposite state is, for example, to remain "untouched" or retain one's "integrity."[50] Modern readers, while recognizing that there may be moral and/or religious and ritual dimensions to these states, have frequently correlated them with the condition of the hymen, which is thought to metonymically render the whole virgin physically intact or permanently unsealed. In many cases, this correlation is unwarranted. Rather, the "corruption" of sex suggests the

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[49] Cooper, "Virginity in Ancient Mesopotamia," 97-99.
[50] Significant terms include words related to the verbs *corrumpo* or φθείρω (and the noun φθορία), adjectives like ἀκήρατος and ἀνέπαφος, *integer* and *intactus*, and the terms pertaining to violence and defilement discussed by Adams, *Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, 198-199.

notion that a person's virginal purity has been contaminated or polluted by the touch or invasion of sexual contact; this is a change to the general state of the body, not a form of damage for a particular part of the genitals.[51] If Romans worried about the hymenal condition of their Vestal Virgins as well as those virgins' overall state of purity through sexual abstinence, they did not say so. In the same Greek cultures that appear not to believe in hymens, a virgin can still be considered pristinely "untouched" by penetrative intercourse and then "corrupted" by it.[52] Roman authors associate "corruption" with the loss of sexual virtue and the effects of illicit sex not only upon virgins, but also on freeborn boys or young men and on married women. For example, reflections on the famous story of Lucretia, who was raped by someone else while already married to her husband, suggest that sex can corrupt the body with dire consequences, even if one is not a virgin: in Livy's version of the story, although Lucretia is innocent in her mind or will, it is possible to justify her suicide by the unavoidable change enacted upon her body.[53] The use of this vocabulary across Greek and Latin works invests penetrative intercourse with the power to physically change the state of a virgin's body, but it is a holistic change in one's level of purity, not an observable change to one's genital anatomy.

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[51] On some of the concepts involved in ancient thought about purity and pollution with respect to sexuality and bodily states, see Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Nicole Boëls-Janssen, "L'interdit des bis nuptae dans certains cultes matronaux: sens et formulation," *Revue des Études Latines* 74 (1997): 47-66; cf. Eve Levavi Feinstein, *Sexual Pollution in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[52] See the studies cited under 2.1 above and my discussion of other resonances for the term "corruption" in chapter 4, especially 4.1.2.

[53] On this and other examples of sexual corruption in Roman sources, see Rebecca Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). She quotes extensively from Livy's story on 91-92. I discuss this source further in chapter 6.1 of this dissertation.

Although terms that point to the polluting power of penetrative sex do not automatically carry strong overtones of physical violence, many sources do link violence and sex. In Classical Greek comedy, sexual intercourse is physically and often emotionally violent.[54] Penises are routinely likened to sharp tools and weapons that penetrate; metaphors like "depitting" suggest that something is taken from a woman through a man's sexual activity with her. This violence, however, seems to be no different when directed at (sexual) virgins than when it is directed at married women, boys, or men. Expressions for vaginal sex are often used of anal sex with males also, and the language of "wounding" can describe sex with wives or other sexually experienced women, as well as sex with males. None of this violent imagery points to a particular bodily index or locus for virginity that would be permanently marred by having sex.

The idea that sex involves "wounding" takes a number of other forms in Greek and Roman literature. Authors depict sexual intercourse as a mutual wounding, or associate the intensity of sex with the wounding of the heart or mind by the arrows of love. Some depictions, such as a passage in Plutarch's *Dialogue on Love*, have mistakenly been understood as a reference to a tearing of the hymen; in actuality, the passage focuses on the wounding a *man* might experience as he begins marriage, and it claims that sex and reproduction are only possible through spouses' reciprocal suffering.[55] Likewise, a section of Lucretius' *Nature of Things* uses the notion of

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[54] The sources for my summary are gathered in Henderson, *Maculate Muse*; cf. the Latin expressions gathered in Adams, *Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, 145-159.
[55] *Dialogue on Love* (or *Amatorius*) 24.

wounding to describe the male experience of lovesickness and the burning desire that repeatedly drives lovers toward one another.[56]

There is, however, much literary evidence that ancient societies at least sometimes saw a virgin's first experience of vaginal-penile intercourse as an act of violence against her (and that different people held diverse attitudes about the violence of defloration).[57] Several sources associate pain and bleeding with virgins' sexual initiation, and this too is sometimes characterized as a sort of "wounding."[58] In Greek drama and Roman poetry, marriage is associated with abduction, and young women are expected to approach their wedding night with fear.[59] A sexually experienced character in the romance novel *Daphnis and Chloe* warns Daphnis that sexual intercourse with the virginal Chloe will cause cries and tears of pain and heavy bleeding.[60] Whether in rape motifs or the portrayal of consummation of respectable marriages, male-female intercourse—especially deflorative intercourse—is often depicted as inherently violent in

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[56] *Nature of Things* 4.1037-1120.

[57] See my discussion in 1.3.3 of the problematic term "defloration." It remains a fitting term for many ancient sources, especially those that emphasize violence or the diminished value of a woman who has lost her sexual virginity.

[58] Adams, *Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, 152. A widely cited study for the broader association of defloration with violence is D. P. Fowler, "Vergil on Killing Virgins," in *Homo Viator: Classical Essays in Honor of John Bramble*, ed. Michael Whitby, Philip Hardie, and Mary Whitby (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1987), 185-198.

[59] See the sources discussed in Richard Seaford, "The Tragic Wedding," *Journal of Hellenistic Studies* 107 (1987): 106-130; Simon Goldhill, *Foucault's Virginity: Ancient Erotic Fiction and the History of Sexuality* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1-45; Calame, *Poetics of Eros*, 121-129, 143-145; Karen Hersch, *The Roman Wedding: Ritual and Meaning in Antiquity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 61-64, 144-190, and 252-253; Caldwell, *Roman Girlhood*, 134-165; Vassiliki Panoussi, "Sexuality and Ritual: Catullus' Wedding Poems," in *A Companion to Catullus*, ed. Marilyn B. Skinner (Malden: Blackwell, 2007), 276-292.

[60] *Daphnis and Chloe* 3.19-20; see an interesting reading in John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 101-126. This novel treats sexual intercourse as innately desirable but not necessarily discoverable without learning how to do it; it implies that sex acts and the violence of defloration are socially constructed, at least in part.

Greek and Roman literature. Passages in the Tosefta and Talmuds reveal a similar assumption (and perhaps, at times, a discomfort) among some late ancient Jewish thinkers; a husband is said to make a bruise or wound on the wedding night, and the Rabbis report conflicting female testimony about the painfulness of first coitus.[61]

Even so, it remains unclear precisely what body part of the virgin defloration is thought to injure, or in what way. Blood or pain may be physiological markers for virginity loss, but this may or may not mean that authors and audiences believed a deflowered woman had undergone the puncturing of a hymenal membrane. Given the non-hymenal explanations for deflorative bleeding found in medical writings, we should not assume that hymens are conceptually present whenever sources suggest that sex injures virgins; we can be certain only that these sources note a common occurrence of pain or bleeding during first experiences with intercourse. Portrayals of women's sexual initiation may characterize it as violent, but they do not communicate clear ideas about any permanent effects that virginity loss inflicts upon the structures of the female body.

Across the many sources discussed in this section, which come from various Mediterranean and Near Eastern societies, which speak to different audiences, and which construct diverse pictures of the female body and the nature of sexual virginity loss, we find some recurring patterns. Female bodies can become open or closed, and these states refer to matters of fertility. The penetration of vaginal-penile intercourse may harbor an inherent violence and initially can cause bleeding and pain. Nonetheless, hymens do not

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[61] Michael L. Satlow, *Tasting the Dish: Rabbinic Rhetorics of Sexuality* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 168-170; Judith Hauptman, *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 85-87 (with too swift of recourse to hymens for explanation of the sources); Rosenberg, "Signs of Virginity," chapter 6.

exist, or, in a few cases, they may be implicitly or indirectly involved in defining "virgins" over against "women." Although texts from all these societies speak of virgins and women as two distinct groups or two different kinds of status, surviving sources fail to offer bodily markers that would establish a line of differentiation between the two. Despite scholars' usual assumptions, it appears that for ancient thinkers, even sexual virginity was usually not defined—or definable—by anatomical features.

2.3. Verifying virginity: proofs of virginity in ancient texts

Just as many modern readers assume that all societies everywhere have observed hymens in virgins' bodies, those studying ancient Mediterranean texts tend to assume that the groups who produced these texts were familiar with the practice of employing gynecological inspections (usually by a midwife or physician) to verify whether a woman is still a virgin.[62] This assumption is most likely anachronistic. The earliest clear evidence for gynecological virginity tests appears in the third century C.E., and most evidence comes from the fourth and fifth centuries and later, as I will discuss in chapter 5.[63] In this section, I describe the various other ways that ancient groups seem to have

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[62] See my comments in chapter 1 and examples in 5.4.1. This misconception has resulted in misreadings and misuse of sources, such as Soranus, *Gynecology* 1.3.17 and 1.9.34-35: several scholars treat one or both of these passages as evidence for gynecological verification of virginity, but neither passage suggests that virginity is being verified. 1.3.17 seems to be describing situations where patients whose vaginas need to be examined for other purposes happen to be virgins, and 1.9.34-35 is concerned with verifying that a potential bride is likely to be fertile.

[63] A possible exception is the pair of references to examination of wives before or after the wedding night in the Dead Sea Scrolls. These passages, which may or may not refer to a genital inspection (see my chapter 5.3), are interpreted through the lens of later practices in Jeffrey H. Tigay, "Examination of the Accused Bride in 4Q159: Forensic Medicine at Qumran," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Society* 22 (1993), 129-134. Cf. Cecilia Wassen, *Women in the Damascus Document* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 71-89, who draws on others' questionable interpretations of sources to discuss the role of

imagined that sexual virginity could be demonstrated, tested, or proven. At moments when it becomes important for virginity to be verified, writers of ancient texts provide a wide range of ideas to suit this need; for these writers, even sexual virginity is not a matter of anatomical condition, but a state that matters for various reasons and is best confirmed by non-bodily means. This holds true for all sorts of sources, whether they purport to offer historical narrative, fictitious storytelling, dramatic depiction of social rituals, legal guidelines, or courtroom scenarios.

Roman sources dealing with the marriages of free citizens make it obvious that the sexual virginity of a bride-to-be is both prized and expected. A young woman's inexperience with sex, however, is apparently known only through others' observations of her behavior; members of the household monitor her whereabouts and activities. During her wedding, the ideal bride wears particular items of apparel and performs scripted emotions and gestures that indicate her virginal status.[64] Her veil, belt, hairstyle, shy demeanor, and reluctance to leave her home and family as she processes to her groom's house are all meant to broadcast her virginity to those present. Although threats to a girl's premarital virginity could undermine her marriageability and was met with

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hymens in bodily examinations; see also Kulp, "'Go Enjoy Your Acquisition,'" 52-53, who dismisses the idea that such a procedure can be inferred for early rabbinic sources, but agrees (or at least assumes) that the fragmentary passages from the Dead Sea Scrolls are describing a physical examination of some kind.

[64] On the display of virginity in wedding rituals, see Hersch's study in *Roman Wedding*; on expectations for and monitoring of virgins, see Caldwell, *Roman Girlhood*.

evolving legal provisions, procedures for proving virginity or its absence remain undescribed in Roman law.[65]

Jewish sources supply a range of methods for verifying a wife's premarital (sexual) virginity when it has been questioned. Female virginity at the time of marriage is highly valued and in some contexts required, and a number of things can be at stake in its verification.[66] In the most extreme instance—the regulations for accusation, defense, and penalties regarding premarital virginity in Deuteronomy 22—the wife's life hangs in the balance. In later legal materials like the Mishnah, as mentioned above, virginal status is of importance for determining other matters, such as the amount of a woman's *ketubah* or her eligibility for marriage to a high priest.

Some Jewish verification methods operate on a principle similar to the conventions of Roman weddings. The Mishnah and Talmud speak of using witnesses to determine a woman's sexual status, and forms of proof include testimony about the symbols of virginity used at her wedding (such as wearing her hair loose and passing out parched corn); since such symbols appear only in the weddings of virgins, they prove that the bride was a virgin.[67] In Deuteronomy 22, a bride's parents can confirm her virginity

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[65] See Caldwell, *Roman Girlhood*, 45-66.

[66] On the high value ascribed to female virginity in the Hebrew Bible and early Jewish texts, see Rosenberg, "Signs of Virginity." He includes discussion in chapter 2 of the possible forms of virginity verification that appear in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and interprets them as gynecological examinations (see my n. 63 above).

[67] See the sources and summaries in Judith Hauptman, *Rereading the Mishnah: A New Approach to Ancient Jewish Texts* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 242-254; Satlow, *Tasting the Dish*, 170-173 and 179; Marks, *First Came Marriage*, 169. Note that some discussions of virginity expect women to be able to supply evidence for loss of virginity in circumstances where the opportunity for physiological evidence would likely be impossible (for example, Mishnah *Ketubot* 1:6-9); witnesses seem more plausible. Cf. Judith Romney Wegner, *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), where the author, based on her own assumptions concerning the prevalence of

by showing a cloth to the city elders; this is traditionally understood to be a garment stained by blood from her wedding night, though other possibilities have been proposed.[68] Early interpreters of this passage frame the situation and supposed forms of evidence in divergent ways, sometimes picturing verbal testimony rather than concrete items like blood-stained cloth.[69] Late ancient Talmudic narratives about rabbis ascertaining virginity address the problem of brides who do not bleed when they lose their sexual virginity, and in one instance, a Rabbi is said to conduct a physical test reminiscent of Egyptian and Greek fertility tests: after having a virgin and a non-virginal woman each sit upon a wine barrel and observing that the smell travels upward through the body of only the non-virginal woman, he verifies the virginity of a young wife by the same procedure.[70] As we saw in section 2.2.1, the signs that prompt a new husband to acknowledge or doubt his bride's virginal state often remain vague in texts, and—when they are clearer—they are diverse. The means imagined for verifying her virginity are diverse as well.

Greek and Roman accounts of virginity tests appear in literature across a broad span of centuries. The tests are almost never physiological or anatomical, though a few

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ideas about hymens and gynecological inspections at the time of the Mishnah, observes that the Rabbis therein "curiously" did not turn to bodily examinations to determine virginity but instead employed conventional cultural presumptions about the virginal or non-virginal state of girls or women from particular social classes or situations (22-23).

[68] See, for example, Wenham, "*Betûlāh*," where the blood is menstrual and questions about pregnancy and paternity are at stake.

[69] *Sifrei Devarim* 235-237 (roughly contemporary with the Mishnah); the forms of proof are left unspecified in Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 4.246-248 and Philo, *Special Laws* 3.79-82.

[70] *Ketubot* 10b in the Babylonian Talmud, available in Valler, *Women and Womanhood*, 45; translation also available in Rosenberg, "Signs of Virginity," 193.

sources suggest that loss of virginity could be measured by changes in a girl's voice quality or neck size.[71] In most cases, a virgin undergoes an ordeal: she is put in a situation where a deity or the forces of nature must intervene to rescue her from danger or from being judged guilty by her accusers. These tests are sometimes conducted for religious and civic purposes; for example, the treasured purity of a Vestal Virgin is at stake in the story of Tuccia, who proved her accusers wrong when she was miraculously able to carry water in a sieve.[72] Ordeals that verify virginity appear in some of the Greek romance novels, such as in a scene of *Leucippe and Clitophon* where Leucippe is shut into a cave sacred to Artemis and will either vanish if she is not a virgin, or emerge to the music of a syrinx if she is one.[73] Tellingly, the first mention of proofs in this novel frame virginity tests as anything but ordinary. Leucippe boldly defends her virginal status by saying, "What further guarantee of the truth should I bring forth? If some test of virginity exists, do it."[74] (The reply from her mother in the scene suggests that such tests do exist but would make the uncertainty public, and her later test is indeed a public ordeal.)[75]

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[71] Ann Ellis Hanson and David Armstrong, "The Virgin's Voice and Neck: Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 245 and Other Texts," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 33 (1986), 97-100.
[72] The story is recounted by a number of Roman historians, including Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Roman Antiquities* 2.67.5-69.3), Valerius Maximus (*Memorable Deeds and Sayings* 8.1.5), and Pliny the Elder (*Natural History* 28.1.2).
[73] *Leucippe and Clitophon* 8.6 and 8.13-14.
[74] *Leucippe and Clitophon* 2.28, based on the Greek in *Achille Tatius d'Alexandrie. Le roman de Leucippé et Clitophon*, ed. Jean-Philippe Garnaud (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1991), 61. Translations throughout this dissertation are my own where I do not indicate otherwise.
[75] Further examples and brief interpretations of sources for Greek and Roman virginity tests are provided in R. M. Rattenbury, "Chastity and Chastity Ordeals in the Ancient Greek Romances," *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society, Literary and Historical Section* 1 (1926): 59-71; Mary F. Foskett, *A Virgin Conceived: Mary and Classical Representations of Virginity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 63 and 192; Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, 83-86 and 204-206.

These types of tests for female virginity closely resemble Greek and Roman ordeals of other kinds. In Heliodorus' *Ethiopian Story*, the male hero's virginity is tested by the same means as the heroine's: each walks upon a sacred gridiron that burns those who are impure.[76] Several ancient writers relate the story of Claudia Quinta, a matron whose chastity was questioned, then divinely confirmed as she received the power to haul a ship ashore by a rope.[77] A married character in *Leucippe and Clitophon* undergoes a test in a spring to determine whether she is telling the truth about her marital fidelity, while Aelian's *Nature of Animals* describes distant foreigners' dangerous ordeal to determine the legitimacy of children when wives are suspected of adultery.[78] The tests that ancient societies or writers invent for female virginity follow the same patterns of logic as their tests for male virginity, married chastity, or paternal legitimacy—in part because these methods (where people consult or expect intervention from deities and the natural world) are the accepted ones for ascertaining truths of all kinds, but probably also because female virginity is generally thought to be verifiable only by such means; the virgin's body does not offer alternative signs. Although the overall state of a female virgin's body may have changed from untouched purity to a corruption that can be detected by gods, animals, or water, the maiden who has lost her virginity is otherwise similar to her virginal counterpart. Proof for virginity is thus not sought in anatomy.

The contested nature of virginal purity in Roman declamation aptly illustrates the situation of virginity verification in ancient Mediterranean cultures. Extant declamation

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[76] *Ethiopian Story* 10.7-9.
[77] See, for instance, Ovid, *Festivals* 4.291-348.
[78] Aelian, *Nature of Animals* 1.57.

collections, which offer samples of creative and conflicting arguments that lawyers could make for hypothetical cases, include scenarios where a penalty is to be determined for rape of a virgin, or the fitness of a candidate for a priesthood is assessed after her chastity is threatened by circumstances beyond her control.[79] The arguments raise and answer various questions: Is virginity a matter strictly of sexual intercourse, or do other things taint its purity? Can it be removed against a girl's will? To whom does her virginity belong, and whom does its loss affect—herself only, her father and family, or also the people her religious and civic role would serve? In the flexible reasoning of such arguments, many different things might be at stake in a virgin's status, and that status is not always clear; proving, quantifying, and even defining virginity is a problem. Since its fundamental character, precise value, necessary prerequisites, and telltale signs are open to debate, it constitutes an excellent topic for exercises in accusation and defense.

2.4. Conclusion

Scholars of ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern history and literature are frequently guilty of anachronism where virginity is concerned. We routinely read texts with the presupposition that virgins differ from women in lacking sexual experience and retaining hymenal intactness; we have treated present-day definitions and observations

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[79] See general background and discussion of one pertinent source in Langlands, *Sexual Morality*, 247-264 (and see my discussion in chapter section 6.1). In this source, Seneca the Elder's *Declamations* 1.2 (or *Controversiae* 1.2), the collected arguments deny or defend a girl's eligibility for a priesthood after a series of events reminiscent of the romance novels and comedies: she is captured by pirates and sold to a pimp, then kills a soldier who refuses to negotiate and spare her virginity like her other potential customers. See also a rape scenario addressed in Quintilian, *Lesser Declamations* 252 and the further sources discussed in Caldwell, *Roman Girlhood*, 73-77.

concerning virginal female bodies as universal, equally applicable to ancient contexts as to our own. These presupposed notions stem from later periods. Late antiquity would see the emergence of gynecological inspections to verify virginity and the debut of pharmacological recipes intended to make vaginas more virginal.[80] By the medieval and Byzantine periods, hymens, bloodied wedding-night sheets, and inspections by midwives became more secure fixtures (though still contested ones) in societies' imaginations. In the centuries before and during the rise of Christianity, these fixtures were largely absent; the sources that should reveal them provide little evidence in favor of their existence, and sometimes contradict them entirely. The very definitions of being a virgin varied: "virgins," as opposed to "women," could be defined as a distinct group by their youthfulness, their innocence, their untamed and uncivilized status, their alluring sexual maturity and marriageability, their sexual inexperience, their marital inexperience, their reproductive inexperience, or in some respects their physical condition. In ancient texts, marks of sexual virginity and evidence for sexual virginity are seldom physiological, let alone anatomical; vaginal-penile intercourse changes a virgin's body in gradual or imperceptible ways (from constriction to fertile openness or from purity to impurity), or it causes a temporary injury that draws blood from an unspecified site. Since virgins have no special organ or tissue to mark their status, proof is found outside the body. As Christians began to make virginity a cornerstone of their theologies and identities, they drew from cultural inheritances that already had a rich array of concepts for such

[80] See chapter 5.

purposes: virgins are different from women, but *how* they are different depends on whom you ask.

3. Mary's Forms of Virginity in Second- and Third-Century Writings

Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus, is a supremely useful figure for investigating ancient Christian conceptualizations of female virginity. More than any other figure, she becomes a site of deliberation for articulating precise definitions and criteria for virginity. As Christian writers make statements about whether Mary remained a virgin permanently, they must draw on notions and assumptions about virginity that would be familiar to their audiences to make statements that are intelligible. Diverse configurations of female virginity come to the fore as these writers discuss or depict Mary's virginity.

In surviving texts, many authors take for granted that Christ was conceived virginally, without human male seed or sexual intercourse. (This remains a point of contention between authors who would later be considered orthodox and various opponents they perceive as outsiders.) Authors who agree on the virginal conception, however, diverge in their opinions about the continuation or cessation of Mary's virginity during and after Christ's birth. The familiar Greek title "Ever-Virgin" (ἀειπάρθενος) and the Latin formula of Mary's virginity persisting *ante partum*, *in partu*, and *post partum* (before, in, and after childbirth) are not the only extant stances on the matter; these terms were formed in part by late-fourth-century debates on her status,[1] and precursors to the

[1] Most famously, the Jovinianist controversy among Latin-speaking Christians; see David G. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Scholars conducting mariological studies have gathered the early data and provided background on the late ancient debates, though they often organize the data teleologically and without regard to the diverse definitions in their sources: Georges Jouassard, "Marie à travers la patristique: maternité divine, virginité, sainteté," in *Maria. Études sur la Sainte Vierge*, ed.

positions can be found in second- and third-century texts. Some authors claim that Mary remained celibate her entire life, while others believe she went on to conceive and bear children in the usual way with Joseph. Some say that her birthing of Jesus did not compromise her own virginal condition, while others assume that it did. As they make their claims, authors reveal some of their assumptions about what a virgin is.

This chapter focuses primarily on four sources from the second and third centuries: the *Protevangelium* or *Protogospel of James*, a passage from the *Miscellanies* of Clement of Alexandria, a chapter of Tertullian of Carthage's *Flesh of Christ*, and Origen of Alexandria's *Homily* 14 *on the Gospel of Luke*. Further passages by Tertullian and Origen will come into play briefly in a discussion of alleged contradictions in each of these authors' thought about Mary. Two other early texts set the stage for thinking through depictions of "the" Virgin: the *Ascension of Isaiah* and *Ode* 19 of the *Odes of Solomon*.[2] Vastly different pictures of Jesus' birth and very different verdicts on whether Mary remained a virgin appear in these six main sources, making Mary an ideal case study for registering differences in pre-fourth-century Christian definitions of virginity.

Hubert du Manoir, vol. 1 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1949), 69-157; *Mariology*, ed. Juniper B. Carol, 3 vols. (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1955-1961); Hilda C. Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, 2 vols. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963-1965).

[2] On the earliest forms of evidence for Christian devotion to Mary, see Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

3.1. *Ascension of Isaiah* and *Odes of Solomon* 19: a virgin above ordinary childbearing

These two texts are thought to have been composed sometime during or close to the second century, most likely in the first half of the second century.[3] They not only presuppose a virginal conception, but also present Mary's bearing of Jesus as utterly exceptional, using sparse, dramatic narration: the *Ascension of Isaiah* relays a prophetic vision, and *Ode* 19 consists in impressionistic lines of poetry.[4] The *Ascension* depicts the birth of Jesus as sudden and secret; one day, when Joseph and the pregnant Mary are alone, she is amazed to find a baby present with them. "And when her amazement wore off, her womb was found as it was before she was with child"—apparently her belly has reverted to its earlier state, with no bodily signs of having gestated or delivered (11.9).[5] Some who know her hear about the baby and tell others, "The virgin Mary has given birth," while many others say, "She has not given birth: the midwife has not gone up [to

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[3] For brief discussions and bibliography on the date of the *Ascension of Isaiah*, refer to Darrell D. Hannah, "Isaiah's Vision in the *Ascension of Isaiah* in the Early Church," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 50.1 (1999): 80-101 (see 84-85); Jonathan Knight, *Disciples of the Beloved One: The Christology, Social Setting and Theological Context of the Ascension of Isaiah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 33-39. A helpful collection of bibliography on the *Ode* appears in Cornelia B. Horn, "The Virgin and the Perfect Virgin: Traces of Early Eastern Christian Mariology in the *Odes of Solomon*," *Studia Patristica* 40 (2006): 413-428 (especially 414-416); see 415 n. 12 on dating. See also Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "The Odes of Solomon," in *Searching the Scriptures, Volume 2: A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 86-98, at 88.

[4] Jennifer Glancy describes the latter work as imagistic rather than narrative, as a comment on the significance of the nativity rather than an account of how it happened: Jennifer A. Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge: Early Christian Bodies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 96-99.

[5] Translation from C. Detlef G. Müller, "The Ascension of Isaiah," in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, English translation ed. R. McL. Wilson, vol. 2 (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 603-620, at 618. For an argument against labeling this work "docetic," see Darrell D. Hannah, "The *Ascension of Isaiah* and Docetic Christology," *Vigiliae Christianae* 53.2 (1999): 165-196.

her] and we have heard no cries of pain" (11.13-14).[6] There is no pain, no need for a midwife, and no permanent alteration of the virgin's body.

The *Ode* likewise raises up a Mary spared from ordinary labor.

> …The Holy Spirit opened Her (own) womb,
> And mixed the milk of the two breasts of the Father.
> And she gave the mixture to the world without their knowing,
> And those who received it are in the perfection of the right hand.
> The womb of the Virgin caught it,
> And she received conception and gave birth.
> And the Virgin became a mother with many mercies.
> And she labored and bore a son and there was no pain for her,
> Because it was not without cause.
> And she did not need a midwife
> Because He (God) delivered her.
> Like a man she gave birth by her will.
> And she bore with manifestation
> And she acquired with much power…[7]

Again there is no pain and no (human) midwife. Mary's bearing involves multiple forms of encounter with the divine, and she takes on a masculine stance of power and willfulness as well as the persona of "a mother with many mercies."[8] She is assigned an exalted place in the scheme of God's interaction with the world, and a way of birthing worthy of this position.

Each of these works presumably has its own purpose in portraying Mary and the nativity as it does; even if they testify to shared ideas or traditions, they probably do not

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[6] Translation from Müller, *New Testament Apocrypha* 2.618.
[7] Translation from Harvey, "Odes of Solomon," 92-93. While the second parenthetical gloss is original, the first is my own addition, based on my understanding of Harvey's reading: the Spirit is herself God's womb, but also is an agent of creation and nourishment and in this sense "has" a womb (93).
[8] See Horn, "The Virgin and the Perfect Virgin," 425-426: describing the Virgin as masculine may serve to show that "the boundaries of natural maternity" have been transcended (426). See also Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge*, 97-98. My thanks to Rachel Wingo, whose unpublished Master's thesis from Duke University was a useful aid for analysis of the text and of authors' interpretations.

share much in terms of overarching aims or interests in Mary.[9] Nor do they exhibit the amount of interest other texts will show in defining virginity and establishing the sense(s) in which Mary can be called a virgin—the *Ode* simply names her one (and possibly implies how one should characterize her virginity by elaborating on what she conceived and how she gave birth), and the *Ascension* prefaces the amazing birth-scene by reiterating the Matthean circumstances of Mary's virginal conception and her temporarily precarious betrothal to Joseph (11.1-5; cf. Matt 1:18-25).[10] At the same time, the two texts create room for mariological notions of later antiquity by ascribing an extraordinary character to Jesus' birth and setting Mary at a distance from the pain, messy fluids, or effects on the body of ordinary gestation and childbearing. The connection between this extraordinary birthing and Mary's status as a virgin is made more explicit in the *Protogospel of James* and in a passage from Clement's *Miscellanies*.

3.2. The *Protogospel of James* and Clement of Alexandria: puerperal virginity

[9] The works already cited offer discussion of possible purposes for these texts, and Glancy contrasts the two portrayals of Mary in *Corporal Knowledge*, 96-106. She views the portrayal of Mary's childbearing in the *Ascension* as an indication of "the author's rejection of body as locus of identity—and knowledge" (100); Mary's body is not marked by childbirth because the body is not the true self. The effect of the *Ode*'s depiction of painless birth, on the other hand, is that "[t]he reader of the hymn is invited to participate in the virgin's surprising knowledge of divinity" as binary epistemological categories are stretched (99).

[10] Matthew's account is open to multiple readings concerning whether Mary conceived virginally; see especially Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (San Francisco: Harper & Row), 1987. Many ancient writers see a claim about virginal conception in the Matthean narrative.

3.2.1. Mary's virginity in the Protogospel of James

A Greek work of unknown provenance, the *Protogospel of James* was written around the late second century and came to exercise great influence through reception and reworking in later Christian traditions.[11] Twenty of the twenty-five chapters center on Mary, giving background on her lineage and family, her exceptional conception by Anna and unusual childhood, and her pregnancy and birthing of Jesus. Many scholars have noted the text's emphasis on Mary's unsurpassed purity, which is expressed in a variety of ways. She is kept from touching common ground in infancy and spends several years living in the Jerusalem Temple (a strange suggestion from a historical standpoint, but powerful from a literary one); there are numerous indicators of her ritual purity.[12] As a young woman she is secluded in Joseph's home, and after her pregnancy is discovered both she and Joseph undergo an ordeal that proves their chastity; such elements highlight her sexual purity. As a parturient mother she is named and proven to be a "virgin," adding yet another dimension to how her purity is expressed.[13] That further form of purity is my focus here.

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[11] Another version of my arguments in this section are published in Julia Kelto Lillis, "Paradox *in Partu*: Verifying Virginity in the *Protevangelium of James*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 24.1 (2016): 1-28. The *Protogospel* was known to Origen (see n. 60 below) and probably also to Clement of Alexandria, which suggests a date in the second century. George T. Zervos argues for an earlier date than most in "Dating the Protevangelium of James: The Justin Martyr Connection," in *SBL Seminar Papers* 33 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 415-434. A recent overview of issues for dating and provenance are now available in Lily C. Vuong, *Gender and Purity in the* Protevangelium of James (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

[12] See Vuong's analysis of Mary's manifold purity, including ritual purity, in *Gender and Purity* and "Purity, Piety, and the Purposes of the *Protevangelium of James*," in *"Non-canonical" Religious Texts in Early Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James H. Charlesworth (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 205-221.

[13] Further discussions of Mary's purity in the *Protogospel* can be found in Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995); Mary F. Foskett, *A Virgin Conceived: Mary and Classical Representations of Virginity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Foskett, "Virginity as Purity in the *Protevangelium of James*," in *A Feminist Companion to*

This last dimension of Mary's purity takes center stage in the most famous and memorable scene of the *Protogospel*, a verification of Mary's virginity by a woman named Salome after Mary has given birth in a cave near Bethlehem. Just prior to this scene, Joseph brings an unnamed Hebrew midwife to the cave (chapter 19), and as he and she stand outside of the cave they observe a great cloud overshadowing it, followed by a piercingly bright light shining within it. As the light recedes, the infant Jesus becomes visible. The midwife exclaims at these wonders and, while leaving the cave, meets Salome (who is not otherwise identified in the text but perhaps is meant to be a midwife as well). The unnamed midwife tells Salome that something incredible has taken place: "A virgin gave birth!"[14] Salome swears that she will not believe this unless she examines Mary herself in a manner that echoes Thomas' statement in John 20:25: "Unless I put my finger (in) and examine her nature, I will not believe that the virgin gave birth."[15] Upon entering the cave and touching Mary's genitals, Salome is repaid for her disbelief as divine fire consumes her hand—but contact with the baby Jesus soon heals her. Salome has presumably received all the proof she needs.

Christians, scholars, and popular audiences have frequently interpreted this episode as an attempt to verify whether Mary miraculously maintains her virginity by

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Mariology, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2005), 67-76; and Pieter van der Horst, "Sex, Birth, Purity and Asceticism in the *Protevangelium Jacobi*," in *Feminist Companion*, ed. Levine, 56-66.

[14] 19.3, with my translation and numbering based on the Greek text from Émile de Strycker, *La forme la plus ancienne du Protévangile de Jacques; recherches sur le papyrus Bodmer 5 avec une édition critique du texte grec et une traduction annotée* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1961), 158.

[15] ἐὰν μὴ βάλω τὸν δάκτυλόν μου καὶ ἐραυνήσω τὴν φύσιν αὐτῆς, οὐ μὴ πιστεύσω ὅτι ἡ παρθένος ἐγέννησεν (19.3, de Strycker 158).

assessing whether she has retained an intact hymen. Readers tend to assume that this way of testing virginity had long been practiced by midwives or physicians of the ancient world. Salome's hunt for a hymen is thought to be the climactic instance of a series of demonstrations and proofs that leave the reader with no doubt about the ongoing, sexual virginity of the mother of Christ.[16]

In light of the material discussed in chapter 2 of this dissertation, which showed that evidence for belief in hymens is very rare in pre-fourth-century sources, it is not especially likely that a hymen is the target of Salome's test. As we have seen, virginity testing was usually not anatomical, and the line between being a "virgin" and a "woman" could be drawn in a number of places, including at the transition of bearing a child. Salome's inspection can most plausibly be read as confirmation that Mary is a virgin not only from sex, but also from ordinary childbirth. I call this exceptional state after Mary's birthing her "puerperal virginity." Salome is not verifying that a hymen is present, but marveling that the usual signs of giving birth are absent—for instance, dilation of the cervix, the stretching or tearing of vaginal and perineal tissues, and the fluids and other materials that usually surround a new mother and infant. Midwives, who routinely saw such sights (but are not routinely connected with virginity testing until later antiquity),[17] make perfect witnesses for this form of virginity. In the events and statements of chapters 19- 20, the narrative's focus shifts from the sexual aspect of Mary's virginity to introduction of her puerperal virginity. Although the episode does not correspond with

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[16] Authors who read a hymen into the text are numerous; see Lillis, "Paradox *in Partu*," 4-8.
[17] This will be discussed further in chapter 5.

later virginity inspections, it constitutes an important contribution to Marian devotion that is echoed and recast in the bloodless, painless births of later gospels and doctrines.

This reading of the *Protogospel* is supported by internal elements as well as by the general dearth in early Greek sources for ideas about hymens and gynecological virginity tests. The logic of the story does not require these ideas in order to be coherent and persuasive; in fact, various features prompt readers to expect that Mary's childbearing will be extraordinary and virginal in its own right, not just as a reaffirmation of her sexual virginity. By chapters 19-20, Mary's sexual virginity is already well-established. The narrative puts Joseph at a safe distance at the time when she conceives (9.3, 13.1). Twice she defends her sexual purity before others, saying "I am pure" and "I do not know a man,"[18] and her truthfulness is confirmed by a test with the "water of conviction" that is administered by the high priest in chapter 16.[19] A different focus is foreshadowed in the annunciation scene and highlighted at the delivery scene.[20] In contrast to Luke's Gospel, the *Protogospel*'s Mary does not bother telling the announcing angel that she does "not know a man"; her question for the angel is not "Since I do not know a man, how can this be?" but instead, "If I will conceive from the Lord, the living God, *will I give birth as every woman does*?"[21] The angel answers, "Not so, Mary, for

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[18] Spoken to Joseph in 13.3 and the high priest in 15.3 (de Strycker 126, 134). Cf. Luke 1:34.
[19] De Strycker 138. This ordeal is loosely based on the procedure described in Numbers 5 for testing the faithfulness of a wife whose husband suspects her of adultery. In the *Protogospel*, both Mary and Joseph are given the "water of conviction" to drink and are sent into the wilderness to verify their testimony (both have claimed that they are "pure" toward one another). Their safe return is taken by the high priest as God's verdict that they are indeed innocent.
[20] Foskett also observes this: *A Virgin Conceived*, 152-153, 159 and "Virginity as Purity," 75.
[21] Cf. Luke 1:34-35. According to de Strycker's text and analysis (114-117), an earlier reading of Mary's question in 11.2 runs: Ἐγω συνλήμψομαι ἀπὸ Κυρίου Θεοῦ ζῶντος ὡς πᾶσα γυνὴ γεννᾷ; Here the emphasis on birth is less pronounced, but still legible. Other witnesses seek to clarify her question, as seen

God's power will overshadow (ἐπισκιάσει) you." The cloud overshadowing the delivery-cave (ἐπισκιάζουσα) primarily signifies the marvel of a unique delivery, not a unique conception; the focus falls on how Mary gives birth, not whether she has had sex.[22] Hence the ambiguous statement of the midwife, usually translated "A virgin gave birth—something her nature does not allow!", which could be translated more concretely and precisely in light of Mary's virginal bearing as, "A virgin gave birth to things that her genitals do not have room for!"[23] The midwife is marveling at a bizarrely pristine birthing scene and an unstretched, undilated birthing body.[24] Salome is unwilling to believe in this virginal way of giving birth unless she sees and touches the body itself, and the divine fire and healing that follow provide the proof she seeks. A "new wonder,"[25] a new kind of delivery, emerges at Mary's birthing of Jesus: the non-puerperal and thus virginal state of this maiden persists beyond her childbearing.

The *Protogospel*, then, does not define virginity by medical appeal to a hymen, nor simply by reference to Mary's continued abstinence from sexual intercourse and the

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in the reading preferred by Ronald Hock, following Constantin von Tischendorf (Ronald F. Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas: With introduction, notes and original text featuring the New Scholars Translation* [Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 1995], 52): Εἰ ἐγὼ συλλήψομαι ἀπὸ κυρίου θεοῦ ζῶντος, καὶ γεννήσω ὡς πᾶσα γυνὴ γεννᾷ;

[22] 11.3 (de Strycker 116) and 19.2 (de Strycker 154).

[23] παρθένος ἐγέννησεν ἃ οὐ χωρεῖ ἡ φύσις αὐτῆς (19.3, de Strycker 158). On the term φύσις as a euphemism for genitals, see John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 217-220.

[24] So also Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge*, 81-136. In her words, the *Protogospel* suggests that Mary's was "a sterile delivery of her infant, a delivery seemingly devoid of placenta and meconium" (108). The cleanliness of the scene is not explicitly described in the text, but is easily inferred. Similarly, the text does not explicitly say that Mary is spared from labor pains, but a dialogue between her and Joseph suggests that she experiences something quite different from ordinary labor discomforts (see chapter 17), while a quiet delivery would best suit the wondrous quality of the birthing scene in chapter 19.

[25] 19.2, de Strycker 156.

purity that this entails. Rather, both her purity and her virginity take multiple forms in the text. She is shown to be ritually, sexually, and puerperally pure; as part of this portrayal, she is shown to be virginal in both sexual and puerperal respects, meeting two different common social criteria for understanding who counts as a "virgin"—but doing so in a wholly exceptional way, since mothers would ordinarily have become "women" in both of these respects. The *Protogospel* thus employs two different definitions of virginity in order to convey the unique, paradoxical status of its heroine.

3.2.2. Mary's virginity in Clement of Alexandria's Miscellanies

In 7.16.93-94 of his *Miscellanies,* Clement seconds the idea that Mary is a virgin after she gives birth. He does this in the course of drawing a comparison between her virginal fertility and the nature of Christian scriptures, and he cites the Salome episode of the *Protogospel*, or a very similar story encountered elsewhere, to support his view.

> Just as it is held by many people up to now that Mary was in a puerperal state[26] because of the birth of her child, though she was not in a puerperal state (for some say that when she was attended by a midwife after her childbearing, she was found to be a virgin), so are the Lord's scriptures, which bring truth to birth and remain virgins with their concealment of the mysteries of truth. "She has given birth and not given birth," the scripture says, as one having conceived out of herself, not out of pairing with another.[27]

As he introduces his analogy between Mary's virginity and Christian scriptures, Clement testifies that there is more than one opinion on whether Mary was a virgin after giving birth. Judging by his phrasing, he casts his vote on the side of her virginity. His brief comments provide an invaluable gloss for understanding what "virginity" means in

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[26] The Greek term here is the noun λεχώ, a woman who is giving birth or who has just given birth.
[27] SC 428.284-286. See n. 41 below on the quotation that Clement includes.

this particular debate: the postpartum Mary may be a maiden/virgin (παρθένος) or she may be a λεχώ, a childbearing woman or woman who has just given birth. The question is not whether she actually produced a child (she did), nor whether she engaged in sex (she did not), though the idea of conceiving "out of herself" rather than by "pairing" is another significant characteristic of a virginal fertility that Mary and/or the scriptures possess. The question over which people disagree is whether Mary remained in a puerperally virginal state despite her childbearing. The form of virginity presented narratively in *Protogospel* 19-20 is rendered more clearly and succinctly here.[28]

For both Clement and the *Protogospel of James*, the question of Mary's virginity is ultimately a question about whether Mary is "puerperal" after the nativity. The dichotomy of being a virgin or not being a virgin rests on whether Mary's body has undergone the havoc of childbearing and manifests the changes and impurities associated with it. This shows continuity with some other uses of the term "virgin" in earlier Mediterranean sources, as we saw in the previous chapter.[29] In these two texts, authors build on available meanings of "virginity" to portray Mary as a special figure whose fertility is marked by a miraculous preservation of her prior state.

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[28] The possibility of speaking of sexual and puerperal types or dimensions of virginity becomes even clearer in the passage of Tertullian's *Flesh of Christ* discussed below.

[29] In addition to my comments and citations in chapter 2 regarding the place of childbearing in transitions from "virgin" to "woman," see the following recent publications for summaries and sources on the violence, changes, and impurities associated with childbirth in antiquity: Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge*, 81-136; Maurizio Bettini, *Women and Weasels: Mythologies of Birth in Ancient Greece and Rome*, trans. Emlyn Eisenach (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 51-52; Eve Levavi Feinstein, *Sexual Pollution in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 11-41.

3.3. Tertullian and Origen: the opened womb, diverging verdicts, and diverse definitions

Two other perspectives on Mary's virginity appear in the writings of Tertullian and Origen. Each of these authors has been accused of contradiction in their statements about Mary; we will see that Tertullian's contradictory tendencies spring from his distinct aims in different works, while Origen's can be resolved by taking into account the common Hellenistic assumptions that undergird his reasoning. We will also see that although these authors engage with the same biblical expression when describing the birth of Jesus from Mary's womb ("every male opening a womb" is to be dedicated to the Lord), they apply the expression in entirely different ways, operating with two different criteria for defining virginity that derive from two different models of female anatomy. One author declares that Mary ceases to be a virgin upon the birth of her son, while the other claims that she remained a virgin perpetually. Scholars have often compared or contrasted their views, but have neglected the possibility that the two authors see the female reproductive system differently. These are not two different answers to the same question, but differing answers to two slightly different questions, for the understanding of what virginity *is* is not the same in each case.

Each writer uses the expression "opening the womb" with a meaning somewhat different from those found within their scriptures. In biblical texts, there are two agents who open wombs. One is God, who is said to "open" the womb of a woman so that she is fertile or "close" a womb in barrenness. "When God saw that Leah was unloved, he

opened her womb; but Rachel was barren" (Gen 29:31).[30] 1 Samuel 1:5-6 states twice that "the Lord had closed" the womb of Hannah, leaving her childless, while the books of Isaiah and Job correlate the open or closed state of the womb with successful or unsuccessful delivery in childbirth.[31] It is possible that the expression "God opened her womb" is not merely a figure of speech but reflects an assumption about physical mechanisms of conception—that the womb must in some sense be physically open instead of closed in order for a woman to conceive.

The other biblical womb-opening agent is offspring, particularly the firstborn child or animal; several passages concern legal procedures for the firstborn "who opens the womb."[32] Luke 2:22-24 echoes these passages: "When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.'" The NRSV translation's phrase "Every firstborn male" obscures the terminology of the expression, which more woodenly reads, "Every male opening a womb" (πᾶν ἄρσεν διανοῖγον

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[30] In this chapter, I am using the NRSV translation for full biblical verses except where noted otherwise. The expression occurs again later in Genesis: after Leah bore a number of sons, "God remembered Rachel, and God heeded her and opened her womb" as well (Gen 30:22; cf. the closure of wombs in Gen 20:17-18). Terminology to designate the womb is varied throughout the Bible in ancient versions and translations and can refer to more of the reproductive system than what we call the uterus, but there appears to be little correlation between the term chosen and the particular notion of womb-opening in a given passage.

[31] Isaiah 66:9 says of Zion's birthing of a nation, "Shall I open the womb and not deliver? says the Lord; shall I, the one who delivers, shut the womb? says your God." (This is cast in different language about fertility in the LXX and Latin versions.) In Job 3:10, Job curses the day of his birth because "it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb, and hide trouble from my eyes." Here a shutting of the womb's doors signifies stillbirth or another kind of prevention of birth (he goes on to ask why he was born alive).

[32] See the wording and contexts of Exodus 13:2, 12, 15 and 34:19 and Numbers 3:12, 8:16, and 18:15. See also Ezekiel 20:26.

μήτραν).[33] In all cases, the biblical passages that involve womb-opening center on fertility—on the possibility of conception or the emergence of offspring. Tertullian and Origen take this biblical language in strikingly different directions.

3.3.1. Tertullian's meanings for Mary's virginity

Tertullian's treatise *Veiling of Virgins* reveals anxiety surrounding a newly visible (yet ideally less conspicuous) social and ecclesial group of Christians: permanent virgins.[34] Likely written around 210 or 215,[35] the text includes extended discussion of the designations "virgin" and "woman." Tertullian argues in support of virgins wearing veils in church instead of distinguishing themselves with bare heads, appealing to a classification scheme in which virgins are a subgroup of women rather than a different group of female persons—and thus they should join other women in being veiled, as instructed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11.[36] In chapter 6, the author seeks to undermine a line of reasoning that takes Mary's status as a "woman" (as she is labeled in Galatians 4:4 and Luke 1:28)[37] to indicate not what Tertullian hopes to demonstrate—that a virgin is also a woman, a species of a genus—but that Mary was already a "woman" rather than a

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[33] NTG 28, p. 185.
[34] To some extent the treatise also addresses virgins who will later marry and women already married (in chapters 16 and 17). Geoffrey D. Dunn suspects that both vowed virgins and virgins not yet married are addressed throughout: see his *Tertullian* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 140-141.
[35] Dunn summarizes scholars' proposals for dating this treatise in *Tertullian*, 135 and discusses them further in "Rhetoric and Tertullian's *De virginibus velandis*," *Vigiliae Christianae* 59.1 (2005): 1-30 (see 25-29).
[36] This classification scheme is central in Tertullian's reasoning from chapter 4 to chapter 10. His opponents' position is that Paul names only "women" in 1 Corinthians 11 because virgins are exempt from the command to veil their heads. Similar reasoning about classification appears in Tertullian's *Prayer* 22.
[37] That is, a *mulier* or γυνή. While Gabriel's greeting in Luke 1:28 does not include the word "women" in standard Greek texts (only Elizabeth calls Mary "blessed among women" in 1:42), the Vulgate reflects Latin versions in which Gabriel addresses Mary with a similar phrase.

"virgin" by merit of being betrothed (and otherwise would have been a virgin and not yet a woman at all).[38] Tertullian rejects this reasoning, arguing that Christ was to be born of a virgin who was nonetheless a woman, albeit an unwedded and uncorrupted kind of woman.[39] Mary is both virgin and woman.

In his earlier treatise *Flesh of Christ*, dated to approximately 202-203,[40] Tertullian uses the same stark division between "virgins" and "women" that he would later ascribe to opponents in *Veiling of Virgins*. In *Flesh of Christ* 23, he speaks very directly about Mary's virginity and draws a firm line between the virgin she once was (before the conception and birth of Jesus) and the woman she then became (by bearing Jesus). He even claims that her non-virginal womanhood following Jesus' birth explains why the apostle Paul said that God's son was born "of a woman" rather than "of a virgin" in Galatians 4:4. Here the category "woman" functions in opposition to "virgin" and does not encompass it.

At the beginning of chapter 23, the author points to Mary's conception and parturition as the "sign that will be contradicted" in Simeon's proclamation from Luke 2:34. He then records a slogan belonging to unspecified docetic or gnostic opponents concerning this sign: they say Mary "gave birth and did not give birth," was "a virgin

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[38] SC 424.148-150.

[39] Tertullian argues that if Mary was called a woman because she was in a sense already married through being betrothed, the prophecy that Christ would be born from a virgin (Isa 7:14) would be rendered false (6.3). Since Mary cannot have ceased to be a virgin before Christ's birth, she must qualify as a woman as part of the subcategory of women called virgins.

[40] Dating is discussed in the introduction of Jean-Pierre Mahé, *Tertullien, La chair du Christ: introduction, texte critique, traduction et commentaire*, 2 vols., SC 216-217 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1975), 216.22-26.

and not a virgin,"[41] which for his opponents means "she did not give birth out of her own flesh," so that Christ did not have real human flesh.[42] Tertullian invents a way to make this slogan theologically accurate by his own standards, pointing out that Mary could be called "a virgin in terms of a husband" (sexually) and "not a virgin in terms of childbearing" (puerperally).[43] He goes on to say, however, that it is best to avoid this double-sidedness and make Mary one thing at a time—she did in fact give birth, and though she conceived as a virgin, "she became married" by delivering Jesus (*in partu suo nupsit*), for he was the male that "opened her womb" instead of a husband doing so:

> She became married by the law of the opened-up[44] body… The same sex (as a hypothetical husband) did the unsealing. Indeed, it's on account of this womb that it is written of others, "Every male that opens[45] the womb shall be called holy to the Lord."[46] …Who so properly opened the womb as the one who opened up a closed one? Yet for everyone, marriage does the opening up.[47]

In Tertullian's opinion, then, it is better to designate Mary a woman instead of a virgin, even if motherhood, not wifehood, is what changed her status.

> She should be called "not a virgin" rather than "a virgin," who became a mother at a leap, in a way, before being a wife. …Since by this reasoning the apostle proclaimed that the Son of God was issued not from a virgin, but "from a woman," he recognized the (condition of Mary's) womb opened by the nuptial event.[48]

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[41] This is a fragment of an *Apocryphon of Ezekiel*, as seen in Tertullian's own reference to Ezekiel later in the same chapter. Note its use in the passage by Clement above.
[42] SC 216.302.
[43] *Virgo quantum a viro, non virgo quantum a partu* (SC 216.302).
[44] From *patefacio*.
[45] From *adaperio*.
[46] Exod 13:2 or 12, Luke 2:23.
[47] SC 216.302-304.
[48] SC 216.304. By citing Galatians 4:4, Tertullian implies not only that Paul acknowledges this "law of the opened body," but also that Paul is aware that Mary's womb in particular was in fact opened in a deflorative fashion by Christ's birth—the startling phrase *nuptialem passionem*, nuptial passion or the nuptial event, suggests that the nativity, though it presumably occurred without sexual desire on the part of mother or child, is a marriage-like event.

An ordinary human birth is necessary for Tertullian's theological arguments in favor of Christ's human flesh and the possibility of bodily resurrection.[49] Mary cannot escape the shameful mess and bodily alteration of delivering if her son is to be more concretely enfleshed than opponents like Marcion, Apelles, and Valentinus would have him be. With his statements about bodies, sex, and birthing, the author removes Mary from the domain of the virginal maiden, relocating her to the category of women inhabited by wives and mothers.

This transition is necessitated by the "opening of the womb" that Mary undergoes, which is invoked not as a fertility-centered notion (as it was in the biblical passages listed above) but as the male act and female experience of defloration; hence Tertullian says above that biblical womb-opening language pertains especially to Christ. In other cases, a womb would have been opened up prior to the birth, but instead of being deflowered by a husband, Mary is deflowered by the birth of her son. If we can assume that Tertullian is applying terms for "opening" and "unsealing" (*adaperio, patefacio, resigno*) to Mary's womb in a more specifically anatomical way than when he elsewhere relates the terms to both sexes and to flesh in general,[50] it appears that a hymen, or something very much like

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[49] The theological necessity of Tertullian's verdict on Mary's virginity is discussed in Geoffrey D. Dunn, "Mary's Virginity *in Partu* and Tertullian's Anti-docetism in *De Carne Christi* Reconsidered," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 58.2 (2007):467-484; Willemien Otten, "Christ's Birth of a Virgin Who Became a Wife: Flesh and Speech in Tertullian's *De Carne Christi*," *Vigiliae Christianae* 51.3 (1996): 247-260.

[50] Flesh as a whole can be "unsealed" in some of Tertullian's formulations. Mary's flesh is said not to be unsealed before Christ's birth in *Flesh of Christ* 17, while in *Modesty* 6.16, both Mary and Christ are said to have flesh not unsealed by marriage (Mary's is not yet unsealed, and Christ's will never be). Unsealing (or here, perhaps resigning) of virginity or modesty is enacted by virgins themselves in *Veiling of Virgins* 5 and 11. The term's broader sense of impurity or violation comes through when Tertullian places unsealing and pollution in parallel in *Against Marcion* 1.28, or when he says in *Against Marcion* 2.10 that the devil unsealed the integrity of humanity's likeness to God. It is only his dwelling on the mechanics of marital

a hymen, is operating in his logic: a woman's reproductive system is initially closed, then is unsealed by sexual intercourse.[51] By this reasoning, a birth can translate to a loss of virginity, for female virginity consists in the unopened state of one's sexual organs. By birthing a child, Mary became a married woman and no longer a virgin.

There is indeed an element of contradiction in Tertullian's discourse on the categories of "virgin" and "woman" and Mary's qualifications for each category at the time of the nativity. The relationship between virginhood and womanhood shifts from one of opposition in the earlier text to an inclusion of virgins inside the category "woman" in the later text; initially, being a virgin means not yet being a woman, while in the later text a virgin is one kind of woman. In *Flesh of Christ*, the "woman" Mary of Galatians 4:4 is no longer a virgin; the very moment of birth transforms her into a woman and allows Paul's phrase "born of a woman" to ring true. In *Veiling of Virgins*, the "woman" Mary of Galatians 4:4 is a virgin as well as a woman; she must count as a virgin not only when she conceives but also when she bears, so that both Paul's phraseology and Isaiah's prophecy hold true ("a virgin will conceive *and* bear," Isa 7:14) and so that her double status supports Tertullian's argument that virgins are women and

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sex and birth in *Flesh of Christ* 23 that allows us to infer a concrete meaning for "unsealing" here (with irreversible opening of female sex organs).

[51] The startling sexualization of the relationship between mother and son in this passage has been highlighted by Benjamin H. Dunning in *Specters of Paul: Sexual Difference in Early Christian Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 124-157, and Glancy in *Corporal Knowledge*, 130-133. It is tempting to entertain the possibility that Tertullian is speaking of a more symbolic than material "opening," denoting the accessing of sexual organs by the mere traffic of a body part (or infant body) traveling through the vagina. In this case, womb-opening in one of its biblical senses (birth)—Christ emerging without necessarily needing to tear a hymenal membrane on his way out—would be thought by Tertullian to resemble defloration too closely because of Christ's pioneering journey through Mary's birth canal. A hymen-containing model, however, fits his comments well and is probably to be preferred.

must submit to regulations for women's behavior. Several scholars have noted the contradictory character of these positions (and others) across Tertullian's works, and many ascribe such tensions to rhetorical exigencies. "Like a good orator, [Tertullian] was able to speak either for or against a position depending upon the particular circumstances."[52] Tensions and paradox can even be deliberate and instructive for convincing or transforming one's audience.[53] Tertullian keeps his categories flexible: under the different pressures of the two instances above, he stretches and compresses the categories "woman" and "virgin" into wider or narrower ones, with Mary fitting into or falling outside of each category as need dictates. He thereby achieves the larger goals of each composition—a defense of Christ's real human flesh and a proscription of female virginal bare-headedness in church.

More can be said about these tensions. Benjamin Dunning has demonstrated the lingering instability and vulnerability of Tertullian's contradictory logic, revealing his only semi-successful attempt to integrate a hierarchy of sexual difference with a Pauline Adam-Christ typological framework.[54] For Tertullian, Mary must be robbed of her virginity because only Christ, a male, can adequately serve the paradigmatic function of being a perfect exemplar of virginity—yet Christ's own virginity should be imperiled by his defloration of his mother. According to Dunning, Tertullian's definition of virginity slips between contrary poles, between an inherently female quality of being unpenetrated

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[52] Dunn, *Tertullian*, 179 n. 2.
[53] Glancy views Tertullian's contradictions this way in *Corporal Knowledge*, 119-120. For a discussion of Tertullian's hermeneutical prowess in his varying argumentative endeavors, see Elizabeth A. Clark, "*Status Feminae*: Tertullian and the Uses of Paul," in *Tertullian and Paul*, ed. Todd D. Still and David E. Wilhite (New York and London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2013), 127-155.
[54] *Specters of Paul*, chapter 5.

and a sexual purity that can belong to males and females alike. Similar analyses of contradiction can be illuminating for the purposes of understanding as well as deconstructing an author's thought.

Our current purposes, however, focus elsewhere, on one particular site within the complex of Tertullian's reasoning. Regardless of the various motivations or constraints that lead to his conclusions (such as needing to foreground Christ's full physical humanity or a prior commitment to gender hierarchy for theological anthropology and social schemas), he is able to reach his conclusions only by utilizing available or plausible ideas about female bodies and behaviors, such as perceived features of female genital anatomy and the nature of deflorative sexual intercourse. What concerns us are the assumptions about virgins and bodies that can be gleaned from the lines of reasoning he constructs—the conceptual resources of his cultural world that make his formulations possible and intelligible. It is noteworthy that in *Veiling of Virgins*, as Geoffrey Dunn points out, Tertullian initially treats virginity as the social status of being unmarried but later redefines virginity as an age category, a prepubescent state of innocence from sexual awareness and desire.[55] Whereas the circumstances of this later treatise inspire Tertullian to draw on conceptual aspects of virginity relating to marital status, sexual experience, and physical maturity to argue his case, his aim in *Flesh of Christ* leads him to dwell on the fleshy human body and to draw on notions about concrete bodily characteristics as he defines virginity and its loss in relation to Mary. Multiple ideas about virginity—virgins

[55] See chapters 11-12 of the treatise; Dunn, *Tertullian*, 139, 184 n. 96 and "Veiling of Virgins," 22-23.

as single, virgins as children, virgins as genitally intact—are enlisted in Tertullian's works.

Among these options, Tertullian deploys a distinctly anatomical definition as he discusses Mary's (loss of) virginity in *Flesh of Christ* 23. When dealing with other virgins and other problems, he readily adapts his categories and their boundaries to suit his purposes. Despite her qualifying as a "woman" in the broadest possible sense in *Veiling of Virgins*, Tertullian's Mary remains a figure whose virginity persisted prior to Christ's birth but then perished.[56] According to at least some of the conceptual resources put to use by this writer in *Flesh of Christ*, women's bodies undergo a permanent change from a closed state to an open state as a result of first coitus. Female virginity loss consists in the opening of a womb; virginity is the persistence of closure.

3.3.2. Origen's understanding of Mary's virginity

Origen's *Homilies on the Gospel of Luke* date to the 230s and were translated into Latin by Jerome of Stridon around 390.[57] The Latin translations and fragments of the Greek survive. *Homily* 14 presents two ideas that have long puzzled scholars, since they appear to contradict the author's thinking in other works. One is the idea that Mary's

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[56] Regardless of whether Mary can be considered a virgin as she bears Jesus, Tertullian seems to assume that her later life was that of a wife and mother: Christ's siblings were really his siblings (*Against Marcion* 4.19; cf. *Flesh of Christ* 7). Tertullian makes statements like this in his support of Christ's humanity, but despite his high view of chastity and virginity, he never makes the contrary claim that Mary remained always a virgin. He also speaks of Mary as a wife in *Monogamy* 8.

[57] For concise information on proposed dates, see the introduction in *Origen: Homilies on Luke; Fragments on Luke*, trans. Joseph T. Lienhard, FOTC 94 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), xxiv. On Jerome's translations, consult also François Fournier, "Les Homélies sur Luc et leur traduction par saint Jérôme," in *Origène. Homélies sur S. Luc: texte latin et fragments grecs*, ed. Henri Crouzel, Fournier, and Pierre Périchon, 2nd ed., SC 87 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1998), 65-92, at 78-79.

womb was "opened" when she gave birth to Jesus, which scholars believe stands at odds with Origen's statements elsewhere about Mary's perpetual virginity. The other is the idea that Mary and Jesus needed purification in accordance with Mosaic law following the nativity, which seems to contradict Origen's discussion of their purity in *Homily* 8 *on Leviticus.*

The purification question is less pertinent here, though *Homily* 8 *on Leviticus* contains fascinating reasoning on the matter of classifying Mary under the names "virgin" and "woman": she is said to be exempt from Mosaic purification requirements for women because of her status as a virgin, yet she also counts as a woman in terms of her female sex and her age or maturity.[58] Most likely the distinct biblical pericopes and preoccupations of each homily dictate the difference. In the Levitican homily, Mary's exceptional status helps Origen meaningfully explain the wording of Leviticus 12:2, while the Lucan homily must explain why Luke 2:22 speaks of "their" purification. Both homilies suggest that Christ himself needs some sort of purification after birth, thanks to the inherent impurity of the human body—in the Levitican homily in which Mary is exempt from purification, Origen still dwells on the uncleanness of all humans at birth and mentions the purification offering that follows Jesus' birth in Luke 2:23-24.[59] This universal uncleanness for embodied humans does not compromise virginity. Mary's exemption in the Levitican homily is an exemption from the special kinds of impurity brought on by sexual intercourse and childbirth, which Origen claims do not pertain to

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[58] *Homilies on Leviticus* 8.2 (SC 287.10-14).
[59] *Homilies on Leviticus* 8.3-4.

someone who conceived and bore in the way that she did. In the Lucan homily, Origen concentrates on her childbearing and the impurity he attributes to childbirth and all those who are born with a human body—an impurity that explains the need for both Mary and Jesus to make an offering for purification, but one that does not change her (or his!) status as a virgin. Virginity entails purity that is antithetical to sexual activity, but virginity is not simply synonymous with purity, Mosaic or otherwise, in Origen's works.

The alleged self-contradiction concerning Mary's opened womb is our focus here. Origen thinks Mary's womb was opened, but affirms in various places that she remained a virgin after giving birth and throughout her life. As will become clear below, this perspective should not be conflated with later formulations of Mary's virginity *in partu*, which proclaim not only ongoing virginity but also hymenal integrity for Mary during parturition; Origen's statements on her "perpetual virginity" do not capture the fullness of this freighted dogmatic phrase, but are claims about virginity as he understands it.

Origen repeatedly confirms that Christ was Mary's only child. He explains that Christ's siblings are from Joseph's previous marriage and were not born of Mary.[60] Mary's ongoing virginity is discussed in *Commentary on Matthew* 10.17, where Origen reports that those who maintain that Jesus' siblings were step-siblings aim to guard Mary's virginal dignity; a body entered by the Holy Spirit and overshadowed by the power of the Most High could hardly be thought to have proceeded with human sexual intercourse afterward. In other words, being filled with the Holy Spirit would naturally

[60] *Commentary on John* 1.4 states that those who think rightly say Mary had no other children; a fragment of the same commentary and *Commentary on Matthew* 10.17 both claim that Jesus' siblings were children of Joseph and an earlier wife (this passage also cites a Book of James, probably the *Protogospel of James*, as a source for this tradition). The same explanation appears in *Homilies on Luke* 7.4.

lead Mary to preserve her virginity, and virginity is (or entails) abstinence from sex.[61] (Origen, like many early thinkers, attached a wide range of moral qualities and theological concepts to the sexually virginal state, seeing it as more than a simple question of one's acts.)[62] Origen agrees that it is right to designate Mary the "first-fruits of virginity" among women, just as her son occupies this role among men.[63] Another passage in the same commentary relays a tradition about Zachariah's death in which Zachariah approves of Mary's praying in a place at the Temple reserved for virgins, even though she has already given birth.[64]

At first glance, a passage from *Homily* 14 *on the Gospel of Luke* appears to contradict this stance on Mary's virginity. Jerome's translation reads:

> "As it is written," (scripture) says, "in the law of Moses, 'Every male that opens the womb will be called holy to the Lord,'" and "Three times per year every male will appear in the sight of the Lord God."[65] This means that males, because they opened the womb[66] of a mother, were holy; they were offered before the altar of the Lord. It says, "Every male that opens the womb"; something (about this) sounds spiritual (in meaning). For you might say that every male, (though) brought forth from the womb, does not open his mother's womb in the same way as the Lord Jesus—since (it is) not the birth of an infant but sexual intercourse with a man (that) unlocks the womb of all women. Yet in fact, the womb of the Lord's mother was unlocked at that moment when her offspring was issued,

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[61] Cf. *Homilies on Luke* 7.
[62] Henri Crouzel has discussed these in *Virginité et mariage selon Origène* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1963).
[63] SC 162.216.
[64] This passage can be found in Erich Klostermann's critical text in GCS 38.42-43 (Latin with Greek fragments), or in Cipriano Vagaggini, *Maria nelle opere di Origene* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1942), 192-193 (Latin only).
[65] Luke 2:23, Num 8:16.
[66] Jerome's vocabulary for the "womb" in this passage includes two different words, *vulva* and *uterus*. *Vulva* is used more frequently, and *uterus* may have a more elevated tone or a different level of precision to its meaning. The two appear nearly interchangeable in the sentence that reads, "the womb (*vulva*) of the Lord's mother was unlocked at that moment when her offspring was issued, since before Christ's nativity no male touched that holy womb (*uterum*)." In wider usage, *vulva* is sometimes applied to the vagina or other organs and at times is used to group together the womb, vagina, and outer genitalia as a single unit. *Uterus* can broadly mean "belly" and thus could encompass the reproductive system as well, though the womb in particular is often meant. See J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 100-109, especially p. 105 on Christian texts and authors.

> since before Christ's nativity no male touched at all that holy womb, (which was) to be revered with all honor. I dare to say something: at the moment about which it is written, "The Spirit of God will come over you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you,"[67] the beginning and conception of seed occurred, and without an unlocking of the womb, a new progeny grew within it.[68]

Origen proceeds to describe the sordid conditions of fetal development[69] in terms similar to those Tertullian used when grappling with Christ's physicality in refutation of opponents like Marcion.[70] How can Origen count the postpartum Mary as a virgin if he concurs with Tertullian's assessment of the ordinary, messy birth a human Jesus would need and the changes to Mary's sexual organs that would result? An important (though incomplete) explanation has been advanced in publications by Cipriano Vagaggini and Henri Crouzel.[71] According to Vagaggini and Crouzel, Origen differs from Tertullian in that he defines virginity not by its "corporeal sign" that a postpartum Mary would lack, but by the basic fact of whether she has ever "known a man."[72] Her lack of sexual experience makes her truly virginal, regardless of her broken hymen, and Origen's statements about her become compatible.

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[67] Luke 1:35.
[68] SC 87.226.
[69] Andrew Jacobs notes that Origen is at pains to maintain a tension between Christ's body as divinely alien and imperfectly human, and thus pedagogically useful for Christians; the sordidness within a womb foregrounds the human or even subhuman aspect of his fleshly body: Andrew S. Jacobs, "Sordid Bodies: Christ's Circumcision and Sacrifice in Origen's Fourteenth Homily on Luke," in *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: the Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Ascetic Discourses*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Weidemann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 219-234.
[70] See relevant passages and analysis in Judith Perkins, "The Rhetoric of the Maternal Body in the Passion of Perpetua," in *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses*, ed. Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), 313-332.
[71] Vagaggini, *Maria*, 88-97; Crouzel, "La théologie mariale d'Origène," in *Origène. Homélies sur S. Luc*, ed. Crouzel, Fournier, and Périchon, 2nd ed., SC 87, 11-64; see especially 40-44.
[72] Crouzel, "La théologie," 40, 63.

The alleged contradiction is resolved more cleanly still if we take the difference a step further. Origen and Tertullian differ not only in the criteria that measure virginity, but also in the pictures of female anatomy that inform their definitions of virginity. If Origen holds a characteristically Greek model of female anatomy, there is no hymen involved in the first place. Once we stop assuming that he has to mean the same thing by "opening the womb" as Tertullian—that an "opened" womb signifies virginity loss through a permanent, one-time change from a closed uterine state to an open one—then his statements about Mary are easily reconciled, as the analysis below will show.

Two obstacles have prevented scholars from noticing that Origen's definition of virginity does not involve a hymen. One is the superficial similarity between this passage and Tertullian's discussion.[73] Another is the liberty exercised by Jerome in his Latin translation. A Greek fragment that appears in several *catenae* ("chains" of patristic comments on biblical passages that are recorded in manuscripts) either gives Origen's words or supplies a paraphrase of his ideas. The differences between the Greek version and Jerome's version show that Jerome may have elaborated considerably in his effort to explicate Origen's thought.

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[73] It is unclear whether Origen read Tertullian's thoughts on this matter. Scholars have often assumed so because both authors have recourse to the idea of a "male opening a womb" as they write about the nativity (for example, Vagaggini, *Maria*, 88-90), though in Origen's case this language is part of the New Testament text with which he is engaging (making Tertullian an unnecessary source or stimulus for explaining why Origen uses the phrase). Crouzel reasons that there is no dependence, since the two authors' conclusions are dissimilar ("La théologie," 41). Overall, it is difficult to conclude whether Tertullian's ideas about Mary exercised any influence on Origen, and their differing conclusions make the question of dependence inconsequential. Origen either knows Tertullian's reasoning and disagrees with it, or does not know it and happens to take a different position.

Τὰ οὖν ἀρσενικὰ ἅγια ὄντα ἅτε μήτραν ἀνοίγοντα ἔδει ἀναφέρεσθαι κυρίῳ παρὰ τῷ θυσιαστηρίῳ, μόνος δὲ Χριστὸς διήνοιξεν μήτραν ἐκ παρθένου τεχθείς· οὐδὲν γὰρ ἄλλο πρὸ τοῦ Χριστοῦ τῆς μήτρας ἐκείνης τῆς ἱερᾶς ἥψατο· πάντων δὲ τὰ πρωτότοκα, εἰ καὶ πρωτότοκά ἐστιν, ἀλλ᾽ οὐ διανοίγουσιν αὐτὰ πρῶτα τὴν μήτραν, ἀλλ᾽ ὁ σύμβιος.[74]	*Masculina, quae ex eo, quod vulvam matris aperuerunt, sancta erant, offerebantur ante altare Domini:* omne, *inquit* masculinum, quod aperit vulvam, *sacratum quippiam sonat. Quemcunque enim de utero effusum marem dixeris, non sic aperit vulvam matris suae ut Dominus Iesus, quia omnium mulierum non partus infantis, sed viri coitus vulvam reserat. Matris vero Domini eo tempore vulva reserata est, quo et partus editus, quia sanctum uterum et omni dignatione venerandum ante nativitatem Christi masculus omnino non tetigit.*
Therefore it was necessary for males, being holy because of opening a womb, to be offered to the Lord near the altar; and only Christ opened up a womb by being born from a virgin, for nothing else before Christ touched that holy womb; while the firstborn of all (parents), even though they are firstborn, still do not themselves open up the womb first, but the mate does.	This means that males, because they opened the womb of a mother, were holy; they were offered before the altar of the Lord. It says, "Every male that opens the womb"; something (about this) sounds spiritual (in meaning). For you might say that every male, (though) brought forth from the womb, does not open his mother's womb in the same way as the Lord Jesus—since (it is) not the birth of an infant but sexual intercourse with a man (that) unlocks the womb of all women. Yet in fact, the womb of the Lord's mother was unlocked at that moment when her offspring was issued, since before Christ's nativity no male touched at all that holy womb, (which was) to be revered with all honor.

Jerome's rendering distorts Origen's logic. The Greek statements provide a succinct contrast that makes Christ the only offspring to emerge from a womb that was not first opened by a mate. Jerome provides a longer set of statements with emphatic contrast: no other male offspring opened a mother's womb the way Christ did, for it is sex with a man and not the birth of a child that opens all women's wombs. A general statement that "nothing else" touched Mary's womb before Christ did is expanded, so

[74] GCS 49.89-90.

that no *male* touched that womb *at all*, while the description of the womb as "holy" is heightened with further language of reverence. Finally, although the Greek quite briefly touches on Christ's action of opening up Mary's womb, Jerome elaborates that "in fact, the womb of the Lord's mother was unlocked at that moment when her offspring was issued." This draws the hearer's or reader's attention to the state of the womb itself, untouched by other males but opened by this one. While terms like "open up" (διανοίγω) and "unlock" (*resero*) do not necessarily indicate initial and unrepeatable actions (as is confirmed by the use of the word "first," πρῶτα, near the end of the passage to clarify that Origen means "open up initially"), Jerome's emphasis on the moment of birth as the moment when Mary's womb was "unlocked"[75] strongly conveys that this is a fateful moment for that previously untouched womb.[76]

Jerome's reading of Origen was likely influenced by Tertullian's *Flesh of Christ* 23; judging by some borrowed material in *Against Helvidius* 18, Jerome was familiar with this work by the early 380s. Though his own conclusions about Mary's lifelong virginity are consciously different from Tertullian's (*Against Helvidius* 17), the potential similarity between mates who "open up the womb first" in Origen's passage and the Christ child who deflowers Mary in Tertullian's text may have colored his understanding

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[75] As we saw above, the same vocabulary recurs in a subsequent sentence; translating Origen's (now lost) Greek about the Spirit and power that came upon Mary to make her conceive, Jerome includes a statement that "without an unlocking of the womb, a new progeny grew within it" (SC 87.226).

[76] Jerome's own stance on the nature of this birth becomes clearer in the course of his career. By the time of this translation he had already argued against Helvidius that Mary remained a virgin during the later stages of her life and did not have an ordinary marriage with Joseph, yet he, like Origen, does not hesitate to describe Jesus' birth as an opening of the womb (*Against Helvidius* 10). Later works qualify this fertility language by also discussing the concrete closure of Mary's womb, which remained closed before and throughout her childbearing (see especially *Dialogue against the Pelagians* 4). I discuss this further in chapter section 5.2.

of Origen's comments. Another possible source of influence is Ambrose of Milan's *Exposition of the Gospel according to Luke*, which was in circulation by 388-389 and was known to Jerome when he translated Origen's *Homilies on Luke*.[77] Ambrose draws on Origen's exegesis of Luke 2, but he places greater emphasis than Origen on the sexual role of the human husband who ordinarily would unlock the womb, and he elaborates on the holiness and purity of Mary's womb and Jesus' birth.[78] By using similar language about Mary's revered womb and the intercourse that unlocks wombs, Jerome, like Ambrose, steers our thoughts toward the condition of the womb itself and the idea of virginity loss.

Whereas the Latin expansion easily evokes virginal defloration and Tertullian's hymen-centered model for virginity, the statements in the surviving Greek are best read another way. Origen's language about the womb-opening performed by Christ and the womb-opening performed by a mate is entirely compatible with the non-hymenal models and assumptions of Greek sources that we encountered in chapter 2. According to medical works like the Hippocratic treatises, female bodies are not sealed by vaginal membranes that rupture at first coitus. Instead, the female body moves gradually from a state of constriction or compactness to a far more open state, while the mouth of the womb (probably a designation for the cervical os in most cases) opens and shuts cyclically to allow for menstruation, conception, gestation, and birth. A husband facilitates the "opening" process in important ways: sexual activity dilates veins and

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[77] Fournier, "Les Homélies," 65-75 (and Jerome's Prologue, SC 87.94). Jerome's negative statements about Ambrose's *Exposition* do not preclude its having an effect on his choices as a translator, especially in passages where Ambrose himself has drawn on but modified Origen.
[78] *Exposition of Luke* 2.56-57. This passage is discussed in my next chapter.

widens and straightens inner passageways, and, most importantly, it softens and opens the uterine mouth to make conception possible. The womb opens again to give birth after being shut in pregnancy. The Hippocratic picture of an opening, closing, opening womb persists in the thought of second-century physicians and in early Byzantine medical reasoning,[79] and it can be found in other types of literature, including a passage of Clement of Alexandria's *Instructor*.[80] It is reasonable to expect Origen's assumptions about anatomy to be similar to these other writers' views, even if his assumptions are vague or general rather than medically expert.

In terms of biblical exegesis, the ideas Origen brings to bear on the "womb-opening" expression closely resemble exegetical moves made by Philo of Alexandria. Philo, too, had sometimes engaged with the expression with reference to a human mate: while he elsewhere attributes womb-opening agency to offspring or God (just as one finds in scripture), he deals in two passages with the question of how both God and a husband can play a key role in "opening the womb" in conception—for it is quite obvious to Philo that a male human mate initiates or brings about female fertility by causing a woman to conceive.[81] His understanding of womb-opening centers on fertility and not on the termination of virginity. Like this earlier Alexandrian from whom he borrows so

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[79] For example, Galen, *Natural Faculties* 3.3. The sixth-century medical writer Aetius gives numerous examples of this model's prevalence in gynecological reasoning. For further examples, see chapter 2.
[80] *Instructor* 2.10.92-93 describes a mouth of the womb that opens to admit semen when it is thirsty for procreation, then closes in pregnancy and opens again in delivery.
[81] *Cherubim* 13.46 (LCL 227.36); *Allegorical Interpretation of Genesis* 2.13.46-48 and 3.63.180-181 (LCL 226:254, 422-424).

many exegetical motifs,[82] Origen understands womb-opening in its biblical sense—as a way of referring to conception or birth—but he, like Philo, also has an interpretative eye on the human sex partner who can cause conception to occur.

According to the Greek sentences shown above, Origen likely relies on some of these biblical and medical notions to discuss Jesus' infancy trip to Jerusalem and fulfillment of Mosaic commands for males that "open the womb." When he says that "only Christ opened up a womb by being born from a virgin," he is not claiming that Christ was the only infant to open a womb at his birth (through, for instance, hymenal rupture); he is claiming that Christ was the only infant whose birth, which (like other births) was a womb-opening event, entailed emergence from a *virgin's* womb. She was indeed a virgin, Origen explains, "for nothing else before Christ touched that holy womb." He goes on to say that other firstborns, "even though they are firstborn, still do not themselves open up the womb first, but the mate does," which makes the bearer no longer virginal; conception and birth normally do not happen without the sexual activity that terminates virginity. As he points out that mates, rather than offspring, are the first to open wombs, he may be thinking of both the other biblical sense for womb-opening language (where God causes women to conceive) and traditional Greek ideas about open or closed wombs, where a husband's sexual agency opens up the virginal female reproductive system for conception through the friction and moistening of intercourse, expanding inner spaces and coaxing open the uterine mouth. Origen's point seems to be

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[82] See especially David T. Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature: A Survey* (Assen: Van Gorcum; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 157-183.

that Christ alone was born from a mother who had not experienced sex. Jerome's version of Origen's point seems to be that Christ alone was born from a womb that had not already undergone the permanent, anatomical opening-up of defloration.

Origen thus constructs the bodily events of the nativity in a different way than Tertullian does, even though both seem to see the birth as a fully human one (rather than a sanitized one, as was the case with other texts above). Tertullian interprets Jesus' emergence from Mary's sealed-up womb as an equivalent to sexual intercourse; the birth becomes an act of defloration. Origen sees Jesus' birth as an emergence from a womb that can both open and close; what makes it different from other births is the virginal identity of Mary, whose fertility was brought about by divine action and not by a human husband. Origen takes "opening the womb" in Luke 2:23 to mean "emerging in birth" and perhaps also "causing conception," and according to his thought, these fertility-oriented meanings have no bearing on the question of Mary's virginity. (A man might still "open" a womb in a biblical or medical sense by causing conception when his partner is no longer a virgin, and Mary's conceiving occurs without the sexual encounter that would deprive her of virginity.)

For Origen, Mary is a virgin because she has not experienced sexual intercourse, and this is the case not *in spite of* or *regardless of* a broken hymen; in his understanding of genital anatomy, she has no hymen to keep or lose. He is not ignoring the hymen or neglecting the breach of her hymenal integrity, but is ignorant of them—they do not exist in his conceptualization of female bodies and virginity. If Mary's genitals are or have a

door,[83] it is a door that opens and shuts, not a door that changes once for all time from barrier to orifice. Origen's Mary can give birth in a fully fleshy way and yet remain a virgin, for virginity is a matter of sexual experience—and giving birth, in Origen's reasoning, is fundamentally different from having sex.

3.4. Conclusion

While all of the texts discussed above agree that Mary conceived as a virgin, and while only Tertullian claims that she was no longer a virgin after giving birth to Christ, their pictures of Mary's virginity are diverse. Different ways of defining virginity are offered in their portrayals. Tertullian and Origen, who guard Jesus' true humanity when they envision a relatively ordinary birthing process, utilize notions about virginity that are quite far removed from the concern with puerperal virginity (preservation from ordinary childbearing) represented in the *Protogospel of James* and Clement of Alexandria's *Miscellanies*, even though Origen may be familiar with both of these sources. Origen's focus on sexual experience, in turn, stands in strong contrast to Tertullian's anatomical definition—which is one among a range of definitions that Tertullian employs in his works. In order to exalt Mary, defend Christ's divinity, defend Christ's humanity, circumscribe female virgins' behavior, or produce edifying readings of biblical passages, the authors of these texts reach for various ideas about virginity as conceptual resources. The distinct nuances of different texts' presentations of Mary's virginity at this early

[83] This becomes a common image for later discussions of the nativity, as the next two chapters of this dissertation show. See also Crouzel, "La théologie," 42-44 on the lack of such imagery in Origen.

stage should prepare us to look for distinct nuances in fourth-century discussions of female virginity, as well. This is the subject of the next chapter.

4. Diverse Configurations of Virginity in Christian Writings of the Fourth Century

Scholarship has usually stressed the commonalities of fourth-century writings that focus on virginity. In the second half of the century, a growing number of treatises appeared that display similar motifs in their interpretations of virginity's significance. For example, many biblical texts reappear from author to author;[1] many writers contrast the benefits and freedom of virginity with the constraints of marriage and the pain of childbearing; several texts stress the importance of free choice in embracing the virginal life; many authors describe virginity as an avenue back to Eden and up to heaven, a lifestyle of the angels shared by humans before the Fall and after the resurrection.[2] Such similarities, however, have obscured fundamental differences.

Fourth-century texts are not uniform in the meanings they assign to virginity, even if they work out its meaningfulness in some related ways. Not only do they spring from and speak to a variety of contexts and lifestyle arrangements;[3] they entail different assumptions and claims about the nature of virginity and its place within the human person (who is often, but not always, a female person in these discussions). Christian writers can locate a virgin's virginity in multiple places and ways: in her body or in her

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[1] For instance, several fourth-century authors who write about lifelong virginity quote or discuss passages from 1 Corinthians 7 and Gospel verses about the absence of marriage after the resurrection (Matt 22:30, Luke 20:35-36, Mark 12:25). For an examination of patristic engagement with 1 Corinthians 7, see Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 259-329.

[2] For summaries on these common themes, see Thomas Camelot, "Les traités 'de virginitate' au IVe siècle," in *Mystique et continence. Travaux scientifiques du VIIe congrès international d'Avon* (Bruges: Desclée De Brouwer, 1952), 273-92.

[3] The great diversity of early Christian ascetic lifestyles is discussed in Susanna Elm, *"Virgins of God": The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Teresa M. Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

soul or mind; as a social, physical, experiential, or spiritual state; even as the sum of her entire way of being and acting. For fourth-century writers, virginity is usually "bodily" in some sense, but the way it involves the body varies. The diversity of fourth-century patristic authors' configurations is clear from their different ways of assigning significance to the body as they discuss virginity.

Certain conceptual spectrums emerge when one reads these discussions with the body in mind. Recurring thematic vocabulary actually points to divergences when we consider what the texts imply about virginity's location through distinctive *uses* of recurring terms. Authors frequently use the vocabulary of "sealing" or being "sealed," yet do so in very different ways. A similar variety occurs in the prevalent water-related imagery with which they illustrate their points: water metaphors feature prominently in many texts on virginity and can provide a useful index of the differences in emphasis and configuration between authors or works. The statements and themes of a particular text or corpus often cover an expansive spectrum of loci and qualities for virginity, but most have a noticeable pull toward one pole or the other along spectrums I would label "body-soul" and "keeping-acquiring." While nearly all discourses associate virginity with both the body and the soul (or mind), individual authors or texts usually emphasize one locus more than the other, falling into different places along a spectrum between bodily and spiritual virginity. Similarly—though not always correlatively—virginity might be portrayed in some instances as something a virgin must guard and keep, while in other cases virginity is portrayed as something that one acquires or achieves. We would expect conceptualizations of virginity centered on the body to describe virginity as a quality that

a girl has from birth and either continues retaining or loses; we might expect conceptualizations focused on the soul to describe virginity as an obtained disposition or virtue. Interestingly, the two spectrums do not always map onto one another in this way as authors gravitate toward the "keeping" or "acquiring" poles, presenting virginity as an innate possession or construing it as a goal to attain.

In this chapter, I juxtapose authors' configurations of virginity by attending to the following questions:

(1) Is virginity primarily located in the body or soul(/mind)?

(2) Is virginity predominantly something to keep, or something to acquire?

(3) What does the author's use of water imagery suggest about the nature of virginity?

(4) How does the author use the terminology of "seals" and "sealing" when discussing virginity?

(5) Given all these elements, in what senses is virginity a state of the body?

I bring these questions to the writings of Basil of Ancyra, Gregory of Nyssa, Ephrem the Syrian, and Ambrose of Milan to reveal the differing contours of their configurations. Each author offers a different combination of elements that amount to a distinct conceptualization of virginity's fundamental character and location. In every case, virginity involves the body to at least some extent, but this juxtaposition will demonstrate that bodily virginity can be many different things.[4] In the final section of the

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[4] It should be noted that scholars of antiquity have cautioned against simplistic dualisms concerning "body" and "soul": modern readers often misunderstand the nature of these designations and how the two are thought to interconnect. A helpful discussion is offered by Teresa Shaw in *Burden of the Flesh*, 29-32 and in Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 3-37. We will see that late ancient Christian authors do consistently divide the human being into these components (hence my

chapter, I consider the different purposes that discourse on virginity might serve in each case, giving attention to the larger projects or functions of the texts and how authors' maps for the conceptual territory of virginity can serve different goals.

4.1. Basil of Ancyra

Basil, bishop of Ancyra beginning in 336, wrote a treatise of sixty-eight chapters known as *True Incorruption in Virginity*.[5] A figure who remains relatively unfamiliar to modern readers, he played an important role in the Homoiousian party of the Trinitarian debates during the tumultuous political and theological events of the mid-fourth century, especially in the late 350s.[6] While it was common for literate fourth-century figures—Christian or not—to have some familiarity with medical literature and the medical theory of the day,[7] Basil is thought to have been a practicing physician himself prior to

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own use of the division for analysis); at the same time, they envision complex body-soul relationships that often connect and unite the two.

[5] The Greek wording of the title, often obscured in other languages, is περί τῆς ἐν παρθενία ἀληθοῦς ἀφθορίας (PG 30.669). The treatise survived among works attributed to Basil of Caesarea (PG 30.669-810), but scholars have reached general agreement on Basil of Ancrya's authorship in light of arguments made in Ferdinand Cavallera, "Le 'De virginitate' de Basile d'Ancyre," *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 6 (1905): 5-14. The treatise is not yet available in English; a French translation of a later Slavonic version (with sizable lacunae) appears in *De virginitate de saint Basile: text vieux-slave et traduction française*, ed. André Vaillant (Paris: Institut d'études slaves, 1943).

[6] On Basil's role in these controversies see Elm, *Virgins*, 126-132; Mark Weedman, "Hilary and the Homoiousians: Using New Categories to Map the Trinitarian Controversy," *Church History* 76.3 (2007): 491-510; Mark DelCogliano, "George of Laodicea: A Historical Reassessment," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 62.4 (2011): 667-692 and "The Influence of Athanasius and the Homoiousians on Basil of Caesarea's Decentralization of 'Unbegotten,'" *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 19.2 (2011): 197-223.

[7] This is apparent from education norms of late antiquity, the increasing prevalence of earlier medical texts that were copied and compiled for various audiences at this time, ancient references to the medical knowledge of figures in non-medical positions of authority, and comments by authors such as Gregory of Nyssa about attending public lectures on medical theory.

becoming a bishop.[8] With this background, we would expect his approach to the promotion of virginity to shed some light on fourth-century assumptions about virginal bodies and any anatomical or medical notions pertaining to what bodily virginity might be. He does not disappoint; his discussion, however, has a markedly philosophical bent and is marked by traditional Greek medical/philosophical notions about the body that are quite distinct from those familiar to a modern reader. As he discusses virginity with an eye on female virgins in particular, Basil highlights the relationship of the soul, body, and senses; his understanding appears to have nothing to do with virginal structures or features of the body that could be directly observed (or which would perceptibly change with the loss of virginity).

4.1.1. Is virginity primarily located in the body or soul(/mind)?

Basil's primary argument is that true virginity is virginity of the soul. Chapter 2 lays out the lines of reasoning of his treatise: whereas most people think about "the name of virginity alone" and may strive to live virginally in vain, true virginity comes from the soul and allows the human being to achieve likeness to God.[9] This is an ultimately spiritual goal of a Platonic kind,[10] entailing the harmonious ordering of soul and body with the higher part (the soul) governing the lower one (the body).

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[8] Jerome is the first source for this (*Illustrious Men* 89), and many readers have acknowledged that Basil's terminology and attention to bodily processes could indeed reflect medical expertise; see especially Teresa Shaw, "Creation, Virginity and Diet in Fourth-Century Christianity: Basil of Ancyra's *On the True Purity of Virginity*," *Gender & History* 9.3 (1997): 579-596.

[9] PG 30.672-673 (quotation from 673).

[10] By "Platonic" I am speaking broadly of the Platonist tradition in late antiquity.

The treatise ascribes a divine character to virginity, though this is mentioned in only a few passages. Virginity "assimilates the human to the uncorrupt God" (2).[11] Because it is divine, the virgin striving to have virginity must carefully attend to her soul, which is akin to the divine in its incorporeality (4). Virginity makes someone who contemplates God into a "spotless mirror" of God's beauty (2),[12] even moving others toward contemplation in turn; according to chapter 22, the virgin is an image of virtue and divine chastity who turns viewers' sights toward the thought of God "just by being seen."[13] To carry out the virgin's goal of 1 Corinthians 7, which is "to please the Lord" without competing cares (such as the pleasing of an earthly spouse), is nothing other than to become "praiseworthy and blessed and similar to him" through virtuous beauty and incorruptibility (24).[14] Although one of Basil's dominant frameworks for discussing the virgin's relationship to God is the marriage or betrothal of a virginal bride and a heavenly bridegroom, he also makes it clear that virginity is a way of becoming like the bridegroom Christ himself, achieving likeness to God.

In this goal of pleasing God through becoming like God, the virgin's soul is what matters, yet the intimate relationship of body and soul necessitates attention to both. Basil approaches the complicated body-soul relationship from a dizzying variety of angles. In the passage that comes closest to a systematic statement about bodily and

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[11] PG 30.672. Throughout this section I use "uncorrupt" to render the adjective ἄφθορος and an "in-" prefix for ἀφθορία and ἀφθαρσία, "incorruption" and "incorruptibility." While "incorruptibility" can imply that corruption is not even possible for the person or entity in question, ἄφθορος stresses the absence of corruption in a special way ("not-corrupted"). I find "uncorrupt" the best English equivalent for this. The noun "incorruption" works well as a more ambiguous term when the sense is less clear.
[12] PG 30.672.
[13] PG 30.716.
[14] PG 30.720.

spiritual virginity (early in chapter 2), Basil explains the following: true virginity is a property of the soul; it makes bodily virginity its aid; and practices of self-mastery (ἐγκρατεία—such as abstaining from sex and certain foods) are an aid and defense for bodily virginity.[15] Evidently the practical measures presented in later chapters of the treatise, which focus on controlling and eliminating pleasures, are directed not simply toward the maintaining of bodily virginity, but help to guard bodily virginity so that one might also have uncorrupt virginity of soul. Ascetic practices serve bodily virginity, and bodily virginity serves virginity of the soul—a hierarchy that fits well with Basil's orderly picture of souls governing bodies.

Such a hierarchy requires harmony between the levels of soul and body, for the lower level does indeed matter to the upper, despite the upper level's greater significance for understanding virginal status. Soul and body are repeatedly presented as distinct entities that nonetheless have an intimate and immediate impact on one another. A virgin cannot have virginity at one level without the other; the corruption of one entails corruption of the other. To aim for bodily virginity without tending to virginity of the soul sets the virgin up for failure and makes her miss the point of pledging virginity altogether (2). Chapter 13 is calculated to challenge assumptions about what constitutes virginity. Virginity is not dictated by physical experiences: "It is possible while having a virginal body not to have a virginal soul."[16] But, Basil goes on, this is not really possible, for there is "no benefit" for a virgin to keep her body uncorrupt when her soul is "always

[15] PG 30.672.
[16] PG 30.694.

being corrupted" by pleasures.[17] If a virgin is rightly afraid to commit outward acts of sexual interaction, yet is unafraid to proceed with such acts in her mind, "one could no longer rightly call her a virgin, not even in body."[18] The body is inevitably "conformed" to passions of the soul by sympathetic relationship, with motions of thought corrupting the body along with the body's "mistress" (the soul);[19] the ascetic training Basil heartily endorses is useless when the soul is not properly steering the body (13).[20] According to later passages in the treatise, virgins become like angels in their "virtue of soul and incorruption of body," which clearly go hand in hand (54).[21] By mortifying the body's pleasurable attraction to members of the opposite sex, the virgin can live in incorruptibility, functioning as a soul alone in which Christ himself lives (51-52). In keeping with Paul's hopes in 2 Corinthians 11:2-3,[22] the virgin must guard her thoughts (νοήματα): "For with the soul remaining uncorrupt, the body too is guarded uncorrupt; and when the soul has been corrupted with bad thinking, even if the body should seem to remain uncorrupt, still its incorruption is found not to be pure, since it is corrupted with pollutions of thoughts" (43).[23] Indeed, experiences of desire, pleasure, and passion corrupt the body and soul alike (59). The reverse is also true: in a complicated passage

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[17] PG 30.696.
[18] PG 30.697.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Cf. chapter 48, where Basil comments that no matter how many measures a virgin takes to drive the devil away from her flesh (such as through fasting and lying on the ground), she might still be engaging with the devil in her soul through the passions.
[21] PG 30.777.
[22] The NRSV reads, "…I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (Basil, like some other ancient witnesses to the text, does not include the words "and pure" in his quotation).
[23] PG 30.753.

in chapter 52, Basil considers virgins sexually attacked and killed during persecutions, concluding that they have remained virginally uncorrupt so long as their bodies and souls do not "sympathize" with pleasure.[24]

Thus bodily virginity is meaningless and nullified without the virginity of the soul, and virginity of the soul—true virginity—can be maintained only by steeling both soul and body against pleasure. Basil's attention to the senses and to mental erotic stimulation underscores that virginity is located in the soul rather than the body, even though it is determined by the states of both body and soul. Virginity hinges on actions or experiences, but not just on sexual experiences enacted with the body: pleasurable experiences imagined within the soul are real actions, actual deeds accomplished through thought (31). Pure bodies are of no profit if souls are full of passions (48). Virginity is at stake in all the senses; as the Lord's bride, the virgin must not engage in adultery in any way, "not by tongue, hearing, eye, touch, nor any other sense at all, least of all by the thinking faculty (διάνοια)" (27).[25] Instead, she must cultivate a virginal glance and virginal hearing (15), and a virgin's sense of taste (6).[26] Her social behavior, public appearances, and speech must be virginal as well (19-20); her whole lifestyle and manner will display whether she is truly virginal (21). A façade of virginity, though, will not fool the bridegroom who seeks her inner fidelity (28), and who will one day, as a judge, expose the real state of her soul for all to see (30-32). Body and soul together maintain and testify to a virgin's state, and disjuncture between the two is ultimately impossible.

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[24] PG 30.774.
[25] PG 30.725.
[26] See Shaw's discussions on the power of taste and its relationship to the other senses and to sexual desire in "Creation, Virginity and Diet" and *Burden of the Flesh*, 81-92.

Some of Basil's analogies contain a demand for natural correlation between a significant object and its surrounding environment: the soul is a sacrificial offering for God, and the body is a sanctuary (41); the soul is a bride for Christ, and the body is a bridal chamber (27). For a sacrifice or bride to be pure, sanctuaries must remain sacred (41) and bridal beds must remain exclusive (39).

Several of Basil's statements about virginity shuttle rapidly between focus on the senses, on the body, on the soul, and on the thoughts or thinking (νοήματα, ἔννοια, διάνοια) that can guard or corrupt both soul and body. The puzzling array of directions in which good and bad influences appear to move within the human being is in fact fitting for the way Basil thinks about all these sites and phenomena: what happens in one sphere automatically affects the others. These interrelations are especially pronounced in passages dealing with "corruption," as shown above and as discussed in more detail under the next question. At the same time, it is clear that Basil prioritizes the soul as the site of virginity, establishing a strong hierarchy that makes bodily virginity subservient to the more important purpose of having a virginal soul. It is also clear in the passages gathered above that for Basil, the true opposite of virginity is pleasure (not, as a modern reader might assume, sexual intercourse itself—and certainly not some sort of anatomical deflowering that alters the body's features). At some moments in the treatise, the force threatening to undo virginity is the pull toward carnal union, or the pull toward earthly worries and cares, or the motion of a soul agitated by vices; but the most consistent opponent and diametrically opposed state is the experience of passionate pleasure in particular. Living virginally is a mastery over pleasures (7), and the choice to live

virginally is a choice to turn away from pleasure in favor of a higher goal and better rewards (68, cf. 40). (Unlike some other authors, Basil does not contrast earthly and heavenly pleasures, but speaks of pleasure only negatively and uses other terms to describe the better things that one should choose instead.) Virginity is essentially a state of the soul, even though the threat of pleasure approaches through the body's fleshly members as well as from within the soul itself.

4.1.2. Is virginity predominantly something to keep, or something to acquire?

Although Basil portrays virginity as a thing both preserved and gained, both guarded and acquired, he falls much closer to the "keeping" pole. The language of protection is omnipresent in *True Incorruption in Virginity*. In the course of the treatise, a reader learns how the female virgin must guard virginity, for whose sake she must guard it, and what she guards against by doing so.

The "how" of the virgin's guarding includes several practical measures that Basil claims will keep virginity of body and soul undamaged. She should engage in hardy training of the body; she should practice a modesty so intense that her shame even prevents her from undressing carelessly when she is alone (34). Most of Basil's practical injunctions could be grouped under a broader principle of practicing sensorial selectivity for the sake of growing in virtue. The sense-organs supply "openings" or holes allowing passage to the soul (4).[27] While the "eyes of the body" have to remain open toward some things in the present life, the virgin will "close those of the soul" toward such things, then

[27] PG 30.677.

"eagerly open them" to observe the "true light" and its beauty (5).[28] She must know when to lend her ear and when not to, as well as how to keep her sense of taste in check so as to choose necessary foods instead of delightful ones (5). What comes into the ears must be guarded, as must the content and proper timing of her speech (20). If "flatteries," a "drug of corruption-causing pleasure," try to gain entrance to the soul through hearing and sound, the virgin must "block up her hearing from within with chaste reasoning" and "know how to turn away her eyes" (15).[29] Even a seemingly uncorrupted body is already under sin's power once a pleasure has gained access to the mind; as Basil depicts it in chapter 15, the soul is like a house that must be locked at its doors and windows if it is not to be entered and occupied by soldiers (who gain the right to inhabit it en masse when just one has successfully entered and staked a claim). The "entrance of the senses must be locked to the soldier of the flesh," for "the senses are in fact the windows of the soul."[30] A chaste woman does not leave these windows open but sets them just a little ajar; she deals wisely with what comes along outside the house, letting in things that are useful for virtue and shooing out everything else, with a firm intellectual shutting of the windows.

Basil also instructs the virgin about whom she must guard by guarding her virginity. In many chapters, he considers the threat she can pose to others' moral well-being; chapters 18-22, 35-37, and 43-45 contain extensive consideration of how she should avoid being a snare for men around her. "She must not, by bothering only with

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[28] PG 30.680.
[29] PG 30.700.
[30] PG 30.701.

her own lack of harm, despise the salvation of those who could be harmed"—she must keep her beauty unexposed (35)[31] and interact only in pure and beneficial ways with the "brothers" who are "friends" and "servants" of Christ the bridegroom (36-37).[32] At times Basil also warns virgins to guard against particular people that may seek to destroy their virginity, such as lustful eunuchs (61-62). For the most part, though, Basil's focus falls on explaining to the audience that virginity is situated within, and that it takes great effort to preserve it within oneself. The virgin's own potentially passionate state is of fundamental concern, even in some sections of the treatise that are also concerned with the temptation toward pleasure that she poses for others—as seen, for example, in focal shifts within chapters 44-47, or the beginning and end of the discussion of eunuchs spanning chapters 56-66. In the latter, she herself is a "eunuch" (57); the question is what kind and by what motivation, for Basil derives three categories of virgins from Jesus' statements about three kinds of eunuchs in Matthew 19:12. There are virgins who are inherently chaste (eunuchs "from birth," "from a mother's womb"), virgins whose lifestyle was chosen by a father (eunuchs "eunuchized by humans," as when a man in 1 Corinthians 7:37-38 keeps his daughter a virgin), and virgins who "eunuchized themselves on account of the kingdom of heaven."[33] The first class has a natural advantage for living chastely, and the virginity of the second class is achieved by someone other than the virgin herself; only those who have chosen virginity for themselves, who struggle to remain uncorrupt, will receive the highest rewards in the

[31] PG 30.740.
[32] PG 30.740-745.
[33] PG 30.784-785.

heavenly kingdom—though Basil affirms in chapter 66 that those who follow the lesser paths are still welcomed. Virginity is ideally a matter of taking charge of one's own state and way of life, guarding oneself in ways that make it possible to achieve higher levels of virtue.

Basil says a great deal, yet in some senses frustratingly little, about what it is that the virgin most basically guards against by preserving her virginity. She protects her "incorruption" (ἀφθορία) and guards against "corruption" (φθορά). Basil uses these and related terms (like "incorruptibility," ἀφθαρσία, and "uncorrupt," ἄφθορος) again and again; "What else does the Lord want than incorruption?" he asks rhetorically in chapter 59.[34] While one would expect a treatise about the "true incorruption" found in virginity to be crystal-clear about the meaning of in/corruption, Basil's terms are frequently ambiguous, and they must be considered carefully and in context. "Corruption" can include a range of possible notions and nuances.

In earlier and contemporary sources, one can find the language of corruption and corruptibility (including the nouns φθορά and φθορία, *corruptio* and *corruptela*, and occasionally overlapping Syriac words based on the root ܫܚܬ) referring to a wide variety of ideas. Such terms can convey both moral and physical states or changes, and more than one kind of bodily change. Many ancient Greek and Latin texts use "corruption" language to designate the defloration of a virgin, both in illicit or undesirable situations and in the morally sanctioned sex of marital consummation. Yet people besides female virgins are said to be "corrupted" by sex too, including boys and others' wives, and this

[34] PG 30.789.

can apply to coerced sex as well as consensual sex. Thus the moral weight of the terms can vary; sometimes they seem predominantly moral, while at other times they describe a change that occurs passively for the corrupted person, without regard for their agency or with no negative consequences for their own morality. In communities that expect women to marry, little moral weight can attach to the transformation of an unspoiled virgin into a sexually active wife, even if this entails the loss of a valuable quality.

With changes of condition from being uncorrupt to being corrupted, it is usually difficult to grasp at what level(s) within the person the change is thought to occur. Bodies sometimes seem to be understood as contaminated in a way that is concrete yet intangible, real but not immediately visible. Pollution through sex can carry a strongly physical sense that is more ritual than medical and more holistic than anatomical. In some instances, a writer's depiction of sexual activity as "corruption" might rest on a concern with the mixing of people in union, which compromises one's purity or singularity.[35] Another set of dimensions is added when writers speak of corruption in Neoplatonic terms.[36] Human bodies are "corrupted" by the natural processes of their transitory existence: they are born, grow, weaken, and die, and their fleshly substance undergoes the corruption of decomposition. Corruptibility is a quality of mortality.

For Basil, corruption is the experience of passion or, especially, of pleasure. His uses of this terminology encompass many ideas or dimensions, but the emphasis always

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[35] See, for example, the analysis of Tertullian's thought in Dyan Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell: Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women, 200-1500* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 14-29.

[36] Corruption in an ontological sense has a philosophical lineage that includes Aristotle and later Aristotelian thought; see his *Coming to Be and Passing Away*.

returns to the question of passions—the question of undesirable transformation from a more virtuous to a more passion-controlled state. Corruption threatens both the body and the soul, and usually entails pollution of some kind.

Like others, Basil can speak of both illicit non-deflorative sex and licit deflorative sex as "corruption" of a woman. An adulterer corrupts a married woman (39), but a husband also corrupts a virgin as she becomes his wife (50), even though marriage is good and legitimate (see, among other chapters, 55). If the two situations rely on a single meaning, a good candidate for what "corrupts" is the experience of sexual pleasure. This aligns well with the contrasts Basil draws between virginity and marriage throughout the treatise: marriage is contrasted with virginity not simply in terms of coming to know about and experience sexual intercourse, nor only in terms of the wife's divided devotion between spouse and Lord; rather, marriage "corrupts" through the experience of specific pleasures and cares, including sexual excitement, worry, and grief (see chapters 17, 23-24 on passionate cares other than pleasure, and chapter 48 on passions like anger and malice that originate in the soul). Basil uses the language of pollution and blemishes to describe what passions do to a person, though it is difficult to pin down precisely what sort of change he thinks has taken place.[37] He hints that bodies can "seem" uncorrupt when they cannot actually be considered pure (43, 48), and that there are "signs" of corruption in

[37] If his other surviving text is any indication, Basil sees passions as the cause of sin, but not sinful in themselves: a synodical letter on the Trinity that he authored or co-authored explains that the Son came to be "in the passions, the causes of sin in the flesh" (he mentions hunger and thirst as examples) while not becoming fully identical with sinful flesh—such passions "move" the body in a sinful way, but they did not move Christ. The letter survives in Epiphanius of Salamis' *Medicine Chest* 73; see 73.8.8, 73.9.3, and 73.9.6 (GCS 37.279-280 [2nd ed.]).

both body and soul (59);[38] this may indicate that bodily corruption is no more visible than that of the soul. In chapter 48, he makes use of a premise that "corruption is a passion of the soul."[39] Chapter 19 speaks of "corrupting the soul with uncultivated thoughts and the body with intemperate surges."[40] It seems that "turbulences" or motions of passions are what corrupt the body as well as the soul.

By speaking of God's incorruption, Basil may include (but does not foreground) the ontological thrust the term can have, with mortal corruptibility standing in contrast to the unchanging, eternal nature of the divine.[41] As Ton van Eijk has observed, Basil's way of discussing incorruptibility in relation to virginity "has not very much to do with the overcoming of physical death," in contrast to some other Greek authors.[42] Virginity's future rewards include an immortal legacy ("an eternal name," Isa 56:5) superior to the earthly "consolation" for mortality through producing children, but this immortality is restricted to the future, whereas incorruption and incorruptibility can belong to the virgin already, in the present life; this is because incorruption and incorruptibility signify freedom from passion and pleasure (πάθος, ἡδονή).[43] This freedom interlocks with ideas about permanence and exclusive attention for God rather than for transient things, but the emphasis repeatedly falls on the absence of passions. In chapter 19, to regulate one's life in favor of incorruptibility and virtue is to flee "pleasures of flesh and pangs of births and

[38] PG 30.753, 764, 789.
[39] PG 30.764.
[40] PG 30.709.
[41] His synodical letter mentions corruption in this ontological sense: corporeal things are always in motion, growing and decaying (see Epiphanius, *Medicine Chest* 73.4.1).
[42] Ton H. C. van Eijk, "Marriage and Virginity, Death and Immortality," in *Epektasis. Mélanges patristiques offerts au Cardinal Jean Danielou*, ed. Jacques Fontaine and Charles Kannengiesser (Paris: Beauchesne, 1972), 209-236, at 226 (with further discussion on 224-227).
[43] Ibid.

the much-suffering, grievous care of life's worries";[44] according to chapter 59, one's members are corrupted by having diverse cares. When a virgin unites with someone other than God, this *intercourse*—a word whose English semantic range captures well the range of Greek words that Basil chooses for naming human sexual connections—compromises her ability to direct her gaze toward God alone and maintain a virtue untarnished by passions, a soul undisturbed by pleasures. Basil concludes his treatise by discussing the elimination of bad desires and preservation of desires for basic necessities (like nutrition) and for virtues, encouraging virgins to make themselves a holy sacrifice for God as they prove themselves to be stronger than pleasure and worthy of the crown of incorruptibility.

In these various ways Basil makes claims about the methods, players, and purposes involved in the virgin's guarding of her virginity. Despite a strong emphasis on the need for virginity to be preserved, Basil does speak of the virginal life as a course of achievement, and occasionally speaks of virginity itself as something one acquires. In chapter 50, he strikes upon a paradox: "the virgin not only remains uncorrupt at the time of the union with the uncorrupt Word, but also becomes (uncorrupt) after the union."[45] Here, however, he is discussing not individual Christian virgins, but a marriage of Christ and the Church and the effects of union between the divine Word and the rational human soul in general. By joining with the divine Word, the soul takes part with him not in the bodily "pleasures and passions and corruption" of human marriage, but in "virtue and

[44] PG 30.709.
[45] PG 30.769.

incorruptibility and true passionlessness (ἀπαθεία)."[46] Christ woos "her" (the soul) into incorruptibility. An ordinary bridegroom "makes the uncorrupt virgin a wife in marriage by corrupting her," but the bridegroom Christ "takes the uncorrupt soul as a wife in fellowship with him" without corrupting her.[47] He even imparts incorruption where it has been lost: taking the soul "that has been corrupted through fleshly pleasures" in a marriage to the devil, Christ "makes out of (this) wife an uncorrupt virgin by fellowship with him(self)."[48] An earthly husband is the founder of his spouse's corruption, but the Lord is the founder of his spouse's incorruption and the "guide of (her) virginity" (following Greek versions of Jeremiah 3:4).[49] Though one looks in vain for a systematic explanation of how or when Basil understands these changes to occur, it is clear that the Christian soul's virginal state of incorruption can be restored.

Later passages further complicate whether virginity is innate or acquired, natural or unnatural, suggesting that it is both—in part because humanity has both an original and a fallen nature, possessing a nature of mortality and sin but also a resemblance to the divine and the potential to regain a more divine nature.[50] As Susanna Elm and Teresa Shaw each observe, Basil implies that the virginal life runs contrary to the strong natural magnetism between the sexes.[51] Virginity "sprouts" incorruption, and a Christian's "achievement" of virginity is "a gain of the virtue-loving soul" that "goes beyond

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[46] PG 30.768.
[47] PG 30.769.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Cf. van Eijk, "Marriage and Virginity," 224-227 and Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh*, 184-187.
[51] Elm, *Virgins*, 114; Shaw, "Creation, Virginity and Diet," 581-584 and *Burden of the Flesh*, 81-92 (and see 220-253 on Basil's and others' visions for defeminizing the female body through asceticism).

nature," while marriage exists for the sake of nature (55).[52] The human, though, was originally incorruptible; the Lord makes virginity a path humans can choose so that "just as the human, by making use of immoderate authority, was forced from incorruptibility into a corruption contrary to nature, so (the human) might be forced by stronger freewill from corruption into an incorruptibility that (is the human's) own nature" (55).[53] That is, Genesis describes a fall into corruptibility—into corruption, in fact—while Christians can elect to regain their incorruptibility by the exercise of freewill, trading their current nature for their original one. Again, one wishes for more explanation than Basil provides: the default state of a fallen human appears to be a corrupt state where one is terribly susceptible to sin because of the power of passions, yet (because of Christ, and perhaps by sheer willpower, or perhaps also through baptism or the commitment to virginity), a virgin becomes incorruptible again. As we have seen in many passages, Basil treats purity as the virgin's default state, though it is precarious enough to necessitate extreme care with guarding it from marring or pollution.

Chapter 58 gives another prescription for "keeping" the incorruption that a virgin already has, and Basil reflects in chapter 59 on "how virginity was created naturally and at the same time incredibly," since it comes into existence with a human being at birth.[54] Taking up Paul's themes from Romans 10:6-9 about the "word of faith" being nearer than one thinks, he writes:

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[52] PG 30.780.
[53] PG 30.781.
[54] PG 30.785-788.

> So too it[55] [scripture] speaks about virginity. Don't say, "How will I go up into heaven, to bring down from there the incorruption of my virginity?" or "How will I go down into the abyss, in order that I might recover from the devil this (virginity that was) corrupted in myself long ago?" Rather, what does it say? "It's near to you": it says, "Virginity is born simultaneously with you by nature."[56]

Basil continues in chapter 59 by elaborating that the virgin need not traverse sea, earth, or heaven to find virginity; she can discover it in herself. To keep it inviolate, she must simply remain as she was born, staying undefiled and not initiating changes in herself through needless actions. Strikingly, Basil seems unwilling or unable to apply his earlier idea about the restoration of the human soul's virginity to the virginity of individual women: he states in this chapter that the "gain" of virginity cannot be retrieved once it is lost. The virgin could indeed traverse heaven and earth, sea, abyss, and air but would still not be able to recover it. "For how will the thing that's been corrupted become uncorrupt anymore?"[57] He goes on to stress that it is impossible for a woman to reverse the corruption of her virginity. While Basil is not the only Christian author to produce this tension between the restorable "virginal" state of humanity as a whole through salvation and the irreversible nature of women's loss of virginity, his location of virginity within the soul and in opposition to passions makes the contrast unusually stark.[58] By his

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[55] Or "he" (referring to Paul).
[56] PG 30.788.
[57] Ibid.
[58] In some other texts, we find similar contrasts between the collective bride of Christ, whose virginity is restorable, and the individual virginal bride of Christ, whose virginal status cannot be regained once it is lost. Virginity might be restored to the whole human race in the history of salvation, but its loss by a Christian might still be permanent (see, for instance, the spiritual restoration of virginity for a people or the soul in Jerome's *Homilies on the Psalms* 18). As shown in the next section, Gregory of Nyssa sometimes portrays the salvation of the race as a restoration of virginity, but he gives few clues about how this might apply to the virginal status of individuals. One would have to consider case-by-case how and why each author has latched onto the idea of regained virginity as a powerful metaphor for salvation without extending implications from this pattern into consideration of the requirements for virginal status.

reasoning in the rest of the treatise, virginity is lost through experience of passions or pleasure, and the divine bridegroom who makes the soul that was "corrupted by fleshly pleasures" into an "uncorrupt virgin by fellowship with him(self)" (50) should be able to restore the true virginity of the corrupted virgin. According to chapter 59, he cannot. Clues to explain this internal contradiction are scarce. Basil does not point to a specific way or site in which the irreversible corrupting has taken place (such as a bodily change that cannot be undone so completely as a soul can be redeemed); rather, throughout the treatise the body's corruption is made to hinge on pleasure, just as the soul's corruption is caused by pleasure or various passions. If all these sections of the treatise are authentically Basil's, he seems to have added a further paradox, if not an outright contradiction, to the natural/beyond-natural paradox of virginity's character: virginity is acquired and acquirable for the soul, but cannot be regained after its loss. Despite the clear sense that virginity is a state humans strive to achieve, there is a limit to this logic in Basil's thinking, and his recurring concern with the preservation of virginity casts it as a possession that must be guarded diligently.

Virginity, then, is in some senses inborn, and in other senses is a state offered to humans as a gift from God or which is able to be renewed. Basil can portray virginity as a thing imparted by Christ on the one hand, and on the other hand, something innate and impossible to restore once it is lost. In his configuration, virginity pertains to both God and humanity, and it is in some ways achieved, but also already possessed; he emphasizes that it is inherent to the virgin and requires vigilance.

4.1.3. What does the author's use of water imagery suggest about the nature of virginity?

Basil's treatise is saturated with vivid imagery and analogic illustrations; water is only one of his recurring sources of imagery, but it is among the most comprehensive, and appears several times to assist with key points.

According to chapter 4, the dynamics of sensory perception, passions, and pleasure are very much like water in their movements within, from, or against the body and soul. The human person and human experiences function like a system of waterways. Pleasure has a single origin and, like a spring, it "spouts up" from the flesh, dividing into the five "channels" or pipes of the senses and flowing toward sensible things.[59] (Virginity, in contrast, comes from the soul.) Affinity with the sense-organs affords openings that allow rushing streams to wash between the body, external world, and soul; waves filled with the "slime" of the flesh create an undertow as they turn back inward, threatening to drag the soul underwater with passion.[60] The virgin must perform filtering at these openings so that the water is cleansed of dirt, lest all become muddy through the disturbance of the flesh-sediment.

Chapters 46-49 renew this imagery and add related illustrations. Soul and body are like oil and water: when tranquil, they remain separate in their proper natures as clear oil sitting atop pure water, but agitation causes them to mix and become turbid, destroying one another's nature by soiling it (46). Passions can originate in the body or in the soul, and both must be kept peaceful. The luminous soul (pictured here as the clear

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[59] PG 30.677.
[60] Ibid.

oil that provides light by serving as fuel for lamps) must remain "un-wave-washed" and "altogether untroubled," and the body's form must be kept pure of murky movements from pleasure (47).[61] Pleasures of food and sex shake up the body, and vices like jealousy and hypocrisy do likewise in the soul. True virtue entails not just ascetic control of the body, but the equal purity of the soul and the symphonizing of body and soul, with turbid flows being repelled in both the soul and the body. "Therefore," explains Basil in chapter 49, "it's necessary that the soul of the virgin be calm, as though forming still pools from the most pure spring of the mind with divine thoughts."[62] Only calm water remains pure and has a surface that can serve as a mirror, reflecting the beauty of the virgin's divine bridegroom. Her soul must stay unwashed by the waves of the passions.

For Basil, then, the human being is a porous system of flowing waterways, susceptible to all manner of sensations and greatly in need of the proper channeling of desires.[63] The life of virtue requires that corporeal pleasures be forsaken in favor of incorporeal love, a bond with a heavenly bridegroom of true beauty. To accomplish this, virgins must carefully monitor their waterways. The sensory selection first described in chapter 5 is a method for guarding what flows in, around, and between the zones of flesh, soul, and external things. In chapter 20, Basil claims that not only what flows in, but what flows out of the virgin through speech must be carefully assessed; her mind should

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[61] PG 30.761.
[62] PG 30.765.
[63] It is possible that medical expertise has helped to shape Basil's picture of the human as an almost perilously porous being of shifting fluids. Humoral theories and ideas about the proper balance and emission of particular fluids are central to many different systems of Greek medical reasoning, and the bodies and health of women are often thought to be fluid-driven or fluid-saturated in a special way, based on the importance of evacuating menstrual blood or the particularly water-retentive nature of female flesh. The permeability of humans in general is sometimes exaggerated in models of the female body.

be filled from a rational and incorruptible "wellspring." She should fortify her mouth by not speaking too much and fortify her ears against the inflow of anything petty, thus gate-keeping for her mind by keeping "silence of hearing and tongue."[64]

Clearly Basil finds the question of water quality, the power of rushing water, and the murkiness of agitated water to be apt metaphors for a human's moral, experiential states. His imagery dwells on both body and soul, and in chapter 14 he offers a particularly holistic picture of the virgin's condition: just as a stone cast into a cistern of water sends ripples out to the furthest point, so a single instance of passion within the "pure water" of the virgin's soul can raise desirous thought upon desirous thought, "raising her whole self on waves."[65] The virgin must strive to keep herself as pure and calm as tranquil water.

4.1.4. How does the author use the terminology of "seals" and "sealing" when discussing virginity?

Language about "seals" and "sealing" is both very common and highly versatile in early Christian literature. Ancient authors not only refer to the everyday gestures of authorization or guarantee that a property owner or official might make by sealing a letter or item with the mark of a signet ring; they also connect such gestures with divine activity, particularly through the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 1:22, Eph 1:14) and baptism.[66]

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[64] PG 30.712.
[65] PG 30.700.
[66] On the greatly varied meanings of "seal" and "sealing" in ancient and early Christian sources, see Franz J. Dölger, *Sphragis. Eine altchristliche Taufbezeichnung in ihren Beziehungen zur profanen und religiösen Kultur des Altertums* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1911). A discussion of patristic understandings of sealing that is outdated but very helpful for glimpsing the rich variety can be found in Geoffrey W. H.

Scholars often interpret language about "seals" and "sealing" in virginity discourse as allusion to a hymenal seal and the notion that a virginal body is persistently closed and never opened, thereby narrowing the many meanings of a body being "sealed" to the idea that it is "shut" (and limiting the idea of being "shut" or "closed" to concrete, anatomical closure). The "sealed fountain" of Song of Songs 4:12, which appears with a positive valence in many Latin and Greek virginity-related texts, is reflexively linked to these same notions by modern readers. Basil does not appeal to this text, and his references to seals and to the actions of opening and closing are varied and complex, with no hint of a hymen in his depictions of the virginal female body.

As shown above, Basil urges that virgins treat their senses like windows that should be set only slightly ajar so that they can be closed against the onrush of passions while the virgin navigates wisely through life (15). The "eyes of the soul" should be squeezed shut toward the shapes flowing in from the present life, but eagerly opened in response to the shining of the true light;[67] intake into the soul and egress through what is spoken through the mouth must be carefully controlled as the virgin heeds when to open or close the sensory passageways of soul and body (5, 20). While Basil is certainly not the first author to articulate the idea that a person's soul has sense-organs that can be

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Lampe, *The Seal of the Spirit: A Study in the Doctrine of Baptism and Confirmation in the New Testament and the Fathers*, 2nd ed. (London: S.P.C.K., 1967), 233-296. Lampe aptly describes the problem of oversimplified treatments of such terminology: scholars must forsake the idea of "a single master key to the interpretation of every instance of 'sealing' in the Bible or the Fathers… The conception of the seal is a focal point at which many different lines of thought converge; it is susceptible of many very varied interpretations, and no single idea, whether it be of the application to the believer of the power of the Name, the sign of the Cross, Baptism itself, Confirmation, or even the indwelling presence of the Spirit, is capable of exhausting its full implications" (286).

[67] PG 30.680.

strategically opened and closed,[68] and while he presumably attributes such processes to men as well as to women, there is a striking similarity between his model of appropriately timed opening and closing and the model of the female reproductive system seen in much Greek medical literature, or in popular notions of conception and birth.[69] The sound and successfully reproductive female body, an important ideal for many members of Mediterranean societies, often required magical or medical aid in order to become accessible in the right ways and shut at the right times. Menstruation could be seen as a cycle of openings and closings of the womb. Basil thinks similarly about the soul, focusing on the senses that allow passage between body, soul, and outside world. Meanwhile, no language about closed genitals or closed wombs appears anywhere in the treatise; it is the sensory orifices that matter—the eyes, ears, mouth, and even the entire body as an organ of touch. When genitals are mentioned at all, it is in connection with the problem of pleasure, and in one brief reference, as a site where corruption can take place (63). Like the medical sources with which he may have been familiar, Basil provides no strong evidence that he believes in hymenal membranes. In this treatise, closure is a virginal state that one sustains or achieves regarding pleasure, not a genital state or tangible fixture of the body.

Seals or sealing (from σφραγίς and σφραγίζω) appear in just two passages in the treatise, once as an image of what to avoid and once as a model of what to pursue. In chapter 13, Basil writes that "if she [the virgin] should allow the innate impressions (of

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[68] For instance, Philo uses the phrase "eyes of the soul" and similar expressions in multiple works; for a summary and references, see *Philo of Alexandria, On Cultivation: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, ed. Albert C. Geljon and David T. Runia (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), 176.
[69] See chapter 2.2.1 of this dissertation.

visible, desirable things) to dwell in her unbroken as in a seal on her thinking, (it becomes) necessary for the mind, occupied with the sealed form (ἰδέα), to disregard all other beautiful things (since it is) always excited at the mental image (φαντασία) of the present form, and to passionately dwell on its enjoyment."[70] In other words, to entertain inward pictures of the wrong things is to have one's thinking be sealed like the wax shaped by a signet ring's impression, which in this case leads to being stimulated toward pleasure and distracted from better things. At the end of chapter 49, Basil speaks of "gluing oneself" to the Lord and becoming "one spirit with him," having been purified of bodily passions and "having been sealed (in respect to) the soul into the same beauty of form (μορφή)."[71] This is a beauty that should indeed mark the soul, shaping or cementing it into an image of that to which it adheres.

Related terminology appears in chapters 58 and 59, where Basil instructs virgins to "sabbatize" or keep the Sabbath by maintaining a holy inactivity: the virgin should remain unmoved (and thus uncorrupt) in both body and mind.[72] In this way she stands like an "inscription" (or "signet" or "engraved image," γλύμμα) of God on stone (58, with similar language appearing much earlier in chapter 22).[73] By remaining undisturbed, she preserves God's engraving of God's image and prevents other marks from being imprinted upon her soul. Otherwise the "signs" or "seals" of corruption (from

[70] PG 30.696.
[71] PG 30.768.
[72] PG 30.785-789.
[73] PG 30.785, PG 30.716.

σήμαντρον), which are wounds of desire, pleasure, and passion, will remain in the soul and body (59).[74]

It seems that for Basil, as for many previous thinkers of various philosophical persuasions, a person is "sealed" or internally shaped by the image of their object of attention. One must choose the right object(s) in order to grow in virtue and become like God. As for the mechanics of opening and closing, the virgin must be open and shut in the right ways and at the right times. This way of describing states for a virgin's senses and members fits well with lines of thought that Basil would have inherited from both medical and philosophical traditions. Across many such traditions, human beings are believed to constantly and often gradually change for the worse or for the better; they might have to make deliberate choices or interventions in order to reach goals like successful reproduction, sustained health, virtuous living, or imitation of the divine. Virgins and their precarious purity are no exception.

4.1.5. Given all these elements, in what senses is virginity a state of the body?

Basil's treatise on virginity proclaims that virginity is a state of the soul whose opposite is the experience of passions, especially pleasure. When he says in chapter 2

[74] PG 30.789. Notably, the language of "wounding" (τιτρώσκω) centers on the soul; a similar idea appears in the opening sentence of the treatise, where Basil uses an expression about heavenly love wounding people. Compare the oft-misinterpreted passage by Plutarch in *Dialogue on Love* (or *Amatorius*) 24 and discussions in other authors in this chapter of the "wounding" that occurs in passages from the Song of Songs. If Basil means to imply hymenal perforation by mentioning "signs of corruption" in the body (and thus, improbably, to appropriate the idea of wounding of the soul from hymenal wounding in particular), he is uncharacteristically vague in doing so: contrast this with his specificity in discussing the genital mutilation of eunuchs, the organs of sacrificed animals, and the inward effects of pleasure.

that many people attend to "the name of virginity alone" rather than "true virginity,"[75] he may be indicating that virginity is traditionally reduced to a "bodily" state of abstaining from sex, or a broader social state of abstaining from marriage and/or embracing Christian asceticism. Against whatever assumptions he ascribes to his readers, Basil insists that "true virginity" is that of the soul, and that the experience of *passions* is what "corrupts" the woman who has engaged in sexual intercourse. Yet he makes it clear that virginity is a state of the entire person, properly organized: body and soul are so intricately intertwined that in order to maintain virginity of the soul, the virgin must attend to both purity of soul and purity of body, lest passions arise from either source. Basil's discussion is both dualistic and holistic: soul and body are constantly spoken of as distinct components and in hierarchical relationship, yet changes to one dramatically and automatically affect the other. Ascetic living helps ensure that the body will remain virginal in respect to pleasures, and this in turn helps secure virginity of the soul. The "true incorruption" that one finds within virginity is a purity of the whole person brought about by the harmonious governance of soul over body and by the resulting (and reinforcing, transformative) focus of one's attention upon the uncorrupt God.

While Basil acknowledges that God's Word in some ways transforms corrupted humans into incorruptible beings through divine incorruption/incorruptibility, the incorruption of virginity is predominantly characterized as the state in which a virgin already finds herself, which she must preserve through a number of safeguards. By taking care to keep the "waters" flowing within her pure and tranquil, she can serve as a

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[75] PG 30.673.

mirror for her bridegroom; by being "sealed" into the proper shape within her soul, she can stand firm as an image of God. Basil's configuration of virginity, in a text with a title appropriately centered on the key concept "incorruption," is God-centered, soul-centered, and bodily all at once.

4.2. Gregory of Nyssa

Gregory of Nyssa's place in scholarship is far more prominent than Basil of Ancrya's. Many of his writings have survived, and recent decades have seen a steep climb in scholarly interest in these writings and in the figure of Gregory himself. One of several children in an aristocratic family of Asia Minor and part of a network of family and friends ("the Cappadocians") who became well-known theologians, bishops, and contributors to the development of monasticism, Gregory was rather reluctantly appointed bishop of Nyssa in 372 by his older brother, Basil of Caesarea. He gradually became a leader of pro-Nicene efforts in the continuing Trinitarian struggles of the late fourth century. His more speculative works, such as the *Life of Moses* and a *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, and earlier works that reflect on asceticism, such as a treatise called *Virginity* and a biography of his sister called the *Life of Macrina*, are among the texts that have especially captivated scholars in recent years. Morwenna Ludlow's 2007 *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post)Modern* charts diverse approaches and results in the study of Gregory's texts, emphasizing that part of the appeal of Gregory's persona and thought are their elusiveness and ambiguity; his complex theology can be, and has been read in many different ways.[76] Ludlow devotes a full chapter to the question "What Is Virginity?" to show how different readings of the treatise *Virginity* "have been generated by different assumptions about what he [Gregory] means by virginity."[77]

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[76] Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post)Modern* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
[77] Ludlow, *Gregory*, 182-201; quotation from 183.

Works of earlier writers inform Gregory's *Virginity*.[78] He clearly knows and has borrowed from Basil of Ancyra's virginity treatise for this work, and seems also to have been influenced by Methodius of Olympus' *Symposium* on virginity that was composed by the very early fourth century. In some works, such as his exegesis of the Song of Songs, Gregory is clearly indebted to Origen of Alexandria. Yet across several writings spanning his career, this author offers quite a consistent and distinctive configuration for the meaning of virginity.[79] The spectrums, imagery, and vocabulary discussed below show a great deal of continuity from the early treatise (*Virginity* was written around 370) to the late *Homilies* or *Commentary on the Song of Songs* (written in the 390s) and in pertinent passages of works written in between. The final one-third of *Virginity* seems somewhat out of place in this regard, and this is because these chapters closely follow Basil's treatise, whereas earlier chapters show the distinctive patterns and concepts that one finds across many of Gregory's later writings.

When we are attuned to the questions asked in this dissertation chapter, it is fairly easy to trace Gregory's dominant ideas about virginity. What is difficult to determine, as Ludlow elucidates in her chapter, is how Gregory would have pictured virginity being lived out in human communities and lifestyles: who counts as a virgin? Can someone be both married and ascetic? To what extent can worldly obligations be combined with the

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[78] Concise consideration of Gregory's patristic sources and influences for *Virginity* is offered within Michel Aubineau, "Les sources du traité," in *Gregoire de Nysse. Traité de la virginité*, ed. Aubineau, SC 119 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1966), 127-142.

[79] On whether to examine Gregory's thought with cautious attention to isolated texts vs. within the context of a larger corpus, see the differing approaches discussed in J. Warren Smith, "The Body of Paradise and the Body of the Resurrection: Gender and the Angelic Life in Gregory of Nyssa's *De hominis opificio*," *Harvard Theological Review* 99.2 (2006): 207-228. My aim here is to highlight the surprising level of continuity that we can discern in Gregory's discourse on virginity across his career and across different works for different audiences within his large extant corpus.

essence(s) of virginal living? Scholars have rightly been interested in this problem and have produced an enormous range of arguments on the varieties of virginal lifestyle that Gregory may endorse, as well as on these lifestyles' relative merit within his theological schema. The treatise *Virginity* is vexing for assessing this, as some passages seem to privilege the celibate life and abstinence from marriage, while others may hint that marriage is the worthier road or that Gregory is using "virginity" and "marriage" to indicate a different contrast altogether than the simple contrast between remaining single and being married.

In this matter, a traditional understanding of Gregory would align him with other early thinkers who elevate celibate purity above a virtuous life in marriage. Several scholars have challenged this line of interpretation. Mark Hart has argued that "virginity" and "marriage" have multiple meanings in *Virginity*, sometimes designating the celibate or married life but also metaphorically referring respectively to the life of virtuous moderation and the life of passionate attachment to transient things.[80] Valerie Karras proposes a fourfold hierarchy in which virtuous virginity ranks highest, followed by virtuous marriage, with lower status for those choosing virginity because of their lack of self-control and the choice for traditional marriage (in which one does not avoid vices or distractions from a focus on God) ranking lowest.[81] Hans Boersma has recently

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[80] Mark Dorsey Hart, "Marriage, Celibacy, and the Life of Virtue: An Interpretation of Gregory of Nyssa's *De Virginitate*," Ph.D. Dissertation (Boston College, 1987); "Reconciliation of Body and Soul: Gregory of Nyssa's Deeper Theology of Marriage," *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 450-478.
[81] Valerie A. Karras, "A Re-evaluation of Marriage, Celibacy, and Irony in Gregory of Nyssa's *On Virginity*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 13.1 (2005): 111-121.

countered several previous interpreters in arguing for the traditional position.[82] Others have stressed the ambiguity itself, suggesting that Gregory deliberately writes in a way that defies clear definitions or reduction to a single model for application.[83]

As this rich debate illustrates, Gregory's *Virginity* tends to leave us uncertain (and curious, and perhaps motivated to reason for ourselves) about the practical ways a person might live virginally—of how virginity does or does not map onto the lifestyles of singleness or matrimony, or traditional social-status alternatives like maidenhood versus full womanhood (and official ecclesiastical roles like that of a dedicated "virgin").[84] The question of application or visible status, however, need not be central to the question of defining virginity, and the very ambiguity of Gregory's position may be meant to signal that this is not the point. Rather, virginity is something so lofty that its core ideas remain abstract, while its expression at the level of human enactment involves diverse and complicated manifestations (whether in Mary, Christ, and biblical saints, in Gregory's sister Macrina, or in the possible paths of an audience attempting to heed Gregory's teachings in *Virginity*). Unlike many other authors, Gregory does not focus discussions of virginity on instructing *female* virgins and those who guide them; his central ideas are

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[82] Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
[83] This is the case, for instance, in Virginia Burrus, *Begotten, Not Made: Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 80-133. For Ludlow, the tensions found in *Virginity* are not meant to resolve; "like a Platonic dialogue, Gregory's treatise serves to debate, question, and render ever more elusive the definition of its stated theme" (*Gregory*, 201).
[84] See also Philip Rousseau, "The Pious Household and the Virgin Chorus: Reflections on Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 13.2 (2005): 165-186, at 168-169.

more clearly relevant for humans in general.[85] His core set of ideas about virginity, discernible across various texts, is the subject of my discussion here.

4.2.1. Is virginity primarily located in the body or soul(/mind)?

Gregory primarily locates virginity in the soul of a human being, though with important requirements and implications for the body. By living the virginal life, a person becomes capable of seeing God and being like God; this is possible through the part of the human that is directly akin to the divine, the mind (the rational aspect of the soul).[86] Gregory has a number of descriptors for this divinizing process and goal, and discusses them in relation to the mind with distinctive, if sometimes underdeveloped claims about the body's involvement.

The opening chapters of the treatise *Virginity* make it clear that Gregory places virginity in the realm of heavenly and spiritual things, rather than in the realm of corporeal things that can be perceived by bodily senses. One translator summarizes this by designating virginity the "central virtue" of self-perfection and "mediating force" that brings God and humanity together,[87] and the picture Gregory paints is indeed grand,

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[85] For example, *Virginity* balances illustrations of the experiences of married men and married women (chapter 3) and interchanges the use of a generic, grammatically masculine subject with feminine language, especially when drawing on Pauline depictions of Christ as a bridegroom. Gregory explicitly says in 20.4 that his discussion of spiritual marriage between the soul and Christ pertains to both men and women.
[86] Gregory's understanding of the soul is considered in J. Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2004), 48-74; he finds that Gregory's dominant model is an Aristotelian, "trichotomous" understanding that emphasizes a mingling of rational and irrational capacities rather than a division into parts. On the relationship between mind and body, see also Smith's "Body of Paradise."
[87] See the introduction to the treatise by Virginia Woods Callahan in *St. Gregory: Ascetical Works*, trans. Callahan, FOTC 58 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1967), 3-5, at 4.

cosmic,[88] and centered on abstract nouns that name invisible realities. Early in chapter 1, he says that virginity is synonymous with another term, "the uncorrupt" or "the incorruptible" (from ἄφθορος and ἄφθαρτος).[89] Those participating in virginity participate in God's incorruptibility and purity (ἀφθαρσία, καθαρότης), and thus God's own glory (1.1).[90] Virginity is a "gift" or "blessing" (χάρισμα, 1.1)[91] with a divine origin and pedigree: the incorruptible Father passionlessly produced a Son, the Son brings incorruptibility to humanity, and humanity can intellectually perceive virginity in these persons and in the incorruptible purity of the Holy Spirit (2.1). Virginity belongs with other otherworldly things (2.1) and remains in heaven among spiritual beings (2.3)—it is a property of the incorporeal nature of the divine, with a purity completely removed from passions of the flesh (2.2). It brings God and humanity to one another and serves as a uniting bond between them (2.3). Works besides *Virginity* suggest similar things. The *Life of Macrina*, written in the early 380s, associates a virginal woman and her ascetic community with the angelic life, alluding to an eschatological future where resurrected human beings will live without marriage "like the angels" (Luke 20:35-36).[92] The links between divine purity, holiness, and Christ's advent via Mary's virginity (*Virginity* 2.2) are echoed in several passages of the *Homily on the Birthday of the Savior* (likely from the 380s) and homilies of the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* that I will discuss below.

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[88] Throughout, I am using "cosmic" in its usual English sense to signal that virginity is something higher or vaster than things of the world, rather than in a Greek sense where it can mean "of the world."
[89] GNO 8/1.251.
[90] GNO 8/1.252.
[91] GNO 8/1.251.
[92] Gregory attributes a superhuman, angelic quality to the lifestyle and mode of being of Macrina and her community: *Macrina* 11-12 (cf. 1).

Virginity's heavenly, spiritual nature makes the virginal life a doorway into virtue more generally (*Virginity* preface 1), and the life of virtue aims at contemplation of true beauty and transformation into true beauty. "True virginity and eagerness for incorruptibility finish at this goal: the ability to see God," who is the only thing truly "beautiful and good and pure" (*Virginity* 11.6).[93] The Christian strives for this by focusing attention on the higher goods leading to this ultimate good, thus keeping the soul from getting pulled down toward mundane concerns by desires for the goods of the material world. The *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, written two decades later, applies the same lines of thought as it depicts the continuing growth of the soul that seeks God. This collection of homilies on the Song's love poetry meditates on the mingling of the human soul (or human race as a whole) with the divine, and on the concomitant possibility of human transfiguration into the divine life; in this work, Gregory often uses virginity to express the soul's (or humanity's) state. The human person can become "betrothed to God as a chaste virgin" (2 Cor 11:2) and, mixing with the unmixed and impassible Lord, can become "one spirit" with him (1 Cor 6:17) as "pure thought instead of heavy flesh" (*Song* homily 1.23).[94] In both *Virginity* and this commentary, Gregory promotes a noetic eroticism, or desirous yearning of the intellect, in the quest for God and Godlikeness.[95] He states in *Virginity* 5 that if the soul looks upward toward divine and

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[93] GNO 8/1.297.

[94] Since the homilies of this commentary often appear without numbered sections or paragraphs in critical editions and translations, I give in each parenthetical citation both a homily number and the relevant page number within GNO 6.

[95] Several scholars have used similar phrasing to discuss desire and eroticism in Gregory's thought, such as Martin Laird, "Under Solomon's Tutelage: The Education of Desire in the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*," *Modern Theology* 18.4 (2002): 507-525.

blessed pleasure, it will not turn back to the pleasures of common life, "but will transfer its erotic faculty from the bodily to the noetic and immaterial contemplation of the beautiful"; moreover, "virginity of the body was invented for us for exactly this kind of disposition of the soul," that the soul would become forgetful of natural passions and seek only divine pleasure (5.1).[96] Notably, Gregory associates pleasure not exclusively with the worldly things that one should leave behind, but also with the heavenly things that ought to be desired and enjoyed instead.[97]

The body's place in Gregory's formulations is twofold. On the one hand, the body is to be transcended; on the other hand, it is to be redeemed. Forgetfulness of the body and salvation of the body stand side-by-side in Gregory's theology without complete integration,[98] and both are invoked in significant ways in Gregory's discussions of virginity.

Since virginity is a matter of the soul and the soul's ability to become Godlike, it requires a turning away from the body. Gregory often enlists biblical language about the "death" of flesh or body to describe the requirements of virtue; to follow Christ, a person must be "crucified to the world" and undergo "deadening (νέκρωσις) of the flesh" (*Virginity* 23.7; cf. Gal 6:14, 2 Cor 4:10).[99] Virtue is impossible without the "death" of this source of distraction (*Song* homilies 6.189, 12.342-345). Gregory can posit that

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[96] GNO 8/1.277-278.
[97] Cf. *Virginity* 18.3. Smith provides extensive discussion of the roles of desire, pleasure, and enjoyment in some of Gregory's other works (*Passion and Paradise*).
[98] On the coexistence and relative development of each approach to the body in Gregory's soteriology, see Smith, "Body of Paradise," 226-228.
[99] GNO 8/1.341.

virginity itself is a "deadening of the body" (*Virginity* 19.1, cf. 20.3).[100] The life of virginity is a technique by which "those living in flesh" learn "to be like the incorporeal nature" (*Virginity* 4.9),[101] dissociating themselves from fleshly life so as not to experience passion along with their bodies (4.8).

Such language reinforces the priority of the soul for understanding virginity, and seems at first glance to give the body little significance at all. Indeed, in the few instances where Gregory speaks of "virginity of the body" (all within *Virginity*),[102] he does so to redirect attention from the body to the soul, to urge a transferring of focus from mundane physical life to higher things, as we saw in *Virginity* 5.1 above. According to *Virginity* 20.1, "bodily virginity" could be seen as a helper and sponsor for "inner and spiritual marriage" to the Lord, a union in the superior realm of spirit and intellect.[103] Gregory expects his audience to associate virginity with the body and counters this assumption. "This achievement (of virginity) is not as simple as one might suppose and is not limited to bodies; it reaches to all things" and requires that the soul, "attaching to the true bridegroom through virginity," avoid not only bodily defilements but pollutions or "adulteries" of the soul as well (15.1).[104] It is a mistake to think that virginity is fundamentally bodily: "Let no one suppose that the thing of virginity is so small and cheap that one (can) consider (it possible) to achieve such a thing by a little exercising of care with the flesh"; rather, the person undertaking this great goal must exercise purity

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[100] GNO 8/1.323.
[101] GNO 8/1.277.
[102] We will see below, however, the significance and likely meaning(s) of Mary's bodily virginity.
[103] GNO 8/1.325.
[104] GNO 8/1.309-310.

"in every thing in himself" and in all of life (18.5).[105] Christian virgins redirect their attention from things of the body to things of the soul, and this is necessary even in the practice of bodily asceticism. Some people fail in their quest for higher things because they are excessive in discipline and become distracted by their concern to monitor the body (22.1). In these passages of *Virginity*, Gregory stays close to Basil of Ancyra's framework, configuring virginity as a state of the soul served by (but more weighty than) a virginal state of body.

Yet the body is equally significant in another way in Gregory's configuration, and in this other area Gregory diverges from Basil's construal, as we will see below. Virginity, Gregory claims, brings incorruptibility into the present life of a virginal Christian, and this includes victory over death for both soul and body. Virginity is also more properly described, he suggests, when one's prior ideas about uncorrupt bodies are replaced or augmented with a fuller sense of the body's potential to serve incorruptibility instead of corruption—when one grasps the fuller picture of the alternative orders of existence (life or death, permanence or transience) that lie open to the human being.

For Gregory, the chief feature of humanity that sets it apart from the divine is its mutable transience, and mortality is a—perhaps the—chief problem of the human condition.[106] While the human being was originally meant to participate eternally in God's being, the fall introduced death. Salvation thus is often understood in Neoplatonic terms in Gregory's works: as the mind becomes able to perceive and fix upon the highest

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[105] GNO 8/1.320-321.

[106] On human-divine similarities and differences see Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 21-47. The significance of the problem of mortality is clear in many of Gregory's works, including the homilies discussed in this chapter section that portray death as the chief enemy to be overcome by Christ.

of goods, the human being simultaneously regains its likeness to the purity and tranquility of that highest divine good, sharing in its qualities and permanence. Marriage is foreign to divine existence and spiritual beings like angels, since it participates in the cycle not of eternal life, but of ever-changing bodily life, where creatures constantly change and move in and out of existence as they are born and perish. Gregory dwells on the problem of mortality at length in *Virginity*, tightly linking marriage with the painful experiences of loss and grief and demonstrating that the problem with earthly pleasures is their deceitful impermanence (chapters 3-4).

Virginity, in contrast, characterizes the divine's eternal existence and allows the human being to resume its original permanence in the here and now. The purer pleasures of contemplating the divine do not end in tragedy and pain, but remain forever. The incorruptible bridegroom will never forsake his spouse through death. The virgin's offspring, which are "life and incorruptibility," "wisdom and righteousness, sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor 1:30), do not cause worry or die but in fact thwart death (13.3, 14.3).[107] Those who forego procreating "establish a limit for death" within themselves—death is halted as though against a wall, shattered as though upon a stone (14.1).[108] In the virgin's life and person, the cycle of mortality is broken.

It becomes clear, then, that Basil and Gregory emphasize different things when they speak of "corruption." Basil's treatise, while it hints at a wider range of meanings, returns over and over to the notion of corruption as the experience of passions and

[107] GNO 8/1.305, 308.
[108] GNO 8/1.306.

pleasure, a type of experience that marks off bodily human existence from the angelic and divine forms of existence to which humans aspire. As we saw above, Basil speaks frequently of the "incorruption" and "incorruptibility" humans might achieve in the present life, and both terms point to the possibility of becoming impervious to passions and passionate pleasure. Gregory, on the other hand, expresses recurring concern with corruption as an ontological problem: that which is corruptible undergoes change, is subject to suffering, and (most problematically) will eventually cease to exist. To find a way out of this state, fallen humans must renew their participation in the incorruptible God, who has made this participation possible again through Christ and thus offers the "incorruptibility" of imperviousness to decay and death, spiritually and physically. For Gregory, immortality lies not merely in the virgin's future, as it seems to for Basil, but can be grasped to some extent in the present life: the virgin already participates in God's incorruptibility and thus has already overcome death.

The extent and form of this physical and spiritual victory remain ambiguous. While Gregory puts a greater stress on the continuity between the present age and coming age than some of his contemporaries, he proposes different pictures of eschatological life in different works and does not always develop a clear picture of the increasingly-divinized body of the eschaton or the present life.[109] An exemplary virgin like Macrina will still die an earthly death, while her proleptic possession of immortality might shine through in various ways (something that happens quite literally with Macrina's glowing

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[109] See the concise discussion of this problem by Caroline Walker Bynum in *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 81-86 and Smith's analysis in *Passion and Paradise*, 183-216.

corpse as well as in her lifestyle and ability to perceive invisible things: *Life of Macrina* 32, cf. 19 and 23). The resurrection life, where bodily beings come to resemble incorporeal ones in their purity, is already available (*Virginity* 14.4).[110] Virginity perhaps allows the Christian to step outside of the ordinary flow of time: no further generations will divide the virgin from the future return of Christ (*Virginity* 14.4), and this brings the eschaton near to such a person already.[111] Earthly human life, in the imagery of the *Homily on the Birthday of the Savior* (244),[112] is bound to the tail of the reptile Death whose head has been crushed but whose tail will continue to move until it is finally rendered powerless "once time should pass on and the things set in motion be brought to a standstill according to the awaited consummation of this life"—yet it is possible to step beyond this motion into the larger reality. While Death's own death throes will last for a predetermined amount of time,[113] human beings can choose whether or not to stay under its power; virgins cease their bodily service to death, which is performed through the instrument of marriage (*Virginity* 14.1), and devote their bodies to angelic living instead.[114] The choice between virginity and marriage is a choice between alternative

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[110] Karras refers to resurrection existence as "material" but "nonbiological" ("Re-evaluation," 118).
[111] See van Eijk, "Marriage and Virginity," 232-233 and Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 296-301. Smith discusses the relationship between time and desire in Gregory's thought, particularly with reference to *The Soul and the Resurrection* and the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*: within the final chapter of *Passion and Paradise* (183-227), see especially 198-202 and accompanying notes.
[112] Since this homily, like those of the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, often appears without numbered sections or paragraphs, I give in each parenthetical citation the relevant page number within GNO 10/2. Translations are my own, but a full English translation is now available in Beth Elise Dunlop, "Earliest Greek Patristic Orations on the Nativity: A Study Including Translations," Ph.D. Dissertation (Boston College, 2004), 154-179.
[113] See van Eijk, "Marriage and Virginity," 232 with reference to *Making of Humanity* 22.
[114] Cf. *Macrina* 11-12.

"orientations" for life,[115] between the service of two competing orders and processes: the cycle of corruption and death or the transformative renewal of life.

Gregory's ontological focus for "corruption" and "incorruptibility" clarifies his statements about bodies that are "virginal" or "uncorrupt," terms that harbor a greater or different meaning than the meaning(s) that he implies his audience would expect.[116] He explains in *Virginity* 14.1 that since virginity destroys death, the body that does not "serve in service to the corruptible life" is "rightly named 'uncorrupt,'"[117] while death's power finds its destruction in the virgin's soul. The alternatives for the body are to lean forward with the soul toward the world to come, or to participate in the cyclical corruption of bodily generation. To practice "bodily" virginity is to withdraw from this cycle and anticipate the resurrection. As I will discuss in the next section, Mary appears in both this chapter and several other works of Gregory's as a figure whose uncorrupt body made possible the incorruptible birth of Christ—a new mode of birth, divorced from pain, amidst the flow of the generations, and a mark of the alternative reality open to humans.[118] Mary's purity of flesh provides a hint concerning human potential: "with all other (people), a pure *soul* would hardly receive the presence of the Holy Spirit. But here the *flesh* becomes a receptacle of the Spirit" for the incarnation.[119]

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[115] This is the terminology used in Karras, "Re-evaluation."
[116] See my discussion in the next section.
[117] GNO 8/1.306.
[118] "Out of all the myriads from which humans have come to exist and to whatever extent nature proceeds while flowing through the birth of those coming next, it is only this one (Christ) who took hold of this life with a new kind of childbirth" (*Song* homily 13.387-388).
[119] *Birthday* 255-256.

For Gregory, then, virginity is unquestionably located in the mind, the rational aspect of the soul, but to be a virgin entails both transcendence of and redemption for the fleshly body. The body's desires must be forgotten, but the entire human stands to gain even now from future goods that can be accessed in advance through a life of virtue and incorruption (even if the body's victory over death in the present life is not worked out very clearly in the author's largely Neoplatonic discussions of salvation). Despite the many facets and diverging scholarly interpretations of *Virginity*,[120] core ideas emerge across the treatise and reemerge across Gregory's later works in places where virginity features prominently. Foremost among these is the equating of virginity with incorruptibility, a freedom from transience and death.

4.2.2. Is virginity predominantly something to keep, or something to acquire?

On the "keeping-acquiring" spectrum, Gregory falls solidly on the "acquiring" end. Whereas modern readers may expect ancient texts to depict female virginity as a state women have from birth unless or until they experience sexual intercourse, Gregory tends to frame virginity as something that is gained or regained by the human being, whether through human achievement or by divine grace (for Gregory incorporates both of these aspects). This is not to say that he completely avoids depicting virginity as something a person automatically has and guards; he sometimes mentions the guarding or preserving of virginity. Yet overwhelmingly, a reader of Gregory gets the sense that

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[120] Ludlow's chapter "What is Virginity?" is divided into sections addressing interpretations that stress bodily, social, and spiritual dimensions—virginity as sexual purity, victory over death, an attitude of detachment, desire for God, withdrawal from the world, and so forth (*Gregory*, 182-201).

virginity is something that is acquired. In *Virginity* (as we saw above) it appears to be higher than humanity, a force as well as a state, a thing that reenters human history with Mary and Christ and conquers death itself. In the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, we find a theme of humanity's restoration to a virginal condition—that is, the acquisition of original human nature instead of the default state of postlapsarian human nature.[121] Gregory acknowledges that people commonly understand virginity as an innate (female) condition or quality that is preserved prior to marriage, but he transfers the concept from the familiar realm of social life to a much larger scale. If anything, virginity protects the Christian rather than the other way around.

On several occasions Gregory takes up popular language concerning virginity and subtly modifies it. In both *Virginity* and his *Homily on the Birthday of the Savior*, Gregory refers explicitly to the association of the term "uncorrupt" with virginity "according to the custom of the masses" (*Virginity* 1.1);[122] "the custom of people knows to call the woman who has not experienced marriage 'uncorrupt'" (*Birthday* 247). In the latter homily, he mentions during a summary of the *Protogospel of James* that Joseph was selected to keep watch over Mary's virginity; here and elsewhere, he perpetuates the idea that virginity is something the unwedded Mary would have and would retain unless

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[121] For Gregory, however, the eschatological restoration of human nature does not return humanity to its past original state, but carries it into the more perfect state originally intended for it. See Verna Harrison, "Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 41.2 (1990): 441-471 (Harrison focuses on the question of gender in creation and the eschaton in particular; on Gregory's thought, see 465-471) and Johannes Zachhuber, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa: Philosophical Background and Theological Significance* (Boston: Brill, 1999), 200-204 (Zachhuber focuses on how this idea manifests in *Soul and Resurrection*).

[122] GNO 8/1.251.

it is destroyed.[123] But what is this quality? Gregory may expect that his audience would view "incorruption" as a kind of purity, since he claims in *Virginity* 1.1 that such language indicates the purity of virginity. The specifics are left to the cultural knowledge of the reader/hearer, who may be thinking of the unmarried woman as unpolluted, as unclaimed territory, or as pristine in various other ways prior to losing this purity through the corruption of sex, marriage, childbirth, or some other transition (for those who would agree with Basil of Ancyra's philosophical formulation, the experience of passionate pleasure). Gregory, however, steers an audience's reflection on such terminology in a very particular direction.

In *Virginity* 1.1, the author proceeds to show that the qualities incorruptible virginity brings to the virgin are qualities of the divine itself. Virginity does not originate with humanity; it is not first and foremost a quality that humans innately have and preserve, but something divine in which humans can come to participate. Nor is it predominantly a sexual or social status: as we saw above concerning the body and soul, questions of sexual and social status are not directly addressed in Gregory's larger picture of reality, where human beings either continue to follow the pattern of the corruptible life or orient themselves toward the coming life of immortality. Mary devotes herself to the latter as an "offering" for God (*Birthday* 255), and her exceptional birthing demonstrates that her body serves not the process of corruption, but the advent of human

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[123] On Joseph guarding Mary's virginity, *Birthday* 253; on Mary's concern that her flesh be preserved "untouched" as an offering to God, *Birthday* 255; on Zechariah allowing Mary to remain in the place at the Temple designated for virgins despite her maternal status and God's power to make her a mother without losing her virginal status, *Birthday* 249-250; on the marvel that with Mary, motherhood does not end virginity (nor does virginity prevent motherhood), *Birthday* 246-247 and *Virginity* 19.1 (cf. *Song* homily 13.388).

incorruptibility. Her labor pangs are not painful[124] because her mode of giving birth is entirely new, sprung from the Holy Spirit's presence in her utterly pure flesh and contributing to God's restoration of human nature rather than to the ongoing cycles of genesis and corruption that directly link bodily birth with death.[125] She is "uncorrupt" in not having given herself into the service of corruptible existence; this virginity remains "uncorrupt" in that it endures in her ("incorruptible") birthing, and her body does not have to undergo the ordinary pain marking the destructive nature inherent to bodily births.[126] As Moses' burning bush kindled fire without being consumed, so Mary gives birth to the divine light without undergoing corruption (*Birthday* 247).[127]

This reorientation of "incorruption" language explains why Gregory's treatment of popular terminology in *Virginity* 1.1 and *Birthday* 247 does not settle on "the uncorrupt" (τὸ ἄφθορον) as a synonym for virginity, but utilizes the stronger theological-philosophical inflection of the term "incorruptibility" (ἀφθαρσία) as well. This underscores the weighty and unexpected content of Gregory's conceptualization of virginity. In place of the ideas commonly associated with female virginity by his audiences, he offers a distinctive network of ideas in which virginity hails from heaven, defies death, destruction, and pain, and invites humans into an alternative pattern of existence. Even those who are already familiar with practical ascetic instructions for

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[124] See, for instance, *Birthday* 254 and *Song* homily 13.388-389.
[125] *Birthday* 246-247 and 255-256; see also a pertinent passage of *Against Apollinaris* in GNO 3/1.223.
[126] In *Song* homily 13.388, Gregory even rejects λοχεία as a designation for Christ's birth. Christ's is a birth (γέννησις) apart from parturition/childbirth (λοχεία)—one cannot speak of "virginity" and "childbirth" for the same person or attribute "childbirth" to a woman who is "uncorrupt" and "lacking the experience of marriage" (ἀφθόρου, ἀπειρογάμου). On the destructive force that accompanies human existence from the moment of birth, see *Virginity* 13.3.
[127] Similarly in *Life of Moses* 2.21: "The light of divinity that shone from her… kept the burning bush uncorrupt, with the shoot of virginity not being withered by giving birth" (GNO 7/1.39).

maintaining virginity (instructions that are already plentiful, according to *Virginity* 23.1) may be ignorant of the true nature and significance of virginity as Gregory will construct it. This is a virginity one receives rather than retains.

The acquiring of virginity features prominently in passages where Gregory considers the changing state of the human race in salvation history. In *Virginity*, he explains that the original human creature was not subject to passion and death but was like the divine; only with the fall did humanity cease to resemble God (12.1). This image remains within the corruptible human waiting to be rediscovered (12.2-3). The steps humanity took away from Eden can be retraced through abandoning marriage and the focus on the flesh (13.1) so that the human creature, "dead" through sin and subject to death through its flesh, will live again by being born of the "incorruptible, life-giving, and immortal" Spirit (13.2).[128] Human nature therefore has an original version and a postlapsarian version; since the latter is naturally drawn to marriage and is no longer inherently virginal, virginity "goes against nature" (7.1).[129] The exemplary saints Elijah and John "stood outside of their own nature," separating themselves from the ordinary sequence of human life to focus on contemplation (6.1).[130] Virginity is a regaining of human nature as it was originally intended, a gift to set human nature aright (2.2)—an "achievement of likeness to the Deity" (12.2).[131] In contrast to what has become natural

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[128] GNO 8/1.305.
[129] GNO 8/1.282.
[130] GNO 8/1.278-279.
[131] GNO 8/1.300. In such discussions, Gregory freely shifts between speaking of human virginity as though it depends on human effort and speaking of it as a gift given to humans through divine grace. Both ideas represent an acquisition or obtaining of virginity rather than a static natural state of virginity, and Gregory does not bother to systematize his ideas about divine and human agency in this matter.

for humans, life in virginity is "a kind of life that no longer brings the sequence of death in its train" (13.3).[132] Christ's birth and Mary's birthing signify transformation: "Do you see the reinvention of nature?"[133]

Gregory's homilies in the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* likewise equate virginity with the restoration of humanity's original nature. The female figure of the Song, who is sometimes the Christian or soul and sometimes the Church or human race, is said in 9.263 to become Christ's "fiancée" and "bride" once she is "renewed for virginity through the birth from above" (presumably baptism). Gregory says in 11.318 that the bridegroom "betrothed the virgin—us—to himself through the mystic rebirth, after she was prostituted to idols, restoring her nature to virginal incorruptibility." This bride can receive perfection and fullness "in (her) nature" once she has been "filled with all innocence and purity" (11.325). Through the incarnate Christ who was the "blossom" or "shoot" of virginity, "the Word put on our nature, making it undefiled, purifying it of all the passions that had grown in union with it" (13.391); among his "wedding gifts" are the "transformation of nature, the changing of the corruptible into the incorruptible" (1.24). As the soul is purified and brightened by God, its beauty increases and becomes "as a virgin's" (4.101). David saw the soul's transformation into beauty in "the city above,"[134] where among other transformations "the prostitute becomes a virgin" (2.49).

Since Gregory slips quite seamlessly between correlating the Song's bride with the individual Christian or "the" human soul and correlating her with the collective

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[132] GNO 8/1.305.
[133] *Birthday* 246.
[134] Ps 86.

Church or race, it is difficult to tell whether he would extend the idea of being reborn in virginity into the question of an individual woman's (or man's) status in social and ecclesial life. Just as in *Virginity*, the question of who "counts" as a virgin is not addressed directly in the *Song* commentary, and seems not to be the point. Gregory speaks only of the gaining or regaining of virginity within the soul or within human nature as a whole, leaving his audience to reason out social or ecclesial implications on their own. While Gregory does not turn, as Basil eventually does, to the matter of lost individual virginity,[135] he puts far more weight than Basil on the acquiring or restoring of virginity and incorruptibility, and assumes a corruptible and passion-experiencing existence prior to this.[136] The language of "achievement" (κατόρθωμα, κατόρθωσις, κατορθόω) fills *Virginity*, and images of acquisition, transformation, and restoration fill the *Commentary on the Song of Songs.*

Other patterns in Gregory's language signal that virginity is not just guarded, but gained. His appeals to notions of danger and safety in *Virginity* do not simply warn Christians of the importance of preserving virginity, but portray the life of virginity as a path of safety by which one flees the dangers of ordinary life. If a person chooses to begin this path, the soul is freed from the demands of the flesh and no longer "risks"

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[135] The closest Gregory comes to discussing lost individual virginity is his discussion of diverging paths (virginity and marriage) in *Virginity* 3, where he claims that someone cannot return to "the boast of virginity" once he (in this case, Gregory himself) has started down the path of the common life (GNO 8/1.256).

[136] Virginity corrects and guides passionate human nature (*Virginity* 2.2); the life of virginity is an "exit" from the life where the sequence of passions have entered (*Virginity* 4.6, GNO 8/1.274). Cf. *Song* homily 13.391 above, where the Word cleanses humanity's nature of the passions that have become part of it.

remaining oblivious to the pleasure of knowing the divine (5.1).[137] Chapters 8-10 contrast the risks marriage poses for virtuous living with the safety of the virginal life. Whereas Basil's description of life as a virgin continually refers to the threat and bombardment of passions and the need to put safeguards in place, Gregory portrays the virginal life as the ultimate safeguard against the moral and spiritual struggle of married living. For the "weak" who may not fare well in the battle to keep spiritual things first while pursuing good things of the world, it is "advantageous… to flee to virginity for refuge as though to an immovable fortress" (9.2).[138] The terminology of "weak" or "strong" people invokes the Pauline language that underlay early Christian debates over whether the virginal life can be chosen only by those who are morally strong or should be chosen by those who are weaker.[139] Here Gregory suggests that virginity is for the weak, since it can serve as a stronghold that protects them from the temptations and danger that are part and parcel of married life. The final third of the treatise (chapters 15-23) borrows more heavily from Basil's material and imitates Basil's language more closely by considering the difficulties of the virginal life itself, with more analogies suggesting defense and peril. Yet the earlier chapters that lay out Gregory's distinctive contributions and reformulations on "virginity" (and with which his later discussions of virginity bear a

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[137] GNO 8/1.278.
[138] GNO 8/1.287.
[139] Some examples of different perspectives on this question (and other ways of applying Paul's language about the "strong" and the "weak" to matters of sexual renunciation) can be found in Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 264-266 and 347-351.

much stronger resemblance) offer images like the fortress of 9.2, where virginity, rather than needing to be guarded, guards the virgin.[140]

Finally, Gregory's construal of virginity as something acquired rather than something kept is vividly apparent in the way he speaks of the encounter between death and virginity or between corruption and incorruptibility. Virginity halts death, putting up an insurmountable barrier against its progress by the immortal offspring that it produces (such as life, incorruptibility, and wisdom; *Virginity* 13.3-14.3). The presence of such things cancels out the power of death; death does not threaten virginity, but is defeated by it. Similarly, incorruptibility trumps corruption. Gregory's illustrations for purity and for pollution or contagions are not restricted to images of impurities defiling pure things, but include images where something positive overtakes or infects the negative, enacting purification or imparting purity. This is what happens in Christ's assumption of mortal flesh through Mary's virginity, by which the "dough" of fleshly nature comes to share in holiness like bread leavened by yeast (*Song* homily 13.381). Gregory tightly connects virginity with the redemption of humanity wherever he discusses it, associating virginity with salvation history and the pursuit of spiritual transformation. He elaborates on incorruptibility's victory over corruption in the closing paragraphs of the *Homily on the Birthday of the Savior* (268-269), drawing on several biblical statements:

> His flesh did not see corruption; for it was not possible for the author of life to be held under the power of corruption. …The king of all impassibility abided an exchanging of

[140] Though this image compares virginity with a building rather than a force or personal agent, it should be noted that Gregory ascribes a certain amount of agency to virginity itself both here and in many of the other passages discussed in this chapter section. Even when it is not personified, virginity is frequently given a sort of hypostasis or status of being that is quite independent of the virgin in Gregory's conceptualization and illustrations.

> his own glory for our life. And purity comes to exist in our dirt, while dirt does not get hold of purity, just as the Gospel says: "The light shone in the darkness, while the darkness did not gain possession of it." …"The mortal is swallowed up by life," as the apostle says; life is not consumed by death. The corrupted is saved through the incorruptible, while corruption does not get hold of incorruptibility.

Many ancient writings on virginity, including the treatise of Basil that Gregory draws upon in *Virginity*, put great emphasis on the threat that corruption poses to the maintenance of virginity. For Gregory, the relationship can be inverted. Virginity is not merely the mundane human state with which he expects audiences to be familiar; it is a part of the divine life, immune to corruption, and it destroys death as humans regain their original nature.

4.2.3. What does the author's use of water imagery suggest about the nature of virginity?

Scholarly debate over Gregory's perspective on marriage and virginity often centers on his water imagery, and with good reason. *Virginity* contains imagery of the channeling of water that the author presents in four different versions, each time with a different focus concerning virginal or married living.[141] These are not the only places where water illustrates Gregory's ideas; in later chapters of *Virginity* he lifts some analogies from Basil's treatise and adds illustrations from seas and sailing, while images closer to that of the water channel appear in other works that have a high concentration of

[141] Both Burrus and Ludlow argue that Gregory's prevalent water metaphors in *Virginity* exhibit a special connection with earlier philosophical and literary traditions that can guide interpretation of the work: Burrus, *Begotten, Not Made*, 80-133 and Morwenna Ludlow, "Useful and Beautiful: A Reading of Gregory of Nyssa's *On Virginity* and a Proposal for Understanding Early Christian Literature," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 79.3 (2014): 219-240, at 230-235.

references to virginity. Some of these images, such as his exposition of the "sealed fountain" in Song of Songs 4:12, are quite telling for the core ideas and emphases that set Gregory's discourse on virginity apart.

In chapters 15-23 of *Virginity*, one finds a few water images that follow or fit well with Basil's. Gregory paints the effects of a single passion on an otherwise tranquil soul with the picture of a stone falling into a lake (15.2). He speaks of the troublesome waves and bitter brine of impassioned life (18.5) and promotes the tranquil sailing of a calm soul that is "un-wave-washed" (23.6).[142] Pleasure is a stream touching the senses, and one must keep the body from becoming turbid (21.1-2).

Yet streaming water is more frequently coded as positive or neutral in Gregory's anthropological, theological, and ethical reflection, including within *Virginity*. Such images range from brief analogies, like Christ being the wellspring of human incorruptibility (2.2), to the more developed and recurring image of flowing water to represent modes of human life. In the four instances in *Virginity* of the latter, Gregory begins with a picture of a dangerous river (representing the ordinary human experience of life's instability and empty pleasures) but soon turns to agricultural metaphors where the stream is the flow of one's energy or attention and the water is not a threat to be avoided, but a force to be directed.

The dangerous river appears in chapter 4 on the heels of Gregory's descriptions of married life as a state of constant grief or fear and the cause of various passions or vices. One can make an escape from this state by moving a safe distance away from the swollen

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[142] GNO 8/1.340.

river, the "winter torrent," of a life spent in attachment to worldly things; this is a life of turbulence and vulnerability to passions and misfortunes (4.6-7).[143] The problem with this mode of life, Gregory shows, is that no earthly thing eagerly sought after "remains forever as it is."[144] With time every good of fleshly life will fade and end, its promise of pleasure turning out to be deceitful because it is temporary.

The alternative Gregory identifies is not the renouncing of pleasure or desire in themselves; the alternative to the overflowing river is a channel of water that also rushes, but flows in a different direction. Desire is aimed toward God and the pleasure sought is of a divine and heavenly kind.[145] The focusing of desire (ἐπιθυμία) that Elijah and John aimed at the Lord is illustrated in 6.2 by water collected in a single stream or pushed through a pipe. Gregory explains that this water is "the human mind."[146] If it flows in multiple directions based on what appeals to the senses, it lacks force; but if it is channeled in a uniform direction, it will naturally rush with great force and even move upward as all other paths are closed to it, reaching toward the truth of higher existence. The human mind has perpetual motion that is meant to be channeled into a single desire and single type of pleasure.

In chapter 8 Gregory adds further complexity to this picture. Cautioning against utter condemnation of marriage, he suggests that it is possible for a skillful "farmer" to divert some water toward marriage while still maintaining a strongly flowing central

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[143] GNO 8/1.274-275. Ludlow points out that "lust is conspicuously absent" from Gregory's mentions of passions or vices in chapter 4; the rushing river is linked to other difficulties than the problem of sexual desire ("Useful and Beautiful," 230).
[144] GNO 8/1.275.
[145] *Virginity* 5.1, 6.1, 9.2, 18.3.
[146] GNO 8/1.280.

stream.[147] An unskillful attempt will result in useless diffuse streams, but by the careful distinguishing of spiritual priorities and necessary practicalities one might, with difficulty, be able to keep the mind generally focused on God while diverting some small amount of desire toward fleshly goals. This course could perhaps be followed with success by those of very "strong" moral fortitude, as opposed to the "weak" who need the safety that virginity provides (see my previous section). Yet because moderation is so difficult and the enticement of mundane goods so strong, many such "streams" have changed course (9.1).[148] In the imagery of chapter 9, Gregory once again uses not the rushing of water but its lack of force to portray the inferiority of the married mode of life to the virginal. The experience of earthly pleasures can cause someone to redirect their thought from divine things to earthly ones, and as they "open a wide space in themselves for the passions," their "desire for the things above abates and is dried up."[149]

The use of water imagery in *Virginity* may have a special purpose beyond these descriptions of different modes for human life. Ludlow sees water metaphors as one of the cues that tells a reader to connect Gregory's treatise with the genre of the epithalamium, poetry for celebrating weddings, and this connection in turn reveals something important about Gregory's theology.[150] Epithalamic poetry commonly employed myths about the marriages of rivers or river deities as a way of assigning human marriage a cosmic and foundational character; marriage was often made out as a

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[147] GNO 8/1.285.
[148] GNO 8/1.287.
[149] Ibid.
[150] "Useful and Beautiful," 231-233.

"grounding principle of the universe."[151] Through water imagery and other measures, Gregory elevates virginity to the status traditionally associated with marriage, making it "a divine trait" and "the apex of the cosmic order."[152] Such metaphors can thus give virginity an otherworldly quality while expressing the nature of the human mind.

The correlation of flowing water with the mind appears not only in *Virginity*, but also in the much later *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. If we humans are to become the Lord's "sister" and "bride" and "an enclosed garden" (Song 4:12), Gregory says, such a garden needs a constant supply of water—hence we must also be "a sealed wellspring" (πηγή, 9.275). He reasons that the "wellspring" (or commonly in English translations, "fountain") suitably describes "our soul's dianoetic faculty," the power of rational thinking that "bursts" and "gushes forth" with thoughts. Connecting this wellspring with verses from Proverbs that teach, "Let your wellspring of water be your own," "Let no one foreign share it with you" (5:17-18), Gregory explains that the dianoetic faculty's motion "becomes 'ours' when it moves toward things profitable for us, offering utmost cooperation with us for the acquisition of good things" (9.275-276). To share one's water with a "foreigner" or "stranger" is to divert one's thought toward the working of evil. The ideal "bride" seals his/her wellspring with purity by using thought to nourish the garden of virtues and higher nature rather than investing any of this water in a "life of thorns." God has planted this garden of virtues in the human being, and the soul's dianoetic faculty is sealed with truth and an inclination toward the good when it is "being

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[151] "Useful and Beautiful," 233.
[152] Ibid.

engaged with these (virtues) and sending a flow toward no external thing" of the body or the outside world (9.277). With increasing perfection, the bride becomes "a well of living water" (Song 4:15) that both receives and imparts the flowing water of "the divine nature"; she has "the depth of a well, but the perpetual motion of a river" (9.292-293). According to *Song* homily 11.321, the one who looks toward "divine and limitless beauty" will find a source of "boundless water" that never ceases to flow, and will be led on to constant discovery and continuing desire.[153] In this work from the end of Gregory's career that centers on the soul's ascent to God, moving water characterizes the activity of the mind and its encounter with the ever-flowing divine.

Water thus has a special role in conveying Gregory's framework for the life of virtue, often conflated in these works with a state of virginity. While he occasionally employs the image of tranquil or pure water, his more distinctive and prominent imagery is that of gushing water, which suits his Neoplatonic emphases well.[154] The "water" of human desire is meant to rush, and the "water" of divine beauty gushes forth endlessly to incite desire. Management of human waterways centers not on guarding one's openings, as with Basil, but on sending one's always-rushing waters in the right direction and being

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[153] Gregory's vision of human participation in God as infinitely dynamic is discussed at length in Smith's *Passion and Paradise*, with attention to the distinct treatments of desire in different works. In the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Gregory's theory of ἐπέκτασις (epectasy, defined by Smith as "the soul's eternal movement into God's infinite being") comes to the fore (*Passion and Paradise*, 11, and see chapters 5-7).

[154] Gregory is not alone among Neoplatonists in embracing the movement of water as apt imagery for the processes he describes. Plotinus, for example, famously uses the imagery of the flowing or emanation of water and light to describe the derivation of existing things from the One in the *Enneads*; he also relates the mind's encounter with the One to the cresting of a wave (*Ennead* 6.7.36). On other kinds of parallels between Plotinus and Gregory, see Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 124-127.

receptive to the divine "waters" that flow toward humanity.[155] Gregory's construal of virginity is marked with images of motion and abundance that characterize the turning of human intellect and human energy toward God.

4.2.4. How does the author use the terminology of "seals" and "sealing" when discussing virginity?

Neither in descriptions of virginity nor in references to Mary's virginal conception and bearing does Gregory depict virginal bodies as closed or sealed shut. He uses the language of "sealing" in other ways and gives various valences to the actions of opening and closing or the states of closure and openness. In the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, where we find the most suggestive imagery for considering sexual and anatomical overtones in Gregory's language, the acts most suited to this—enclosing a garden and sealing a fountain, opening a door, being wounded with love, losing one's veil—are interpreted without any connections between opening/closing/closure motifs and female virgins' genital state (aside from connections readers/hearers could bring and impose, as present-day scholars are wont to do). The eroticism of Gregory's theology celebrates the opening or unveiling of the mind toward God and draws on only the most general allusions to sexual desire and union, implying no clear claims or assumptions about virginal bodies in doing so.

Song homily 9, discussed briefly above, considers the enclosed garden and sealed wellspring of Song of Songs 4:12. Gregory urges the person who would become the

[155] More instances where divine nature, teaching, or activity are represented by water in the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* are discussed in Laird, *Gregory*, 54-56, and see further discussion on 135-144, 152-153 of water or "flow" metaphors concerning the mind and the divine.

Lord's "sister" (through doing his will) and "bride" (through being joined to him) to become a "flourishing garden" of diverse trees (9.273). God has planted virtues in this inner human garden that need to be tended in order to mature (9.274, 276-277). "The one who has become a flourishing garden of these kinds of trees, full of plants and secured on every side by the fence of the commandments, so that he yields no passage to the thief and wild animals… this one becomes sister and bride" (9.274-275). One *becomes* an enclosed garden of mature trees.

The "sealed" wellspring or fountain is the necessary source of water for tending this protected orchard. As discussed above, the way to have a properly sealed wellspring is to send the stream of one's thoughts toward the nurturing of the "better nature" instead of consideration of evil (9.276); when the soul's dianoetic faculty is focused on virtues instead of externals, "it is sealed by the imprint of truth, shaped by a disposition toward the good" (9.277). Gregory understands this kind of sealing as a protective mark upon the mind. It "freely gives something inviolable to what is guarded through it" and frightens the thief away (9.276). In this image the bride has reached a point of great virtue, so that her διάνοια stays "untouched by enemies" with purity and passionlessness; purity is what seals and maintains the clarity of the water (9.276). While the language in this section stresses the exclusive guarding and keeping of purity as though for a master or owner (δεσπότης), it remains clear that purity is something achieved and that the "seal" is something given or enacted for the mature mind that has adequately learned where to invest its "water."

Homilies 11 and 12 offer images not of building fences and marking fountains, but of opening the soul toward the divine. In the Song-bride's removal of clothing and washing of feet Gregory reads the soul's creation of new access for the Word, a rending of the "heart's veil" which is the "flesh" or "the old humanity" (11.327-328). In 11.333, the veil is not torn but drawn back, pulled away from the door of her soul so that its gate stands open for the king of glory. Gregory reflects on this moment in the Song (5:4, "My beloved put his hand through the opening") with two different interpretations. He understands from the hand alone being put "through the opening" that the wide space opened in the soul is far too narrow for the bridegroom himself. A first meaning for this is that humans' limited comprehension of divine realities allows only God's "hand," divine activity within the world, to be sensed and grasped by the human soul until the coming age makes fuller knowledge possible (11.333-337).[156] A second meaning takes the confined aperture to be not our limited human knowledge but limited human existence, which the Word incomprehensibly was able to enter by becoming flesh; the bride is prophesying about the incarnation (11.338-339). The image of the "door" that can so easily spur past exegetes and modern scholars to think about vaginas is presented in Gregory's exegesis as an epistemological and ontological frontier where the human and divine make contact.

Homily 12 addresses Song 5:5-7. Gregory interprets the line "I rose to open to my beloved; my hands dripped myrrh" as signifying baptism and a receiving of the power

[156] The extent to which Gregory thinks humans will be able to comprehend God even in an eschatological future is a debated point. One consideration of the problem of how Gregory characterizes the future age can be found in Hans Boersma, "Overcoming Time and Space: Gregory of Nyssa's Anagogical Theology," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 20.4 (2012): 574-612.

of resurrection through virtuous mortification of the body (12.342-344). The middle of the sermon considers the ceaseless searching of the human soul for greater and greater understanding of God (12.352-357). Gregory frames verse 7, in which the bride encounters city watchmen who "struck me, wounded me, took my veil from me," as a series of events that sound negative but are in fact positive (12.359-366). Her spiritual progress reveals that she still has something more to remove from her vision so that she can gaze freely on the beauty she desires, and this removal of a veil is duly accomplished (12.360-361). The watchmen are angels, and their blow to her soul is one that frees it from death (12.361-365); her wound is the mark that the divine makes deep within her (12.365-366). In Homily 13 this reappears as the "arrow of love" lying deep within the soul, the "fellowship with divinity" that wounds the soul with love (13.378). Opening, stripping, and piercing are all understood here as actions affecting the whole symbolic "body" of the soul (correlated with various body parts, but not with genitals) and as representative of the soul's progressing experiences as it transcends earthly constraints and pursues its heavenly lover. Opening, not closing, is the gesture of purity.

Gregory makes brief but fascinating connections between "seals" and virginity in two other instances. One is a scene in the *Life of Macrina* where the virgins in Macrina's community lament her death. Among the cries that Gregory attributes to them—"Quenched is the lamp of our eyes; …destroyed is the safety of our life!"—is the lament, "Taken away is the seal of incorruptibility!" (*Macrina* 26).[157] Apparently Macrina herself can be called a "seal" of other virgins' incorruptibility, perhaps because she has

[157] GNO 8/1.400.

created an imprint of incorruptibility by shaping their angel-like life, proving possible and enabling their participation in incorruptibility. In a *Lord's Prayer* sermon, Gregory states, "Prayer is a seal of virginity."[158] The surrounding context concerns the power of prayer to make people's endeavors successful and to keep them immune to sin through ongoing connection with God; this statement about virginity is part of a list of the ways prayer protects or provides for people in various situations and professions (the next claim in the list is that prayer is a "guarantee of marriage").[159] The "seal" of virginity here appears to be the sure success of steadfast virginal living that prayer makes possible.

Like many ancient Christian authors, then, Gregory speaks of seals and enclosure not with any discernible allusion to the condition of female genitals, but with reference to a range of states and actions for the human soul. If Gregory was familiar with the notion of a virginal hymen at all, then he must not have found the idea remotely helpful for explaining the essence of virginity or the wonder of Mary's childbearing in which motherhood and virginity could coexist. The noetic eroticism of *Virginity* and the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* is better served by imagery of gradually opening up oneself toward purity than by imagery of protecting one's purity through enclosure. Given Gregory's intellectual heritage, it is likely that he, with many Greek philosophers and scientists before and during his time, lacks hymenal concepts altogether, though we have no way of knowing this with certainty. Positive acts of sealing or enclosure, meanwhile, are performed to guard the mind or soul or entire person; sealedness is not

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[158] GNO 7/2.8.
[159] Ibid.

inherent but acquired. Basil's and Gregory's comments on the importance of becoming sealed align with the teachings of other fourth-century authors who discuss virginity, such as Methodius of Olympus and Athanasius of Alexandria. One of Methodius' *Symposium* characters stresses the need for all one's parts and senses to be "pure and sealed" to prevent sin from entering.[160] Athanasius' *Second Letter to Virgins*,[161] a text in which virginity is very much construed as something women preserve and must guard, nevertheless instructs that virgins become "enshrouded, separated, set apart, and withdrawn in every way, with a steadfast will, and to be sealed up, just as you were sealed by the Lord at the beginning as a servant" (in baptism).[162] Such writings show that sealing was a powerful act and metaphor in Christian understanding, and was frequently used in virginity discourse without reference to a notion that female virgins have sealed genitals.

4.2.5. Given all these elements, in what senses is virginity a state of the body?

Like Basil of Ancyra, Gregory anchors virginity in the human soul rather than the human body; he is even less "bodily" in focus than Basil, who explicates the relationship between soul and body at length. Gregory expects the audience of *Virginity* to be familiar with ascetic practices and "bodily virginity," but he redirects their attention from these aspects to a higher level, the true sites of virginity—heaven, the divine, and the

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[160] *Symposium* speech 11.282-283 (SC 95.306).
[161] This is also known as *A Letter to Virgins Who Went and Prayed in Jerusalem and Returned*.
[162] Section 30 as translated by David Brakke in his *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 292-302, at 301. Athanasius goes on to quote Song of Songs 4:12 and urges virgins to "be guarded and withdrawn and sealed."

human mind. The rushing stream of human desire and energy can be aimed in this direction when the wellspring of rational thought is sealed by divine ownership while standing open and uncovered to receive divine purity. The body's meaning in this schema is in the first place antithetical to the life of virginity (the body must "die" as the virtuous mind reigns supreme), but the body is presumably also included in the eschatological promise of resurrection and angelic life, which humans can proleptically enter in an escape from the earthly order of flowing time and physical corruption.

In contrast or at least in addition to what his audiences may assume about "uncorrupt" bodies and the practice of "virginity of the body," Gregory makes bodily virginity a dedication of one's body to the service of incorruptibility instead of the service of the temporary material world and the processes of generation and decay. His writings show no sign of the belief that women's bodies are anatomically altered by defloration, and his discussions of virginity look beyond the body to the soul and humanity's resemblance to a virginal God. To be a virgin is to regain divine likeness and the immortal goodness of incorruptibility.

4.3. Ephrem the Syrian

Ephrem, who is perhaps the best-known ancient author of the Syriac language, is also one of the very few fourth-century Syriac writers whose works survive. He lived in cities on the shifting eastern edge of the Roman empire—Nisibis and, in the final decade of his life (363-373), Edessa. While he was not a bishop, his roles as a deacon, liturgical leader, teacher, and composer of a wealth of hymns, metrical sermons, and works of prose were sufficient to ensure his legacy as one of the foundational theologians for subsequent Syriac Christian traditions of all stripes.[163]

Within these compositions lies a scattered abundance of thought on virginity. Ephrem's authentic works do not seem to include any treatises centered on virginity,[164] but the topic arises often, especially inside two large collections of hymns known as his *Hymns on the Nativity* and *Hymns on Virginity* (with the latter title being somewhat deceptive, since the collection concerns a range of subjects and only a few of its hymns focus on virginity).[165] These poems, along with other passages, exhibit recurring notions

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[163] On the history and character of ascetic practices (including lifelong virginity and post-marital celibacy) among Syriac Christians of the earliest centuries, see Sidney H. Griffith, "Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism," in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 220-245. For a succinct summary of scholarly views on Ephrem's own roles, perspective, and involvement concerning the asceticism of his communities, see the introduction in *St. Ephrem the Syrian: The Hymns on Faith*, trans. Jeffrey T. Wickes, FOTC 130 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 8-13. On women's ascetic roles, see Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant: Women's Choirs and Sacred Song in Ancient Syriac Christianity," *Hugoye* 8 (2005): 125-149.

[164] The prose *Sermon on Virginity* attributed to Ephrem appears to be a pastiche of material from his hymns rather than an authentic work.

[165] The title *Hymns on Virginity* does not come from Ephrem himself. The fifth-century author Philoxenus of Mabbug includes them within the larger group of Ephrem's *Hymns on the Church*: Lucas Van Rompay, "*Mallpânâ dilan Suryâyâ*: Ephrem in the Works of Philoxenus of Mabbog," *Hugoye* 7.1 (2007): 83-105, at 90. André de Halleux has shown that the same is true for an early manuscript that classifies Ephrem's hymns: "Une clé pour les hymnes d'Ephrem dans le ms Sinaï syr. 10," *Le Muséon* 85 (1972): 171-199. Kathleen McVey points out that a postscript in a principal manuscript for the collection expands on the

that connect across works and make it possible to speak of Ephrem's discourse on virginity as a coherent realm within his thought; yet it is a loose coherence. His writing, especially in the poetry of the hymns, relies not on clear-cut systematic exposition but on the richness of symbolism and the power of paradoxes. The significance of images and terms often proves fluid and full of interconnections. Although the genre of the hymn thus resists the stability of a simple or singular definition for a concept like virginity, clear patterns do emerge that warrant generalization. Ephrem's mapping of female virginity can be fruitfully considered using the same spectrums as the thought of his Greek- and Latin-writing contemporaries, and his distinctive configuration entails both unitive themes and a remarkable versatility of vocabulary and imagery.

4.3.1. Is virginity primarily located in the body or soul(/mind)?

In contrast to many authors, Ephrem does not tend to conceptually isolate "bodily virginity" by naming it as a discrete idea or dimension from "virginity of the soul" (as we saw with Basil and will see with Ambrose). One prose passage, *Letter to Publius* 15, treats virginity of the body as a potential misconstrual of virginity (a move not unlike some of Gregory's): it presents a judgment scene where "pure virgins" who are betrothed

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Virginity title with the phrase "and on the Symbols of the Lord," which better accounts for the eclectic contents and uniting themes of these hymns: *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, trans. Kathleen E. McVey (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 259 (and see a discussion in the introduction, 39-47). Hymns 1-3 and 24 of this collection are the most pertinent for considering Ephrem's virginity discourse; on their editions, content, and possible contexts, see also Francisco Javier Martínez, "Efrén de Nisibis, Himnos *De virginitate*, I-III," in *To Train His Soul in Books: Syriac Asceticism in Early Christianity*, ed. Robin Darling Young and Monica J. Blanchard (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 23-53.

to Christ "only in their bodies" and lack good deeds find that their virginity is rejected by the Lord, while the good deeds of non-virgins make up for their lack of virginity.[166] Even so, Ephrem's way of construing virginity is undeniably bodily. In *Publius* 15, persons who have betrothed their bodies in a marriage can surpass virgins because of being "clothed" in good deeds and love for the Lord, but this pertains to one's overall standing before Christ and not to the question of what counts as true virginity. To commit one's body to marriage while dedicating one's spirit to the love of God is superior to committing one's body alone to virginity—but Ephrem does not say this makes the married person a virgin. Virginity is defined by the relationship(s) to which one has given one's body (ܦܓܪܗ): virgins dedicate their bodies exclusively to the Lord, while those who are married have committed their bodies to another relationship, as well.

In the many passages on virginity found in his hymns, Ephrem rarely dichotomizes bodies and souls/minds.[167] His discussions of female virginity have a strongly physical character, and they create the overall impression that this author understands virginity to be a state of the whole person for which the body is paramount. He develops two major themes in his discourse that serve as core definitions for female virginity: female virginity is a state of barrenness (but one that God has miraculously transformed into a state of fertility), and female virginity is a precious and precarious sexual state, always susceptible to threat and doubt (but one for which God has

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[166] The Syriac text is available in Sebastian Brock, "Ephrem's Letter to Publius," *Le Muséon* 89 (1976): 261-305 (quotations translated from 286).

[167] Although Ephrem sometimes draws sharper distinctions between these components of the human being elsewhere, he usually stresses the union of body and soul in his theology. On the thorough integration of body, soul, and spirit in his anthropology, see P. Tanios Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique de Saint Ephrem le Syrien* (Kaslik: Université Saint Esprit, 1988), 430-451.

ingeniously created proofs). The first theme appears when Ephrem dwells on the wonder of the virgin Mary becoming a mother; the second emerges when he dwells on the problem of a virgin's vulnerability to the "stealing" of her virginity and the problem of non-Christian slander against Mary or present-day Christian virgins. Both of these themes center on the body.

When writing about Mary's virginal conception of Christ, Ephrem frequently defines virginity as physical sterility. Her womb is compared to fruitless places in natural or agricultural landscapes, such as rock and dry earth.[168] She calls herself "barren" or "deprived" (ܚܝܫܐ) in *Nativity* 5.19, underscoring the absence of physical reproduction from virginal women's bodies.[169] Mary's wondrous conceiving and bearing are repeatedly tied to the reversals of fertility experienced by other biblical figures, especially Elizabeth (*Nativity* 2.20, 6.16, 21.16-17),[170] and Ephrem pictures barren women from Bethlehem caressing the miraculously conceived baby Jesus and asking him to bless their wombs with fertility (*Nativity* 7.13). The earth's fecundity or barrenness is also set up as a fitting parallel for Mary's: "(It was) winter, which made the land barren; (yet) during it

[168] See section 4.3.3 below for examples of the numerous passages where this occurs.
[169] CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.49. My translations are often influenced by those of McVey in *Ephrem*.
[170] See *Nativity* 8.13-16, where Mary's virginal fertility is both superior to and in continuity with the newfound fertility of biblical wives whose barrenness was reversed only after long periods of suffering and prayer. Reversal of fertility and the relationship between Mary's and Elizabeth's fertility is also prominent in sections 1.12-17 of the *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, a work attributed to Ephrem but recently argued to be an early-fifth-century product of his students (with much of its content drawn from Ephrem himself). On its authorship see Christian Lange, *The Portrayal of Christ in the Syriac Commentary on the Diatessaron* (Louvain: Peeters, 2005); *Ephraem der Syrer. Kommentar zum Diatessaron*, trans. Christian Lange, FC 54.1-2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008).

virginity learned the act of birthing. (It was) December,[171] which stills the land's birthpangs; (yet) during it there were birthpangs for virginity" (*Nativity* 4.121-122).[172]

Borrowing terminology from biblical accounts, Ephrem sometimes speaks of these changes in fertility as instances of God opening or closing wombs, rendering them fertile or sterile.[173] An infertile womb, whether of a barren wife or a virgin, is understood to be "closed." In *Nativity* 21.16-17, for example, Elizabeth's initial sterility is contrasted with Mary's virginal productivity in the language of closing and opening:

> The married woman was barren and suppressed of fruits,
> while Mary's womb chastely conceived.
> … Barrenness made supplication so that the will that was capable would close the open gate, open the closed one.
> He made the wedded womb sterile; he made the virginal womb fruitful.[174]

Either God or Christ is cast as the agent responsible for human fertility or sterility in *Nativity* 6.16, 7.13, 8.14-16, and 14.9-10 and *Virginity* 7.3 and 22.14-15.[175] In *Nativity* 4, Christ's agency is especially pronounced. Constructing parallels between the life-giving events of Christ's birth and his death and resurrection, Ephrem writes:

> As the fetus of the Son was being formed in the womb,
> he himself was forming infants in the womb.
> … As he (hung) on the cross, he gave life to the dead;
> in the same way, while he was an infant, he was forming infants.
> As he was being killed, he was opening tombs;
> while he was being in the womb, he opened wombs.[176]

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[171] Or January: ܟܢܘܢ. The wording does not indicate which of the two months is meant.
[172] CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.36.
[173] On the biblical expression "opening the womb," see chapter 3.3 of this dissertation.
[174] CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.108.
[175] Ephrem likwise attributes womb-opening to God in *Commentary on Genesis* 14.3 and 28.1.
[176] *Nativity* 4.161, 170-171 (CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.40-41). Wombs and tombs are also linked in later Syriac baptismal imagery and liturgies.

Here "opening wombs" designates Christ's forming of fetuses in their mother's bodies, which parallels the restoration of life to the dead accomplished through his own death and resurrection. Another hymn, *Nativity* 10, posits the same tight relationship between wombs and tombs, but in this case Ephrem is describing not ordinary, fertile wombs but the infertile, virginal one in which Christ himself was conceived and brought to term:

> 6. With your resurrection you convinced them [slanderers]
> about your birth…
>
> 7. A womb and Sheol joyfully shouted and cried out
> about your resurrection. A womb conceived you—
> it was sealed; Sheol birthed you—
> it was marked by a signet. It was not by nature
> that the womb conceived and Sheol yielded!
>
> 8. Sealed was the tomb that they entrusted
> with guarding the dead one. Virginal was the womb
> that no one knew. A virginal womb
> and a sealed tomb, like trumpets,
> cried out to a deaf people, into its ear.[177]

According to this hymn, the miraculous birth and resurrection mutually prove one another, defeating the doubt of non-believers (who are usually "the people" of the Jews). To find a living person inside a sealed tomb is just as unexpected as finding a growing baby within a "closed" womb, which is a space devoid of life.[178] With Christ, the grave gives birth and the sterile womb of a virgin conceives; places of death are transformed into places that produce life. These hymns stress the power of God to alter nature itself, changing death into life and virginity into fecundity. In all of these celebrations of

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[177] *Nativity* 10.6-8 (CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.67-68).
[178] Compare also the understanding of an infertile womb as dead in *Commentary on Genesis* 12.3 and in chapter 1 of the *Commentary on the Diatessaron*.

Mary's conception, gestation, and parturition, the fundamental significance of her virginity is that the virgin body is, by nature, an infertile body.

While other ancient authors sometimes touch on the paradox of a virgin being able to give birth, the equation of virginity with sterility is usually peripheral, not central in their mapping of virginity. This point of focus also contradicts common expectations for modern readers regarding what ancient authors find miraculous about Christ's nativity. Many who are familiar with the doctrine of Mary's virginity *in partu* expect ancient sources portraying Mary as a perpetual virgin to focus on the miraculous preservation of her organs, especially her hymen tissue, during the process of giving birth; the wonder is thought to stem primarily from the impossibility (without divine intervention) of a baby both being conceived in and emerging from a womb that remains sealed shut by a membrane. As we will see further below and in section 4.3.4, some of Ephrem's passages that contain the terminology of "seals" and "sealing" might indicate similar ideas. In many cases, however, Ephrem points not to an intact hymen, but to Mary's virginal sterility as the overcome obstacle that causes amazement.[179] To express the wonder of her conceiving and bearing, Ephrem foregrounds not a genital barrier, but the barrenness of Mary's body. Conceiving and bearing routinely appear in tandem in his hymns, and with Mary they represent a single miracle of a lifeless womb producing

[179] As we saw in chapter 3, mariological studies have often posed too narrow a range of questions in studies of early authors' thought on Mary's virginity, asking if her womb remained intact and whether her delivery was ordinary and painful. Ephrem's comments do not give clear answers to these questions or show whether they are relevant for his understanding of Mary's virginal status. Pertinent texts are gathered and discussed in Ignacio Ortiz de Urbina, "La Vergine Maria nella teologia di S. Efrem," in *Symposium Siriacum 1972* (Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1974), 65-104 (see especially 77-88).

life.[180] This focus on fertility is of a piece with larger patterns in his writings, where multiple processes or events—human, divine, and otherwise—are cast in the language of begetting or giving birth, using a wide range of vocabulary that designates wombs.[181] In light of the firm hold that fertility has on Ephrem's poetic and exegetical imagination, it should not be surprising that he places so much emphasis on the idea that virginity is physical sterility. At the same time, it is truly distinctive for this idea to reside at the core of a fourth-century author's virginity discourse.

Another point of contrast with several Greek and Latin authors is that Ephrem seldom emphasizes virgins' alternative (spiritual) forms of reproduction when he reflects on Mary's virginal fertility.[182] The nearest analogue in his recurring imagery is the idea that Christ "dwells" (ܥܓܢ) in celibate female Christians. This appears in *Virginity* 24.11

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[180] Examples of the pairing of conception and birth include *Virginity* 6.7-8 and 42.12-26, 29; *Nativity* 16.8, 19.8, and 22.36; *Hymns on Faith* 20.5; see also the parallelism in *Faith* 4.2, which sometimes appears as strophe 20 of *Nativity* 21. Writing in Mary's voice in *Nativity* 15.5-6, Ephrem pairs her wondrous conceiving with her mouth's "birthing" of praise, and summarizes her bodily fertility saying, "…the womb conceived you [Christ] without marital union, and without seed the womb birthed you" (CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.82). The miracle of both the conception and the birth is her fruitfulness.

[181] No fewer than six Syriac terms can at least sometimes be rendered in English as "womb": ܟܪܣܐ and ܒܛܢܐ (the most common in Ephrem), ܡܥܝܐ (commonly used in the Bible), and also ܟܘܪܣ, ܟܘܦܐ, and ܟܣܝ. Though some of these terms can be used to refer to other parts of the body than the uterus or reproductive organs (for example, the belly or a cavity more generally, or the lap or bosom), the three that are most commonly used by Ephrem do not seem to have a clear semantic distinction in his works. For various examples of the diverse entities and processes described through the language of conceiving, begetting, and birth, see *Hymns on the Resurrection* 8.7, *Nativity* 21.7-8, *Virginity* 6.7-8, and *Nativity* 4.154 (all dealing with wombs of the divine or of creation); *Sermon on our Lord* 2 for the recurring motif that Christ had multiple kinds of births; *Hymns on the Church* 36.3, *Virginity* 7.3, 5-8 and *Nativity* 24.16 (on baptism and the Church's fertility); *Faith* 20.1-5 (on prayer and faith) and *Publius* 1 (on the gospel having a womb); *Nativity* 15.5-6, *Sermon on Our Lord* 10, *Virginity* 23.4-5 and *Virginity* 42.9-29 (on birthing praise or speech, or prophecy and evangelism as birthing). A few of these topics and activities are linked to wombs and birthing by several early Christian authors: on baptism, for instance, see Robin M. Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity: Ritual, Visual, and Theological Dimensions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 56-58, 143-149, 162-165. Others are far less common, and these connections' prominence throughout Ephrem's works is noteworthy.

[182] Greek and Latin examples are numerous; we already saw Gregory speak of the virgin's immortal offspring in *Virginity* 13.3 and 14.3.

and 25.10 as well as *Nativity* 12.9 and 17.11; in *Nativity* 17.5 and 4.130-132 this dwelling is said to be within the mind (and contrasted with his bodily dwelling in the womb in 4.130), though *Nativity* 12.5-6 locates the dwelling within or inside of the "seal" and "signet" that chaste women possess (this passage is translated and discussed below). Virgins encapsulate Christ rather than birthing him, or birthing anything else. Mary's sterility is changed into full-fledged fecundity, but other virgins embody a rather static imitation of her pregnancy that is a step removed from fertility imagery; the reversal of virginal barrenness is for Mary alone. This is particularly remarkable given Ephrem's general attitude toward human reproduction, which is much more positive than the attitude found in some of his contemporaries' works or in alternative Syriac perspectives that condemn marriage, sexual intercourse, and childbearing altogether.[183]

Ephrem's second major way of defining female virginity—as the precious and precarious state of not having engaged in sexual relations—concerns not only Mary, but figures of the Old Testament and the virgins of Ephrem's own day. Virgins in his audience are cautioned that their virginity could easily be lost, while his full audience is assured that God has designed means of proving the presence of virginity, for Mary's sake and the sake of the Christian virgins whose persisting virginity is constantly doubted and slandered by outsiders. Although these proofs are varied and not exclusively focused on anatomical (or other bodily) features, in all instances Ephrem seems to be thinking of female virginity as a state that depends upon what happens to or with a woman's body.

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[183] On the range of early Syriac ascetic perspectives and attitudes toward sexual reproduction and Ephrem's relatively positive stance, see Sergey Minov, "Marriage and Sexuality in the *Book of Steps*: From Encratism to Orthodoxy," in *Breaking the Mind: New Studies in the Syriac* Book of Steps, ed. Kristian S. Heal and Robert A. Kitchen (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 221-261.

Ephrem's discourse on the loss, preservation, or proof of virginity involves a perplexing terminological problem for translators and interpreters. He uses not only the Syriac term *btulutā* (ܒܬܘܠܘܬܐ), typically translated as "virginity," but also *btulē* (ܒܬܘܠܹܐ), a plural term with notorious difficulties. Equivalent to the Hebrew term *betulim*, it is grammatically masculine and could be rendered most basically as "virgin things/people"; as a collective, it can be taken as either concrete ("virginal proofs," "virginal body parts") or abstract ("virginity").[184] It translates equally ambiguous Hebrew and Greek terms that could most basically be rendered as "virginities" or "virgin things." In biblical and other literature, the term sometimes indicates some unspecified sign(s) or feature(s) of virginity, while at other times it serves as a synonym for virginity itself, or for the idea of "virginness," the quality of being a virgin. Deuteronomy 22 delineates situations where a new husband accuses his wife of lacking her *btulē*, and her parents must present the *btulē* to elders on a cloth if she is to be vindicated. In a case like this, the term may refer to stains of vaginal blood used as physiological proof that her husband was her first sexual partner,[185] and it could refer to anatomical forms of proof in other instances (such as a virginally narrow vagina or the presence of a hymen).[186] In Ephrem's works, *btulē* sometimes appear to be signs that prove a woman has retained her virginity, but at other

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[184] See the dictionary entries in CSD (Payne Smith, 1903), p. 56 and SL (Sokoloff, 2009), p. 195.
[185] The likelihood that Ephrem understands the evidence to be bloodstains is supported by *Hymns against Heresies* 47.1, where he sets in parallel the cloths of Hebrew brides and a eucharistic cloth possessed by Christians that holds the blood of Christ.
[186] The Hebrew equivalent is frequently used for bloodstains or bleeding in early rabbinic sources, and eventually comes to refer to anatomical markers like a hymenal membrane. The latter meaning is possible in certain Talmudic discussions of girls' *betulim* (sometimes spelled *betulin* in rabbinic texts); see my chapter section 5.3. These late ancient interpretations may be the first Jewish sources to equate the *betulim* with a hymen. I thank Michael Rosenberg for sharing this insight with me.

times the word is conflated or used interchangeably with *btulutā*, "virginity." The possible bodily referents of virginity's "signs" remain unclear, and the examples below include instances where the term must refer instead to "virginity" or "virginness."

Hymns on Virginity 1-3 convey that virginity is highly valuable and all too easily lost or taken. It is called a "pearl" (a common designation elsewhere in Ephrem's works as well) and associated with treasuries and the risk of theft.[187] Ephrem employs Old Testament narratives to communicate these qualities. Warning virgins to avoid wine, he points out in *Virginity* 1 that wine conquered men as honorable as Noah (Gen 9:20-27) and allowed Lot's daughters to steal conception from Lot (Gen 19:30-38). He continues, "How much more will (wine) do what is easy: that through it men steal *btulē*. …Guard your treasury from young men" (*Virginity* 1.11).[188] *Virginity* 2 dwells on Tamar's angst following her rape by Amnon (2 Sam 13).

> 4. Tamar rent her garments, for she saw that her pearl was lost.
> In place of her coat she would be able to acquire another,
> while for her virginity (ܒܬܘܠܝܘܬܐ) she could not find a substitute**,**
> for if (it is) stolen, it cannot be recovered again…
>
> 5. Tamar was afraid to be silent and she was ashamed to speak;
> since she could not be silent and also could not speak,
> she rent her garments, so that the evident rips
> would cry out in the silence that her hidden *btulē* had been pillaged.
> The great number of pearls that were upon her did not console her
> about that (lost) one that was greatest.
>
> 6. The young woman was a king's daughter whose limbs carried beryls,
> yet her virginity (ܒܬܘܠܝܘܬܐ), while single—it exceeded all of them.
> For this reason the unclean one disdained the beryls yet ploughed the signets,

[187] Terms like "pearl" and "treasury" are theologically dense, appearing in Ephrem's works not only to label virginity but also to refer to the gospel, faith, all manner of divine blessings, and sometimes Christ himself.
[188] CSCO 223 Scr. Syr. 94.4.

and rejected the jewels yet stole the *btulē*.[189]

Ephrem builds on the theme of preciousness and precariousness in the same hymn by addressing virginity in the second person with words of warning. "A thief knows your value, virginity, but you do not perceive how much your worth is!" (*Virginity* 2.6).[190] "Behold, in the inner room and in the wilderness they lie in wait for you, O virginity… To where will you go, lone dove, since your hunters are many in every place?" (*Virginity* 2.8).[191] He marshals another biblical pair, Dinah and Shechem (Gen 34), to illustrate the dangers that threaten virginity and the dangers that will threaten its thieves, drawing parallels with Tamar's vulnerability and Amnon's later fate (2.8-9). Jephthah's daughter provides an example of a virgin whose pearl, remaining with her through all dangers, "consoled her" (a surprising reading of Judges 11:29-40)—"whereas she whose pearl is lost here—sorrow will be her companion at her death; and on the day of resurrection there will be fear again, in the presence of that judge, when she has repented" (2.10).[192]

In this hymn, Ephrem assumes that female virginity can be removed against one's will, and this places a practical and sometimes moral burden on the female virgin. Although he stresses Amnon's deceitful cunning (2.1-3) and calls Tamar "innocent" (or at least "guileless": ܫܠܝܡܬܐ—2.2),[193] he still depicts her as a woman filled with grief because her virginity has been destroyed (again, she "rent her garments, for she saw that

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[189] *Virginity* 2.4-6 (CSCO 223 Scr. Syr. 94.5-6).
[190] CSCO 223 Scr. Syr. 94.6.
[191] CSCO 223 Scr. Syr. 94.6-7. Ephrem repeatedly presents virginity or chastity as a bird in a nest that might be uprooted or hunted (*Virginity* 1.7, 2.1, 3.16, and 24.1-3).
[192] CSCO 223 Scr. Syr. 94.7.
[193] CSCO 223 Scr. Syr. 94.5.

her pearl was lost," thus signaling the theft of her hidden *btulē*: 2.4-5). The assault on her body constitutes a theft of her virginity; her virginal status is endangered and lost, regardless of her own will in the matter. The warning about judgment on the day of resurrection in 2.10 and the remaining sections of the hymn (2.11-15), which consist in exhortations for virgins to guard their behaviors and portray chastity with all their senses, seem to assign full responsibility to the virgin herself (even if a measure of comfort may be present in the reminders of 2.7 and 2.9 that those who destroy virginity reap their own destruction). Virginity, a precious commodity that thieves desire and hunters pursue, appears to reside in the body, which is vulnerable to attack.

In other hymns, Ephrem deals with the question of stolen virginity differently. *Virginity* 1.9 declares that a man who uses force against a virgin proves her chastity by his coercion, and that her will (ܨܒܝܐ), like a priest with hyssop, purifies her (ܚܣܠܠ).[194] *Virginity* 3.12 imagines situations of theft where the pearl of virginity may be surrendered to the thief by the victim; as a result, both parties become thieves but lose the treasure itself. Similarly, 3.13 implies culpability for a virgin who cooperates with her aggressor. In *Nativity* 12.10, the possibility of theft is denied altogether: Christ protects his virginal brides and would thwart the attempt to steal virginity.[195] Such variety suggests a preoccupation with the difficult problem of virginity's fundamental location, especially in the dissonance between the body and the soul or will when virgins are sexually assaulted. Ephrem raises this issue in conversation with scriptural stories and laws, outlining

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[194] CSCO 223 Scr. Syr. 94.3.
[195] The thief intending to steal would be "brought to naught and destroyed" (CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.73).

possible ways to resolve the problem and to frame diverse situations in which virginity is lost. Only in one case (*Virginity* 1.9) is the body's status trumped by the will, and even here Ephrem makes a claim about chastity and purity rather than a clear claim about retained virginity.

Meanwhile, the same *Hymns on Virginity* focus on the body in other ways. Whereas Christ's assumption of a human body is sometimes described as the donning of a garment,[196] *Virginity* 1 speaks to the body (ܦܓܪܐ) as the site of the self, urging it to strip off the old human being in favor of the new (1.1) and to choose to be inhabited by virginity rather than by wicked desire (1.7-8).[197] The body is directly addressed with similar exhortations and warnings in *Virginity* 3.3-10. As we will see below, virgins are instructed to show their divine betrothed the proof of their virginity "on" or "with" their bodies (*Virginity* 3.14). Whether he is focusing on virgins' innocence or their complicity in the theft of their virginity, Ephrem tends to make the body the basic locus of identity as well as of virginity as he describes virginity's worth and the danger of theft.[198]

Closely tied to these depictions of virginity under threat is the notion that Christian virginity is under attack in another form: non-Christians disbelieve that Mary and lifelong celibates have remained virgins, and they level slander against both. These

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[196] For example, in *Nativity* 16.11 and 17.4. For further examples and discussion of early Syriac correlations between the body and a garment, see Sebastian Brock, "Clothing Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Syriac Tradition," in *Typus, Symbol, Allegorie bei den östlichen Vätern und ihren Parallelen im Mittelalter*, ed. Margot Schmidt (Regensburg: Pustet,1982), 11-38.

[197] CSCO 223 Scr. Syr. 94.1, 3.

[198] Compare also the use of another word for body, ܒܕܥܬܐ, in *Nativity* 28.5 (CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.142). Here Ephrem deliberates over whether to label Mary as a virgin or a wife; he says that each title is contradicted by something else about her status, yet the body is a single entity and does not allow a person to be called two different things at once. Her virginal or non-virginal status is located in her body.

outsiders are generally Jews, though their identity is not always specified; as Christine Shepardson has argued, Ephrem portrays those outside the bounds of proper faith in ways that conflate groups, particularly by linking non-Nicene Christian theology with Jewishness.[199] In several passages of the *Nativity* and *Virginity* hymns, Ephrem sets up a picture in which slanderers (and any others) who doubt virgins' virginity are answered by proofs that protect women and conquer doubt. Although virginity is a precarious state, it is also reassuringly verifiable.

Such passages show that Ephrem has diverse proofs for virginity in mind. Not all are based on physiological or anatomical evidence, but just as with virginity's precariousness above, they appear to rest on the assumption that bodily sexual activity is the dividing line between a virginal and non-virginal state. Ephrem's terms for the evidence of virginity remain ambiguous and tend to have multiple meanings; the nearest we come to clarity is in a few discussions of Mary and her indisputably virginal status.

In some passages, the proofs of Mary's virginity are clearly located beyond any observable features of her body. Miraculous events surrounding Jesus or his family give witness to the virgin birth. In *Nativity* 6.3-5, Mary tells her infant that she is persecuted and slandered, asking him to defend her against the evil people who doubt that his conception was pure; she urges him, "Show miracles, for they will persuade (doubters) where your conception is from" (6.3).[200] In *Nativity* 10, the virgin birth and Christ's resurrection are proofs for one another. The *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, which

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[199] Christine Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy: Ephrem's Hymns in Fourth-century Syria* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008).
[200] CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.51.

survives among Ephrem's works but which, in its final redaction, may be the work of his students,[201] perpetuates the idea that miraculous events provide convincing evidence of Mary's virginity. Joseph comes to believe that her conception was virginal because of Zechariah falling mute, Elizabeth conceiving, and other wonders (*Diatessaron* 2.4, cf. 2.19). Jesus' astonishing mode of birth is "sealed and confirmed" by his act of turning water into wine (*Diatessaron* 5.6-7).[202] In such instances, Mary's virginity still seems to be the bodily state of abstinence from sexual relations, but one looks elsewhere—not to bodily features—for proof of its presence.

The most extensive discussion of proving virginity considers both Mary and present-day virgins: *Nativity* 12 opens by expressing amazement over Christ's incarnation and quickly turns to the matter of slander and proof, which are the subject of strophes 2-10 (quoted in full here).

> 2. Infant in the womb, since the seal of virginity
> remains, the womb became for you
> the royal temple, and *btulē*
> a curtain (ܦܬܘܪ ܗܘ ܟܐ) over it [the temple]. *Btulē* outside,
> a fetus inside: a great paradox!
>
> 3. O for the chest that was empty
> and was sealed—and while it was marked by a signet,
> there came forth from within (it) the great signet
> of the king of kings! The witness cries out
> that this gift is not nature's.
>
> 4. *Btulē* have belonged to the race of women
> on your account, that they might confirm that your conception
> was holy. Within the seals
> your purity dwelled. The seal rebukes
> the one who brings false accusations that your mother committed deception.

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[201] See note 170 above.
[202] Based on the Syriac available in *Commentaire de l'évangile concordant: texte syriaque (Manuscrit Chester Beatty 709); folios additionnels*, ed. Louis Leloir (Leuven: Peeters, 1990), 40-42.

5. Within the seal you have dwelled now also,
within chaste women, and if someone slanders
your betrotheds, the silent seal
shrieks to counter him; the sealed
curtain cries out that our king is there.

6. The seal gives witness for your betrotheds
and for the one who birthed you. Within the seal
you were dwelling in your mother, and in chaste women
(you dwell) within the signet. Your seal will declare innocence
for your betrotheds just as for your mother.

7. Since chaste holiness (ܩܕܝܫܘܬܐ)[203] is lofty, so that it is not credible
among unclean people, the seal and signet
of the king of kings persuades (people) that the pearl
is preserved. Your handmaids acquire
good defenders among slanderers.

8. If with a seal this treasury
was not believed in, without a signet
who would be able to believe
that it was not pillaged? God convinced
people for the sake of his holy ones.

9. You dwelled in Mary, and unclean people slandered (her, saying)
that the conception was not yours.[204] And since you have dwelled now
within chaste women, now they are slandered
like pregnant women. They slander the one who is pregnant
and the one who is not pregnant: a great atrocity!

10. Your wall of defense (ܩܝܛܘܢܟ) guards your betrotheds
just like your mother. And if there were a thief
who came to steal, by you he would be brought to naught
and destroyed; and if there were a slanderer
who came to slander, by you he would be made speechless.[205]

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[203] This term, used in early Syriac sources to denote both holiness and chastity, is often applied more narrowly to those who have committed themselves to celibacy after marriage (see Griffith, "Asceticism," 223). In this hymn, Ephrem seems to use terms concerning virgins' chastity in particular, or possibly has in mind the chastity shared by both groups. On potential difficulties and pitfalls with interpreting the term in fourth-century works, see Naomi Koltun-Fromm, "Yokes of the Holy-Ones: The Embodiment of a Christian Vocation," *Harvard Theological Review* 94.2 (2001): 207-220.
[204] Perhaps meaning that this was not the conception of the Christ.
[205] CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.71-73.

Throughout these sections of the hymn, a "seal" and "signet" offer indubitable evidence that Mary and Christian virgins have retained their virginity. Because of the great flexibility of Ephrem's terms and images, concrete genital interpretations for the "seal" and "signet" are possible in some—but not all—of their occurrences, even inside this hymn; for example, in strophe 3 the "great signet" that "comes forth" is Christ. The multiple meanings of these terms will be discussed at greater length in 4.3.4. This hymn, more than any other, seems likely to evince the notion of a hymen: the *btulē* become a "curtain" over a "sealed" womb, which may be meant to indicate that virginal wombs are sealed with a membrane. If Ephrem's terms should be taken this concretely, then we have in *Nativity* 12 a highly physical, anatomically-based understanding for how one might verify virginity.

As we have already seen with Tamar's virginity, however, the *btulē* cannot always mean "bodily signs that prove virginity." Besides its use to mean "virginity" or "virginness" in *Virginity* 2, there are moments when it would be illogical to treat *btulē* as a hymen or as blood. Ephrem consistently describes Mary as a virgin and never as non-virginal, but he also says that her virginal child "put on his mother's *btulē* and brought (them) out with him" when he emerged (*Nativity* 19.9).[206] If this referred to a hymen or blood, the "bringing out" of the evidence would suggest that her virginity was lost in the course of giving birth. A better interpretation is that as a virgin himself, Christ "wears" (i.e., lives out) the same virginity as his mother during his earthly life.[207] In *Nativity*

[206] CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.100.
[207] This is also Beck's interpretation in CSCO 187 Scr. Syr. 83.90-91 (n. 12).

16.12-13, Mary sings again that her son has "put on" (ܠܒܫ) her pearl, which "has not been lost" (ܕܠܐ ܐܒܕ); she compares virginity (ܒܬܘܠܝܘܬܐ) to a high priest's vestment, and virgins' *btulē* to purple robes that only the king may touch (both are reserved for Christ alone).[208] The parallelism and idea of Christ touching and wearing the *btulē* favor a more abstract interpretation of the term than "bodily signs of virginity."

Some passages invoke specific Old Testament models for assessing chastity, and these too require that *btulē* refer to multiple things. The biblical means of verifying chastity include the presentation of a virginal bride's *btulē* in Deuteronomy 22 and the drinking of bitter waters in Numbers 5 to test the faithfulness of a wife accused of adultery. *Nativity* 14.11-15 reads:

> 11. While the unclean people were fornicating
> and envious, God saw
> how many were slandering, and he had compassion
> for females. Because of us
> he multiplied his strategems among the slanderers.
>
> 12. So if her partner should hate her,
> he would (have to) write to dismiss her; and if he was being envious with her,
> the waters (of testing) proved her (innocent); and if he slandered her,
> (her father) presented the cloth. All slander
> was confounded with Mary, who was sealed.
>
> 13. Moses laid out beforehand
> how much they were slandering: that though cloths
> of virgins were (kept) with their parents,
> they denounced them and killed them.
> How much more did they slander the son's mother!
>
> 14. With water tests and with cloths
> he instructed them, so that when he came—
> the Lord of conceptions[209]—and they slandered the womb
> that he dwelled in, pure *btulē*

[208] CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.85-86.
[209] Or "fetuses" (ܪܚܡ̈ܐ).

in the face of its conception[210] would convince them about him.[211]

15. If, therefore, (in the case) of a man's wife,
btulē that came forth saved her from the sword,
guard (*btulē*) and be guarded (by *btulē*),[212]
(you) wise women. It is (a kind of) war-arms that, if its master is guilty,[213]
turns to make war with him.[214]

Virginity 3.14 deals solely with more recent virgins:

It is written that if a husband accuses his wife, her father brings out her *btulē*;
however, since your betrothed is the high one who sees secretly,
show hidden *btulē* to your hidden Lord secretly,
not with your cloth but with your body.
Wronged women showed *btulē* with a cloth;
as for you—show your *btulē* to your betrothed.[215]

The allusions to Deuteronomy 22 rely on *btulē* being physical evidence of virginity (probably blood on "the cloth"). This form of physiological evidence cannot be the referent of *btulē* when the term is applied to Mary or lifelong virgins. Permanent virgins would not have produced the bloodstains that could be used to prove premarital virginity, so *Nativity* 14.14 must mean something else by Mary's *btulē* (and 14.15 can only reiterate the meaning from Deuteronomy if this address is meant for wives and not virgins—whereas in the context of Mary's persisting *btulē*, one would expect an exhortation to "preserve *btulē*" to be addressed to virgins). Both passages gesture toward this problem by making the biblical verification model a precursor to the more recent

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[210] Or "in light of its (also having a) fetus."
[211] Namely, that he had been miraculously conceived.
[212] Or "preserve and be preserved" (ܢܛܪ).
[213] That is, guilty of false accusation, or "defeated" in his false accusation. In Deuteronomy 22.18-19, the false accuser of a virginal bride receives a penalty.
[214] CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.79-80.
[215] CSCO 223 Scr. Syr. 94.12.

proofs or embodiments of virginity. The Old Testament means of testing chastity become lessons on the way to Mary's "pure" virginity or means of proof (*Nativity* 14.14), and Christian virgins are told to show the Lord not *btulē* on a cloth, but hidden *btulē* that are demonstrated with the body (*Virginity* 3.14). It is possible that Ephrem is thinking of an anatomical indicator of virginity such as a hymen, or some other bodily trait that his audience would find familiar; he could also be speaking less concretely. Possibly Mary's surpassing "virginness" is the proof that seals (i.e., confirms) her virginity beyond a doubt or shows that she is, as a person, "sealed" by virginity (i.e., pledged to it).[216] In light of Ephrem's diverse uses of the term "hidden," the language of "hidden" *btulē* that are shown with the body could refer to the supra-earthly quality of Christian virginity, which is manifest on a spiritual level but enacted with one's body and way of life in the world (compare the spiritual seal left *upon bodies* by baptismal anointing in *Virginity* 7.6).[217] His shift between biblical models and necessarily divergent uses of *btulē* provides oblique acknowledgement of the odd fit between biblical material on no-longer-virginal wives and the situation of permanent virgins, while a common thread joins the

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[216] Again, see section 4.3.4 below for further discussion on the many meanings of "seals" and "sealing" in Ephrem's works.

[217] Ephrem's dichotomy between what is "hidden" (ܟܣܝܐ) and what is "revealed" (ܓܠܝܐ) operates in a range of ways. He uses these terms to juxtapose heavenly versus earthly entities (thus often calling God "the hidden one"), the spiritual as opposed to the openly sensible, or private interior realities as opposed to things openly known. It can refer to the revealing and concealing that are bound up with types or prefigurations and their fulfillment. It may sometimes indicate true (hidden) reality as opposed to mere appearance, designate the inward and outward aspects of a human being, or refer to things that are considered internal to the human body in contrast with things apparent on the outside of the body. Ephrem refers to *btulē* as hidden on more than one occasion (*Nativity* 28.5, *Virginity* 2.5, and in *Virginity* 3.14 above), but the rich range of meanings makes it difficult to grasp what he means by either term in *Virginity* 3.14. It may be that we should take *btulē* here as "virginness" that exists on a spiritual or interior level, much as John's virginity is called a pearl hidden within him (*Virginity* 15.4). If *btulē* is meant to refer to bodily evidence of female virginity, such evidence is perhaps thought to be "hidden" in the interior of the body or not openly evident.

two: God has made it possible to verify that women are maintaining proper bodily status, reserving their sexual potential for the right "spouse" (in the case of virgins, for Christ). Ephrem's Christian audience can rest assured that slander against their prized forms of virginity is answered by proofs—a variety of them.

With Ephrem, then, the gravitational cores of virginity discourse are the notions that virgins' bodies are barren (yet not empty—and in Mary's case, fertile) and that virgins' state of sexual abstinence is under threat (yet not without protections and proofs). Both modes of definition emphasize human physicality and treat bodily acts and experiences as determinative for virginity, but they form a duplex configuration: virginity is "bodily" in two quite different senses. These two areas of primary thematic development—sterility transformed into fertility and precariousness countered by proofs—exhibit Ephrem's penchant for paradox as they direct attention to the power of God, whose overturning of nature and protection of chaste followers, according to Ephrem, merit highest praise.

4.3.2. Is virginity predominantly something to keep, or something to acquire?

For Ephrem, female virginity is something that a woman inherently has rather than something she acquires. The language of "achievement" or "gain" found in Basil or Gregory is scarce in Ephrem's surviving works, though occasional passages communicate that virginity originates in heaven[218] or that lifelong Christian virginity entails shaping oneself with chastity according to the image of God, with the performance

[218] See *Virginity* 1.7-8 and 24.3; cf. *Nativity* 14.18.

of suitable good works.[219] Whereas many fourth-century writers raise the question of whether lifelong virginity is a natural or unnatural state for human beings, Ephrem seems content to deal with "nature" in different ways, such as in his pronouncements that Mary's fertility falls outside of nature's operations. Virginity, when understood as sexual abstinence, must be guarded; yet when understood as a sterile state, virginity itself undergoes a transformation or gain that alters *its* nature, as we will see below.

Ephrem's patterns of vocabulary in *Virginity* 1-3 construe virginity as a possession of the virgin, who must be careful not to lose it. As shown in the previous section, virginity is costly and desirable to thieves; it is susceptible to the advance of hunters (*Virginity* 1.11, 2.1-10, 3.12-13). Virgins must guard against losing their virginity through forcible theft or willing surrender. Mary's virginity, too, can be described as a prior state she continues to maintain. Her "seal of virginity remains" (*Nativity* 12.2), just as the "pearl" of other virgins is "preserved" (12.7).[220] Though she becomes a mother, she lacks the sexual experience of a wife, and her *btulē* remain with her (*Nativity* 11.1-3, 28.5).[221] Her "pearl" is not "lost" but is "put on" by her son as he begins his own life of virginity (*Nativity* 16.12, cf. 19.9).[222]

Once lost, virginity cannot be retrieved or regained. On many occasions Ephrem states that biblical figures who engaged in seemingly illicit sexual behaviors were in fact

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[219] See *Virginity* 2.15 and *Letter to Publius* 15-16.
[220] See the translation and citation in 4.3.1 above.
[221] Both passages make her status paradoxical: one cannot simply label her a virgin or a wife and mother. According to *Nativity* 28.5, if one calls her a man's wife, "the *btulē* cry out" in contradiction (CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.142).
[222] These strophes are cited and discussed in 4.3.1 above.

doing something chaste, or became chaste;[223] nowhere, however, does he call this a return to virginity. He hints that virginity is placed in human beings as part of God's handiwork, and humans cannot replicate it. After declaring that Tamar's "pearl" had been "lost" and that once virginity is stolen, "it cannot be recovered again," he laments: "Woe to you, virginity! For your destruction is easy for all, and your making is easy only for the Lord of all" (*Virginity* 2.4).[224] Human beings have the power to destroy or corrupt (ܫܚܠ) virginity with ease, but not to create it. The "bird" virginity builds a nest in the celibate's life that cannot be rebuilt; "if she departs, she abandons it forever" (*Virginity* 1.7).[225] Ephrem might sometimes be able to imagine virginity—or at least a virgin's chastity and purity—enduring despite forcible assaults (*Virginity* 1.9), but its loss is irrevocable, whether it has been taken by force or given up by its possessor.[226]

Considering Ephrem's location on the keeping-acquiring spectrum, some aspects of his discourse are surprising. For an author who speaks so often of virginity, he gives remarkably little behavioral prescription for virgins. In comparison with the authors we have already considered, he is far more like Gregory than like Basil in this respect; he frequently crafts praises of virginity or reflections on Mary's wondrous conception and

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[223] Noteworthy female examples include the Tamar of Genesis 38 (not to be confused with the Tamar of *Virginity* 2), the Samaritan woman of John 4, and other women praised in *Nativity* 9 and *Virginity* 22. A discussion of Ephrem's interpretation of Tamar's story in light of Jewish exegetical traditions can be found in Tryggve Kronholm, "Holy Adultery: The Interpretation of the Story of Judah and Tamar (Gen. 38) in the Genuine Hymns of Ephraem Syrus (ca. 306-373)," *Orientalia Suecana* 40 (1991): 149-163.
[224] CSCO 223 Scr. Syr. 94.6.
[225] CSCO 223 Scr. Syr. 94.3.
[226] Again, *Virginity* 1.9 suggests that the will is more important than the body, but this does not necessarily mean that virginity is retained when the will is resolute and the body is attacked. If virginity is fundamentally located in the body, Ephrem might consider it lost in such a situation, even if the broader virtue of chastity has not been lost. It is not fully clear in his works whether chastity in general, or the holiness of married couples who commit to sexual abstinence, rank equally with virginity in his estimation.

birthing, and only infrequently lays out practical guidelines for the virginal life. Interestingly, some of his practical prescriptions in the opening *Virginity* hymns seem to slip between addressing feminine audiences and masculine or mixed-gender audiences, while his considerations of the problem of "theft" and the possibility of losing virginity against one's will target women in particular.[227]

Even more remarkable are Ephrem's considerations of what is natural for humans and for virginity. Many fourth-century authors make claims about whether living virginally is innate to or transcendent of human nature, as we have seen with Basil and Gregory. Ephrem, on the other hand, discusses God's transformation of virginity's own nature. This transformation happens when Mary's virginally barren body conceives and gives birth. According to *Nativity* 4.121, virginity acquired something new when Christ came: it "learned the act of birthing."[228] Mary's conception and bearing occurred "outside of nature," outside of the qualities and capabilities of virginity (*Nativity* 11.3-4),[229] and they are therefore novel and wondrous (*Nativity* 16.8). In connection with Mary's and Elizabeth's reversals of fertility in *Nativity* 21, Ephrem writes that the Lord "pressed and changed nature (ܛܒܥ)" with both women; "the Lord of natures changed the virgin's nature" (21.18).[230] Mary keeps a virginity that is already hers, but virginity

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[227] On the other hand, compare the "pillaging" Lot's daughters committed when they "stole conception" from him while he was drunk (*Virginity* 1.11, CSCO 223 Scr. Syr. 94.4). Male virginity is certainly of interest to Ephrem, and its preciousness is often conveyed with the same kinds of terms as female virginity (including "pearl"): examples can be found in *Hymns on Paradise* 6.24 and 7.16-18 and in *Virginity* 15.4. Despite this, his discussions of proof and theft usually concern female virginity only (and the same holds true for correlating virginity with sterility).
[228] CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.36.
[229] CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.69-70.
[230] CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.108.

itself, when it is defined as an infertile state, acquires a different nature than it had before. Mary's virginal womb is no longer barren.

4.3.3. What does the author's use of water imagery suggest about the nature of virginity?

Many of Ephrem's depictions of virginity rely on water-related imagery. Particularly prominent are images from agriculture or the natural world where water yields life and dryness fails to produce life. Water and lack of water are thus key illustrations for Ephrem's equating of virginity with bodily sterility.

In Ephrem's hymns, fertility is closely associated with moisture and is achieved by the addition of moisture to an otherwise unproductive womb. *Nativity* 18.13 describes the earth's fruitfulness in such terms: "Whenever its barren womb is moistened, it then gives birth."[231] The comparison of a barren wife to seed-destroying soil in *Virginity* 22.15 suggests that the necessary moisture in human reproduction is not merely wet male seed; the "ground" of the womb must be sufficiently damp. Virginity, as a state of sterility, is "dry" or makes for a "dry" womb. Mary is "parched ground," but thanks to the transformation of her barrenness into fecundity, she gives fruit that is a "vast sea" (*Nativity* 18.13).[232]

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[231] CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.93. Cf. the river's "moist womb" that "conceived" Christ anew at his baptism in *Hymns on the Church* 36.3; text and translation available in *Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Poems*, ed. Sebastian P. Brock and George A. Kiraz (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2006), 70-71. Infertile women's breasts are also dry: Elizabeth's breasts, "sterile and dead," were deprived of milk in her youth, but God "moistened" them in her old age (*Nativity* 21.18, CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.108).
[232] CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.93.

Mary and her womb are equated with a host of dry, infertile things. The most common is "thirsty" or "parched" earth (ܐܪܥܐ ܝܒܫܬܐ), which appears not only in the passage above, but in *Nativity* 4.84 and 11.4, *Virginity* 23.5, and *Hymns on the Resurrection* 1.3.[233] As dry soil, Mary becoming fruitful is astonishing: "You [Christ] unexpectedly made the thirsty ground into a fountain of milk" (*Nativity* 11.4).[234] Her child is not simply a product of miraculous moisture, but a source of it. A spring to quench others' thirst flows from the thirsty ground of her body (*Nativity* 4.84), and this ground's yield—brought about by the living rain and dew that Christ himself sends upon it—is seen again when he falls into Sheol like a seed and springs up from it like wheat (*Resurrection* 1.3). In his advent, birth, death, and ascension he resembles a flowing river, growing plant, and fruit (*Resurrection* 1.6).

Mary's fertile generation of Christ is further illustrated with other images of dryness yielding life. "From a virginal womb as though from a rock sprouted a seed from which there were harvests" (*Nativity* 4.85).[235] "Aaron's staff budded and caused dry wood to give fruit; its secret meaning has been explained today, for the virginal womb gave birth" (*Nativity* 1.17).[236] The *Commentary on the Diatessaron* attributed to Ephrem adds that the living fire of the burning bush in Exodus 3 "watered and moistened" the virgin's womb to cause it to bear.[237]

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[233] CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.33, 70; CSCO 223 Scr. Syr. 94.82; Brock and Kiraz, 82-83.
[234] CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.70.
[235] CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.33.
[236] CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.3. Cf. the image of a cluster on a formerly barren vine in *Nativity* 8.8 and 6.16.
[237] *Diatessaron* 1.25, in *Commentaire de l'Évangile concordant: texte syriaque (Manuscrit Chester Beatty 709)*, ed. Louis Leloir (Dublin: Hodges Figgis, 1963), 24.

All of these images highlight the most distinctive definition for virginity that Ephrem offers. The female virgin is barren, as symbolized here by dry soil, rock, wood, or plants; water is the source of life. Yet Christ, the ultimate fruit and source of life, grows from Mary's dry womb to impart life to all.[238]

4.3.4. How does the author use the terminology of "seals" and "sealing" when discussing virginity?

Ephrem's use of the terminology of "seals" and "sealing" is abundant and widely varied. He certainly uses no fewer variations of meaning than other fourth-century authors, and perhaps employs even more. The most significant Syriac words of Ephrem's that can be translated with "seal" terms in English are the nouns ܚܬܡܐ (a broad term that is captured well by the versatile word "seal") and ܟܬܒܐ (a signet or stamp), along with their cognate verbs (ܚܬܡ, ܟܬܒ) and the passive participles "sealed" (ܡܚܬܡ) and "signed" or "stamped" (ܡܟܬܒ). At times these words' meanings are quite clear, but at other times they are ambiguous. Many of the clear examples show that the idea of being physically "closed" or "sealed shut" is not always the—or even a—sense of these terms in a particular passage, while it seems to be an important dimension in other cases. In a similar way, Ephrem uses the opposites "open" and "closed" to refer to various kinds of bodily states and capabilities.

Several actions and things are called "sealing" and "seals" or "signets" in Ephrem's works. Like other Christian authors across the ancient world, Ephrem

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[238] Cf. *Virginity* 23.3.

frequently associates these terms with baptism or baptismal chrismation. Such "sealing" can invoke the notion of marks of identity (as ancient wax seals with impressions from signet rings would convey), the transformation of a baptizand into a new imitation of God's image (like the wax being given a new shape by the ring's impression), or the pledge of future resurrection (as when a ruler stamps a decree with an authoritative seal as a guarantee). Baptism changes the corrupted human's image into that of the "hidden king" (*Virginity* 7.5); "in the symbol of a signet ring that makes its stamp in sealing-wax, the hidden seal of the Spirit, too, is stamped by oil on bodies that are anointed at baptism and marked in immersion" (7.6).[239] Mary has surpassing purity because Christ "stamped himself as though with a signet" upon her mind (*Nativity* 28.7).[240] Christ is called a seal in *Virginity* 37.1 and a signet in *Nativity* 12.3.

Sealing also conjures up ideas about minted money or other forms of imprinted images, as well as the prototype and power behind these acts. It can indicate ratification, proof, and certification, as well as finality, completion, and typological fulfillment. "Moses wrote about how the serpent was detestable; the Lord came and sealed this" (*Virginity* 29.11).[241] "Your [the city of Shechem's] crown has been sealed and your figuring (as a type) concluded, your secret meaning accomplished and your measure complete" (*Virginity* 19.8).[242] The state of being sealed shut (as a letter might be) is implied in some of Ephrem's uses of these terms: the physical sealing up of Jesus' tomb

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[239] CSCO 223 Scr. Syr. 94.26.
[240] CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.142. See also the "stamping" or imprinting of divinity upon humanity in *Nativity* 1.99.
[241] CSCO 223 Scr. Syr. 94.108.
[242] CSCO 223 Scr. Syr. 94.66.

in *Nativity* 10.2-9 (cf. Matt 27:62-66) makes the miracle of his resurrection incontrovertible. Others of these examples appeal to different notions of concrete objects or states and do not directly relate to closure.

The rich variety of meanings that Ephrem attaches to "seal" terms through diverse uses makes it difficult to determine which (and how many) of such meanings are layered within passages about virginity. We should not assume too quickly that a "seal of virginity" designates the hymen or a similar kind of anatomical concept, even if later Syriac literature comes to apply the phrase to Mary in this way.[243] Given the array of nuances above, it is possible that the "seal" of virginity in works like *Nativity* 12 points to the abstract notion of virginity itself, since virginity might be seen as a mark and safeguard for the believer. To call Mary or her womb "sealed" (*Nativity* 10.7-9, 14.12 and implied in *Nativity* 12) might express that her body is pledged to virginal living or certified as virginal by evidence like miracles or her lifestyle; it could even express that she is reproductively "closed" (sterile) in her own bodily nature (hence the close parallels with the miraculously life-giving tomb in *Nativity* 10). It is indeed possible that Ephrem thinks of virginal wombs as "sealed" through genital closure, with a hymenal barrier blocking off internal organs and providing concrete proof of virginity; this could fit the

[243] For example, see the dialogue poem between Mary and Joseph (especially the use of ܒܬܘܠܝܐ and *btulē* in stanza 10) in *Mary and Joseph, and Other Dialogue Poems on Mary*, ed. Sebastian P. Brock (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 32-47, or stanzas 1-4 of a hymn on Mary in Brock's *Bride of Light: Hymns on Mary from the Syriac Churches* (Kottayam: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1994), 58-60 (hymn 12 or entry 17). Anonymous works like these are difficult to date, but probably come from no earlier than the fifth century: Sebastian Brock, "Syriac Dialogue Poems: Marginalia to a Recent Edtion," *Le Muséon* 97 (1984): 29-58 (see 35-36, 44).

logic of some passages in the hymns[244] and is especially plausible for *Nativity* 12, where Mary's and other virgins' "seals" are also called a "curtain" and are said to refute others' slander. If this anatomical notion is part of Ephrem's configuration of female virginity, it is all the more striking that he turns to it only occasionally—Mary's incredible fertility seems more significant to him than her hymen, and his varying uses of the term *btulē* keep such physical indicators from becoming central for defining virginal chastity.

Like Gregory, Ephrem also tends to privilege opening, rather than closure, as a positive act or state for the human body. Even though he depicts virginity as superior to a life of marriage and procreation,[245] he routinely depicts fertility in a positive light;[246] as we saw above, this fertility is an "opening" of the womb, while the tragedy of barrenness is considered a state of "closure" for the womb. All sorts of human capabilities are described with the same terms: parts of the body that are "shut" are incapable of carrying out their function (for example, deaf ears, blind eyes, or a mute mouth), and they must be "opened" to fulfill these functions and bring glory to God.[247]

Closure, then, usually appears in Ephrem's works as an undesirable state for human bodies, and seals only sometimes denote closure. "Sealing" likely carries an enormous range of physical and spiritual resonances in Ephrem's discourse on virginity.

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[244] E.g., *Virginity* 2.11, where Ephrem refers to blood that seals a virgin's "gate" (CSCO 223 Scr. Syr. 94.7).
[245] See *Virginity* 24 and *Nativity* 17.5 and 28.3.
[246] See *Virginity* 5.14 in addition to all the previously cited passages celebrating Mary's unique possession of both virginity and fertility. Judging by these and many other passages, Ephrem has a particular empathy for the situation of barren women.
[247] Examples can be found in *Sermon on Our Lord* 10.2 and 32.1 and in *Nativity* 4.138-140.

4.3.5. Given all these elements, in what senses is virginity a state of the body?

Ephrem's discourse on virginity gravitates toward fertility and fragility. Female virginity, celebrated in a special form in the person of Mary, is a naturally infertile state that God marvelously transforms into a productive one. It is also a sexual bodily state for virgins of Ephrem's own day that is at once fragile—easily lost and easily taken—and precious enough to warrant certain reassuring divine measures. God may thwart or avenge its theft when necessary, and the ingenious proofs of its presence that God has devised can safeguard virgins against slander or accusation.

Ephrem construes female virginity as an inherent possession to be kept rather than acquired, though virginity's own character is changed by Mary's acquisition of fertility for her barren womb. The water imagery of Ephrem's hymns frequently serves his strong emphasis on this fertility, underscoring the wonder of a life-giving savior's birth from a "dry," naturally unproductive body. By applying the language of "seals" and "sealing" to virgins or virginity, Ephrem creates an array of potential links between different facets of his theology, while leaving the layers of meaning in many passages ambiguous and flexible; the "sealed" virginal body can be understood in a host of different ways, depending on context and connections. His works anchor virginity firmly in the body, but—like the bird to which it is sometimes compared—the concept of virginity tends to soar beyond the confines of simple definition, settling intermittently at its primary sites of meaning as it continues to point toward further horizons of theological significance.[248]

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[248] On the limits of systematic exposition for approaching Ephrem's thought, see Kees den Biesen, *Simple and Bold: Ephrem's Art of Symbolic Thought* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006), xiv.

4.4. Ambrose of Milan

Ambrose of Milan is well-known to scholars as a pivotal figure in the theological and political landscape of the late fourth century. Appointed as bishop of Milan in about 374 after following a more traditional Roman career path in law and as a governor, he became an influential proponent of Nicene orthodoxy in the Latin-speaking world and engaged in noteworthy acts of confrontation or cooperation with imperial rulers. Like Gregory of Nyssa, he could boast of a family tree that included a Christian martyr and a sister dedicated to virginity (he addressed his earliest published work on virginity to this sister, Marcellina).[249] He also contributed much to the institutionalizing of consecrated virginity and to late-fourth-century debates over the nature of Mary's virginal status during and after Christ's birth.

In terms of treatises focused on virginity, Ambrose was particularly prolific. The precise number and original forms of his publications are uncertain, but those known today have survived as four separate treatises that span his career, while various other works include significant discussions of Mary's virginity. The first treatise, *Virgins*, was published in or close to 377 and is his earliest surviving work. The date of the next, *Virginity*, is often argued to belong soon after *Virgins* in the late 370s, while some place it during the 380s or even later.[250] A third treatise, *Education of a Virgin*, comes from the

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[249] See *Virginity* 3.7.37-38, where he speaks of an ancestor named Soteris as he addresses his sister. Soteris appears in *Exhortation to Virginity* 12.82, as well.

[250] Discussions of the various dates can be found in the introduction to *Ambrosio de Milán. Sobre las vírgenes, La virginidad, La educación de la virgen, Exhortación a la virginidad*, trans. Domingo Ramos-Lissón (Madrid: Ciudad Nueva, 2011), 11-31, at 21-25; Ariel Bybee Laughton, "Virginity Discourse and Ascetic Politics in the Writings of Ambrose of Milan," Ph.D. Dissertation (Duke University, 2010), 37 n. 64; Michaela Zelzer, "Zur Chronologie der Werke des Ambrosius: Überblick über die Forschung von 1974

early 390s and was written for the consecration of a virgin named Ambrosia.[251] *Exhortation to Virginity*, a treatise that opens with discussion of a recent recovery of saints' relics but which principally deals with exhortations to the ascetic life amid the dedication of a new church building, is generally agreed to have been written in 394.

These works exhibit the influence of many earlier writers, both Latin and Greek.[252] *Virgins* is clearly modeled in many sections on Athanasius' *First Letter to Virgins*, while one can also hear echoes of themes from the works of Tertullian and Cyprian of Carthage.[253] With authors like Gregory Ambrose comes to share an interest in Origen's exegesis, especially of the Song of Songs. Ambrose tends to combine or eclectically draw from multiple earlier models in his virginity discourse. The results are sometimes rather paradoxical, as I will discuss in the final section of this chapter. In the sections below, however, my focus is on Ambrose's bodily conceptualization of virginity,

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bis 1997," in *Nec timeo mori. Atti del Congresso internazionale di studi ambrosiani nel XVI centenario della morte di sant' Ambrogio* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1998), 73-92; and Karl Shuve, *The Song of Songs and the Fashioning of Identity in Early Latin Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 128-130. I assume here that it is a relatively early work.

[251] The final chapters of the treatise are clearly meant for this purpose, while earlier sections may or may not have been composed for the same event. Ambrosia was the niece of another Italian bishop and friend, Eusebius of Bologna.

[252] Ambrose engaged with Greek works more extensively than some of his contemporaries did. On his theological engagement with and adaptation of Greek theological thought, see, for example, Christoph Markschies, *Ambrosius von Mailand und die Trinitätstheologie: Kirchen- und theologiegeschichtliche Studien zu Antiarianismus und Neunizänismus bei Ambrosius und im lateinischen Westen (364-381 n. Chr.)* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1995). His extensive borrowing from earlier Greek writers was mentioned critically by Jerome on multiple occasions (in the prefaces to Jerome's *Commentary on Ephesians* and translations of Didymus of Alexandria's *Holy Spirit* and Origen's *Homilies on Luke*).

[253] For a discussion of Ambrose's various sources, see Kim Power, "The Secret Garden: The Meaning and Function of the *Hortus Conclusus* in Ambrose of Milan's Homilies on Virginity," Ph.D. Dissertation (LaTrobe University, 1997), 18-30 and (for a more detailed comparison of Ambrose with Cyprian and Athanasius) the earlier essay of Yves-Marie Duval, "L'originalité du *De virginibus* dans le movement ascétique occidental: Ambroise, Cyprien, Athanase," in *Ambroise de Milan. XVIe centenaire de son élection épiscopale: dix études*, ed. Duval (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1974), 9-66.

a distinctive conceptualization that emerges gradually in his works and sets him apart from the fourth-century authors we have considered so far.

4.4.1. Is virginity primarily located in the body or soul(/mind)?

Ambrose repeatedly ties virginity to both the body and the soul. His treatment of virginity as a spiritual state shares some features with other authors discussed in this chapter, while his way of discussing bodily virginity in his late works stands out in its specificity and concreteness. In the course of his career, one can find varying emphases and growing clarity (or else increasing explicitness) concerning the bodily nature of virginity; as his claims about virginity's physicality crystallize, one nonetheless finds rich elaborations at the opposite end of the spectrum as well, with a flourishing of discussion on both the virginal soul and the virginal body. With Ambrose, in contrast to most fourth-century authors that precede him, bodily virginity comes to take on an anatomical character, as I will discuss below.

In his earliest works on virginity, Ambrose demonstrates a strong interest in both the soul and the body. His writings at this time indicate reliance on multiple prior models or configurations for virginity, but at this early stage he does little to integrate them. Later works, including the two virginity treatises of the 390s, exhibit a tighter interweaving of diverse ideas about virginity, alongside a more precise interest in the relationship between body and soul more generally. Meanwhile, works and passages about Mary's virginity *in partu* show an increasingly precise focus for the nature of bodily virginity: the condition of female sex organs. We turn first to the varied and less

integrated claims about body and soul found in the early treatises, then to Mary's physical virginity and, finally, to the more elaborately developed and densely interlocked claims of the late virginity treatises.

Virgins, the initial treatise, brings together a wide range of themes and exemplars for the consecrated virginal life and contains many indications that Ambrose is concerned about both physical and spiritual aspects of virginal living; both aspects are necessary for maintaining virginity. Borrowing from Athanasius' *First Letter to Virgins*, he holds Mary up as a meek model for virgin girls, stressing that she was a virgin in both body and mind: her body remained without "contamination" (*contagio*), and her God-pleasing character and behaviors showed highly virtuous traits (2.2.7).[254] Everything about her self-presentation signaled her virtuous virginity (2.2.6-15), for her mind, unrestrained by her body, shone out in her walk, gestures, voice, and appearance (2.2.7; cf. 2.2.9 and 3.3.13).[255] In 2.2.18, Ambrose extends Mary's holiness to other virgins, invoking the (apparently common) idea that a virgin's body is God's temple and elaborating on this image by equating the altar with the virgin's mind (both *mens* and *animus*).[256]

The necessary correspondence of virginal body and virginal mind is again brought to the fore when Ambrose tells the story of an unnamed Antiochene virgin who was

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[254] SAEMO 14/1.168-170. My numbering for treatises reflects Gori's critical editions in SAEMO 14/1 and 14/2. For *Virgins*, the first digit is a book number; the other works on virginity are not divided into multiple books. The term *contagio* would become very significant in Ambrose's later theological—including his mariological—reasoning, and Augustine would further develop the concept in discussions of original sin. For an example of its significance in Ambrose's thinking about Mary, see the interpretation of a passage from *Exposition of the Gospel according to Luke* in David G. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 199-201.

[255] Cf. Ambrose's later discussion of this inner/outer alignment as he addresses clergy in *Duties* 1.18.

[256] SAEMO 14/1.180.

condemned to a brothel prior to her martyrdom. By Ambrose's telling, her persecutors recognized that the best way to persuade her to renounce her Christianity was to remove her chastity, or at least to threaten to remove it (2.4.23). As the virgin deliberated, she ultimately chose faithfulness to "the author of virginity" over virginity itself (in this case, by continuing to confess Christ even at the risk of being forced into sex at the brothel), in hopes that her purity too would somehow be preserved. Her guiding principle, in Ambrose's formulation, was that "it is more bearable to have (only) a virgin mind than (only) virgin flesh" (2.4.24).[257] Like several other early stories and retellings concerning virgin martyrs, however, Ambrose's does not stop with the prioritization of the mind, soul, or will over the state of the body. The heroine's hope is realized: she is rescued from rape and dies pure (2.4.27-33). Unlike the few authors who confront the problem of (in)congruence between virginal soul and virginal body in cases of rape,[258] Ambrose follows the more typical trajectory of celebrating stories in which the woman who wishes to have both forms of virginity is granted both, against all odds.[259] He suggests that it is almost unthinkable for anything else to have happened: such a chaste person could hardly have submitted her body to sex, and chastity is so powerful that it is not tainted by a brothel's ill repute but eliminates that ill repute (2.4.25-26). In this story, then, virginity of the mind outweighs bodily virginity, but where the first is present the second is expected to endure, even if this requires a miracle.

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[257] SAEMO 14/1.186.
[258] We saw Basil of Ancyra's brief treatment of this matter above (*True Incorruption in Virginity* 52), and we will consider Augustine of Hippo's discussion in *City of God* in chapter 6 of this dissertation.
[259] The earliest and most famous example is Thecla, whose *Acts* describe escapes from the threat of sexual violence as well as death.

The implicit necessity of virginal flesh for maintaining one's virginity becomes even clearer in book 3 of *Virgins*, when Ambrose addresses his sister Marcellina's question about how to view past virgins who committed suicide to avoid sexual assault (3.7.32-38). In these cases, no miraculous rescue is expected; the danger of a woman having her virginity stolen against her will is treated as real and inescapable except through violence toward herself. Ambrose praises the use of suicide in such situations, even designating these deaths as martyrdoms in themselves (3.7.32-36).[260] Despite the virginal mind supposedly taking higher priority, the closing word of the treatise is an implicit insistence that true virginity requires virginity of the body.

At this earliest stage of Ambrose's compositions, virginity of the body, though considered crucial, is not yet explained in detail or located in any specific place. Sexual intercourse poses a threat to female purity because it can contaminate the chaste body. This act of pollution may be represented well by Peter Brown's phrase "alien intrusion," that is, the concern that something foreign to oneself has transgressed a boundary and mixed elements that should have remained separate.[261] Without more specifics, this view of physical virginity suggests only a very broad notion of bodily purity, a state of remaining unaffected by the full-body impurity that sexual interaction would introduce.

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[260] Timothy Hill argues that the modern category of "suicide" (which focuses on agency and relies on a Western conceptualization of the individual) is insufficient for understanding ancient Roman ideas about appropriate and inappropriate forms of death; rather, extant Roman views center on whether a form of death is suitable for a person's social standing: see Timothy D. Hill, *Ambitiosa Mors: Suicide and Self in Roman Thought and Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004). It may be that early Christians saw self-inflicted deaths as appropriate for virgin martyrs not only because of the value of virginity and the shame attached to losing it in the wrong manner, but also because this courageous death would be eminently fitting for these women's social identity.

[261] Brown, *Body and Society*, 354.

Notably, Ambrose tends to bring in the matter of physical virginity in *Virgins* when he is dealing with past exemplars, whereas virginity of the soul receives the emphasis in his more direct instructions to present-day virgins. In book 1, he employs several passages of the Song of Songs, which would become one of the most significant books for exegesis and imagery in his subsequent virginity discourse.[262] Though his later writings would build on the book's erotic language to discuss physical as well as spiritual considerations, in *Virgins* the discussion is predominantly spiritual. Song 4:7-8 is said to describe the "perfect beauty of the virginal soul (*anima*)" that is unmoved by transient things (1.7.38). The good "fragrance of your garments" from Song 4:11 is the virgin's imitation of the Lord's body through her mortification of her own body and the purity of her chastity (1.7.39).[263] Here and in subsequent sections (especially 1.8.46-48), Ambrose directs attention not to virginal female bodies, but to virginal souls, to Christ's body, and to God's seal upon the virgin's heart. The virgin is to take up "wings of the spirit" so that she might fly above vices to seek Christ (1.8.44). The "enclosed garden" and "sealed fountain" of Song 4:12 are gardens where God's image is accurately reflected in the clear fountain of one's soul, where one's garden of virtue is fenced in by a "wall of the Spirit" and "the prophets' teachings," and where the fountain's streams are not disturbed by "scattered mud" or "watering-holes of spiritual beasts" (1.8.45-46).[264] Ambrose's treatment here resembles the highly spiritualized, virtue-focused readings of Song of

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[262] Ambrose also employs the Song of Songs in later catechetical writings, such as *Isaac, or the Soul*; he does not reserve exegesis of this biblical book for ascetic elites alone. Origen, in contrast, had warned against study of the book by those who were not yet spiritually advanced (*Commentary on the Song of Songs* Prologue 1).
[263] SAEMO 14/1.138-140.
[264] SAEMO 14/1.142-146.

Songs by Origen and in Gregory's later commentary, though Ambrose is indebted to Athanasius in his application of the Song to female virgins in particular.[265]

While the treatise *Virginity* is in many ways quite different from *Virgins*,[266] there is much continuity in its very general depiction of physical virginity and its emphasis on virginity of the soul. The exemplars whose bodily purity was considered in *Virgins* do not feature in this way in *Virginity*, but the mentions of bodily virginity remain similar to those of the earlier treatise. Virginity of flesh and integrity of mind are presented as two aspects of virginity in 3.13 (though here in the context of shaming a Christian audience by pointing out that even "gentiles" honor the physical virginity of Rome's Vestal virgins).[267] The indispensability of bodily purity surfaces in 12.76, as Ambrose instructs virgins not to fear persecutors: "Even if they should carry off your body—that is, your body's *life*—Christ is near."[268] By narrowing his reassurance to a scenario in which the virgin's life (and not her virginity) is forcibly taken, the author seems to stand in continuity with his martyr accounts in *Virgins*, which celebrated the preserving of bodily virginity at all costs and expected the true virgin's will to prevail in keeping her body—not only her mind—virginal. A quasi-bodily interpretation of verses from the Song of Songs appears in 13.80-84, where he explains that the virgin's desirable state of closure (as the enclosed garden and sealed fountain of Song 4:12) concerns closure of the mouth.

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[265] Shuve, *Song of Songs*, 17, 112-114.
[266] See, for instance, the analysis of the two treatises in Power, "Secret Garden"; Laughton, "Virginity Discourse," 80-131; Shuve, *Song of Songs*, 109-137.
[267] SAEMO 14/2.22. On Ambrose's perception of the Vestals as representing a rival institution and ideology of virginity to Christian ones he sought to develop, see Laughton, "Virginity Discourse," 190-234.
[268] SAEMO 14/2.62.

One's mouth, or more precisely one's speech, is a door that Christ wants to find closed at all times, except when the virgin holds conversation with him.[269]

As in *Virgins*, however, the emphasis in *Virginity* falls on the soul, particularly in Ambrose's treatment of the Song of Songs. Passages dealing with gardens are interpreted in relation to the soul or mind and its spiritual fruits (10.54, 12.68-69). Like a breeze in a garden, God's Word can blow upon the soul; then, instead of the body's turbulence attacking it, Christ will govern the soul and keep passions at bay (15.93-96). The houses or rooms of the Song are given similar symbolism: the bride's "mother's house" of Song 3:4 is the virgin's interior space, a "spiritual house" where the Holy Spirit can dwell (13.78), and Christ shall enter through the "window" of the virgin's mind if she cleanses it from sin (13.79).[270] Once again there is discussion of the soul taking flight with spiritual wings to soar above the world (17.107-118). It is one's pursuit of or devotion to chastity that must remain "inviolate" (6.28).[271]

Neither in *Virgins* nor *Virginity* does Ambrose give physical virginity an exact location within the body. Like earlier Latin authors who could use identical terms to describe the sexual honor or forcible corruption of virgin girls, citizen boys, and married women,[272] Ambrose seems to remain general in his understanding of the mechanics of bodily purity. Without other sources or his later works, it would be impossible to tell

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[269] Ambrose instructs male clergy to practice somewhat similar behavior, with silence as one's default state and careful weighing of one's speech before speaking (*Duties* 1.2-6, 1.18); see also the teachings for a broader Christian audience in *Mysteries* 9.55 and (with special reference to women) in *Sacraments* 6.3.
[270] SAEMO 14/2.64.
[271] SAEMO 14/2.32.
[272] See chapter 2 of this dissertation, or consult Rebecca Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

whether he harbored any notion of an anatomical dimension for virginity at this time, such as the notion of a hymenal membrane. Yet judging by another of his very early works, Ambrose did already have some kind of anatomical understanding of virginity at this early point. He expresses it very briefly in a passage of the treatise *Widows* and does not yet clearly integrate it with the spiritualizing and very generalized bodily notions in his first two virginity treatises.

Widows 4.26 stresses the importance of a widow's unquestionably chaste behavior, contrasting the evidence for her sexual virtue or respectability (*pudicitia*)—which can be proven only by her way of life or moral character—with the situation of virgins, where "integrity of flesh," though secondary to moral conduct as evidence of chastity, can nonetheless overturn slander through "a midwife's say-so."[273] Here Ambrose demonstrates familiarity with the idea that female virginity is anchored in the body in a way that can be verified through medical examination (whereas widows cannot have recourse to this line of defense and are judged by behavior and disposition alone). Whether in the interest of modesty or because direct links with anatomical notions did not yet seem crucial to his arguments and instructions, such assumptions about virginal bodies do not manifest in *Virgins* and *Virginity* as definite allusions to genital integrity or the anatomical boundary of hymen tissue, but may manifest in his broader concern with boundaries. As Karl Shuve has observed, bodily, social, and spiritual boundaries are regulated with a "striking isomorphism" and indeed slippage in *Virginity*, with a tight relationship between withdrawal from society, spiritual purity, and bodily

[273] SAEMO 14/1.268.

inaccessibility.[274] Only in later virginity discourse, however, does Ambrose clearly enmesh the notion of a hymen with his other models.[275]

A new level of specificity enters Ambrose's discourse on bodily virginity when he writes on Mary's virginity *in partu* in intermediate and late works. With Mary, Ambrose comes to articulate a definite association between the state of (female) virginity and the idea of genitals remaining "closed" and not "opened." As we have seen in earlier chapters, ancient Mediterranean sources that depict an "open" or "closed" state for the female reproductive system are usually concerned with fertility rather than virginity loss, and women's wombs are often thought to open and close in succession rather than to be sealed shut and then permanently opened by sexual intercourse.[276] Yet as we will see in the next chapter, an increasing number of authors in the late fourth and early fifth centuries come to describe female virginal bodies as genitally "closed" and non-virginal bodies as "opened," probably by the loss of the hymenal tissue that has so frequently (but inaccurately) been pictured as a wide or complete seal across the vagina. Ambrose is one of the earliest authors to develop the notion, first seen in Tertullian,[277] that a virgin's womb is "closed" and a deflowered woman's womb has been "opened."

Interestingly enough, Ambrose mixes his models and meanings even in his discourse on Mary's virginity, with one discussion of her closed/opened womb

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[274] Shuve, *Song of Songs*, 135.
[275] His imagery in *Virginity* 11.60-67 (SAEMO 14/2.52-58) could even undercut such a model, for if one views the virgin's spiritual "opening" and then "locking" of her "vessel" (mind?) to receive and retain Christ's "unguent" as analogous with the reception of seed in a womb (an analogy made explicit in a much later work but without the relocking—*Isaac, or the Soul* 6.53), then in this early work, Ambrose employs the traditional idea that female fertility relies on wombs opening to receive seed but closing again to gestate—in contrast with a hymenal emphasis on the irreversible opening of the womb in defloration.
[276] See chapter sections 2.2 and 3.3 in this dissertation.
[277] *Flesh of Christ* 23, discussed in my chapter section 3.3.1.

conforming to the more common pattern of fertility language and other discussions employing the idea that virginity entails closed genitals. A famous passage from Ambrose's *Exposition of the Gospel according to Luke* (2.56-57) retains the focus on fertility for opened/closed language that is found in biblical books and earlier Greek patristic literature. Ambrose grounds Christ's holiness in his unique birth by making him the sole subject of statements from Exodus 13 (quoted in Luke 2:23 at this point in the commentary), "Every male opening a womb will be called holy to the Lord."[278] Only Christ possesses this undefiled holiness, for only he "opened his own mother's womb and (thus, later) went out immaculate" (2.57); only Mary conceived in her womb not through sex with a husband that "unlocked" its hidden places, but because "the Holy Spirit poured immaculate seed into her inviolable womb" (2.56).[279] This presignified that Christ would make his virginal Church fruitful with a similar act of opening (2.57).

As Charles Neumann has argued, Ambrose here claims that Christ did indeed open Mary's womb, but he is speaking of the conception, not of the birth, and of the initiation of fertility, not of the destruction of virginity.[280] To "open the womb," in the context of biblical passages, is to grant a woman fertility (when God does it) or to be born (when offspring does it).[281] What sets Ambrose's discussion apart from common uses of the phrase in biblical and early patristic works is his idea that a husband, rather than God or offspring, is the one who ordinarily performs this "opening"—though Ambrose's

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[278] This is my own translation for the author's quotation from Luke, which itself is a near-quotation of Exodus 13:2 and 13:12.
[279] SC 45.97-98.
[280] Charles William Neumann, *The Virgin Mary in the Works of Saint Ambrose* (Fribourg: University Press, 1962), 113-138.
[281] See my chapter section 3.3.

choice of terms for the "unlocking" (*resero*) of the womb in sex and the "opening" (*aperio*) of the womb's fertility in conception might be significant too.[282] Among surviving works from prior centuries, only Philo, Tertullian, and Origen attribute womb-opening to husbands, and only with Tertullian is this an act of defloration instead of fertility.[283] In *Exposition of Luke* 2.56-57, Ambrose stays close to Origen's focus on Mary's fertility in interpreting Luke 2:23. Christ "opened" his mother's womb in the sense that he made it fruitful through conception, but this did not alter her virginity.[284]

We find a correlation of womb-opening with defloration when Ambrose compares Mary or her womb to a building, as a hall reserved for a king or as the Jerusalem Temple with a closed eastern door as envisioned in Ezekiel 44:1-3. A hymn attributed to Ambrose that is likely authentic says of the conception, "The belly of the virgin swells, [yet] the barrier of *pudor* remains" as God dwells in his temple (*Hymn* 4.4).[285] Mary's womb is also called a "royal hall of *pudor*" in 4.5. Ambrose often uses the term *pudor* to refer to the traditional Roman sense of modesty or shame that should attend free women's sexual morality and public behavior, but on occasion he seems to use it as a genital

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[282] See also his work *Cain and Abel* 1.10.45-46, which includes the quotation of similar Old Testament language about "every male that opens a womb." Ambrose here lists sex, conception, and birthing as things in or by which "a female's womb is opened, with the *pudor* of virginity deflowered," and he makes reference to situations where a virgin's womb is "unlocked" apart from marriage (CSEL 32/1.376).
[283] See my discussion of the passages in 3.3 of this dissertation.
[284] We saw in chapter 3 that Origen's way of understanding virginity most likely lacks the notion of a hymen altogether. Judging by the passage from *Widows* given above, Ambrose assumes that virginity involves some kind of verifiable anatomical state, but the "opening" he has in mind *here* appears to be strictly focused on the achievement of fertility, not the state of the vagina. His confidence in Mary's retention of virginity is confirmed by statements earlier in *Exposition of Luke* (and repeated with greater force and precision in later works) that Mary was married but not violated after birthing Jesus (2.6-7).
[285] My translations are based on the Latin reproduced in Boniface Ramsey, *Ambrose* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 173.

euphemism.[286] Here, as in *Exposition of Luke* 2.56-57, he directs attention only to the conception and pregnancy rather than the question of Mary's genital status following Christ's birth. Even so, his focus on a "barrier" or "closed door" (*claustrum*) of the womb implies that conception through sexual intercourse with a man would have opened the door or removed the barrier, whereas Mary's womb remained closed. Virginity entails closed genitals.

While these passages address Mary's virginity at the conception and during pregnancy rather than her virginity *in partu*, many of Ambrose's late works deal with Mary's physical virginity after Christ's nativity. These discussions were part of a wider debate among Latin-speaking church leaders and authors during the 380s and 390s. Some surmised that Mary was a virgin prior to conceiving and bearing Christ, but lost her virginity afterward; for the authors Helvidius and Jovinian, this conclusion could be drawn from scriptural details,[287] and her availability as a model for the married as well as the celibate suited their stance on the equal value of these lifestyles and the equal reward awaiting celibate and married Christians in the afterlife.[288] These views were lambasted in works by Ambrose and Jerome and were condemned at Latin councils of the 390s. Ambrose played an instrumental role in said condemnations, and argued fiercely in favor

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[286] While *pudor* is not included among the words for genitals collected in J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), this use seems like a logical extension in light of some related terms that do appear (see 54-56). On meanings for *pudor* in earlier Latin sources, see Robert A. Kaster, "The Shame of the Romans," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 127 (1997): 1-19 and the taxonomy of meanings in his *Emotion, Restraint, and Community in Ancient Rome* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 28-65.

[287] For example, Matthew 1:25 might suggest that Joseph had sexual relations with Mary after she gave birth, and all four canonical Gospels mention siblings of Jesus (Matt 13:55-56, Mark 6:3, Luke 8:19, John 2:12). Writers who defended Mary's lifelong virginity offered various explanations for such passages.

[288] Somewhat less is known about the views of Bonosus, another opponent of Ambrose in this matter.

of Mary's perpetual virginity and virginity's superiority over marriage within earthly and heavenly hierarchies.[289]

In *Education of a Virgin*, which will be discussed more extensively below, Ambrose dedicates several chapters to arguments for Mary's lifelong virginity. Sections 8.52-57 connect Mary's physical virginity with Ezekiel 44:1-3, which relates Ezekiel's vision of a closed gate on the eastern side of the Temple that no one but the God of Israel is allowed to pass through. Ambrose writes in 8.52:

> Mary is the gate through whom Christ entered into this world, when he was produced in a virginal childbirth, and did not loosen the innate lock of virginity. The enclosure of *pudor* remained undefiled, and the seals of integrity endured inviolate, when he was going out from the virgin.[290]

Christ "passed through" this gate—Mary—but she remained closed; "he did not open (her)" in doing so (8.53).[291] This clearly includes a different sense of "opening" from the discussion of fertility in *Exposition of Luke*; his imagery now relies on the idea that sealed-up organs signify virginity. In 8.54 Ambrose specifies that he is speaking concretely of the physical state of Mary's womb: while one could say that every human has a "gate" or door through which Christ proceeds (presumably in the heart or mind), "there is also a door of the *venter*," of the belly or womb. Only one such door, Mary's,

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[289] For further background on the debates and Ambrose's role within them, see Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy*; Neumann, *The Virgin Mary*, chapters 4-7; and Laughton, "Virginity Discourse," 61-68.
[290] SAEMO 14/2.152. What I render here as "lock" is technically plural (*claustra*); it sometimes designates "bolts" or other plural ideas but is often best translated as singular in English (see the dictionary entry *claustra* in LD [Lewis and Short, 1879], p. 351 and the many plural forms among the cited examples in the entry for *claustrum* in OLD [Glare, 2012], vol. 1, p. 367). "Enclosure" could be a wall or fence as well as an enclosed space (*s[a]eptum*), and the adjective *genitalis*, while possibly meaning "genital," often means that something is hereditary or inherent (thus "innate" in my translation): OLD 2.1849-1850 and 1.833, LD 1615 and 808.
[291] SAEMO 14/2.152.

was able to remain shut with the passage of offspring and preserve "the innate lock of a virgin," since only the Lord passed through it (8.55); no one but God would pass that way thereafter, not even Joseph (8.55-57).[292]

The Temple gate also appears in a letter from the 390s. A letter to Siricius quotes Ezekiel 44:1-3 and declares that "this gate is Mary," whom the Lord passed through; but even after birth "it will (still) be closed, since a *virgin* both conceived and gave birth."[293] According to Ambrose's reasoning here, to give birth as a virgin is to have—or to be—a consistently closed door. Another letter, dated very late in Ambrose's career, deploys statements about Mary's virginal genitals to support the value of asceticism.[294] Ambrose argues that the savior of the world saw fit both to choose a virgin mother and to emerge from her without damaging her virginity. "When he was born from Mary's womb, he nonetheless kept safe the innate enclosure of (her) *pudor* and (kept) the seals of her virginity undefiled."[295] A state so dear to God must be holy and truly precious.

These formulations locate virginity anatomically by suggesting that it resides in a particular body part. Although Ambrose continues to emphasize the importance of mind and soul for maintaining one's virginity, the necessity of remaining virginal in one's body persists in these writings, and the physical qualities he associates with the virginal state receive a newly visible place. Virginal status depends on genital condition, and probably

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[292] SAEMO 14/2.154-156 (quotations on 154).
[293] This is among Ambrose's "Letters outside the collection" or *Epistulae extra collectionem*, for which I will use the abbreviation *Letter ex. coll.* For this letter, *Letter ex. coll.* 15 (section 6, CSEL 82/3.306), the equivalent Maurist number is 42.
[294] *Letter ex. coll.* 14 (Maur. 63), section 33. J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz dates it to 396 in *Ambrose of Milan: Political Letters and Speeches*, trans. Liebeschuetz (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 292-295.
[295] CSEL 82/3.252.

more specifically on the presence, change, or removal of hymenal tissue that acts as a closed door or natural lock to bar the womb from the outside world. With the debate over Mary's types of virginity, Ambrose develops a clearer stance on the nature of bodily virginity, either as a more explicit articulation of his prior assumptions about virginal vaginas or as a more specific conclusion at which he has recently arrived. In the early treatise *Widows*, we find a conviction that female virginity can be medically verified; by the 390s, we find the idea that female virgins' genitals have a built-in physical barrier.

Ambrose's treatises on virginity from this final decade, *Education of a Virgin* and *Exhortation to Virginity*, include references to Mary's genital closure and an integration of this ideal into discourse directed at present-day virgins. These works contain little discussion of the exact nature and relationship of human bodies, souls, and minds, but in other works composed by about this time, Ambrose had begun to spell out a fairly detailed anthropology.[296] Scholars have shown that by his reasoning, the soul and body are distinct, yet "integrally related" in a "hylomorphic" relationship (where soul gives "form" to the "matter" of the body).[297] This holds true in his virginity discourse, where the two aspects appear side-by-side and, at times, nearly blend into one. Virginity of

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[296] These include the treatises named for Old Testament patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph) that are based upon catechetical sermons; see Marcia L. Colish, *Ambrose's Patriarchs: Ethics for the Common Man* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005, with a discussion of dating on 24-29) and (with consideration of various works) J. Warren Smith, *Christian Grace and Pagan Virtue: The Theological Foundation of Ambrose's Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Ambrose does discuss the integrity and relationship of body and soul in *Education of a Virgin* 2.10-15; for examples of his lengthier discussions elsewhere, see the several relevant passages in *Isaac, or the Soul* 6.50-7.62. Colish accentuates the contrast between the ethical content of these treatises and that of Ambrose's works for ascetic audiences (*Ambrose's Patriarchs*, 149-158), whereas some commonalities of theme and scriptural imagery could be used to make a case for viewing lay and ascetic ethics along a smoother continuum.

[297] Colish, *Ambrose's Patriarchs*, 150-151; Smith, *Christian Grace*, 29-42. Smith notes that body and soul are meant to exist in harmony, and that their division of purpose is a result of the fall (and see his comments on 33-34 concerning how best to describe this division).

body, in its newly crystallized form, continues to be stressed alongside the ever-crucial virginity of soul, and parallels between the two are drawn with sharper strokes than before.

In *Education of a Virgin*, Ambrose frequently proclaims Mary's perpetual virginity and thereby provides hints about how virginity might be defined. He defends the lifelong permanence of Mary's virginity with a long list of arguments, many of which are culled from earlier authors (sections 5.35-7.50). These make it clear that he is defining virginity as fundamentally sexual as opposed to, for instance, marital (in these sections he distinguishes between the marriage pact in which Mary participated with Joseph and the terms implying loss of virginity that were *not* characteristic of their marriage, such as *corruptela*, *defloratio*, and *admixtio*).[298] He describes Mary's womb as a temple consecrated by Christ (5.33, 17.105) and a royal or heavenly "court" or "hall," *aula*, that is mentioned in scripture (6.44, 7.50, 12.79, 17.105);[299] in 12.79 he begins to talk also of Mary's uterus as an *olla*, a pot, which (he explains) is a variant for *aula* in Latin biblical manuscripts. The exclusive dedication or submission of a virgin to God makes her a royal hall, and Mary's "pot" boiled with the Spirit to bring forth the savior, an image he continues to develop in later sections of the treatise and directly applies to his audience of virgins while instructing them to let Christ descend into their very viscera (13.82-83).[300] The physical, spatial emphasis for Mary's and other virgins' bodies in

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[298] SAEMO 14/2.136-150.
[299] SAEMO 14/2.144, 150, 166, 186.
[300] Ambrose may find this reading coherent and worthy of development because of ancient tendencies to describe the uterus as a container, or because of the role that heat was thought to play in the process of human reproduction. On the latter, a frequently cited description appears in Brown, *Body and Society*, 17.

these illustrations heightens the sense that virginity has a concrete dimension and can be located in a particular place within female bodies: the reproductive system.

In *Education* 8.52-9.62, Ambrose turns immediately from reflecting on Mary's closed womb to addressing the virgins in his audience. The sections cited in my discussion above (8.52-57) explain that the door of Mary's womb remained shut when Christ passed through her to enter the world, and that no one else ever opened it. Ambrose turns suddenly from his emphatic description of Mary's genital condition to a set of analogies and instructions for his virginal audience that are based upon this concrete picture of Mary's closed womb.

> So virginity is a closed gate, and virginity is a closed garden, and virginity is a sealed fountain. Listen diligently, virgin, with opened ears and closed *pudor*; open the hand, so that the pauper should recognize you, (and) close the mouth, lest a ravisher steal in; open the mind, preserve the seal.[301]

Figurative links from the earlier treatises remain (the mouth should be closed, the mind should be opened), but through repetition of terms, Ambrose now links a virgin's "closed *pudor*" and preservation of "the seal" or "sign" (*signaculum*) to the genital closure of Mary in the immediately preceding paragraphs.[302] To be an enclosed garden now more explicitly includes having—and keeping—a closed womb. "You are a closed gate, virgin; let no one open your doorway, which the holy and true one closed once and for all… Closed is your *pudor*; let no one open it" (9.62).[303] The spiritual emphases of

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[301] *Education* 9.58 (SAEMO 14/2.156).
[302] The parallels between mouths and genitals in ancient medical understandings of women's anatomy are noted in Giulia Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), and in the studies of Hippocratic medicine cited in my chapter 2.
[303] SAEMO 14/2.158.

Ambrose's earlier writings do not disappear in *Education of a Virgin*: in his consecration prayer for the virgin Ambrosia (17.105-114), he begins and ends his references to her with a focus on her *anima* (17.107, 17.114),[304] and he continues to weave in spiritualized interpretations of the Song of Songs that center on the virtues and designate love as the wall and enclosure of the virgin's garden (17.111-113).[305] With the inclusion of genital enclosure in his discussions, however, the treatise yields a tighter weave of intensely physical imagery and spiritualizing interpretations for passages like Song of Songs 4:12.

Exhortation to Virginity likewise shows a tight interweaving of physical and spiritual emphases. In this work, Ambrose spends several chapters speaking in the voice of the widow Juliana, the benefactor being honored at this dedication of a new church building. Most of the treatise is addressed to her children, three daughters and a son, who are apparently old enough for such exhortation but are perhaps still considering whether to commit themselves formally to celibacy (or possibly some are being consecrated on this very occasion, given the brief dedicatory language in 14.94—but see also 10.71, where it sounds as though a daughter or some daughters have already taken a vow of virginity). In parallel to the church being consecrated, Juliana has (according to Ambrose) already dedicated her own "temple of sexual honor (*pudicitia*) and integrity" to God in her offspring (2.10),[306] and the bishop urges the children to choose (or continue) the life of virginity.

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[304] SAEMO 14/2.186, 194.
[305] Compare the similar balance in the *Exposition of Luke*, where Ambrose works on both sides of the body-soul/mind spectrum by dwelling on Mary's bodily virginity in 2.56 but reflecting on the nature of "a pure and immaculate virginity of the soul" when he quotes Song 4:12 in section 4.13 (SC 45.156).
[306] SAEMO 14/2.206-208.

While a great array of Ambrose's past themes, terms, and instructions reappear in this treatise, one passage in particular demonstrates the complex relationship between bodily and spiritual aspects of virginity found in his late works. In this passage, images from Song 4:12 once again serve as central sites for assessing where Ambrose's discourse falls on the body-soul/mind spectrum. As I will discuss in the final section of this chapter, the gender-inclusive makeup of his immediate audience may have affected the ways that Ambrose casts some of his ideas about the nature of virginity. In the case of this passage, there is so much ambiguity or slippage between the spiritual and the physical that it is difficult to tell whether the author is struggling to keep his discourse relevant for a group that includes a young man (and thus referring to female virginal anatomy only obliquely), or if he has deliberately pulled the ends of the spectrum into such close interrelationship that the two poles, body and soul/mind, are nearly interchangeable. Given his emphasis in other late works on the ideal harmony and near-unity of body and soul, the latter is a very plausible explanation.

In *Exhortation* 5.29, Ambrose uses phrasing reminiscent of Mary's genital integrity as he discusses it in other works, yet he quickly ties the phrases to the soul. He claims that in the Song of Songs, Christ praises virginity in what he says about the bride, including that she is "a closed garden, a sealed fountain, where virginity (that is) fenced off with the barrier of *pudor* produces better fruits, (virginity) in which the seals of chastity persist undefiled. Preserve this garden of your soul…" He associates the soul with the fountain in the next phrase ("this garden of your soul, this fountain of pure liquid"), warning virgins not to let someone disturb the fountain and mark (or unseal?—

designo) "what birth sealed in you."[307] It is unclear if Ambrose is trying to employ these formulations, which elsewhere pertained to genitals, to vividly convey the need to guard one's purity of soul (as it was sealed in God's image by baptism,[308] or initially at creation), or if this is a systematic statement about body and soul together, with a closed body serving as a protective garden around the fountain that represents the soul (with the garden "*of* your soul" meaning "*around/for* your soul" rather than "*which is* your soul"). In either case, the passage shares with other relatively late works a heightened emphasis on concrete enclosure and densely interlocked considerations of the body and the soul. Bodily virginity is, at the least, a prerequisite and paradigm for the soul's purity; judging by this and other passages, the two aspects of virginity may have come to merit equal concern in Ambrose's configuration (if they did not already in Ambrose's early discourse, where bodily virginity is claimed to be secondary but is so indispensable that true virgins will die to protect it or have it miraculously protected for them).

A subsequent passage of *Exhortation to Virginity* directs attention to the body in a similar way. In 6.35, after proceeding to narrow his focus to the benefits of virginity for women (4:20-6.34), Ambrose writes about the "true" offering his audience should make:

> What is so true as undefiled virginity, which guards the seal of (one's) *pudor* and the innate barrier of integrity? In truth, moreover, when a young woman is deflowered by the custom of marital union, she loses that which is her own, because an alien thing is mixed with it.[309] Indeed, that which we are born (as) is true, not (that) into which we are changed—(that) which we have received from the creator, not (that) which we have taken

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[307] SAEMO 14/2.220.
[308] The seal of God's image that a Christian receives from the Holy Spirit at baptism is discussed and mentioned in numerous places across Ambrose's works.
[309] Or "with her" (*ei*).

> up from cohabitation. …[Preserve your virginity] so that (the creator) might recognize in you his work, and (might recognize) that innate seal unviolated and untouched.[310]

Much as with 5.29, the language in 6.35 resembles discussions elsewhere of closed genitals, while it also retains similarity with the early works' generalized concerns with pollution and boundaries ("she loses that which is her own, because an alien thing is mixed with it") and lies in close proximity—in terminology as well as flow of paragraphs—to 5.29 and its concern with the soul. Multiple models for virginal purity have been compiled here, and multiple resonances are possible as a result.[311]

Other late works, such as *Letter ex. coll.* 14 (Maur. 63), also intermix virginity of the body and of the soul or mind. Recall that paragraph 33 of this letter discussed Mary's virginity and how Christ "kept safe the innate enclosure of [Mary's] *pudor* and (kept) the seals of her virginity undefiled." In paragraph 36, Song 4:12 is cited alongside a phrase from Ephesians 5 ("a virgin without a blemish, without a wrinkle") to demonstrate that Christ highly values virginity and speaks of the Church as his virginal bride in scripture. The garden and fountain are given virtue-oriented interpretations (the garden produces fragrant fruits, it is surrounded by the wall of chastity, and virginity is a fountain and origin of sexual virtue or honor, *pudicitia*), but another phrase suggests an anatomical dimension: the fountain (or the *pudicitia* it produces) "guards inviolate the seals of

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[310] SAEMO 14/2.226.

[311] Another important term for Ambrose's evolving discourse is *integritas*, "integrity," and the related adjective *integer*. While these remain key terms throughout his writings on virginity, by the late treatises they not only refer to varying ideas like general purity of body and singleness of lifestyle (cf. their uses in *Virginity*, where *integritas* sometimes designates the life of celibacy—such as in 5.25-7.35) and the wholeness of abstract things like faith (e.g., in *Exhortation* 14.94); they may also hint at the concrete state of virgins' genitals that are whole, untouched, and pure (for example, when "the integrity of holy Mary" is shorthand for "virginity" in *Exhortation* 14.93; SAEMO 14/2.270).

integrity."[312] Ambrose goes on to say that God's image is evident in this virginity-fountain, for the virgin's purity is shown forth in both simplicity of character and a correspondingly pure and lovely status of her body. Discussion of the Church is blended with a picture of the inviolate body of the virginal woman, whose virtuous mind and intact genitals correspond to one another and constitute her purity.

Such passages show strong continuity with the earliest treatises: virginity consists in both bodily and spiritual purity. Yet in the late works, bodily virginity is not left in abstract phrases and in martyrs' stories from the past. Ambrose delineates Mary's virginity in explicit terms and maps her genital condition onto virgins as a whole by applying the same turns of phrase to his present-day audiences, often making quick shifts between bodily and spiritual aspects that stitch the two together into an increasingly dense fabric and inseparable whole.

4.4.2. Is virginity predominantly something to keep, or something to acquire?

Because Ambrose compiles and builds on themes and images from numerous earlier authors' works on virginity, one can find several different, sometimes disparate elements held in common with other authors. Despite this, there can be no doubt that he tends to view virginity as something a female virgin already has and must carefully guard so that she will keep it and not lose it. These ideas can be found throughout his writings on virginity, from very early to very late works. It is possible that Ambrose sees virginity

[312] CSEL 82/3.253-254.

as an achievement to pursue or a state begun in a new way through baptism or a vow,[313] but his emphasis falls heavily on preservation of this state, rather than exposition on how it might be begun—even when he exhorts young people to embark upon the celibate life (in *Exhortation*) or defends himself for encouraging this (in *Virginity*). Instead, he implies that virginity is innate.

The strongest point of connection Ambrose shares with authors who stress the acquired quality of virginity is an insistence that preserved virginity is superhuman. To remain virginal is to defy human customs and transcend human nature. This claim appears often in *Virgins*, where Ambrose depicts the virgin martyr Agnes' virtue and Mary's ascetic fasting as things that exceed nature (1.2.5, 2.2.8), and virginity itself as something outside of nature's laws and customs, originating in heaven and spreading on earth after the advent of Christ (1.3.11-13). Even so, virginity is preserved rather than acquired. Although Agnes' great feats set her beyond nature, they consist in obtaining martyrdom and *remaining* a virgin (1.2.5). A martyr's status is something one achieves, while virginity is something one retains. The Antiochene virgin's story in 2.4.22-33 deals expressly with the concern that she not lose her preexisting state of chastity.

The guarding and protection of virginity feature prominently in sections of *Virgins*. The virgin can enclose and guard her garden of virtues with the proper precepts and precautions (1.8.46). Others lend protection as well: the Church provides safeguards against enemy sieges (1.8.49), and the Lord and his hosts of angels provide a special level

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[313] A fanciful monologue by past martyrs in *Virgins* 3.7.34 hints at the idea that baptism is the origin, or a renewal, of virginity.

of defense for holy and undefiled virgins (1.8.51).[314] Nevertheless, the virgin must take care to guard her own behaviors (2.2.9) and has a role in building her own fortifications as she matures in faith (2.6.43).

Virginity shows similar lines of thought. Arguing for virginity's superiority over marriage, Ambrose explains that Gospel accounts of Christ blessing children are meant to convey the blessedness of childlike chastity in particular, since these children preserved a flawless integrity and since children are naturally ignorant of sexual corruption or *corruptela* (6.30).[315] Virginity, it seems, is a state of childhood that can be perpetuated in adulthood. Other passages about preserving one's state are applicable to baptized Christians besides virgins (such as the warning in 10.58 to keep one's washed feet clean—speaking figuratively with Song 5:3 and John 13—so that the contaminations of the world and passions of the body do not soil them again),[316] but the association of virginity with childhood suggests that being a virgin precedes baptism.

The much later treatises continue this emphasis on virginity being something one preserves and must guard. Passages on Mary speak of her virginity remaining, persisting, or being preserved (especially throughout *Education* 5.35-8.57); she produced Christ "with her virginity still safe and sound" (*Education* 5.33).[317] Virgins are instructed that virginity is a flower one ought to guard and a twig others must not scorch; the virgin is a garden whose fruits must be guarded and whose fence and wall must not be removed, a

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[314] There is also a rare instance of virginity granting rather than requiring protection in *Letter ex. coll.* 14 (Maur. 63), section 38, where Ambrose describes virginity as a wall of divine protection against the storms of the world.
[315] SAEMO 14/2.32-34.
[316] A similar passage is addressed to broader audiences in *Isaac, or the Soul* 6.52 and *Jacob* 5.19.
[317] SAEMO 14/2.134.

fountain whose water must not be polluted, and a gate closed by God whom no one should open (*Education* 9.59-62). She should hold fast to what she already has (Rev 3:11, *Education* 10.63). Virgins' proper sexual shame might be guarded by a mother, but the virgin herself must take measures to seclude herself and be on guard about her behaviors, especially her speech (*Exhortation* 10.71-73, 13.86-88). Juliana's virgin daughters are urged to preserve the image of God that they already present—an image Ambrose seems to think will be especially pronounced in virgins—and he prays for their spirit, soul, and body to be kept whole or untouched, *integrum* (1 Thess 5:23; *Exhortation* 13.84, 14.94).[318]

Above all, *Exhortation* 6.35 (shown above) demonstrates that Ambrose casts virginity as an inherent state that is changed when a female virgin experiences sexual intercourse. Virginity that is undefiled preserves *pudor*'s "seal," and integrity either is or has an "innate barrier"; the "seal" is innate (*genitale*) as well. Marital sexuality is a mixing that causes the virgin to lose "that which is her own." Furthermore, "that which we are born (as)," which is received from God, is "true," as opposed to "(that) into which we are changed" by cohabiting, and God will recognize in virgins their original created state and their "unviolated and untouched" innate seal.[319]

In both his early works with generalized depictions of bodily purity and his late works with specifically anatomical depictions, Ambrose stresses that virgins already possess their virginity and must guard it. This correlates to an ongoing concern with the

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[318] SAEMO 14/2.264, 270.
[319] SAEMO 14/2.226.

boundaries of the Church and the need to preserve uncontaminated Christian beliefs and norms, as seen in passages like paragraphs 5-6 of his *Letter ex. coll.* 15 (Maur. 42): the pure creed guarded by the Roman church is set in parallel with Mary's preserved womb. As I will discuss in the final section of this chapter, Ambrose's configuration of virginity serves to underscore the importance of boundaries and safeguarding both for and beyond the virgin's own body.

4.4.3. What does the author's use of water imagery suggest about the nature of virginity?

Ambrose employs a number of illustrations and biblical images involving water. These provide useful perspective on two aspects of his thought: his accumulating interpretations of the "sealed fountain" from the Song of Songs, and the flexibility and quick reversals that often mark his interpretation of other passages or images.

Several scholars have pointed out the omnipresence of Song 4:12 in Ambrose's works.[320] In the course of his career, the "sealed fountain" is gradually assigned multiple layers of meaning. In *Virgins* 1.8.45, the fountain within the virgin is the site where she can purely reflect God's image, amidst the garden of the soul where virginity grows. Later works often include this idea of maintaining a clear reflection in the fountain's pure and untroubled waters, but other meanings are brought in as well. In *Virginity* 13.80, Ambrose links the sealed fountain with the door of the virgin's mouth that is meant to be

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[320] In Anglophone scholarship, Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Uses of the Song of Songs: Origen and the Later Latin Fathers," in Clark, *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen, 1986), 386-427; Power, "Secret Garden"; most recently, Shuve, *Song of Songs*, chapters 4 and 5. Power relates this verse to the carefully groomed gardens of upper-class Roman homes, where channeled water and trimmed hedges demonstrated orderliness and control ("Secret Garden," 10).

found closed when Christ arrives to visit her; her "mouth should not open easily, nor unseal for common conversation."[321] The sealed fountain comes closer to signifying or determining virginity itself in other instances. In *Letter ex. coll.* 14 (Maur. 63), Ambrose writes that virginity itself is a fountain, one that not only exhibits God's image, but is a source for sexual virtue that guards integrity's seals; a pure mind and undefiled body go hand in hand (section 36). His phrases invoke intact bodies as well as intact minds. In *Education* 9.61, virgins are told that they are a sealed fountain whose water should not become polluted or disturbed; the surrounding context and beginning of the section in chapter 58 suggest a wide range of possible meanings for this sealed state, since there are various things the virgin should open (her ears, mind, and almsgiving hand) and keep shut (her *pudor*, mouth, and preserved seal).

Ambrose's water imagery supplies examples of the valence reversals that mark many passages in his writings, especially in late works. An image from scripture, such as flowing water, might be coded as positive at one moment but negative the next, its meanings doubled and its valence reversed. In the late work *Isaac, or the Soul*, which is a composition focused on the relationship between the soul and Christ through exploration of figures from the book of Genesis, the sealed fountain stands for complex aspects of the life of faith for any devoted Christian. "The soul is a garden… an enclosed garden, lest it be invaded by beasts; and a sealed fountain that can wash away (the soul's)

[321] SAEMO 14/2.66.

own sins by the integrity of (its) seal and perseverance of faith," a fountain called "sealed" because "the invisible God's image is expressed in it" (5.48).[322]

Earlier in the same work, the fountain's waters are seen as negative: the sealed fountain represents the carefully guarded mind that must resist the pull of bodily pleasures, lest it "open up (the pleasures') fountain that ought to be closed and fenced by eagerness of effort and consideration of reason" and thus let pleasurable thoughts flow forth (1.2).[323] The mind sealed by God's image keeps the stream-like power of pleasures safely locked away and the soul pure. In many passages of *Isaac*, however, a flowing fountain is a very positive image. Just prior to his discussion of the resolute mind remaining a sealed fountain, he speaks of Isaac (who is a type of Christ) as a "fountain of joy," a source of wisdom for the soul that flows in "spiritual streams."[324] Virtue, wisdom, love, and Christ himself are connected with fountains and wells in *Isaac*.[325] Waters provide cleansing (4.24) and symbolize the depth of holy mysteries (4.26). These positive associations do not prevent Ambrose from swift inversions of imagery in passages like 1.2, where flowing waters suddenly become the threatening movement of the Christian's bodily pleasures. Ambrose's range of valences is similar to Gregory's, but where Gregory sets conflicting images in separate sections or moves gradually from one to the other, Ambrose places them in quick succession that keeps the tensions taut.

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[322] CSEL 32/1.672-673. Ambrose ties together the fountain (soul), the Church, and virginity in this passage, as well. In the final section of this chapter, I will briefly consider the relationship between virgins and other Christians in Ambrose's discourse.
[323] CSEL 32/1.643.
[324] Section 1.2, CSEL 32/1.642-643.
[325] Allan Fitzgerald, "Ambrose at the Well: *De Isaac et anima*," *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 48 (2002): 79-99.

Others of Ambrose's works show similar occurrences of positive and negative water imagery alongside one another. In *Virginity*, Christ is a fountain that quenches the fire of one's feverous desires or sins (16.99), but is also the heat that can dry up the torrent of worldly delights (16.100). In the concluding sections of *Virginity*, "the deep" (*altum*) of the sea signifies multiple things: the threat of "the world" but also its expansive mission field, the depth of the human heart that faith and preaching must reach, the knowledge of Christ in contrast with the shallow understanding of Jews, the depth of God's wisdom, and the depth of present-day Christians' faith and devotion, in which virgins have a special role (18.119-20.135).[326] As I will discuss later in this chapter, this technique of layered interpretations and quick reversals appears to be an important trait of Ambrose's writings where his thought on virginity is concerned, for it makes it possible for the author to compile a wide range of ideas and place them side by side. Flowing fountains and cooling rains regularly appear as illustrations of salvation reaching humanity or the tempering of human passions,[327] yet Ambrose freely interprets waters as helping and harming, saving and threatening, sometimes in surprisingly close succession.

4.4.4. How does the author use the terminology of "seals" and "sealing" when discussing virginity?

The layering and reversals of Ambrose's water images hold true for his "sealing" terminology as well. Just as his configuring of virginity as physical and spiritual draws on a wide range of prior models and develops ideas at both ends of the spectrum, his use

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[326] SAEMO 14/2.94-106.
[327] See, for example, *Virgins* 1.5.22, *Virginity* 14.90, *Education* 13.81-82, and *Exhortation* 10.71.

of the vocabulary of sealing and closure spans a broad range of fourth-century Christian discourse. Like σφραγ- terms in Greek and the roots ܫܡܪ and ܚܬܡ in Syriac, Latin terms like *signo, sigillum* and *signaculum* are attached to a huge variety of meanings, acts, and processes in early sources; Kim Power notes, for instance, that Romans would associate seals with locks, with guarding or fortification and the protection of valuables, and also with signatures and the impressing of one thing's shape upon another, while Ambrose also clearly associates it with baptism.[328] Ambrose (following Tertullian) may be the second extant author who correlates a "closed womb" with virgins' hymenal intactness, and in his works we see—perhaps for the first time—the association of Song 4:12 with the allegedly "closed," "sealed" quality of female virgins' genitals.

Examples of spiritual "seals" are easy to find throughout Ambrose's corpus. He frequently quotes Song 8:6, "Set me as a seal (*sigillum*) on your heart and as a seal (*signaculum*) over your arm," and refers to the image of God that has been placed as a seal upon the believer (*Virgins* 1.8.46-48, *Education* 17.113;[329] see also his discussion of Christ as the seal in *Isaac* 8.75, *Mysteries* 1.7.41 and of the sealing the Trinity performs at baptism in *Sacraments* 6.2.5-8). He applies a figurative and reversible sort of sealing to the mouth when he utilizes verses from Song of Songs in commanding virgins to guard their speech and to keep their mouths closed except when they are conversing with Christ (*Virginity* 13.80-84, *Education* 9.58, *Exhortation* 9.58). The Song's closed garden and

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[328] Power, "Secret Garden," 205-209. Power argues that Ambrose's imagery of "seals" and "sealing" depends on the idea of a hymen from the beginning, while I have shown here that this association becomes apparent only in his later compositions. On the use of "seal" terminology in relation to baptism in particular within Ambrose's theology, see Anselm Blumberg, *Accepisti signaculum spiritale: Das geistliche Siegel der Taufe im Spiegel der Werke des Ambrosius von Mailand* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2012).
[329] SAEMO 14/1.146-148, 14/2.192.

sealed fountain, as we have seen, are frequently interpreted as spiritual realities pertaining to the soul (*Virgins* 1.8.45, *Virginity* 10.54 and 12.68-69, *Education* 17.111, *Exhortation* 5.29).

Like other authors examined in this chapter, Ambrose speaks positively of many kinds of opening as well as closure in his exhortations to virgins. The litany of things that should remain closed according to *Education* 9.58 are paired with things that should be, or remain, opened, including the virgin's ears, generous hand, and mind, and the same holds true for the scriptures that Christ has opened to her (9.62). The relationship between the Song's lovers is cast as an erotic spiritual connection between Christ and the virgin's mind, soul, or heart, which should open to him alone (*Virginity* 11.60-67 and 12.70-74, *Exhortation* 9.58); here Ambrose follows the same interpretative trajectory that appealed to Gregory. Even the opening of a virgin's womb can be positive when the opening refers to the initiation of fertility, as it had for Origen and also could for Ephrem—this seems to be the case for Christ's agency in Mary's conception in *Exposition of Luke* 2.56-57—or when the mind is opened, filled, and relocked in a pattern reminiscent of a receptive womb (*Virginity* 11.60-67, especially 66; cf. the similar imagery with a more explicitly reproductive dimension in *Isaac* 6.53).

More distinctive to Ambrose's configuration of virginity is the hymenal or hymen-like element of equating physical virginity with the persistence of a virgin's innate genital closure. Mary's womb may have been "opened" in the sense that Christ caused her to conceive, but Ambrose emphatically insists that she (or her womb—the two are often elided) was and forever remained "closed," like the gate of the Temple in

Ezekiel 44:1-3 and the Song's closed garden and sealed fountain.[330] In his late compositions, discussion of Mary's anatomical virginity flows immediately into direct address of the virgins in Ambrose's audience, who are told that virginity itself and virgins themselves are closed, shut, and sealed (*Education* 8.52-9.62; cf. *Exhortation* 4.26-6.35). They are instructed to maintain a closed *pudor*, a term which sometimes appears to be a euphemism for their genitals or genital barriers, as we have seen in various passages (*Education* 9.58 and 9.62, *Exhortation* 6.35; see also *Education* 8.52, *Hymn* 4.4, and *Letter ex. coll.* 14 [Maur. 63], section 33). In the works of Ambrose, bodily virginity becomes anatomical in a way rarely found before this time, as a state of genital closure.

Overall, for Ambrose, sealing and enclosure come to be physical conditions as well as spiritual, moral, and social acts. His discourse draws upon a full range of ways that earlier and contemporaneous Christians used such terms. A virgin does create enclosure of certain types around herself, such as the fencing in of her soul-garden with spiritual and scriptural protection (*Virgins* 1.8.45-46); this aligns with instructions found in earlier writers like Athanasius and contemporaries like Gregory. By Ambrose's late works, however, it becomes clear that becoming enclosed or sealed is not simply a condition one accomplishes, but a reflection or extension of the natural enclosure that God has built into the very body of the female virgin.[331] The female virgin's womb is inherently sealed shut unless it is opened by defloration. This enclosure, while serving as

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[330] In Burrus' words, Ambrose's Mary "was all surface and border, defense and containment; in abbreviated form, she 'was' her eternally unruptured hymen" (*Begotten, Not Made*, 136).
[331] On Ambrose's naturalizing of socially constructed ideas with the help of seemingly "natural" symbols, cf. Power, "Secret Garden," 10, and see my discussion below on the effectiveness of anatomized virginity for supporting Ambrose's agendas as a church leader.

a possible paradigm for the life of virtue among Christian men and non-celibate women, appears to be a crucial element of virginity for Mary and for the virgins Ambrose addresses in his late virginity treatises.

4.4.5. Given all these elements, in what senses is virginity a state of the body?

In his first works on virginity, Ambrose stays at a very general level when discussing virginity's physicality: the purity of a body uncontaminated by sex is an indispensable part of being a virgin. By his late works, the physical and spiritual dimensions that have already appeared are joined by new articulations of the anatomical nature of virginity as both ends of the continuum (body and soul/mind/spirit) continue to be developed. Across all these works, Ambrose exhibits a deep concern that virgins maintain strong boundaries to protect their purity and special status. Although the lifelong preservation of virginity goes beyond the usual habits or abilities of human nature (as he emphasizes in his first treatise), the late treatises emphasize that virginity is innate, and compositions from both periods suggest that the preservation and guarding of virginity is an urgent project involving stringent self-discipline.

Ambrose's water imagery and use of language about sealing and (en)closure confirm that he is integrating an enormous range of themes, texts, and ideas, and the meanings of his images and terms are sometimes packed into remarkably dense layers as he turns from one point of exposition to another. He draws on multiple prior authors and compiles seemingly disparate notions and interpretations. At the same time, his approach is distinct. Like Basil of Ancyra and Gregory of Nyssa, he draws on a Platonic

framework for his anthropology, yet the three authors' configurations for the bodily nature of virginity radically diverge. He may share Basil's emphasis on guarding virginity, Gregory's interest in virtue, and Athanasius' concern with boundaries,[332] but these are combined (however uneasily or persuasively) with claims or assumptions about virginal anatomy that, prior to the late fourth century, are glimpsed only in Tertullian and Cyprian of Carthage.[333] With Ambrose, in contrast to many fourth-century writers, one finally has just cause to consider the hymenal overtones that can arise from a writer's naming of seals and closure (overtones that often echo back from an ancient text simply because modern readers have projected the underlying pitch themselves). He is among those who usher in a new phase in the history of virginity—a shift toward newly specific and intense interest in the relationship between virginal status and genital condition.

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[332] On the latter, see Brakke, *Athanasius*; Virginia Burrus, "Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10.1 (1994): 27-51; Shuve, *Song of Songs*, 112-114.

[333] See my next chapter for Cyprian's place within this lineage of thought on anatomical virginity.

4.5. The divergent configurations and differing projects of the four authors

In the discussions above, it becomes apparent that much of these authors' thinking on virginity can be distilled to a core concept or small group of concepts. Basil's *True Incorruption in Virginity* is truly centered on incorruption, constructing virginity as a state free from passion, in the body but especially in the soul; to practice virginity is to remain uncorrupt. Gregory builds on Basil's earlier treatise, but places more weight on the "acquiring" pole and stresses the connection between the advent of Christian virginity and Christian victory over mortality; in his treatise *Virginity*, the core concept is incorruptibility, the human achievement of divine imperviousness to corruption and death. The emphasis is different from Basil's: to practice virginity is to become incorruptible. Whereas neither Basil nor Gregory provides any evidence for a belief in hymenal membranes as a physical component of female virginity, Ephrem occasionally appeals to ideas that could involve hymens, and Ambrose capitalizes on the idea of closed virginal wombs. In Ephrem's discourse on Mary, virginity is a state of bodily barrenness that miraculously becomes fruitful; in his discourse on virgins more generally, virginity is a valuable sexual state that must be defended against theft and slander. For Ambrose, female virginity comes to be construed as a state of purity through enclosure in which the body is naturally sealed shut and the virgin should live in a way that honors proper boundaries, physically, socially, and spiritually. The state of the body is crucial for all of these configurations, but in drastically different ways: what matters about the body might be its ability to experience passionate pleasure, its mortality, its fertility, its history of sexual contact, or its hymenal integrity.

Through earlier Christian literature, images in Jewish and Christian scriptures, developing ascetic practices, and broader social notions of the significance of virginity (for women especially), these writers inherited and could select from a range of ideas to construct their configurations. Despite some themes and vocabulary held in common, these fourth-century works are not uniform in expressing what virginity is; just as in earlier centuries, various clusters of ideas reside in and near "virginity" terminology, making terms like παρθενία, ⲣⲁⲑⲉⲛⲓⲁ, and *virginitas* malleable enough to contain significantly different formulae or combinations of elements. This makes virginity an eminently useful concept, for it can easily absorb and reflect issues with which a writer is concerned and can be used in a variety of discursive projects. In this section, I briefly consider possible purposes or connections for the distinct constructions of virginity in the works discussed above.

4.5.1. Basil's project

Basil addresses his treatise to a fellow bishop named Letoios, thought by recent scholars to be Letoios of Melitene. His opening paragraphs frame the work as a much-needed set of teachings that explain how and why Christians might engage in the ascetic lifestyle of virginity: others have written hymns on virginity, encomia of those who fast, and lengthy praises for those renouncing wealth, yet Basil aims to produce a work addressing all such practices while setting out plainly the way to "true virtue" (chapter

1).[334] In chapter 2, as mentioned above, he claims that people think about "the name of virginity alone" without concern for genuine virginity;[335] his ensuing discussion stresses the virginity of soul that one must practice in order not to be striving in vain, with a deliberate focus on the ways a female virgin can successfully or aberrantly aim toward her goal. Basil makes it clear in chapter 1 that he expects a wider audience of readers than Letoios and the Christians whom Letoios governs, and the manuscript evidence suggests that the text's circulation was indeed quite wide, perhaps reaching more ancient readers than other Greek virginity treatises that are more widely studied today.[336]

As Basil's comments imply, an array of ascetic practices already existed in Asia Minor by the time of his episcopacy. Elm has classified several different arrangements and features of ascetic Christianity found in this region during the early and mid-fourth century, noting especially the diverse attitudes concerning the possibility of eradicating gender (and in some cases other differences in status, such as the divide between slave and free) and the benefits or problems of mixed male-female ascetic communities and partnerships.[337] Though the concrete practices and living arrangements envisioned by Basil are difficult to infer, his treatise has a clear impulse toward the regulation and unifying guidance of ascetic lifestyles by bishops like himself. I suggest that Basil's overarching project is to secure greater clerical authority in matters of asceticism by offering a technical description of the physics of desire and renunciation.

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[334] PG 30.672.
[335] PG 30.673.
[336] See Elm, *Virgins of God*, 113.
[337] Elm, *Virgins of God*, part 1.

In a context marked by various ascetic developments and experiments, Basil asserts an orderly hierarchy of knowledge about virginity that places power in the hands of educated bishops. He makes this assertion by claiming that virginity is a property of the soul and, simultaneously, by setting himself up as an expert on the soul and on its relationship to the rest of the human person. In the mid-fourth century it was by no means taken for granted by all Christians that an ecclesiastical hierarchy should hold the ethical reins of the Christian faith, and competing models for asceticism took shape in Asia Minor and neighboring regions. A female virgin might live in a same-gender or mixed-gender group, in her family's household, or with a celibate man; asceticism was practiced inside cities and beyond them, in conjunction with begging or with work and with service to others; authority on ascetic practice and spiritual growth could be placed in the hands of the virgin, her guardian, or the mentors or whole communities who guided her withdrawal from societal obligations and social differentiations of rank.[338] In the midst of this pluriform movement, Basil makes a bid for the special authority of clergy by implying that the wise practice of renunciation, the science of asceticism, belongs to the domain of clerical expertise.

Basil's model of authority mirrors the hierarchical structure of soul-over-body that permeates the treatise. Already in chapter 2, the visible and lauded ascetic practices familiar to his audiences are subordinated to bodily virginity, which is subordinated to virginity of the soul (we could say "psychic" virginity). By claiming that most people fail to grasp the truth of the matter despite the existence of many writings and practices

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[338] Ibid.

that focus on renunciation, Basil suggests that help from leaders like himself is necessary in order to get things straight—for the essence of ascetic living is a state of uncorrupt virtue best captured in the vocabulary of educated specialists like philosophers, physicians, and now bishops, whose roles as guides echo the benevolent governance of the soul over the body. For those Christians who might be lured by the more radical ascetic groups that rejected clerical hierarchies altogether,[339] the idea that hierarchy is built into the very nature of the human being may have served as a compelling assurance that leaders like Basil could offer a wealth of knowledge and were in a natural position to provide valuable guidance. Perhaps the treatise's success in terms of circulation and copying was owed to its popularity with clerical authorities.

Basil's ways of discussing the relationships between souls and bodies and of casting virginity as a fundamentally psychic, virtue-related matter are not innovations; he has many Christian and non-Christian precedents, and his conservative impulses should not necessarily be viewed as strategies in an unsavory clerical conspiracy, nor even representative of shifts in the techniques of consolidating power.[340] Nonetheless, his assertion of special knowledge about the physiology of the soul as well as the body (deeply marked by philosophical and perhaps medical traditions) promotes a system in

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[339] Discussion and sources concerning such groups, with a broader geographical scope, can be found in Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

[340] Among those who precede Basil in certain respects are Methodius of Olympus, who focuses largely on chastity and virtue when discussing virginity; Clement of Alexandria, who shows great concern over the control or elimination of desires and pleasure; and various non-Christian philosophical authors who share Basil's interest in the proper organization of a soul-body hierarchy. Countless late ancient texts reveal assumptions that reality and society are necessarily hierarchical, suggesting that it is quite natural—albeit not inevitable—for a writer like Basil to claim that human rewards in heaven will vary in proportion to earthly achievements and that even angels have differentiated statuses (chapters 51, 60, 66).

which traditionally educated writers serve as authority figures over others.[341] In Basil's reasoning, even practitioners of the most impressive feats of bodily asceticism might fail to reach their own goals, while episcopal leaders can properly illuminate the path to virtue as educators within an orderly social hierarchy. Virginity, a chief focus of much popular ascetic practice, thus becomes a unifying point to draw various ascetic movements under the umbrella of ecclesiastical control, bringing disparate practices into a single realm of episcopal jurisdiction and support. The varied and sometimes amorphous sets of ideas about virginity that circulated in antiquity are here channeled into the effort to give ascetic life a firmer shape and clearer institutional grounding.

4.5.2. Gregory's project

Gregory's focus on incorruptibility gives his descriptions of virginity a different cast. To be sure, he too can apply his energies to hierarchical models; not only does he insist that the soul (especially its rational part, the mind) ought to rule the rest of the human being, but his practical advice in the final chapter of *Virginity* advocates imitation

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[341] Medical, ethical, and spiritual expertise often operate on a continuum—not as isolated disciplines—in ancient education and self-presentation. Recent publications dealing with the overlap include Vivian Nutton, *Ancient Medicine* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004)—see 248-271, 303; Philip J. van der Eijk, *Medicine and Philosophy in Classical Antiquity: Doctors and Philosophers on Nature, Soul, Health and Disease* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); L. Michael White, "Moral Pathology: Passions, Progress, and Protreptic in Clement of Alexandria," in *Passions and Moral Progress in Greco-Roman Thought*, ed. John T. Fitzgerald (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 284-321; Heidi Marx-Wolf, "Medicine," in *Late Ancient Knowing: Explorations in Intellectual History*, ed. Catherine M. Chin and Moulie Vidas (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 80-98 and "The Good Physician: Imperial Doctors and Medical Professionalization in Late Antiquity," *Studia Patristica* (forthcoming); Heidi Marx-Wolf and Kristi Upson-Saia, "The State of the Question: Religion, Medicine, Disability, and Health in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 8.2 (2015): 257-272; Wendy Mayer, "Medicine in Transition: Christian Adaptation in the Later Fourth-Century East," in *Shifting Genres in Late Antiquity*, ed. Geoffrey Greatrex and Hugh Elton (Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 11-26. Perhaps Basil fails to frame his medical expertise more explicitly because he saw continuity (rather than contrast) between his role as a physician and his role as a bishop.

of older ascetics who are well-established in a narrowly particular tradition of asceticism that Gregory deems suitable (not too extreme, not with male-female cohabitation, and so forth).[342] Only with the help of the right superiors can Christians navigate the virginal life safely. It is during the final third of *Virginity*, including and leading up to this chapter, that Gregory sounds most like Basil of Ancyra. He even replicates or expands on some of Basil's imagery: pleasure flows like a stream toward the senses (21.1), the soul must be unwashed by waves (18.5, 23.6), the female virgin must keep herself holy for her divine bridegroom (16, cf. 20.4 and 23.7), and anyone striving for virtue through virginity must guard against the numerous forms of immoderation that may assail the soul and do it harm (18). Danger and risk, used earlier in the treatise only concerning the married life (for virginity is an "immoveable fortress," 9.2),[343] enter into the virginal life in the chapters that cling closest to Basil's treatise.

Yet the abstract notions at the core of Gregory's virginity discourse tend to break free of all this, and a greater sense of freedom, victory, and optimism on the acquisition of virginity predominates in the earlier two-thirds of *Virginity* and in works like *Life of Macrina*, the *Homily on the Birthday of the Savior*, and the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. Virginity is given or gained and this rescues the believer. Corruption, grief, and the threat of loss and death are adversaries that have already been conquered; the

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[342] Interpretations of *Virginity* depend in part on whether one links the treatise to Basil of Caesarea's endeavors in the structuring of communal ascetic life. Gregory's composition is often thought to have been written for Basil's community of monks or intended to serve Basil's organizing project by addressing a wider audience (for instance, Brown, *Body and Society*, 289-304; Anna M. Silvas, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Letters* [Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007], 7-23), but others have questioned the association of the treatise with monastic communities (Ludlow, "Useful and Beautiful," 229-230).
[343] GNO 8/1.287.

Christian virgin already participates in incorruptibility, which swallows up corruption and cannot be overcome by it (*Virginity* 1-2 and 13-14, *Birthday* 269). The transitory pleasures of the flesh are to be shunned, but eternally reliable pleasure arises from pursuit of Godlikeness as one's desire is aimed at the proper object. Moving water is only rarely connected with the threatening turbulence found in Basil's treatise, and can represent instead the flowing energies of the mind that should rush toward heavenly things. The flexibility of the concept of virginity allows Gregory to integrate pieces of various prior texts and to move in new directions.[344]

Gregory's overarching project in *Virginity* and in sections of other works pertaining to virginity appears to be the refashioning of virginity as a universal and otherworldly concept. Determining social contexts or polemical purposes for his virginity discourse is difficult precisely because he seems determined to make virginity cosmic, divine, and (thus) free from the tether of a gendered body and clear systematization. This is not entirely new: the characters of Methodius' *Symposium*, for example, often speak in similarly abstract terms as they articulate virginity's heavenly origins, spiritual nature, and connection with incorruptibility.[345] Many such ideas have

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[344] Again, see Aubineau, "Les sources du traité," 127-142 for a brief discussion of Gregory's patristic sources.

[345] On themes like these, see, for instance, the discourse of Theopatra (fourth speech) and the speeches by Thecla, Tusiane, and Domnina (eight through tenth speeches). Recent considerations of Methodius' thought on virginity and of the difficulties of unraveling his views and vocabulary include M. Benedetta Zorzi, "The Use of the Terms ἁγνεία, παρθενία, σωφροσύνη, and ἐγκράτεια in the *Symposium* of Methodius of Olympus," *Vigiliae Christianae* 63.2 (2009): 138-168; Ilaria Ramelli, "L'Inno a Cristo-Logos alla fine del *Simposio* di Metodio: alle origini della poesia filosofica cristiana," in *Motivi e forme della poesia cristiana antica tra scrittura e tradizione classica. XXXVI Incontro di studiosi dell'antichità cristiana, Roma 3-5 maggio 2007* (Rome: Institutum patristicum Augustinianum, 2008), 257-280; Amy Hughes, "'Chastely I Live for Thee': Virginity as Bondage and Freedom in Origen of Alexandria,

been viewed by scholars as elaboration upon earlier Greek thought, including the creative Christian reflections of Origen.[346] Gregory develops some of the trajectories found in earlier works like Methodius' *Symposium* and favors these over other developing trends, such as the emphases of Basil of Ancyra's *Virginity* and of other moral and encomiastic texts that both Gregory and Basil imply were in circulation among Christians.[347] Where Basil consolidates the meanings of virginity in concrete practices, Gregory multiplies the meanings, avoiding firm anchoring in practical prescriptions or clear classifications of lifestyle. Gregory advances the concept of incorruptibility as the center of virginity's meaning, yet he uses this concept to make the idea of virginity more boundless than ever. While his writings indirectly support the particular monastic traditions developing around him (such as the communities formed by his brother Basil or sister Macrina), Gregory seems reluctant to circumscribe virginity and ascetic life, preferring instead to renew the philosophical-theological heritage that casts virginity in lofty terms and sparks ongoing deliberation—rather than decisive conclusions—on its forms within human society.

As is clear from my earlier discussion, Gregory repeatedly puts virginity on a heavenly level. The cosmic importance associated with marriage in epithalamic poetry is

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Methodius of Olympus, and Gregory of Nyssa," Ph.D. Dissertation (Wheaton College, 2013). On how virginity intersects with immortality and incorruptibility, see van Eijk, "Marriage and Virginity."

[346] Gregory is undoubtedly influenced by Origen's approaches to exegesis in his treatment of the Song of Songs, but the extant portions of Origen's works on this book seldom overlap with the passages of Gregory's that are most pertinent for considering his thought on virginity. If one can rely on the Procopian excerpts supplied in *Patrologia Graeca*, it seems that at least one set of Origenian interpretations of Song of Songs 4:12 involved linking the "enclosed garden" with the soul's rational governance, or drawing a distinction between the present perfection of the "bride" (she is an enclosed garden) and her greater perfection in the coming age (as a sealed wellspring; PG 13.204).

[347] *True Incorruption in Virginity* 1 for Basil, *Virginity* 23.1 for Gregory.

reassigned to virginity. He redirects attention from popular ideas about virginity and practical questions about virginal status to virginity's divine and salvific roots, and frequently portrays virginal status as something acquired or received rather than inherent and preserved. Virginity is depicted as gift and achievement not only in the symbolic language of a commentary dealing with mystical union with God, but also in a treatise that proffers praise and advice concerning virginity itself. When speaking about virginity, Gregory is also speaking about redemption, salvation history, spiritual transformation, and the goal of Godlikeness. Through the content he invests in the term, he transfers "virginity" discourse that could otherwise be about practical and social matters into a loftier register.

By doing this, Gregory makes virginity pertinent to all Christians. *Virginity* is not focused on women in particular, let alone women who have already vowed to live in virginity, but it is also not restricted to men in its considerations and examples. In contrast to Basil's treatise, which stresses the necessity and difficulty of defeminizing female flesh and thus neutralizing desire between sexes,[348] Gregory is concerned with flesh in general as he underscores the problem of mortality. Corruption is an ontological issue, and human salvation is the (re)gaining of incorruptibility. By correlating virginity with the salvation of the human race and the transformation of the human soul in the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Gregory makes room for married Christians to have points of connection with this cosmic force through their own moral-philosophical

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[348] Discussion on this can be found in Shaw, "Creation, Virginity and Diet," 581-584 and *Burden of the Flesh*, 81-92, 220-253; cf. Elm, *Virgins of God*, 113-121.

achievements, as he envisions for individual Christians in *Virginity* 8 with the picture of skillful diversion of a stream. The virginal exemplar he develops most, Macrina, is a virginal "widow" who is set up as a paradigm of transformation into quasi-angelic existence; Gregory makes it clear that her excellence consists in extreme virtue, and she surpasses all other characters, female or male, in this aim.[349] The emphasis on virtue and lack of strict codification for female virginity leaves others' possible imitations of Macrina open-ended. These works paint an inclusive picture where virginity in some senses pertains to everyone, while patterns for living out the virginal pursuit of virtue are suggested through generalized precept, narrative, and illustration, not declared with strict definitions or clearly demarcated limits. Gregory's definition of virginity implies universality and defies clear boundaries—hence the many different readings of his ideals and boundaries that have been possible for modern readers.

This project of conceptual refashioning is also visible when Gregory suggests in *Virginity* 1 that virginity's meaning is inexhaustible (he links the limitations of the treatise with the problem of comprehending the divine in chapter 10). Virginity, which is equivalent with incorruptibility, escapes the confines of simple definition and full comprehension. Even in *Virginity*, Gregory points to human models but refrains from getting specific with his parameters for practicing the virginal life. He excuses himself from practical exhortation by appealing to the omnipresence of such advice and arguing that the living model is more important than written instructions (23.1). In section 2 of

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[349] She not only fosters a community where human life resembles angelic life, but is held up throughout the story as a model of virtue who surpasses all other characters, Gregory included, in her self-control. On her "married" status, see *Macrina* 4-5.

the preface he expresses concern about the immoderate length that a treatise with specific counsels would reach, but he also insists that his more general approach will contain everything essential, so as "not to overlook any of the necessary things."[350] Both passages seem to hint that his more universal approach is in fact superior to treatises like Basil of Ancyra's that are full of detailed prescriptions. His chapter on seeking a guide of the right ascetic persuasion only briefly lists examples of the wrong behaviors (23.3-4) and explains the right criteria for a teacher in a very general and abstract way: the man worth imitating is the one "in the midst of life and death" who is dead toward the flesh but living in the spirit (23.6).[351] Though he explains in the preface that this later chapter will refer to "our most pious bishop and father"—likely his own brother, Basil of Caesarea—as the suitable teacher, he also explains that he has omitted names so that the treatise's counsel will remain useful to anyone who reads it and will make possible their wise selection of a guide of their own (preface 2).[352] The preface thus anticipates a wide readership who should be able to apply Gregory's broad principles and description of virtuous qualities in their own quest for models and their own pursuit of virtue.

In short, Gregory's theological and ethical reflection on virginity tends to build on certain trajectories in preexisting discourse on virginity while quietly undermining other trajectories and trends. He aligns himself with earlier Platonic thinkers who spiritually allegorized virginity and in some cases even gave virginity itself a fundamentally spiritual character and an ontological significance. Across different kinds of works that

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[350] GNO 8/1.248.
[351] GNO 8/1.339.
[352] GNO 8/1.249.

span his career, his thought on virginity has a cosmic and universal bent that contrasts sharply with texts like those of Basil of Ancyra or the exhortations of Gregory's contemporary Ambrose, which prescribe proper behaviors for female virgins, as well as with letters like one of Basil's of Caesarea's that dwells on the tragedy of a female virgin's "fall."[353] We search for clear statements about the implications of his thought for individual virgins, but he refuses to give them to us. His virginity discourse is both centripetal and centrifugal: he draws many ideas toward a conceptual center—divine incorruptibility—yet the inexhaustible meaning he identifies in this concept and his varied ways of reflecting upon it send forth ideas in turn that defy attempts to pinpoint precisely how the practice of virginity may look.[354]

4.5.3. Ephrem's project

Ephrem's two-pronged configuration of virginity displays a recurring concern. Whether the virginity in view belongs to the virginally barren Mary or to female practitioners of lifelong celibacy in Ephrem's own time, its existence apparently requires a verbal defense. Hymn after hymn offers statements and exegetical parallels about the persuasive evidence for virginity that lies all around the doubter or accuser, announcing its presence to those who will listen.

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[353] This letter, which addresses a virgin's failure to preserve her virginity, is *Letter* 46 among those attributed to Basil of Caesarea. Another extant letter, even harsher in tone, is the Latin *Letter to Susanna*, which may come from this same period or may have been written slightly later than Gregory's lifetime. Other virginity treatises of unknown authorship survive from the fourth and fifth centuries, and they too are highly prescriptive.

[354] My thanks are owed to Jeremy Schott, Sandy Haney, Amy Hughes, and Morwenna Ludlow for a conference discussion that tied this centripetal/centrifugal language to Gregory's thought on virginity.

This drive to unveil the ubiquitous evidence of virginity suggests that Ephrem holds dear the need to defend and valorize Christianity's special investment in the concept. This may be in part an effort to heighten the status of his Christian communities in the eyes of outsiders; it is even more likely an important enterprise for the self-definition of insiders. This feature of the faith—virginity's centrality, both for establishing the divinity of Christ and for embodying the holiness of God's people in a conspicuously sanctified lifestyle—could be used to strengthen a community's sense of what it means to be a Christian or a non-Christian.

Ephrem's writings, like those of many early Christian authors, exhibit anxiety about the boundary between Christian and Jew—a boundary that was tenuous, porous, and always under construction. In order to build a Christian identity, writers like Ephrem frequently defined this identity over against groups construed as outsiders and opponents; such endeavors can conceptually and socially establish or solidify the very groups that they claim to describe.[355] As Shepardson has shown, the Jewish-Christian boundary is prominent in Ephrem's discourse, though it also operates to delineate the bounds of orthodoxy through association of non-Nicene Christians with Jews (suggesting that Christians who are insufficiently orthodox are "Jewish" rather than "Christian").[356] For an author like Ephrem, the fluidity of Christian and Jewish identities in his fourth-century

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[355] For broad discussions of identity construction among ancient Christians and Jews, see Judith Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 11-26 and Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 1-13.
[356] Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy*.

context demanded stabilization, and multiple kinds of boundaries could be drawn simultaneously if groups who should be considered "outsiders" were conflated.

"The people" of the Jews are frequently cast as antagonists when Ephrem discusses virginity, as we saw in section 4.3.[357] They disbelieve the resurrection and divine conception of Christ, which (according to the author) provide persuasive proof of one another (*Nativity* 10). Jews are routinely said to slander Mary, and may be the target of references in *Nativity* 12 to the slanderer who is rebuked, countered, and made speechless by the "seal and signet" of Mary and other women committed to chastity.[358] In *Nativity* 14, the men among the Hebrew people of Moses' time are portrayed as licentious, violent, and eager to slander their own wives. These depictions convey that Jews are a people who doubt God's power and lack sexual morality, while Christians are a people who have faith in God's salvific works and embrace the highest standards of purity in sexual life.

Ephrem repeatedly draws a picture in which slandering opponents are on the attack, but the victims are victorious, for their evidence is airtight. Mary expresses confidence that her son will vindicate her from the slander she faces (*Nativity* 15). Symmetrical themes and scenarios in hymns like *Nativity* 10, 12, and 14 create chains of proof where miracles, bodily evidence, and divinely ordained procedures for verifying chastity are braided together to render a Christian perspective persuasive. Old Testament texts, a shared core and site of competition for Christian and Jewish self-definition,

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[357] Cf. *Demonstrations* 6 and 18 by the earlier fourth-century Syriac author Aphrahat, who argues for the superiority of celibacy over marriage, warns that some will scoff at this idea, and attributes the opposite position to Jews.
[358] CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.72-73.

occupy a central place in Ephrem's assertions about the verifiability of virginity, even when the fit between content and current context seems odd (as when post-coital and virginal versions of *btulē* are spoken of side-by-side).[359] God's provision through Moses of methods that prove chastity and make it difficult to dismiss a wife are inspired by compassion for women of the time, but are ultimately designed "because of us" (ܒܝܠܢ), on behalf of the Christians who will likewise suffer slander once the Messiah has been born of a virgin and virginity has become a consecrated way of life (*Nativity* 14.11).[360] Adultery water tests and the keeping of cloths with *btulē* were God's tools for instructing Jews, so that they (in the form of their descendants) could be convinced about Mary's *btulē* and Jesus' divine lineage (*Nativity* 14.14). The proofs, Ephrem suggests, are everywhere; those who are not convinced must be deaf (*Nativity* 10.8).

By reiterating this pattern of attack and defense, Ephrem makes virginity, a status and conceptual site so often contested in societies, into a solid cornerstone for Christian identity. The distinctive practice of lifelong celibacy, the unique conception of Jesus, and the fragility of virginal commitment, all of which could easily become points of vulnerability within this identity, are recast as the very bedrock of the faith and marks of superiority vis-à-vis outsiders. Ephrem's audiences receive a proclamation that they, as Christians, are different from others, bound together by their investment in the significance of virginity and by trust in a God who not only performs seemingly

[359] See the discussion of Old Testament models for verifying chastity in section 4.3.1.
[360] CSCO 186 Scr. Syr. 82.79.

unbelievable feats, but makes such feats believable through countless forms of trustworthy evidence.

4.5.4. Ambrose's project

Ambrose's virginity discourse suggests a network of interrelated goals that are pursued through the amalgamation of interrelated elements from past and current thought on virginity. His discourse is distinctive in the explicitly anatomical dimension it comes to include and the high number of ideas, sources, and models that are borrowed and merged; even in his initial treatise, he incorporates a vast range of preexisting virginity themes, while his later works blend even more far-flung models and concerns by integrating anatomical notions about virginity with more common components already found in Christian virginity treatises.[361] Like Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose multiplies meanings, but unlike Gregory, he does this restrictively and prescriptively, delineating criteria and acceptable behaviors for female virgins.

Some scholars have discussed his interest in enclosure from an anthropological perspective, showing (usually in conjunction with Mary Douglas' work) that Ambrose's fixation on enclosed female bodies demonstrates the tendency of communities—especially when they are anxious about their outer boundaries or inner orderliness—to

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[361] Tellingly, Camelot used Ambrose's works to structure his discussion of virginity treatises' essential themes in "Les traités 'de virginitate.'" On the wide variety of themes inside *Virgins*, note the comment by Jerome in his letter to the virgin Eustochium that Ambrose's books to his sister provide a comprehensive discourse on the praiseworthiness of virginity (*Epistle* 22.22). On the integration of anatomical notions with components of prior virginity treatises, note that our rare hints of anatomical virginity notions are found not in treatises about virginity, but in other kinds of works.

map their ideals of purity and integrity onto bodies of their members, often women's.[362] Virgins who live with ascetic zeal bounded by orderly feminine virtues can thereby advertise Ambrose's preferred version of Christianity to suspicious outsiders and theologically troublesome members within local communities. Scholars have noted connections between his concerns for purity among consecrated virgins and his ideals of purity and orthodoxy in other theological areas.[363] Female virgins come to symbolize the Church in a powerful way in Ambrose's thought, and his instructions for them both grant them symbolic power as embodiments of orthodox and moral purity and subordinate them to episcopal authority, drawing their potential influence and resources within reach of the (Nicene) Church.[364]

A hymenal configuration of virginity serves these purposes well. While Ambrose did not invent the idea of the hymen, he gradually took up a series of notions that raise the bar for the virginal ideal by demanding both spiritual purity and verifiable genital integrity in a "true" virgin. These include the notion that a virgin's womb is naturally "closed" until a husband "opens" it (as we saw in Tertullian in the last chapter); that sexual virginity is (or at least entails) a virginal state of the body, such that a midwife can ascertain it by medical examination (an idea we will see emerge in a letter by Cyprian of Carthage in the next chapter); and that virgins are brides of Christ who must behave with

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[362] For instance, Power, "Secret Garden" (see pertinent introductory comments on 1-11); Brown, *Body and Society*, 341-365. Power observes that this is a Christian manifestation of longstanding Roman concerns with the bounded, enclosed female body ("Secret Garden," 9—though I would add that this ideal could exist with or without including the notion of a hymen, which Power takes as a given).
[363] See especially Laughton, "Virginity Discourse," 15-79, and also Power, "Secret Garden."
[364] Shuve, *Song of Songs*, chapters 4 and 5; Virginia Burrus, "Word and Flesh"; Brown, *Body and Society*, 343-345, 355-356.

proper modesty and withhold their bodies from adulterous contact with other men (a theme stressed by both of these Carthaginian authors long before Ambrose's time and by other authors earlier in the fourth century). Ambrose combines these elements with other spiritual and behavioral ideals, including claims that virgins ought to be well-enclosed through seclusion, coverage of clothing, and selectivity of their company and teachers (concerns expressed in various ways by Athanasius of Alexandria and Basil of Ancyra). These ideals thus become grounded in the very nature of the female body: virgins are born "shut," and everything about their lives and faith should imitate the natural boundary that their creator has circumscribed for their purity.[365] The "sealed" virginal state can symbolize spiritual aims urged upon all Christians,[366] yet it seems to be a fully physical necessity for counting Mary and consecrated women as virgins; their superior status vis-à-vis the married, on earth and in heaven, is affirmed and made concretely apparent by hymenal integrity. By appealing to this compelling construction of virginity's nature, Ambrose can craft teachings for virgins that dovetail with his goals for promoting one form of Christianity over others and for validating and entrenching asceticism—all while retaining the orderly gendered norms of traditional marriage in the relationship between the virgin and Christ, whose husbandly authority is communicated

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[365] Compare *Duties* 1.18.77-78, where Ambrose claims that nature's arrangement of the body, with beautiful parts clearly visible and shameful parts partially hidden, instructs humans to be modest with their clothing. For him, human behaviors should imitate the natural arrangement of the body.

[366] It has been observed that Ambrose not only depicts the Church as a female virgin, but makes female virginity a foundation and model for the whole economy of Christian salvation: Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy*, 197-204; Laughton, "Virginity Discourse," 138-145; Shuve, *Song of Songs*, chapters 4 and 5, esp. 135-137. His exegesis relating to the virginal bride of the Song of Songs yields similar themes in the early virginity treatises and late catechetical works, which suggests that he indeed comes to see virginity as paradigmatic for the Christian life in general.

through the teachings of male church leaders.[367] The success of this fateful alignment of notions is evident from the pervasiveness of bridal imagery and hymenal models for virginity in later centuries, and our wealth of surviving reflections on virginity by Ambrose testifies to the usefulness of this approach for Christian thought and practice of the very late fourth century and beyond.

For Ambrose's interconnected aims of furthering particular forms of ascetic practice and doctrinal purity, he apparently wants to marshal as many preexisting ideas as possible and to speak as comprehensively as possible (to women and also to men, and about both physical and spiritual aspects of virginity). By his late works, he compiles elements of so many different traditions or texts, and speaks so comprehensively, that his discourse gets paradoxical to the point of disorienting an attentive modern-day audience. Though the swift turns and paradoxes could be elegantly managed for rhetorical effect, he gives no direct acknowledgment of the tensions, nor cues for the reader/hearer to marvel at them; he performs startling shifts at many turns, on many fronts.[368]

We have already seen examples of Ambrose's sudden shifts and quick reversals in his use of positive and negative water imagery (see section 4.4.3 above) and his parallel instructions about opening and closure (such as in *Education* 9.58). He produces stark contrasts when he combines the virtue-focused ideal of the open, receptive soul with the

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[367] Laughton offers extensive discussion of Ambrose's evolving goals and strategies, including efforts to render consecrated virginity respectable to his audience through parallelisms to marriage, endorsement of traditional familial and gender roles, and promotion of a parent-like authority over virgins by bishops: "Virginity Discourse," 80-131 (with some related discussion concerning the later virginity treatises in her subsequent chapter, especially 160-173).

[368] Power comments on Ambrose's "convoluted and sometimes mixed metaphors" in *Education* and notes that he combines preexisting and new uses of metaphors from scripture ("Secret Garden," 289-290).

ideal of the shut and secluded body and the mouth that is closed except toward Christ (for example, in *Exhortation* 9.58 or with varying valences in the much earlier passages of *Virginity* 11.60-13.84).[369] In *Exhortation to Virginity*, shifts in addressee, biblical exemplars, and subject matter make it extremely difficult to understand when Ambrose is speaking to and about women, men, or both.[370] Not only does he assume the voice of the widow Juliana for much of the treatise, but his addresses to her children vary between direct speech to the son or the *filiae* (daughters) and the more general *filii* (children), while some passages in his own voice speak to a singular virgin (*virgo*). When speaking as Juliana, "she" focuses on the benefits of the virginal life for women but sometimes turns to remind her son that he was especially intended for dedication to God (8.51-52; cf. 8.55). Female virginal figures from scripture are enumerated in 5.28, while subsequent sections that seem particularly focused on female virginity draw on biblical verses about male priests or Levites (5.32-6.35 and 6.39-7.44). It is unclear in later passages whether it is only female virgins or also male virgins who are meant to respond to Christ's erotic overtures from the Song of Songs and identify with other female figures from scripture (9.56-61, 12.81). One wonders if Ambrose's references to the "barrier of *pudor*" and "seals of integrity" in this treatise would be accompanied with more graphic discussion of preserving bodily virginity if he did not feel the need to make his exhortations relevant to Juliana's son as well as her daughters (for example, in 5.29).[371]

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[369] Cf. the oscillations between valorization of covering or of stripping in his exegesis of the Song of Songs in *Virginity* 8.48, developed at greater length (and thus with greater tensions) in *Isaac* 6.55.
[370] Burrus addresses Ambrose's use of feminine and masculine personas in other works and from other analytical angles: *Begotten, Not Made*, 134-183.
[371] SAEMO 14/2.220.

Throughout, the applicability of the discourse to men as well as women remains fuzzy, with the dominant focus on female virginity interrupted by shifts that keep the target audience fluid, and with flexible moves between imagery of the body and the mind that allow for the possibility of creative application of feminine paradigms in male adaptation.

Finally, spiritual and physical points of focus for locating virginity can themselves be viewed as a site of tension in Ambrose's works. His late treatises show contrary pulls between attending to spiritual aspects of virginity and conceptually crystallizing physical virginity. Another author's simultaneous gravitation toward each extreme end of the spectrum will be the focus of chapter 6 in this dissertation. Already in Ambrose, we find this double polarization yielding interesting results: in a pair of letters discussed in my next chapter, Ambrose vehemently objects to the practice of gynecological virginity inspections, a verification technique for which his hymenal configuration all too easily lends support—but which he rejects with protestations that virginity is ultimately located and proven in a girl's chaste character and behavior. However paradoxically, virginity can be defined and concretely epitomized by the hymen while also elevated to the lofty level of moral and spiritual chastity that transcends the body.

A number of recent readers are inclined to see the quick reversals and tension-filled layering of imagery in Ambrose's mature works as skillful and likely to please his ancient audiences.[372] Of course, it is difficult to guess whether the earliest listeners and readers found the tensions and abrupt transitions in such works rhetorically dazzling or

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[372] For example, Power, "Secret Garden," 291, 322, 363-385; Burrus, *Begotten, Not Made*, 134-183; Fitzgerald, "Ambrose at the Well."

bewildering. Whatever these features suggest about Ambrose's skills as a speaker, writer, and thinker, they highlight an important aspect of late-fourth- and early-fifth-century Christian reflection on virginity: the tendency to amass past models, themes, images, and connections in new virginity discourse, often without direct acknowledgment of the tensions between them. Ambrose's amalgamation of earlier traditions and the unexpected lack of enthusiasm with which his first treatise was met in Milan[373] shows the growing pains of an ascetic movement that was by no means universally welcomed, the literature of which took root in different contexts, among different thinkers with different priorities, and the ideas of which suggest great cultural diversity even where writers are lifting themes and terms from one another at the surface level. Ambrose's writings show particularly clearly that by the end of the fourth century, authors writing on virginity had a range of sources and models at their disposal, and thus had ample opportunity (and motivation) to compile diverse ideas and—whether intentionally or not—to subtly modify, diverge from, or unevenly patch together the discourse of their predecessors.

[373] On the latter, see Laughton, "Virginity Discourse," chapter 2.

5. The Turn Toward Anatomy in Late Ancient Virginity Discourse

To this point, our focus has been on the diversity of ancient virginity discourse. In this chapter, we examine a commonality across late ancient discourses that indicates historical change. The very late fourth and turn to the fifth century was a watershed moment in the history of virginity—and in the history of (ways of conceptualizing) vaginas. At this time, various writers and sources, Christian and not, rather suddenly exhibit some shared assumptions about physical virginity and the distinctive condition of virginal sex organs. Female virginity becomes anatomized, turned into an inherent, concrete, and observable feature of the female body. This gives the concept "virginity" a new specificity in its "bodily" forms or aspects: whereas bodily virginity had previously been understood in a variety of ways through its anchoring in the body's experiences, bodily behaviors, or the purity of one's whole body that could be invisibly undone by the contamination of sexual contact, virgins now are thought to manifest sexual virginity and purity in the structures of their bodies, or in the unaltered qualities of those structures.

This anatomizing move creates the possibility for female virgins to be defined as women or girls whose genital organs are perceptibly intact. Often this integrity seems to take the form of a hymen in the minds of authors, but in some instances the notions are vague, and in other instances it is clear that virginal vaginas are marked by some other feature than hymens—such as narrowness in size and shape or tightness of tissue. Nevertheless, both hymenal and other ways of picturing virginal vaginas rely on and reinforce the idea that penile-vaginal intercourse causes a permanent and perceivable change to a virgin's sex organs. At the turn from the fourth to the fifth century, these

organs' virginal or deflowered condition is thought by many to be verifiable by sight or by touch.

The present chapter lays out diverse evidence for this anatomical turn in ancient discourse on virginity. Writers do not turn away from all previous approaches to configuring virginity; they often combine preexisting models, yet share a new orientation that keeps anatomical features in view. We can trace the development of the notion of a hymen with sketchy lines in corpuses of late-fourth- and fifth-century Christian authors, and it appears as one model among others for understanding female virginity in Jewish texts from around the same period. As we will see in the first section below, the naming of this seal as a "hymen" or "membrane" may not have been common practice until an even later time. The broader anatomical turn, however, is more widely visible across fourth- and fifth-century discussions of genital-based virginity tests and the problem of whether certain vaginas seem virginal enough. In the sections below, I consider these sources in turn and then discuss possible connections between late ancient interest in virginal vaginas and various social arenas (marriage, the sex trade, the slave trade, and consecrated Christian virginity) for which the valuing of virginity held significance.

5.1. The advent of the "hymen" as a term for a virginal, vaginal membrane

The affixing of the name "hymen" to a genital membrane of virgins seems to have become popular at a later time than the anatomical turn described in the rest of this chapter. The English word "hymen" comes from the Greek word ὑμήν, a term for

membranes within the body.[1] As explained in chapter 2, the concept of a virginal hymen is almost entirely absent from our wealth of surviving medical literature prior to late antiquity. While the name appears to designate all sorts of other membranes in human anatomy, its sole pre-late-ancient appearance as a vaginal structure found in virgins occurs in Soranus' second-century *Gynecology*, in a passage where the author claims such a membrane patently does not exist.[2] Soranus does not tell us whose opinion he is refuting; scholars have variously suggested that midwives, physicians, or popular belief in Rome attributed hymens to virgins.[3] Whatever the tradition or society that held the notion in Soranus' time, it was probably a minority opinion rather than common knowledge, for testimony that people believed in hymens—or, like Soranus, rejected someone else's ideas about hymens—is extremely rare. In medical literature, aside from one reiteration of Soranus' comments,[4] the idea remains absent for centuries. Nor do other types of texts prior to late antiquity name or even clearly describe the virginal hymen; at best, its existence in female bodies might occasionally be assumed or implied

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[1] OED (Simpson and Weiner, 1989), vol. 7, p. 549; GEL (Liddell, Scott, Jones, and McKenzie, 1996), p. 1849.

[2] *Gynecology* 1.3.17. See chapter 2.2.1 of this dissertation.

[3] Gillian Clark speculates that Soranus may be countering a theory among midwives: *Body and Gender, Soul and Reason in Late Antiquity* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 224. Aline Rousselle associates the view with Roman doctors in *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*, trans. Felicia Pheasant (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 27, 33. Giulia Sissa considers various possibilities but tends to associate hymens with Roman and especially Christian Roman thought: *Sex and Sensuality in the Ancient World*, trans. George Staunton (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 90-91; *Greek Virginity*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1990) 114, 165-177; and "Maidenhood without Maidenhead: The Female Body in Ancient Greece," in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, ed. David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 339-364, at 361-363. Below, I draw on Sissa's more recent hypothesis that the notion of a hymen arose to assuage Roman male anxiety about the possibility for contraception and (thus) undetectable sexual activity for women: "The Hymen Is a Problem, Still. Virginity, Imperforation, and Contraception, from Greece to Rome," *Eugesta* 3 (2013): 67-123 (see especially 96-97, 103-117).

[4] This is discussed further below.

in some literature, while seemingly similar words have other referents. Beyond the use of the term for other sorts of membranes, a separate set of "hymen" terms is used in Greek and Latin literature in passages about weddings. These refer to nuptial songs or refrains or to weddings as a whole (the ὑμέναιος/ὑμήναιος or *hymenaeus*), or use the proper names Hymen or Hymenaeus/Hymenaios to invoke a god or legendary human figure associated with marriage and weddings.[5] These names and the Greek word for membranes seem to have arisen independently, and they are not associated with one another in earlier ancient sources.

This situation begins to change in late antiquity, but references to "hymens" as virginal membranes remain surprisingly scarce. Two such references appear in what are likely later expansions of fourth- and fifth-century Latin texts; another appears in a seventh-century Latin encyclopedia; and the first attempt to integrate the hymen into the logic and anatomical models of medical literature is found in a seventh-century Greek work. If either of the first two instances actually comes from the fourth or fifth century, the term's use roughly coincides with the appearance of other evidence for belief in hymens, which, as we will see below, usually involved different terminology—such as speaking of a virgin's "closed" womb or genital "seal."

A definition of the hymen as a genital membrane of virgins is found in a commentary on Terence's comedies that was written by the mid-fourth-century author

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[5] The identity of this figure is sometimes the god of marriage (who sometimes cross-dresses as a bride), sometimes a youth who tragically died or disappeared on his wedding day (and in some accounts was resurrected by Asclepius), and sometimes a lovely youth who was mistakenly captured with a group of Athenian maidens (and, after killing the pirate abductors, was allowed to marry the virgin of his dreams). For a helpful compilation of the disparate traditions, see Karen Hersch, *The Roman Wedding: Ritual and Meaning in Antiquity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 236-261.

Aelius Donatus. Donatus was a grammarian and probably not a Christian, but his students included the famous Christian writers Rufinus of Aquileia and Jerome of Stridon; he was active in Rome and possibly came from North Africa.[6] The *Commentary on Terence* that survives under his name, however, survives only in an abridged form that may have been compiled from the later *scholia* recorded in margins of manuscripts for Terence's works.[7] Commenting upon a scene in Terence's *Brothers* where a wedding is about to take place, the author—perhaps Donatus, perhaps another late ancient commentator or the later redactor of his comments—offers three accounts of the reason that the wedding song is called a *hymenaeus*. One explanation for the term is that it is named for Hymenaeus, the son of Liber (Bacchus) and Venus and the founder of weddings. Others, he writes, associate it with an Athenian man who rescued a group of virgins kidnapped by pirates. A third explanation follows: "Others—because the hymen is said to be some sort of membrane, by which virginity is defended, which is destroyed at first coitus—think that the *hymenaeus* is so called as a hymn of virginal weddings."[8] If Donatus himself authored the passage, he may be an early source for this meaning of the term *hymen*, which was then taken up by some other writers and editors. Otherwise the definition entered the work during the later process of compilation.

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[6] See the helpful entry on Donatus in Robert A. Kaster, *Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 275-278.
[7] OCD (Hornblower and Spawforth,1999), pp. 494-495; Kaster, *Guardians of Language*, 276. On the relationship and relative dates of the surviving forms of works by Donatus and by Servius, an author discussed below, see George Byron Waldrop, "Donatus, the Interpreter of Vergil and Terence," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 38 (1927): 75-142.
[8] *Brothers* 904, and *Adelphoe* 5.7.6 in *Aeli Donati quod fertur Commentum Terenti*, ed. Paul Wessner, vol. 2 (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1905), 171-172 (quotation translated from 172). The Latin reads: *alii, quod hymen dicatur membrana quaedam, qua est munita virginitas, quae primo corrumpitur coitu, hymenaeum putant veluti hymnum vocari virginalium nuptiarum*.

A definition similar to this one appears in a commentary on Vergil's *Aeneid* composed by Servius, a non-Christian author of the late fourth and early fifth centuries.[9] The initial work comes from the opening decades of the 400s, but it was expanded in the seventh or eighth century by a compiler who utilized other early commentaries, including Donatus' comments on the *Aeneid*; the pertinent passage belongs to this later layer, which makes its date uncertain.[10] According to this version, a phrase about marriage contracts (*pactosque hymenaeos*) found in *Aeneid* 4.99 prompts a comment on the origins of the term *hymenaeus*, to which Servius had already attended briefly in 1.651.[11] The author relays a series of legendary events connected with the youth Hymenaeus, whose adventures and happy marriage resulted in the Athenian practice of invoking his name at weddings. Then, more briefly, the author adds: "There is also another explanation for the term; for a hymen is said to be some kind of membrane—a virginal one, as it were—of a girl; since she ceases to be a virgin once it has been ruptured, weddings are called

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[9] While Servius was not a Christian, he may have had little investment in traditional Roman religious practices: see Fabio Stok, "Commenting on Virgil, from Aelius Donatus to Servius," *Dead Sea Discoveries* 19 (2012): 464-484. For a summary of what is known about Servius and an analysis of his views on language in this commentary, see Kaster, *Guardians of Language*, 169-197; or, more briefly, Don Fowler, "The Virgil Commentary of Servius," in *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, ed. Charles Martindale (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 73-78.

[10] On the dating of Servius' own content, which has been dated by some to the 410s and by others to the first decade of the fifth century, see C. E. Murgia, "The Dating of Servius Reconsidered," *Classical Philology* 98.1 (2003): 45-69; Stok, "Commenting on Virgil," 472. Servius engages with Donatus' writings on the *Aeneid*, and it has become conventional to say that the expansions of the later, longer recension of Servius are based upon Donatus' material; some scholars, however, take other views on the relationships between the manuscript witnesses, and some have suggested that the seventh- or eighth-century version also incorporates even earlier commentators (though perhaps filtered through the collecting and paraphrasing of scholia). See the differing premises and positions among the essays in *Servio: stratificazioni esegetiche e modelli culturali; Servius: Exegetical Stratifications and Cultural Models*, ed. Sergio Casali and Fabio Stok (Brussels: Latomus, 2008); cf. Waldrop, "Donatus."

[11] The longer version of the commentary also returns to the question at 4.127.

hymeneal."[12] Whether this content comes from Servius, from another early commentator (for instance, as an adaptation of Donatus' comments), or from the redactor, its form in the seventh- or eighth-century version of the work is marked with doubt. The speaker distances the opinion from himself by his wording ("is said to be," "some kind of," "as it were," with the use of a subjunctive following *quia*), and he offers it as a secondary possibility after a much fuller explanation that he seems to prefer.[13] As we saw above, the wording in Donatus' commentary makes the connection tentative, as well.

The Christian scholar and bishop Isidore of Seville likewise assigns "hymen" a virginal meaning in his seventh-century *Etymologies*, an encyclopedic work that held a central place in Latin intellectual culture throughout the Middle Ages. Discussing the origins of various words pertaining to marriages, Isidore provides two possibilities for the term *hymenaeus* (spelled *imineus* here), which he presumably takes to refer to a wedding or a wedding song. The term, he says, comes from "a certain Hymenaeus, who was the first to enjoy a fortunate wedding," or "from the term ὑμήν, the membrane that is the closed gateway of virginity" (ἀπὸ τοῦ ὑμένος, *quae membrana virginitatis est claustrum*).[14] Isidore's work is largely a creative compendium of authors who wrote in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries, and it is possible he is paraphrasing the etymologies

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[12] *Commentary on Vergil's* Aeneid 4.99; *Servianorum in Vergilii carmina commentariorum. Editio Harvardiana*, ed. Edward K. Rand et al., vol. 3 on books 3-5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 286-287. The Latin reads: *Est etiam alia ratio vocabuli; nam hymen quaedam membrana quasi virginalis puellae esse dicitur; qua rupta quia desinat esse virgo, hymenaei nuptiae sunt dictae*.

[13] This skeptical tone is also observed by Sissa in *Greek Virginity*, 105-109.

[14] *Etymologies* 9.7.22, as translated in *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 211; Latin from *Isidore de Séville. Étymologies, livre IX: les langues et les groups sociaux*, ed. Marc Reydellet (Paris: Belles Lettres,1984), 235. As noted with reference to Ambrose of Milan's works in the previous chapter, the term *claustrum* can refer to a barrier, defensive wall, closed door, or lock.

provided in Servius' commentary.[15] These passages suggest a new late ancient prevalence for the notion of virginal hymens and the merging of this notion with earlier terms for wedding celebrations and the mythology associated with weddings. By this time, nuptial terms have perhaps come to evoke both the figure Hymen and the idea that a membrane is ruptured on the wedding night, whereas earlier ancient texts reveal only the former connection, linking weddings with Hymen but not with hymens.[16]

Medical literature does not immediately reflect the broader turn toward anatomized virginity discussed throughout this chapter. In the mid-fourth century, Oribasius, physician of the emperor Julian, can be found repeating Soranus' position in denial of hymens' existence.[17] Late ancient medical sources engage closely with earlier works, including the gynecological material of the Hippocratic corpus, and writers continue to place virgins' bodies on a continuum with those of the mature, reproducing women most virgins are expected to become. The requisite openness of the female system in traditional medical thought renders the idea of a sealed-up virginal womb difficult or even absurd.[18] We will see later in this chapter that certain medical sources

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[15] See the helpful background provided in the introduction of *Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Barney et al., 3-28. The relationship between Servius' and Isidore's comments on hymens depends, of course, on the dating issues addressed above; one recent treatment of their relationship in general is Riccardo Scarcia, "Working Hypotheses on the Connection between Servius and Isidore of Seville," in *Servio*, ed. Casali and Stok, 216-223.

[16] Latin and Greek literature of earlier antiquity discusses wedding nights, Hymen, and the wedding songs called by a similar name without making reference to ideas about hymens. In the ninth century, the Byzantine scholar and Patriarch Photius, summarizing from the earlier *Chrestomathy* of Proclus, offers three different etymologies for the name given to the wedding song, none of which involves virginal membranes (*Library* [or *Bibliotheca*] 239).

[17] *Medical Collections* 24.31.

[18] On the difficulty of reconciling the notion of hymenal closure with prior and persisting medical reasoning about female bodies, see Caroline Musgrove, "Debating Virginity in the Late Alexandrian School of Medicine," *Studia Patristica* (forthcoming). This essay provides both helpful background and careful analysis of the seventh-century text I am about to discuss.

testify to an increasing interest in the virginal quality of particular organs from the fourth or fifth century on, yet these too operate without reference to hymens.

Only around the start of the seventh century do we find hymenal reasoning manifest in a piece of medical literature. A commentary on a Hippocratic work, composed of the teachings of Stephanus of Athens in the context of the medical educational tradition at Alexandria, poses the question of how virgins can menstruate if the mouth of a virgin's womb is covered by "some kind of membrane" (ὑμήν τις) that prevents anything from passing in or out of the womb.[19] Stephanus reaches for a solution to the problem that can accommodate both old and new ideas—longstanding medical assumptions concerning opened or closed wombs and healthful menstruation, and the younger notion that virgins' wombs are inherently sealed off by a membrane. He explains that there is a secondary mechanism for the evacuation of menstrual blood, an alternative to the blood collecting in the womb and exiting through the womb's mouth: the menstrual blood of virgins, and also of the many pregnant women who bleed lightly during pregnancy when their uterine mouths are shut tight, does not collect inside the uterus at all but is diverted into the veins of the uterine mouth itself and can flow out the vagina from that point.[20] This explanation allows the notion of a virginal barrier to be grafted onto the formerly hymenless model of female sex organs that medical thinkers

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[19] Stephanus, *Hippocratic Aphorisms* 5.63 (CMG XI.1.3.3, p. 162). The question includes both the problem of how a virgin can menstruate and how it is possible for the mouth of her womb to be closed, since this hymenal barricade is located at the same site; the context is a discussion of how it is possible for some pregnant women to emit blood from their sex organs during pregnancy, a time when the uterine mouth is thought to be shut.

[20] For the text of his solution, see CMG XI.1.3.3, p. 164.

had supplied. Virgins' wombs are sealed up, but menstrual blood can still flow from their bodies.

Tellingly, virgins' ability to menstruate despite their sealed wombs had already received non-medical consideration in a Christian text from the early fifth century. Augustine of Hippo uses the mysterious mechanics of virginal menstruation to support the possibility of lust-free human reproduction in Adam and Eve's original paradise: among other things, this happier state of affairs would have involved preservation of women's genital integrity, with male seed entering the womb by the same path that menses follow to exit.[21] Augustine seems to assume a picture rather similar to modern medical understandings of hymen tissue, where the tissue only partially covers the vaginal opening and does not seal it completely shut. The ideas voiced in Stephanus' commentary, on the other hand, are shaped by further images from medicine as well—especially the image of a uterine mouth that closes completely, or nearly so, during pregnancy and in some situations of illness, infertility, or immaturity—and the fuller seal envisioned in this medical commentary must itself absorb and secrete blood, since otherwise blood would need to collect within the womb and breach the womb's seal to exit it. In a late ancient Greek text like this one, belief in the hymen as a closed seal for the womb sits uneasily alongside long-held medical assumptions and practical observations about virgins' anatomy and physiology.

Whether as complete seals or partial barricades, whether imagined to stretch across the very mouth of the uterus or across the gateway of the vagina, hymens as a

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[21] *City of God* 14.26.

named and accepted physical entity make their debut in writings of late antiquity—and perhaps not until the remarkably late moment of the early seventh century.[22] These initial examples insert the notion of a hymen into systems of thought that previously lacked them (etymologies for wedding terminology, models for female anatomy), and show uncertainty about how the concepts fit together. While these sources include non-Christian voices and represent traditions of knowledge often dominated by "pagans,"[23] the sources discussed in the next sections, which demonstrate a clear anatomical turn in the late fourth and fifth centuries, come predominantly—though not exclusively—from Christians. Oftentimes, both hymenal and other anatomical conceptualizations of virginity are attested with different terms than the name "hymen." In *City of God*, Augustine does not name hymens nor speak more specifically than with the broad notion of virgins' "integrity,"[24] yet he implies the hymen's presence in virgins' bodies in four separate sections of the work; besides the passage in 14.26 described above, a depiction of virginity testing discussed below, and a pertinent comment on Mary's virginity in 22.8, he refers in 6.9 to an act of perforation that new husbands carry out upon their wives in their first sexual encounter.[25] We turn first to a set of evidence for the anatomical turn

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[22] For a brief but helpful consideration of related terminology in the medieval periods, see Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000, 150-152 (n. 67 to chapter 1).

[23] On the problems and necessity of using a term like "pagans," see my reference in chapter 1.3.4.

[24] For instance, in the passage described above (*City of God* 14.26, CCSL 48:449). Although Augustine implies in all these cases that virgins have hymens, we probably should not take *integritas* as a euphemism for the hymen itself; more likely the abstract idea of bodily intactness is meant, and a hymen is a necessary part of this intact condition.

[25] In this passage, Augustine mocks the Roman idea that a host of gods and goddesses participate in the wedding night. He finds it especially ridiculous for a husband's role to be usurped or aided by the goddess Pertunda, whose name implies an act of piercing or perforating as the couple engages in sexual intercourse; a new husband, he claims, would not let anyone but himself carry out this act.

that draws on similar notions to those in the texts above, but does so without using "hymen" terminology.

5.2. Mary's womb and virginity's anatomical nature in Christian exegesis of the 390s and early fifth century

The late ancient shift toward anatomical understandings of virginity is visible in the exegesis of Christian authors.[26] Expressions found in a range of biblical literature concerning the "opening" of women's wombs are quite suddenly given a new, virginity-focused meaning in the very late fourth and early fifth centuries. Whereas authors of earlier Christian texts engage with "womb-opening" expressions by discussing fertility, a large number of late ancient authors use the language of "closed" and "opened" wombs to describe the virginal or non-virginal status of a woman's body, especially Mary's.

As we have already seen in earlier chapters, biblical passages correlate "closed" wombs with infertility and "opened" wombs with fertility.[27] The two agents that open wombs are God and offspring: God can open a woman's womb so that she conceives children or close wombs so that women cannot bear,[28] and the young born from an animal or human mother is said to open its mother's womb.[29] Womb-opening thus refers

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[26] A different version of my arguments in this section will appear in Julia Kelto Lillis, "Who Opens the Womb? Fertility and Virginity in Patristic Texts," *Studia Patristica* (forthcoming).
[27] See especially my discussion in 3.3.
[28] Gen 20:17-18, 29:31, 30:22; 1 Sam 1:5-6; cf. Isa 66:9, Job 3:10.
[29] Exod 13:2, 13:12, 13:15, 34:19; Num 3:12, 8:16, 18:15; Ezek 20:26; Luke 2:23. The verbs for "opening" vary somewhat, but their frequent overlap in meaning and in Jewish and Christian exegesis provides warrant for treating them as similar in my analysis here. Likewise, biblical and patristic texts use a variety of terms that can be rendered in English as "womb"; in some instances, there are shades of difference between the meanings of the terms in a given language, but in many cases the semantic overlap makes such distinctions insignificant for our purposes. The referent is a female reproductive organ or set of organs, often including more than what we know as the uterus today.

either to God's causation of fertility through making a woman able to conceive, or to offspring's emergence from the womb in the culmination of female fertility. In these biblical passages, no husband or lover is said to open wombs, and no direct connection is made between womb-opening and virginal status.[30]

These patterns of meaning recur in the exegesis of several early Christian writers, before, during, and beyond the rise of virginity-related interpretations. Some writers simply cite the biblical content and presumably interpret the language of "closed" and "opened" wombs as references to sterility and fertility.[31] For instance, in the third- or fourth-century work known as the *Didascalia,* a sentence based on verses in Exodus 13 (but borrowed from Luke 2:23, "Every male opening a womb will be called holy to the Lord")[32] is grouped with other biblical quotations to make the point that first things are superior to what comes after them, as seen with the special privileging and blessing of firstborn children in scripture.[33] Some writers show their fertility-oriented understanding of womb-opening language by applying it more broadly or discussing it directly: through Irenaeus of Lyons, we encounter second-century Valentinian exegesis of the biblical phrase "every male that opens the womb" in which the Savior imparts fertility to Achamoth, the offspring of the banished aeon Sophia; Irenaeus himself uses a similar

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[30] Remarkably but unsurprisingly, these biblical texts attribute the reproductive work of women's bodies to the agency of a masculine figure (God or male offspring). It is very common for ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern sources to depict conception and birth as processes initiated by male activity.
[31] These include Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.10.4; Origen, *Homilies on Numbers* 3.2.1 and with more exposition in 3.4.1 (see also *Homilies on Genesis* 6.3); Didymus of Alexandria, *Commentary on Job* 67 (on Job 3:10) and *Commentary on the Psalms* 317 (on Ps 43:13b); and see further discussion of fourth-century authors below.
[32] See my comments in 3.3 concerning translations of the phrase.
[33] *Didascalia* 26. The question of dating and successive layers of composition are treated at length in *The* Didascalia apostolorum: *An English Version*, trans. Alistair Stewart-Sykes (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009).

expression elsewhere to refer to fertility.[34] Several writers of the fourth century, including Ephrem the Syrian, Athanasius of Alexandria, Basil of Caesarea, and John Chrysostom, engage with or use the terminology of closed and opened wombs with a focus on fertility and without equating such states with virginity or lack of virginity.[35] In these passages, God and offspring remain the only agents of womb-opening. The understanding of womb-opening as a designation for fertility is sometimes found in the writings of authors who also come to associate womb-opening with defloration.[36]

A few authors introduce another agent when writing about womb-opening, yet retain the focus on fertility mapped out by the biblical passages. Philo, Origen, and probably Epiphanius of Salamis claim that a husband or mate "opens the womb." As

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[34] *Against Heresies* 1.3.4 (also quoted by Epiphanius in *Medicine Chest* 31.14.12; see Irenaeus' surrounding sections, especially 1.4.5, for context) and, for his use of similar language, *Against Heresies* 4.33.11.

[35] Some of these passages have been mistakenly taken by scholars as verdicts on whether Mary retained her virginity during the process of giving birth. For Ephrem, see *Commentary on Genesis* 14.3, 28.1; *Hymns on the Nativity* 4.170-171, 21.16-17; *Hymns on Virginity* 11.16. In the *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, which is likely a product of Ephrem's students in its known form, Luke 2:23 is applied to Christians as a whole, who, begotten by Christ through baptism, are all firstborns (2.8); God's agency in opening or closing human wombs is discussed in 1.12-17 and remains a strong theme throughout the initial sections of the work. (*Diatessaron* 21.2, which survives in a later Armenian version, declares that Christ opened a closed womb in being born, while other passages on Mary's persisting virginity, such as 2.8 and 21.21, confirm that this is a matter of fertility and not of virginity loss.) Athanasius understands the womb-opening phrase in Luke 2:23 to mean simply that Jesus was born from Mary (*Letter* 59.5, or cited in full by Epiphanius in *Medicine Chest* 77.7.3), and he too indicates that he thinks Mary remained a lifelong virgin. Assuming that Basil is the author of the *Homily on the Holy Generation of Christ*, he provides another instance where womb-opening is correlated with being firstborn (section 5); for an argument in favor of his authorship (but with a misunderstanding about the import of the passage for Mary's virginity), see Mark DelCogliano, "Tradition and Polemic in Basil of Caesarea's Homily on the Theophany," *Vigiliae Christianae* 66.1 (2012): 30-55. For Chrysostom, see *Homilies on Genesis* 51 and *Against Opponents of the Monastic Life* 4 (on offspring opening the womb); *Homilies on Hannah* 1-3, 5 and *Homilies on Ephesians* 24 (on God opening or closing wombs); *Homilies on Genesis* 49 and 56 (on further extensions of the terminology, where God not only opens or closes but wakens or binds and disables wombs). Another homily frequently attributed to Chrysostom is discussed further below.

[36] This is true of prolific writers like Ambrose and Jerome, who eventually connect opened and closed wombs with defloration and virginity but who sometimes focus on fertility as well or instead: for instance, Ambrose, *Noah* 12.39, *Abraham* 1.7.61, and *Letter* 14 (33 in the Maurist numbering), sections 3-5; Jerome, *Against Helvidius* 10 and *Letter* 22.21.

indicated in earlier chapters, Philo says that to open the womb "pertains to" or "is characteristic of" a man or husband (ἀνδρὸς ἴδιον), and he goes to considerable effort to explain how both God and a human male can play a chief role in the initiating of fertility.[37] When preaching on Luke 2:23, Origen comments that in general, a mate opens the womb before the offspring opens it in birth, and that Christ, in contrast, was born from a womb that had been made fertile by divine power rather than through sexual intercourse.[38] We saw in chapter 3 that the womb-opening Origen has in mind for male mates is their ability to cause conception, and may include the physical opening-up of an opening, closing uterine mouth that must be open in order to receive semen. Origen's reasoning is echoed over a century later in Epiphanius' *Medicine Chest*. Epiphanius states that Christ was unique in "opening (the) womb of a mother" who was a virgin, since no other firstborn could truly open a womb.[39] Like Origen, Epiphanius considers Mary to have remained a virgin throughout her life and not to be disqualified from virginal status by the womb-opening event of her son's birth.[40] He most likely sees womb-opening in biblical terms, as the imparting of fertility or the emergence of

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[37] *Cherubim* 13.46 (LCL 227.36); *Allegorical Interpretation of Genesis* 2.13.46-48 and 3.63.180-181 (LCL 226:254, 422-424). He reasons that God has ultimate control over fertility, but that God brings forth offspring to or for the human mate who also plays a role. Many of his discussions are allegorical and discuss offspring of the soul. Instances in which Philo attributes womb-opening to God or offspring include *Mating with the Preliminary Studies* 2.7; *The Change of Names* 23.130-25.144 and 44.255; *Who Is the Heir of Divine Things* 10.50-51 and 24.117-119; *The Birth of Abel and the Sacrifices Offered by Him and Cain* 27.89, 29.97, 31.102-32.106, and 36.118; *The Posterity of Cain and His Exile* 40.134-135 and 52.179.

[38] *Homily* 14 *on the Gospel of Luke*. See my discussion in chapter 3.3.2.

[39] *Medicine Chest* 78.19.3 (GCS 37.469-470, 2nd ed.).

[40] Subsequent passages of the work make this obvious (*Medicine Chest* 78.20-22).

offspring; a human mate would ordinarily bring about fertility, while with Christ, only God or the divine offspring itself is needed in order for conception and birth to occur.[41]

All of these writers receive and employ the language of "womb-opening" in fertility-focused ways. A very different trajectory appears in some early Latin authors and increasing numbers of other authors who write near the beginning of the fifth century. For these authors, the opening of a womb is not simply a matter of fertility, and they do not subscribe to the widespread Greek tradition of speaking of wombs' opening and closing as a cyclical process. For them, "closed" wombs are virginally intact, and "opened" wombs are no longer sexually virginal; to open a womb is to permanently change its condition, whether by rupturing a membrane or widening a virginally constricted channel. Their references to the womb, like those found in biblical texts, involve a wide array of terms and often seem to designate organs beyond the uterus, including the vagina.[42]

Prior to the anatomical turn, the sole representative of this interpretative trajectory for biblical "womb-opening" expressions is Tertullian of Carthage. His discussion of Mary's virginal and then non-virginal status, which we examined in chapter 3,

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[41] While Epiphanius' statements on this matter are succinct and not entirely clear, later Coptic and Arabic *catenae* expand on them by claiming that Mary's womb was in fact not opened or unsealed. Epiphanius himself does not appear to be making a pronouncement on whether Mary's womb was virginally sealed.
[42] On the overlap in Latin, see especially J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 100-109. Adams writes: "In the vocabulary of popular speech no rigid distinction is necessarily made between the womb, the internal genitalia (vagina) and the external pudenda" (103, cf. 94 n. 2; and see the discussion of Latin biblical translation on 105). Other helpful studies of early Latin anatomical terminology include Jacques André, *Le vocabulaire latin de l'anatomie* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1991), especially 181-193; D. R. Langslow, *Medical Latin in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). The situation is similar for the Greek and Syriac sources discussed below: a variety of terms are used, but many are treated interchangeably or overlap substantially, and it often seems that the writer has more in mind than the organ we call the uterus.

acknowledges that she conceived as a virgin but claims that by giving birth, she ceased to be a virgin.[43] Tertullian reasons that Christ's emergence unsealed Mary's womb in the same way that sex with a husband ordinarily would; the condition of her sex organs determines her status. Only in the late fourth century do we see another author take up this anatomical definition for virginity and this anatomical way of wielding womb-opening language. With Ambrose of Milan and then with a rapidly growing number of writers, we find that womb-opening is understood as defloration.

Chapter 4.4 chronicled the shift in Ambrose's works from concerns with the general purity of virgins' bodies to an explicit concern with virgins' genital intactness, particularly for Mary. In letters from the 390s and late works like *Education of a Virgin* and *Exhortation to Virginity*, he treats womb-opening as the termination of virginity, with closure being the womb's natural condition prior to sexual intercourse: Christ "did not loosen the innate lock of virginity" when he was born.[44] In multiple instances, Ambrose depicts Mary's womb as closed up with a door or lock, and he associates this image with the Temple gate of Ezekiel 44:1-3 that remains shut at all times, with only God or the prince passing through it.[45] This passage would swiftly become a favorite among patristic authors for describing Mary's womb as somehow opened or traversed, yet

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[43] *Flesh of Christ* 23.
[44] *Education* 8.52 (SAEMO 14/2.152). Other pertinent passages include *Education* 8.53-57, 9.58, 9.62; *Letters outside the collection* 15.6 and 14.33; *Hymn* 4.4; and the converging bodily and spiritual emphases for describing virginity in *Exhortation* 5.29, 6.35, and surrounding sections. All of these are discussed further in 4.4.1 of this dissertation.
[45] In the NRSV translation: "Then he brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary, which faces east; and it was shut. The Lord said to me: This gate shall remain shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it; for the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered by it; therefore it shall remain shut. Only the prince, because he is a prince, may sit in it to eat food before the Lord; he shall enter by way of the vestibule of the gate, and shall go out by the same way."

always closed.[46] The Jovinianist controversy that drove Ambrose's specificity inspired some other Christian authors to articulate ideas about the condition of Mary's childbearing womb with new precision. Early versions of the doctrinal formulas that affirm Mary's virginity in multiple respects—such as in her conceiving, in her bearing, and after giving birth—do not always specify whether virginity *in partu* entails Mary's womb remaining in a "closed" state of hymenal integrity,[47] but this idea soon becomes apparent in authors who utilize the terminology of opening, closure, or physical seals to discuss Mary's virginity.

Jerome, like Ambrose, gets more specific about Mary's virginal integrity in the course of his career. In *Against Helvidius*, written during the early 380s, he argues for Mary's continuing commitment to virginity but does not hesitate to talk of Christ's birth as an opening of the womb.[48] In *Against Jovinian* and a subsequent *Letter to Pammachius* (which appeared in 393 and 394, spurred by the debates over the relative

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[46] We will see some examples below. A discussion of the comparison's history can be found in Timothy S. Clark, "Ezekiel's Temple and Mary's Virginity: A Peculiar Strand in Eastern Orthodox Interpretation of Old Testament Sanctuary Motifs," in *Exegesis and Hermeneutics in the Churches of the East: Select Papers from the SBL Meeting in San Diego, 2007*, ed. Vahan S. Hovhanessian (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 85-98. Clark assumes that the hymen is part of such imagery for Mary, and expresses surprise at the late date of the imagery's appearance in our sources (87). The juxtaposition of Ezekiel 44:1-3 with Luke 2:23 in later Greek homilies is noted in Pauline Allen, "Portrayals of Mary in Greek Homiletic Literature (6th-7th centuries)," in *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium: Texts and Images*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Mary B. Cunningham (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 69-88. See also the continuation of the imagery in the later Latin works discussed in José Antonio de Aldama, *Virgo mater: estudios de teología patrística* (Granada: Facultad de Teología, 1963), 160-164 (cf. 164-182).

[47] The following essays provide helpful collections of early sources and conciliar statements on Mary's virginity (though they are problematic in the dating of a few sources and in their treatment of "virginity" as a static concept and always hymenal): Philip J. Donnelly, "The Perpetual Virginity of the Mother of God," in *Mariology*, ed. Juniper B. Carol, vol. 2 (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1957), 228-296; Eamon R. Carroll, "Mary in the Documents of the Magisterium," in *Mariology*, ed. Carol, vol. 3 (1955), 1-50 (see 10-14). I discuss the descriptive, yet ambiguous case of a sermon by Zeno of Verona in a later section below.

[48] *Against Helvidius* 10. Jerome quotes the biblical expression to make the point that a firstborn child who opens the womb is called "firstborn" whether or not younger siblings follow; in Jesus' case, the firstborn is an only child, for Mary remains a virgin.

merits of celibacy and marriage), he defends Mary's ongoing virginity in terms more pertinent to the question of virginal anatomy, comparing her womb to the unused tomb cut from hardest rock in which Jesus' body was laid, to the enclosed garden of Song of Songs 4:12, to the closed doors that the risen Jesus enters in John 20,[49] and to the gate from Ezekiel that is always shut—images that seem calculated to refute the idea of her defloration, not merely her lack of other progeny.[50] Finally, in the much later *Dialogue against the Pelagians* (written in about 415), he brings these differing trajectories together into the classic paradoxical formulation: although Christ opened Mary's womb, it still remained closed, then and forever. The biblical phrase "opening the womb" is said to apply in a unique way to Christ, for "only Christ opened a virginal womb's closed doors, which nevertheless remained closed perpetually."[51] By this stage, Jerome makes it clear that while a virginal womb might "open" in the sense of conceiving or bearing, it must remain continually "closed" in another sense if it is indeed virginal.

While we will see below that this correlation between still-closed genitals and virginal status is ubiquitous in sources of the fifth century, a few Greek and Syriac texts that reveal similar notions might belong to the late fourth century. All of these texts pose certain difficulties, either for dating and authorship or for interpretation. We already saw in 4.3 that Ephrem's language about virgins or wombs being "sealed" carries multiple

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[49] John 20:19, 20:26.
[50] *Against Jovinian* 1.31; *Letter* 49.21 (as numbered in CSEL 54, but numbered as *Letter* 48 in PL and some English translations). Many of these images also appear, singly or together, in passages of Jerome's commentaries that are helpfully collected in Benoît Jeanjean, "La virginité de Marie selon saint Jérôme polémiste et exegete," in *La virginité de Marie: 53e session de la Société Française d'Études Mariales, Issoudun, 1997* (Paris: Médiaspaul, 1998), 85-103.
[51] *Dialogue against the Pelagians* 4 (CCSL 80.57-58).

meanings and at times may imply that virgins' genital organs are sealed up by hymen tissue, though in other instances he clearly uses closure of the womb to describe sterility.[52] A work recently argued to hail from the late-fourth-century Syriac author Cyrillona compares Mary's womb to a veil wrapped around leavened bread (Christ), on which "virginity was placed… like seals" and from which Christ's going forth "did not loosen the wrapping or the seal."[53] In a Greek sermon of uncertain authorship that is often attributed to Chrysostom, we again see what may be anatomical logic at work as the writer speaks of seals: Mary's childbearing does not involve "corruption" but an "unblemished seal of virginity," for Christ "keeps (her) womb unchanged and guards (her) virginity (so that it is) unharmed."[54] These possible witnesses to late-fourth-century associations between genital closure and virginity do not make reference to biblical passages about closed or opened wombs, but another Greek sermon, this one attributed to Amphilochius of Iconium, puzzles over the application of such language to Christ's birth in Luke 2:23.[55] The author quotes the biblical text and points out that if Jesus opened his

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[52] See the sources I cite and discuss in 4.3.1 and 4.3.4, such as *Hymns on the Nativity* 12.

[53] *On the Institution of the Eucharist*, lines 73-78 as given in edited Syriac and English translation in Carl W. Griffin, "Cyrillona: A Critical Study and Commentary," Ph.D. Dissertation (The Catholic University of America, 2011), 357-358 (Syriac) and 419 (English). The text and translation are now available in *The Works of Cyrillona*, ed. Carl Griffin (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2016), 24-25.

[54] PG 56.387, 390 (the work is known under the titles *The Nativity of Our Savior Jesus Christ* and *The Nativity of the Lord*). The influential argument favoring Chrysostom's authorship is Charles Martin, "Un florilège grec d'homélies christologiques des IVe et Ve siècles sur la nativité (Paris gr. 1491)," *Le Muséon* 54 (1941): 17-57, at 30-33. Greater caution is expressed by José Antonio de Aldama, "Contribución al estudio de la tradición manuscrita de la homilía 'In Salvatori nostri Iesu Christi nativitatem' attribuida al Crisóstomo," in *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen*, ed. Franz Paschke, Jürgen Dummer, Johannes Irmscher and Kurt Treu (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1981), 1-4. The latter argues that the homily dates from before the Council of Ephesus, without giving a verdict on whether it belongs to Chrysostom or a different late-fourth or early-fifth-century author.

[55] For different positions on the question of Amphilochius' authorship of this sermon, see Bernard Meunier, "Ambroise et Amphiloque," in *Regards sur le monde antique. Hommages à Guy Sabbah*, ed. Madeleine Piot (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2002), 187-195 and Sever J. Voicu, "«Léonce» de

mother's womb, she was no longer a virgin. To solve this problem, the author appeals to Ezekiel 44 and states that Mary's "virginal gates," like the Temple gate envisioned by Ezekiel, absolutely "were not opened."[56] He reasons that even closed things are open to God, whose power could bring about an inexpressible birth. This paradoxical reasoning is common in sources of the fifth century and afterward.

Virginity is equated with a closed womb in numerous fifth-century texts.[57] In many cases, discussions of Mary's closed womb arise independently of exegesis on biblical passages about opened or closed wombs, and they are connected instead with the other biblical images of closure named above. For instance, one of Augustine's Christmas homilies proclaims that with Mary, "virginity's integrity remained both closed in conception and uncorrupted in childbirth,"[58] while in at least four different works, Augustine forges a link between Christ's emergence from a closed womb at birth and his ability to enter a locked room after the resurrection.[59]

Constantinople et les homélies 2 et 3," in *Amphiloque d'Iconium. Homélies: tome I, Homélies 1-5*, ed. Michel Bonnet, SC 552 **(**Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2012), 231-233.

[56] *Homily* 2.2-3, with quotations from section 3 (SC 552.240).

[57] Some sources imply that Mary's closed womb was unlocked by the process of giving birth, without mention of whether she was returned to a state of closure afterward. This is the scenario we are left with by Jerome's Latin translation of Origen's *Homily* 14 *on the Gospel of Luke*, as we saw in chapter 3. Some authors, however, seem to consider Mary a virgin despite this unlocking. A Latin letter that scholars have attributed to Eutropius, a Spanish priest of the late fourth and early fifth centuries, explains that wombs like Rachel's must be opened by God in order for a husband to enter its doors and sow seed, while Mary's infant, not a deflowerer of virginity, was the one who unlocked her womb (*Perfect Man* 6, PL 30.82-85). On contrasts between this passage and Tertullian's *Flesh of Christ* 23, a seemingly similar discussion and possible literary source for Eutropius, see de Aldama, *Virgo mater*, 137-138; for further Western examples of similar conclusions about Mary's womb from the sixth century and afterward, see 139-144.

[58] *Homily* 192.1 (NBA 32/1.50).

[59] *Homily* 191.2; *Homily* 247.2; *Letter* 137.2; *City of God* 22.8. Some of Augustine's sermons, which are difficult to date, come from as early as the 390s.

> Why would he, who was able to enter through closed doors as a large person, not be able to exit through uncorrupted body parts as a small person, too? …Faith does not doubt that either thing is possible for God: that he could present a body of adult age to those sitting inside the house with its entrance not having been unlocked, and that the infant bridegroom could go forth from his inner chamber—that is, the virginal womb—with (his) mother's virginity uninjured.[60]

A lesser-known author who may have been a contemporary of Augustine's, Aponius (or Apponius), wrote a Latin *Commentary on the Song of Songs* in which Mary's virginal integrity includes having an intact womb.[61] The "enclosed garden" of Song 4:12 leads Aponius to characterize Mary's womb somewhat cryptically as "unlocked by no deceit of corruption"—a gesture toward bodily features that is all the more striking in light of the author's main comparison in the passage, which is to equate the garden's closed state with the impenetrable spiritual state of Christians who rightly believe *that* Mary's womb was not thus unlocked, and who espouse proper beliefs about Christ's divinity and humanity.[62] For these authors, the womb that bore Christ was locked like a secured house or garden.

A host of texts from throughout the first half of the fifth century depict Mary's womb as a closed gate or doorway.[63] Rufinus explains that Mary's way of giving birth

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[60] *Homily* 191.2 (NBA 32/1.46).

[61] *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 9.29 states that Christ leaves Mary's womb intact when he is born; cf. 12.86. Aponius frequently refers to virginal integrity, and makes intriguing comments about virgins, chastity, and integrity of blood that warrant further investigation. A helpful accounting of the problematic issue of dating Aponius is found in Karl Shuve, *The Song of Songs and the Fashioning of Identity in Early Latin Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 19 n. 72.

[62] *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 7.38 (SC 421.212).

[63] One also finds other affirmations that Mary's organs remain unchanged and virginal when she gives birth. Oftentimes these statements do not explicitly reveal whether authors see such bodily integrity as something anatomical like hymen tissue, but an increasing number of sources show an interest in the idea that her body remains undamaged and intact, and some may indeed locate virginal integrity in genital anatomy. For one example, see the text from the very early fifth century known as *Questions from a Pagan to a Christian* or *Consultation of the Christian Zacchaeus and the Philosopher Apollonius*, section 1.11,

was unprecedented; because her virginity was preserved, her "gate remained closed forever," as Ezekiel had foreseen.[64] Cyril of Alexandria agrees that her "gate" was "shut" as her child came forth.[65] Theodotus of Ancyra connects Christ's resurrection and Christ's birth, claiming that upon his resurrection from a tomb "he opened tombs," while at his birth from a womb "he did not open it," but "left it closed."[66] Proclus of Constantinople connects Mary's postpartum womb with the locked room the risen Jesus enters in John 20 and with the closed gate from Ezekiel 44, adding that Christ "did not break virginity's bars."[67] These themes and biblical citations are found again in a sermon by Hesychius of Jerusalem.[68] According to the Latin liturgical poet Caelius Sedulius, the infant preserved his mother's organs "unviolated," leaving her "closed" when he emerged.[69] Peter Chrysologus similarly describes Christ exiting the womb in such a way "that the virginal door would not be open."[70] Syriac poems from the early fifth century or later tell of Mary's "sealed" womb and her "signs" or "seals" of virginity.[71]

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where an ongoing conversation about Christ's incorruptibility is tied to his ability to be born from Mary's body without undoing its integrity.

[64] *Commentary on the Creed* 8 (CCSL 20.145).

[65] *Homily* 11 (PG 77.1032).

[66] *Homily* 5.1 (OCP 26.225).

[67] *Homily* 1.2 and 1.9 (ACO 1.1.1, pp. 104 and 107); the text is now available in *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Homilies 1-5, texts and translations*, ed. Maximos of Simonopetra (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003), 138, 159.

[68] *Homily* 5.2.

[69] *Song* 2.44-47 (CSEL 10.47).

[70] *Homily* 145 (PL 52.589).

[71] As, for example, in the dialogue poem between Mary and Joseph in *Mary and Joseph, and Other Dialogue Poems on Mary*, ed. Sebastian P. Brock (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 32-47, or in stanzas 1-4 of a hymn on Mary in Brock's *Bride of Light: Hymns on Mary from the Syriac Churches* (Kottayam: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1994), 58-60 (hymn 12 or entry 17).

In these texts, virginity is understood as a matter of anatomy. Mary's virginity or loss of virginity, which had been defined in other ways in earlier sources,[72] is determined by the material condition of a particular part or region of her body: she either retains the innate state of closure that constitutes virginity, or has had her womb opened and is thus no longer a virgin. (Late ancient engagement with the *Protogospel of James* sometimes testifies to this same shift, as I will show in a later section below.) In contrast to earlier patristic authors, who, with the sole exception of Tertullian, take womb-opening expressions as references to fertility as they interpret and make use of biblical passages, several authors writing at the turn from the fourth to the fifth century use the terminology of closed and opened wombs to discuss virginity and defloration. Some texts of this period and afterward preserve the meaning of the biblical expressions by presenting the paradox of Mary's womb being opened and not opened at the same time.[73] With others, who speak simply of her womb remaining closed, the notion of having a "closed" or "opened" womb seems to have broken free of its biblical tethering altogether, and not to have sprung directly from the biblical expressions at all. The equation of closed/opened wombs with virginity/defloration must have been drawn from other cultural and theological sources of thought than scripture, and it is re-anchored in scripture not

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[72] Diverse virginity configurations in second- and third-century sources on Mary are discussed in chapter 3 of this dissertation. Note that some early sources are concerned with the virginal qualities of Mary's body after giving birth, yet construct the virgin/woman dichotomy in terms of whether her body miraculously resembles that of a maiden who has not had children, vs. that of a woman freshly delivered of a child.

[73] Examples beyond those listed above include a passage found among the letters of Nilus of Ancyra, which belongs to the early fifth century if it is authentic (and otherwise perhaps to the sixth): "The one who, in being born, opened the spotless womb, also sealed the womb after being born, with his characteristic wisdom and power and miracle-making, and did not loosen the signs of virginity at all" (book 1, *Letter* 270; PG 79.181). On the authorship of Nilus' letters see Alan Cameron, "The Authenticity of the Letters of St. Nilus of Ancyra," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 17.2 (1976): 181-196. For one sixth-century formulation, see that of Romanos the Melodist in *Nativity Hymn* 1.9.

through invocation of biblical passages about wombs, but through images that communicate the state of concrete closure (a shut gate, walled garden, closed fountain, locked door, or sealed tomb). In other words, the notion of a closed virginal womb had a life of its own and only belatedly appeared to Christians to be a natural way of reading biblical texts about closed or opened wombs.

This shift in the referents and import of "womb-opening" expressions provides one index of the late ancient turn toward anatomical definitions of virginity. The wide-ranging notions of virginity's "physical" aspects seen in earlier Christian texts—including earlier fourth-century ones—give way to a widespread assumption that women are born with closed-up wombs and no longer count as virgins if their wombs have been opened. Penetration, whether caused by a man's penis or an infant's members, does not only change the state of a virgin's body by "touching" and polluting it; by this new thinking, it mechanistically changes her very organs, rupturing the seal that closed off other parts of her genitals or permanently widening her vagina. Whether concerns specific to Christianity drove the anatomical turn or exemplify theological application of a wider cultural shift in anatomical assumptions, the belief that virgins' wombs are sealed shut already existed in some narrower segments of the Mediterranean world before late antiquity, as its brief appearances in the works of Soranus and Tertullian indicate. Christian discourse on opened and closed wombs shows the ascent of this belief from minority opinion to expansive acceptance.

5.3. Qualities of virginal genitals in late ancient Jewish sources

Jewish sources, like Christian sources, demonstrate the new intensity and specificity of late ancient reflection on female virgins' genital state. Texts from the Hebrew Bible, the Mishnah, and other early sources suggest that sexual virginity was often thought to reveal itself through physiological signs, such as the occurrence of bleeding upon engaging in penile-vaginal intercourse. In Talmudic texts and other relatively late works, on the other hand, we find beliefs about the anatomical features—the structures or shapes—of a virgin's sex organs that distinguish her from a woman who has lost her virginity.

The early Jewish sources we surveyed in chapter sections 2.2.1 and 2.3 do not clearly explain what it is that a new husband has observed about his wife if he accuses her of premarital sexual activity. His perception of her previous sexual experience seems to be based on the couple's first act of intercourse, and the earliest source on the matter, Deuteronomy 22:13-21, speaks of the wife's parents presenting a cloth to elders of the town in order to disprove the husband's claim. In such a situation, bloodstains are a likely candidate for the sought-for proof.[74] A section of the Mishnah deals with virginity claims in multiple ways—by explaining how to time weddings such that a husband can go to court quickly if need be (Mishnah *Ketubot* 1:1), by restricting which women can

[74] Early interpretations of Deuteronomy 22:13-21 often leave the manner of assessing virginity vague (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 4.246-248; Philo, *Special Laws* 3.79-82; a passage that closely paraphrases Deuteronomy is found among the Dead Sea Scrolls in 11Q19 65.7-15). *Sifrei Devarim* 235-237 includes two interpretations: one takes the wife's lack of signs of virginity and the spreading of a cloth before elders to mean that witnesses say she engaged in sexual activity with someone else before living with her husband, and that her father should produce witnesses to discredit those witnesses' testimony; a second opinion within the passage is that the procedure from Deuteronomy should be understood literally.

have virginity claims raised against them (Mishnah *Ketubot* 1:2-5), and by considering whether a woman's testimony requires the corroboration of further evidence when she defends herself by saying that she was raped or that she sustained a non-sexual injury (Mishnah *Ketubot* 1:6-7). These passages indicate that the new wife's virginity signs are probably physical and will be noticed by her husband, but the specifics are unclear; the physiological sign of bleeding remains a likely possibility. There is no indication whether the writers of these early texts conceived of particular genital structures like a membrane, or of anatomical qualities like the shape of the vaginal opening, that could be observed in a virgin's body.

A pair of fragmentary texts among the Dead Sea Scrolls shows the importance of premarital virginity at Qumran and offers further evidence that is intriguing, but difficult to interpret. These passages from 4Q271 and 4Q159 were probably composed by and during the first century B.C.E., respectively. The first passage, 4Q271 3.10-15, discourages men from marrying sexually experienced women and requires that a potential wife whose reputation as a virgin has been called into question should first be examined by knowledgeable women.[75] If this technique for confirming retained sexual virginity is a bodily examination, it may be that the inspection is based on anatomical genital features, though this is far from clear. The other passage, 4Q159 2-4.8-10, seems to concern the more traditional situation of a new husband having sex with his wife and

[75] See the texts and translations available in PTSDSSP 3.162-163 and Cecilia Wassen, *Women in the Damascus Document* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 72-73.

then suspecting her of having previously lost her virginity.[76] Again there is to be an examination by trustworthy women, who will verify whether the claim is true. In this case, any examination of her body would serve to confirm whether or not the wife has lost her virginity very recently rather than at an earlier time. The physiological or anatomical feature(s) that would prove this are left unsaid; perhaps the women would attempt to see whether the tissue of the vagina or hymen looks freshly lacerated.[77] These passages deal with two different situations, and both remain ambiguous as to the types of procedure involved, which may or may not be physical and genital.[78]

In the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, ideas about physiological signs for virginity are joined by ideas about virginal anatomy. Some passages posit that bleeding constitutes or proves virginity, while others imply that virginal vaginas are distinctive in being perceptibly narrow or sealed by a hymen. The physiological proof of bleeding is evident in a series of passages from the Palestinian Talmud (*Ketubot* 1:1/25a): for instance, in one case, a husband accuses his new wife of substituting bird's blood for her own; in another, the woman's virginity signs are only the size of a mustard seed, and the Rabbis comment on whether such a small amount of blood is a desirable or undesirable

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[76] Two somewhat divergent texts and translations appear in an early edition, DJD 5.8, and in Wassen, *Women in the Damascus Document*, 83 (see 82 n. 137).
[77] A few speculations are offered in Jeffrey H. Tigay, "Examination of the Accused Bride in 4Q159: Forensic Medicine at Qumran," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Society* 22 (1993), 129-134, at 133. See the discussion of some possibilities and their implications for marital sexuality in Michael Rosenberg, "Signs of Virginity" (pre-publication book manuscript, 2015), 82-89.
[78] On bodily examinations to determine maturity status (i.e., whether a girl counts as a minor or as an adult) and menstrual or other impurities, see Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 128-159.

thing.[79] In addition to newly explicit discussions of bleeding, however, we find application of the term *betulim* (often understood as "virginity signs") to a bodily structure. In *Ketubot* 1:3/25c of the Palestinian Talmud, Rabbis discuss who counts as a virgin and consider the problem of virginity signs persisting after penetrative intercourse. Seeking to resolve why the Mishnah treats as a virgin a woman who has had intercourse with a boy who is still a minor, some of the Rabbis attribute her status to her partner's low level of force in the sex act, which is not strong enough to affect her "signs" (סימנין); thus it has even happened that a woman becomes pregnant with her "virginity-signs remaining" (בתוליה קיימין).[80] It is likely that this discussion reflects a belief that observable tissue, such as a hymen, would ordinarily be removed by vaginal penetration.[81]

The Babylonian Talmud likewise contains a combination of ideas about bleeding and ideas about bodily structures or shapes. *Niddah* 45a elaborates on a Mishnah concerning the disturbing question of whether sex between men and very young girls has legal consequences for matters like betrothal.[82] The Mishnah itself (*Niddah* 5:4) enigmatically compares intercourse with a girl under the age of three to the act of putting

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[79] The text is available in *The Jerusalem Talmud. Third Order: Našim, Tractate Ketubot; Sixth Order: Tahorot, Tractate Niddah*, ed. Heinrich W. Guggenheimer (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 29-31. In an earlier part of the section, a woman tells a Rabbi that she lacks signs of virginity (*betulim*) because they fell out previously, since the steps in her family's home were steep (Guggenheimer 18). Presumably the virginity signs—drops of blood or possibly visible tissue—disappeared because of a fall or by excessive stretching (cf. *Shabbat* 63b of the Babylonian Talmud).

[80] Guggenheimer 41.

[81] For further discussion of the various ideas on virginity found in the Palestinian Talmud, see Rosenberg, "Signs of Virginity," chapter 4.

[82] For brief discussion of Jewish feminist treatment of this topic, see Lieve M. Teugels, *Bible and Midrash: The Story of "The Wooing of Rebekah"* (Leuven, Paris, and Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2004), 220-226.

a finger into an eye;[83] in the Talmud, the Rabbis propose explanations for this ruling based on whether blood accompanies intercourse with the girl before and after this age, along with an explanation for the comparison to an eye: "as the eye produces tears and produces tears again, the *betulim* also go away and come (back)."[84] The analogy to weeping seems to indicate blood as a sign, while the idea that the signs return may indicate closer reflection on the source of the bleeding and the healing or regeneration of some kind of tissue.

A different anatomical feature is expected in some of the passages that deal with a husband's legal claim of finding an "open door" when he first has sex with his wife.[85] This expression recurs in the Talmuds and refers to a groom's accusation that his bride, whom he thought to be a virgin, is not one. Although the expression operates as a figure of speech, it also comes to describe a virgin's physical traits, as seen in the Babylonian Talmud. In a series of stories, *Ketubot* 9b-10b relays and casts doubt upon husbands' subjective impressions of their wives' virginal or non-virginal state, making reference to the shape of genitals and not only to blood—in fact, the Rabbis here draw a distinction between a claim about an open door and a claim about (not finding) blood. In response to a groom's claim that he "found an open door," one Rabbi is said to have attributed this mistaken perception to the groom penetrating at an angle or penetrating too forcefully; at the proper angle, the "door" would be found "locked," while by forceful penetration the

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[83] This Mishnah is also considered (but remains ambiguous in meaning) in *Ketubot* 11b of the Babylonian Talmud.
[84] HEEBT 27.45a.
[85] On this type of virginity claim that rivals or seeks to displace claims about bleeding, see the discussion in Rosenberg, "Signs of Virginity," chapter 5.

man perhaps "tore out the door and bolt."[86] Interpreters have often understood this as a question of vaginal narrowness, and this may be correct. The husbands expect to feel resistance when they first penetrate a vagina; virginal vaginas are expected to be perceptibly tight and possibly also barred by a "bolt" of hymenal tissue.

Unlike bleeding, which is the focus of claims against wives in the episodes that follow this exchange, the criterion of a closed or open door makes virginity a definite matter of anatomy. The observation of virginal bleeding as a physiological phenomenon does not always involve theorization that specific body parts have changed, disappeared, or undergone irreparable damage. An "open door," on the other hand, is an altered organ, a vagina that is permanently widened or opened up. This anatomical understanding for the expression arises in or after the mid-fourth century, posing a fascinating parallel to Christians' newfound habit of equating virginity with a concrete state for the womb (static closure or permanent openness) in this same period.[87]

Another narrative episode from the same section of the Babylonian Talmud, already mentioned in my chapter 2, tells of a Rabbi conducting a virginity test that is focused on a feature or features of the body.[88] He is approached by a husband who says he has not found blood and whose wife explains that she is still a virgin. She does not explain if this is because he is lying about having sex with her or if she is defining her own virginity by whether her body has bled or changed in some way. To verify her virginal state, the Rabbi performs an experiment and test with a wine barrel. He requests

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[86] Babylonian Talmud *Ketubot* 10a (HEEBT 11.10a).
[87] See the analysis concerning dating and development of "open door" claims in Rosenberg, "Signs of Virginity," chapter 5.
[88] Babylonian Talmud *Ketubot* 10b. See my chapter section 2.3.

that a sexually virginal and a non-virginal slave each sit on the barrel, and observes that the smell of the wine travels through the body of the non-virginal woman but not of the virgin. (This is reminiscent of Egyptian and Greek tests for fertility or pregnancy in which a long passageway is thought to connect the genitals to the mouth, and constriction and/or the closed mouth of the womb is thought to inhibit the passage of fumes in women who are not likely to conceive.) Then, placing the wife on the barrel, he proves her virginity by noting that the smell does not travel upward through her body. Virginity entails some form of bodily closure, though it is difficult to tell if this is the closure of hymen tissue or the forms of closure and constriction that earlier Greek medical thinkers saw as common and temporary problems for young women.[89]

Meanwhile, both the Babylonian Talmud and the roughly contemporary text *Genesis Rabbah* discuss virginity as something that can be partial or whole, or something that has multiple aspects and criteria. *Yebamot* 59a entails deliberations over suitable candidates for marrying a high priest, and some Rabbis take the biblical requirement that the woman be "in/with her virginity/virginity-signs" (בבתוליה, Lev 21:13)[90] to mean that she must have "all" of her virginity or virginity-signs.[91] The midrashic work *Genesis Rabbah*, which was probably composed in fifth-century Palestine, distinguishes between different dimensions for virginity, or rival criteria for virginal purity, that include

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[89] Attached to the story is a set of comments about the Rabbi's lack of firsthand experience with virginity examinations. Some scholars have seen this as a rationalization for his choice not to conduct or request a gynecological examination of the wife. In context, though, the comments more likely explain why he first experimented with the slaves instead of immediately testing the new wife herself. Putting the wife on the wine barrel *is* the traditional examination of which he had heard without seeing it done.

[90] BHS (1997 edition), p. 194.

[91] כל, as opposed to "part" of it or "some" of them (מקצת; HEEBT 10.59a). It is unclear whether this implies the entirety of one's hymen, all of a group of virginity-signs, or all the aspects of virginity as certain Rabbis understand it.

physical markers. Commenting on the biblical Rebecca's potentially redundant description as "a virgin, whom no man had known" (Gen 24:16), the rabbinic voices of *Genesis Rabbah* deliberate why both descriptors are necessary. One line of reasoning reports the Mishnaic debate over whether a woman whose virginity-signs are lost through a non-sexual injury counts as a virgin.[92] Another solution is that Rebecca, as the first woman to marry a man circumcised in infancy, fittingly possessed the highest level of sexual purity. She was free from sexual contact of all kinds, whereas women among gentiles are known to "guard themselves at the place of their testimony" but make "another place" (presumably the anus) available for premarital sex; Rebecca was a virgin both "at the *betulim* place" and "at another place."[93] The vagina is seen as a "place of testimony," a site of proof for virginity, whether its *betulim* (signs) are drops of blood, hymenal tissue, or a virginally narrow shape. By this period, however, rabbinic writers show themselves to be acutely aware of the difficulties of defining a status whose aspects may be physical, moral, or both.[94] For late ancient rabbinic writers, understanding virginity requires strenuous attention and multiple interpretations, some of which center on women's genital anatomy.

5.4. The rise of gynecological virginity tests

Contrary to many scholars' assumptions, the verification of virginity or virginity loss by medical inspection seems not to have been widely practiced, or even universally

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[92] Mishnah *Ketubot* 1:3.
[93] *Genesis Rabbah* 60:5, based on Rosenberg's translation ("Signs of Virginity," 155); for the text, *Midrash Bereshit Rabba*, ed. Juda Theodor and Chanoch Albeck, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1965), 645.
[94] See Teugels, *Bible and Midrash*, 193-211.

familiar as an idea, in ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern societies prior to late antiquity. As we saw in chapter 2, people of earlier periods invented a range of methods for proving or testing virginity in their literary works, social lives, and real or imagined legal scenarios, but very few methods involved assessment of physical characteristics, and just a lone pair of texts from among the Dead Sea Scrolls (discussed above) supplies possible evidence of the inspection of women's genitals to verify retained or recently lost virginity. The scene of Mary's inspection in the *Protogospel of James*, often taken as a second-century witness for virginity tests by midwives, is better understood as a statement about Mary's preservation from the bodily effects of ordinary childbirth.[95] Later Christian texts, on the other hand, provide our first clear evidence for virginity inspections by midwives—or indeed by any medical experts—and also begin to superimpose the practice on their understandings of the *Protogospel*. Beginning with a third-century source from North Africa and continuing with a handful of diverse sources from the time of the anatomical turn, we find Christian authors discussing the medical verification of virginity. The appearance of such tests demonstrates the growing popularity of a belief that female virginity involves assessable features that are built into the virgin's very body.

[95] See my interpretation in chapter 3.2.1.

5.4.1. Traditional tasks of midwives and shifting perceptions in the reception of the **Protogospel of James**

Scholars of antiquity sometimes express surprise that a given text, genre, or society concerned with verifying virginity has not left evidence of making recourse to gynecological inspections. Numerous recent writers feel it necessary to account for the absence of these tests, or explain other phenomena in literature as a displaced version or novel contestation of medical virginity inspections, which are routinely treated as a method ancient societies must at least conceptually have had at their disposal.[96] In such instances, ancient social norms are deemed too concerned with modesty to allow for the intrusion of medical inspection, or are reasoned to be so compelling in other aspects of constructing virginal identity that medical proof would be superfluous. Many who are unfamiliar with ancient medical literature assume that male authors and male or female healthcare providers lacked access to and practical knowledge about female sex organs, particularly those of virgins.

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[96] For example, Judith Romney Wegner, *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 22-23; Holt N. Parker, "Why Were the Vestals Virgins? Or the Chastity of Women and the Safety of the Roman State," *American Journal of Philology* 125.4 (2004): 563-601, at 587; Simon Goldhill, *Foucault's Virginity: Ancient Erotic Fiction and the History of Sexuality* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 116, on Leucippe's virginity and the popular tradition or medical controversy that may lurk in the background of her story; Helen Morales, *Vision and Narrative in Achilles Tatius' Leucippe and Clitophon* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 193-196, treating an examination of a phoenix as a substitute for examining Leucippe's genitals; Judith Evans Grubbs, *Law and Family in Late Antiquity: The Emperor Constantine's Marriage Legislation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 199, dealing with possible fourth-century investigative procedures and pointing out that inspections would be insulting to Roman families; Françoise Meltzer, *For Fear of the Fire: Joan of Arc and the Limits of Subjectivity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 71, on what she sees as the *Protogospel of James*' displacing of proof from miraculously preserved anatomy to miraculous punishment of the midwife; Benjamin H. Dunning, *Specters of Paul: Sexual Difference in Early Christian Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 111-112, framing the nature of physical integrity as a matter of ongoing debate in Greco-Roman antiquity and reiterating Gillian Clark's assumption that midwives of the first and second centuries were in the habit of conducting virginity tests (*Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Life-Styles* [Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993], 74-75).

Medical sources create a very different picture. Vaginal specula have been found among the medical instruments that survive from antiquity and could assist examination and treatment for a number of different problems.[97] Gynecological literature contains descriptive detail of the female reproductive system and its normal and abnormal operation in women and girls of various ages.[98] Midwives appear as experts in this and other literature, and both female and male medical practitioners fulfill a range of tasks connected with childbirth or pregnancy and with the genital and general health of women.[99] Physicians who authored gynecological works show that they expect a measure of knowledge about genital anatomy and reproductive health from their patients as well as the doctors and midwives who attend them: Hippocratic writers, for instance, sometimes envision reproductively experienced women reporting on the condition of their uterine mouths and helping properly place instruments used for treatment of the uterus,[100] while Soranus implies that someone—perhaps the midwife, possibly the girl

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[97] Ralph Jackson, "Roman Doctors and Their Instruments: Recent Research into Ancient Practice," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 3 (1990): 5-27, and his *Doctors and Diseases in the Roman Empire* (London: British Museum Publications, 1988), 90-94.

[98] Particularly helpful publications include Lesley Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies in Classical Greek Science* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994); Helen King, *Hippocrates' Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998); Rebecca Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women: Gender, Nature, and Authority from Celsus to Galen* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[99] Practices were not uniform across time, place, or practitioner, but we surely should not think women were utterly sequestered among other women in their medical care, nor that midwives and doctors lacked basic knowledge about their patient's organs and health. On the Roman imperial period, see Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women*. For Hippocratic practices, see Jennifer Kosak, "Interpretations of the Healer's Touch in the Hippocratic Corpus," in *Homo Patiens: Approaches to the Patient in the Ancient World*, ed. Georgia Petridou and Chiara Thumiger (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016), 247-264, especially 252, 256-257; G. E. R. Lloyd, *Science, Folklore and Ideology: Studies in the Life Sciences in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 62-86. See also Ann Ellis Hanson, "A Division of Labor: Roles for Men in Greek and Roman Births," *Thamyris* 1.2 (1994): 157-202.

[100] See the passages cited and discussed in King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, 47-49.

herself—can assess a virgin's reproductive organs to reassure a prospective mate that she will likely be able to conceive and bear children.[101]

It is not lack of knowledge or access, then, that dictates the paucity of evidence for early medical inspections to verify virginity. Rather, it is likely that such inspections were not commonly used or imagined as a useable method. Midwives' tasks, though diverse, met other needs, particularly those connected with fertility. According to legal sources, the authority of midwives could be required when doubts arose about whether a wife was pregnant or about the birth of a legitimate heir.[102] By the late medieval period, this legal role had expanded to include virginity verification, such as in cases where spouses sought annulment of an unconsummated marriage based on male impotence.[103]

We saw in chapter 3.2 that the expertise of midwives in the famous episode of the *Protogospel of James* served to convey the miraculous nature of Mary's delivery rather than to reconfirm her sexual virginity, and that Clement of Alexandria understood the scene to establish that Mary was an un-puerperal maiden as opposed to a woman-in-childbirth (that is, her body looked like that of a girl who had not yet become a mother, despite her having just given birth). This function aligns with the customary tasks of midwives prior to the anatomical turn. Later in antiquity, we find varying ways of receiving and elaborating on the episode from the *Protogospel*. The narrative itself enjoyed wide circulation in late antiquity and afterward, with translation into numerous

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[101] Soranus, *Gynecology* 1.9.34-35.
[102] Paul, *Opinions* 2.24.7-9; *Digest of Justinian* 25.4.1 (Ulpian).
[103] Erwin H. Ackerknecht, "Midwives as Experts in Court," *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 52 (1976): 1224-1228; Jacqueline Murray, "On the Origins and Role of 'Wise Women' in Causes for Annulment on the Grounds of Male Impotence," *Journal of Medieval History* 16.3 (1990): 235-249.

languages.[104] Some Greek authors who precede or do not participate in the anatomical turn, such as Gregory of Nyssa, show familiarity with the *Protogospel* and reiterate its sense of wonder that Mary could remain a virginal maiden despite giving birth; these writers reflect on the paradoxical meeting of motherhood and virginity and its implications for salvation and immortality, but the paradox does not appear to include the notion that virgins have special tissue or structures in their sex organs.[105] Zeno of Verona, whose Latin sermons likely date from the 360s and 370s, alludes to the *Protogospel* and dwells at length on the marvel of Mary's unique experience of childbirth.[106] Zeno stresses the purity of the birth and virginal condition of the mother's body, but it is difficult to tell whether he pictures an anatomical barrier over Mary's womb or not, since he restricts his comments about her sex organs or uterus to the observation that they were not "loosened" by the birth and that the midwife's burning hand testified to Mary's ongoing virginity.[107]

Some reworkings of the story in poems and gospels of the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries show more clearly that understandings of Mary's virginal childbearing have

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[104] For a helpful discussion of the transmission and reworking of the *Protogospel of James* in late ancient Christian literature, see Sever J. Voicu, "Ways to Survival for the Infancy Apocrypha," in *Infancy Apocrypha: Stories and Identities*, ed. Claire Clivaz et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 401-417. Gregor Emmenegger discusses the work's reception in a chapter that addresses questions related to mine, with slightly different conclusions: Gregor Emmenegger, *Wie die Jungfrau zum Kind kam: zum Einfluss antiker medizinischer und naturphilosophischer Theorien auf die Entwicklung des christlichen Dogmas*. Fribourg: Academic Press, 2014, 197-256.

[105] See my citations of Gregory's homily *Birthday of the Savior* in 4.2.1-2. Other sermons of the time that contain similar reflections on Mary's virginal motherhood and might suggest familiarity with the themes of the *Protogospel* include Basil of Caesarea's *Homily on the Holy Generation of Christ* (see n. 35 above) and a sermon attributed to John Chrysostom but perhaps composed by a late-fourth-century Cappadocian author, *Homily on the Annunciation* (PG 62.763-770); for background and translated passages, see Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 272-281.

[106] *Tractate* 1.54 (CCSL 22.128-129; this is numbered as 2.8 in PL).

[107] Sections 4-5 (quotation translated from CCSL 22.129).

come to include the notions of hymenal integrity and medical verification of virginity. In a late ancient Syriac verse homily, Mary insists to an unbelieving Joseph that she is a sealed virgin and that local midwives could attest to her state.[108] A Syriac dialogue poem, perhaps from the sixth century, paints a similar picture; Mary insists that the seals of her virginity have not been loosened, and she invites Joseph to summon midwives who can verify this.[109] Though a widely read Latin infancy gospel that incorporates the *Protogospel* elaborates only on the lack of bleeding and pain in Mary's delivery of Christ, a roughly seventh-century work based upon it adds further specifics: the midwife who initially attends Mary states that she has found Mary a virgin not only in respect to childbirth, but also vis-à-vis the male sex, and she tells Salome with wonder that the virgin's reproductive organs have remained closed.[110] In these late ancient texts, the virginity that can be ascertained by midwives is not merely the dramatic absence of childbirth's effects upon the body—many of which, like messy fluids and extreme cervical dilation, are temporary—but the presence of a membrane or other closure mechanism that seals the genitals. The stories envision midwives rendering verdicts not only on how Mary's body compares to ordinary childbearing bodies, but on her sexual

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[108] *Verse Homily on Mary and Joseph*, lines 206-209. This is available in a collection by Brock (*Bride of Light*), cited in note 71 above.
[109] *Mary and Joseph*, stanza 22 (and see Mary's language about seals throughout the poem); this too is available in a collection by Brock (*Mary and Joseph*), cited in note 71 above. Some suggest that the poem arose as an expansion on Matthew 1:18-25 independently of the influence of the *Protogospel*.
[110] Descriptions and pertinent sections of both texts are available in *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations*, ed. Bart D. Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 73-131. The first, the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, dates from the sixth or early seventh century. The second, known as *The Latin Infancy Gospels* or the *J Composition*, is a product of the seventh or possibly eighth century; see sections 75 and 77 for the midwife's words.

virginity, as well. By the logic of these narratives, midwives are able to find anatomical evidence for virginity when they examine a virgin's sex organs.

5.4.2. Patristic evidence for virginity inspections by midwives

Four ancient patristic authors make reference to actual or hypothetical virginity inspections performed by midwives. Like the notion of a hymen or a closed womb, these scenarios initially appear in the works of Latin-speaking writers and eventually can be found in other works, as well. Intriguingly, one North African source predates the other evidence by over a century, and the varying attitudes among these authors toward the practice of virginity inspections hint that it may have been a more familiar or accepted practice in Roman North Africa than elsewhere. While only the latest of these sources has a clear reliance on the idea of hymen tissue, all the sources testify to the newly prevalent assumption in late antiquity that virginity is located in the sex organs of the female body and can be medically verified.

An outlier in its early date, Cyprian of Carthage's *Letter* 4 gives evidence for gynecological virginity tests in the middle of the third century.[111] This letter, composed by Cyprian and a group of fellow clergymen to another bishop named Pomponius, concerns a disciplinary situation: certain men of Pomponius' North African Christian community,[112] including a deacon, have been sharing beds with women who have taken

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[111] This is the numbering for the letter in CCSL 3B.17-26; it appears in some collections as *Letter* 61 or 62.
[112] The location of Pomponius' community within North Africa is uncertain. Possibly he is the same person as Pomponius of Dionysiana, whose bishopric was somewhere in the province of Africa Proconsularis: see Geoffrey D. Dunn, "Infected Sheep and Diseased Cattle, or the Pure and Holy Flock: Cyprian's Pastoral Care of Virgins," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11.1 (2003): 1-20, at 13.

vows of virginity.[113] The women claim that these sleeping arrangements have had no effect on their sexual status, for they remain uncorrupted virgins. Cyprian heartily disapproves of these relationships; he affirms Pomponius' decision to excommunicate the men and advises that Pomponius set the extent of each female virgin's penance in correspondence with whether her claim to continued virginity is true. Despite distrust of the practice of virginity inspections and his concern that its availability could be used as a warrant for continent cohabitation, Cyprian instructs Pomponius to have midwives conduct careful examinations to determine the truth of the virgins' claims.

> Let no one think she can be defended [in her plan to live with and sleep beside a man] with the excuse that she can be inspected and it can be proved whether she is a virgin, since the hand and eye of midwives may often be mistaken; and if she is found to be an uncorrupted virgin in that part in which a woman can be, she still could have sinned with some other part of the body that can be corrupted and yet cannot be inspected. …If the virgins have done penance for this illicit bed-sharing and they have withdrawn from each other, let the virgins be carefully inspected by midwives in the meantime, and if they have been found virgins, let them be admitted (back) to the Church… If, however, some of them have been discovered to be corrupted, let them do full penance, since she who has committed this crime is an adulteress—not against a husband, but against Christ.[114]

In this context, the possibility of verifying virginity through examination by a midwife is taken for granted, but examinations are also spoken of as both unreliable (for assessing corruption of the genitals) and insufficient (for measuring other forms of corruption). The task of genital inspection seems familiar to Cyprian, whatever its

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[113] The cohabitation of celibate men and women in continent but quasi-marital relationships is attested in various forms in antiquity. If the large number of prohibitions from councils and individual church leaders is any indication, the practice was quite common. For background and sources, see Elizabeth A. Clark, "John Chrysostom and the *Subintroductae*," *Church History* 46.2 (1977): 171-185; Elizabeth A. Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2.1 (1986): 61-88, at 80-81; Blake Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives: John Chrysostom's Attack on Spiritual Marriage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 75-99; Livia Neureiter, "John Chrysostom's Treatises on 'Spiritual Marriage,'" *Studia Patristica* 41 (2006): 457-462.
[114] *Letter* 4.3-4 (CCSL 3B.20-23).

problems, and he relies upon it even as he voices reservations: he instructs Pomponius to tailor his requirements for the women based on the midwives' findings. Other authors express stronger reservations, and their discomfort might reflect that for them, this technique for verifying virginity is novel and far from standard practice.

Ambrose, as we saw in chapter 4, makes mention in the treatise *Widows* that virgins' reputations are sometimes saved by midwives' testimony to their bodily integrity.[115] He discusses virginity inspections at greater length in *Letter* 56, which was written to a fellow North Italian bishop, Syagrius of Verona.[116] This letter, along with a subsequent one, addresses the actual case of an individual female virgin and probably comes from late in Ambrose's career.[117] By Ambrose's reckoning, the situation entailed false (and probably informal) charges, based on rumors rather than eyewitnesses, that a consecrated virgin named Indicia had engaged in sexual relations. In order to lay the matter to rest, Syagrius apparently planned to require an examination by a midwife. The exact series of events is uncertain, but Ambrose's *Letter* 56 seems to be an attempt to prevent the examination, while his complaints in *Letter* 57 may indicate that the test was conducted despite his advice; it is also possible that *Letter* 56 deals with the resolution of the case when the examination had already happened. Unlike Cyprian's correspondence

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[115] *Widows* 4.26. Ambrose describes this form of evidence for virginity as secondary to moral conduct and character, which, according to him, are the only kinds of evidence that widows can offer of their own sexual virtue.

[116] The letter is so numbered in CSEL 82/2.84-97; its Maurist numbering as *Letter* 5 appears in PL and elsewhere, while some collections have used yet another sequence (it is *Letter* 32 in the English translation provided in FOTC 26.152-163, with a related letter following on 163-171).

[117] It is often dated to 380, but see the points in favor of a later date included in FOTC 26.152 n. 1. Kevin Uhalde assigns it to a date "around the year 394" in *Expectations of Justice in the Age of Augustine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 68, with 168 n. 121.

with Pomponius, Ambrose's letters to Syagrius reveal a thoroughgoing rejection of the practice of verifying virginity by gynecological inspection.

Ambrose raises several objections in his attempt to discourage Syagrius from submitting Indicia to a virginity test. He calls such inspections harmful, shocking, shameful, and a violation of modesty.[118] Evident modesty, the true proof of virginity, is a virgin's holiest quality,[119] and Ambrose imagines unskilled midwives leaving a mark on the virgin's reputation and sense of shame (perhaps also on an organ?).[120] He repeatedly claims that the results of inspections are dubious, for midwives tend either to lack proper skill or to be susceptible to bribery and favors; physicians, he says, have also been unsure of the trustworthiness of the practice.[121] Because of the dubious results, the question of virginal status might be left unresolved, as he says happened recently when different examiners disagreed about their findings with a female slave.[122] According to Ambrose, virginity examinations are an innovation upon midwives' usual tasks, and the traditional means for verifying virginity—where virginity is proven by testimony to the virgin's sound character and modest behavior, and would be disproven by the physical signs of pregnancy—are far superior.[123] His sarcastic comments show that gynecological inspections were not at all routine for assessing virginity: "Should those about to marry

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[118] *Letter* 56.5, 9, 14, 19; cf. *Letter* 57.1, 19.
[119] *Letter* 56.6.
[120] *Letter* 56.9, with reference to the virgin's *pudor* (CSEL 82/2.89; see my discussion of Ambrose's uses of this term in chapter sections 4.4.1 and 4.4.4).
[121] *Letter* 56.6, 8-11.
[122] *Letter* 56.8-9.
[123] *Letter* 56.10-14, 21-24.

be inspected first so that they may marry with more esteem? Are those taking the veil to be subjected to this kind of handling first?"[124]

Given Ambrose's pivotal role in the anatomization of Mary's virginity, his negative attitude toward virginity inspections may seem surprising. His late works capitalize on the idea that both Mary and other female virgins have sex organs that are concretely, naturally, and firmly closed. His early work *Widows* reveals familiarity with the notion of midwives verifying virginity, and his fellow bishop Syagrius sees this practice as an alternative method for establishing virginal status in lieu of a trial. Faced, however, with the real possibility of a female virgin undergoing an inspection, Ambrose objects to anatomical verification and falls back on approaches to verifying virginity that had been cross-culturally conventional for centuries: witnesses speak to or against a virgin's behavior and character, and pregnancy provides proof if virginity has been lost.[125]

Ambrose's key concern is the affront to modesty that gynecological inspections pose. His works on virginity suggest that he places modesty at the core of a female virgin's identity and ideal behavior; to assess it by transgressing it is unacceptable. Through his reaction to this problem, he lays out for us the difficulties and paradox that attend the early Christian anatomization of virginity. Fourth-century treatises on

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[124] *Letter* 56.7 (CSEL 82/2.88).

[125] In addition to his comments about this in sections 10-14 and 21-24, Ambrose says in sections 4 and 5 of the letter that *if* Indicia's accuser had proof, no examination of her body would be necessary. Reliance in Roman law on testimony rather than physical proof, which Ambrose exemplifies in this incident, is noted in Hasso Jaeger, *La preuve judiciaire d'après la tradition rabbinique et patristique* (Brussels: Editions de la Librairie Encyclopedique, S.P.R.L., 1965), 516-517. On the legal and social means of ascertaining virginity, see Sissa, "Hymen Is a Problem," 103-107; Laura E. Caldwell, *Roman Girlhood and the Fashioning of Femininity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 45-66; and my chapter 2.3.

virginity, even with their differing configurations for the concept and their varying meanings for "bodily" virginity, tend to stress the importance of the soul, mind, or spirit for being a virgin. For Ambrose, virginity requires virginal body parts, but the state of the genitals is meant to mirror the state of the mind; virginity is anatomical, but it is also something else, moral and total, and is not anchored solely in sex organs. Anatomizing virginity underscores and grants specificity to both the bodily and the spiritual aspects of being a virgin, but the medical verification that anatomization makes possible cannot sufficiently capture and confirm that broader state. For Ambrose, the closed hidden organs of a virgin are meant to stay hidden.

Ambrose's references to gynecological virginity tests also add some sketchy contours to a history of such testing. By the late fourth century, tests that had already existed in North Africa were occurring in northern Italy, and it seems likely that their frequency was increasing. Ambrose already alludes to the practice in the late 370s (if this is the correct date for his treatise *Widows*), and he refers to previous cases in *Letter* 56 (likely written in the 390s or late 380s) as he attempts to prevent Syagrius from resorting to the method. Virginity inspections were certainly not a standard part of Roman legal proceedings or social practice; legal sources do not include them, and Ambrose's sarcastic comments about employing tests prior to marriages or to Christian virginity vows can only pack a rhetorical punch if the inspections are not already viewed as a routine practice.[126] Social reputation and observations of behavior and character had long

[126] An early-fourth-century law concerning the proof of a girl's virginity before marriage is discussed in Grubbs, *Law and Family*, 193-202. Grubbs notes the possibility that the intended proof would be

supplied the necessary guarantee of a woman's virginity or marital chastity. Moreover, according to Ambrose, medical verification is a difficult matter and requires of practitioners not just trustworthiness, but a high level of skill. Yet in the course of his objections, he does not question the idea that virgins are anatomically distinct. However questionable the possibility of accurately diagnosing their state, virgins possess closed sex organs that have not been opened by sexual intercourse.

John Chrysostom is the earliest Greek author to mention the practice of gynecological virginity tests. He does so in the treatise *The Necessity of Guarding Virginity*, which was probably written in Antioch during the late 380s or early 390s.[127] Like Cyprian, Chrysostom is concerned with the cohabiting of female virgins with men. In this and a related treatise,[128] he attacks this practice and counters various objections that the men or women could raise. He refers to gynecological inspections in two passages, the first of which hyperbolically describes incessant testing of virginity:

> (There is) a sprint for midwives every day to the virgins' houses, just like (when they run) to those laboring in childbirth, not in order to deliver someone giving birth—for this too has happened sometimes—but in order to determine, just like those purchasing female slaves, who is ruined and who is unharmed.[129] One (virgin) readily submitted to

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ascertained by inspection, but acknowledges that the investigation may simply be a matter of enquiry through hearsay and the testimony of family and friends.

[127] Ancient sources point to two different dates for the treatise, and some scholars have suggested that it was issued both in Antioch, while he was a deacon or priest, and in Constantinople, when he had become a bishop; see, for example, Jean Dumortier, "La Date des deux traités de Saint Jean Chrysostome aux moines et aux vierges," *Mélanges de Science Religieuse* 6 (1949): 247-252. A compelling argument that it was composed in Antioch some years later than the conventional dating of the early 380s can be found in Blake Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows*, 213-220.

[128] The companion work is an *Instruction and Refutation Directed against Those Men Cohabiting with Virgins*, directed to the men rather than the women. Both texts are available in English translation in Elizabeth A. Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends: Essays and Translations* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1979), 158-248.

[129] τίς μὲν ἡ διεφθαρμένη, τίς δὲ ἡ ἀνέπαφος.

> the examination, while another resisted, and by this very (act) departed disgraced, even if she had not been ruined; and the one was caught, the other not, while the latter, in turn, is no less ashamed than the former, since she was not able to make her trustworthiness known from her manner but needed the evidence that comes from close inspection.[130]

Like Cyprian, Chrysostom rejects virgins' (real or hypothetical) defense of their lifestyles through the proof of physical examination. In a second passage he insists that bodily purity requires more than untouched genitals, and throughout the treatise he argues that virginity requires proper purity and orientation toward Christ in a virgin's entire way of being. Concerning purity of body, he writes that "a midwife's wisdom and skill is able to see only such a thing as whether the body did not (previously) accept sexual intercourse with a man," while the future day of judgment will reveal whether a virgin has also preserved herself from other body-defiling activities like kisses and embraces and is thus truly pure and uncorrupt.[131]

Much as with Cyprian and Ambrose, the exact nature of these inspections remains unclear. It could be features other than hymen tissue, such as the shape or tissue quality of the vagina itself, that indicate virginal status. In the works cited in section 5.2 above, Chrysostom understands biblical womb-opening expressions in terms of reproductive capacities, and he does not appear to have the same investment as some of his contemporaries in the notion of a closed womb for Mary; he gives us few hints whether virginity was, in his mind, a hymenally sealed state. Regardless, we see here that virgins' genitals are expected to be noticeably different from non-virginal genitals when observed

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[130] *The Necessity of Guarding Virginity* 2; translated from the Greek text in *Saint Jean Chrysostome. Les cohabitations suspectes; Comment observer la virginité*, ed. Jean Dumortier (Paris: Les Belle Lettres, 1955), 100.
[131] *The Necessity of Guarding Virginity* 3 (Dumortier 106).

by the trained eye or hand. Unlike Cyprian, Chrysostom does not advocate the use of anatomical inspections, but he still assumes that midwives who perform them are capable of determining whether a female virgin has engaged in sexual intercourse.

Chrysostom's negative views of the practice somewhat resemble Ambrose's objections. This is particularly the case in his protestation that the sounder proof of virginity—virginal character—should be evident without a test, and in his association of physical examination with the undignified evaluation of slaves' bodies by those who purchase them. (The link between gynecological inspection and bodily inspections of slaves will be considered in my final section below.) By framing his comment about constant virginity testing with reference to midwives' more typical functions—running to houses to deliver women in labor—Chrysostom, too, implies that these midwives' activities fall outside of usual practice: they are running to virgins' houses *not* to do what one might expect, but to perform a form of verification that Chrysostom must spell out for the reader (the verification of "who is ruined and who is unharmed"). The attitudes of Ambrose and Chrysostom show that gynecological virginity tests were a controversial matter, posing problems for modesty and dignity and undercutting what the authors saw as the true meaning of virginity. It seems that the tests were innovative enough to require a word of explanation by Chrysostom and to meet with extensive objections from Ambrose, an author who in other ways welcomed the mapping of virginal condition onto virgins' body parts.

A different attitude appears in Augustine's *City of God*. We have seen that *City of God* contains multiple passages alluding to the concept of a hymen without assigning a

name to it: in newlywed sex, a husband performs an act of perforation upon his wife (6.9); in a world without sin, semen would have entered a womb without disrupting its integrity, just as menstrual blood leaves it (14.26); in giving birth, Mary's womb stayed closed like locked doors (22.8). Another passage draws on the concept of hymens in conjunction with virginity testing to make a point about where a person's holiness truly lies. In *City of God* 1.18, Augustine addresses the traumatic recent events of the sack of Rome, when many virgins and other women were sexually assaulted. He seeks to show that sexual purity is a feature of the mind or soul and cannot be destroyed by the pollution of someone else's forceful lust. He explains that a steadfast will can even sanctify the raped body, for bodily holiness does not depend on the body's members remaining untouched by violence; a damaged body can still be a holy one. To support his argument, he utilizes an account of a virginity test gone wrong:

> It is not by this that the body is holy, (by the fact) that its parts are intact… For example, a midwife, when investigating a certain virgin's integrity by hand, destroyed (it), whether by spite or lack of skill or accidentally. I don't imagine anyone to think so foolishly that they would consider anything to have been lost (from) her (sanctity), even from the sanctity of that very body, even though the integrity of that body part has been lost.[132]

The use of this scenario in service of a larger argument shows that Augustine expects his audience to be familiar with the idea of gynecological virginity tests. No explanation or defense of the practice is needed; he simply assumes that his audience will follow his reasoning by imagining a midwife feeling and damaging a virgin's genitals with her hand, and will judge this act to have no bearing on the virgin's purity or holiness. His scenario implies that medical verification of virginity carries risks, and his

[132] CCSL 47:19. I will discuss this passage at greater length in chapter 6.

entire discussion revolves around the insistence that inner chastity is more important than bodily integrity—a matter we will revisit in light of this passage in the next chapter. In terms of attitudes toward the practice of gynecological inspection, however, Augustine resembles Cyprian rather than Ambrose or Chrysostom. Rather than discouraging it as a shocking violation of female modesty or depicting it as an inappropriate extension of midwives' duties, he matter-of-factly employs it as a plausible situation that can illustrate his point. He assumes that his audience assumes that midwives can investigate virginity by seeing and touching female genitals.

These four authors hold two crucial beliefs about virginity in common. Each makes it clear in his writings that he sees virginity as a state of the whole person and dependent on behaviors, not only on the state of sex organs. Yet despite resistance to the idea that virginity could be reduced to a genital state, each also shows that he believes virgins have specially virginal organs. Cyprian, Chrysostom, and Augustine seem confident that there is something anatomical for midwives to check, whether it be hymen tissue or another means of proof; their own ideas may be as vague as many people's today concerning hymens. Ambrose reveals less about his beliefs on the matter in the *Letter to Syagrius*, where he seeks to discourage others from putting stock in such methods, but my previous chapter charts the emergence of an explicitly hymenal configuration for virginity in others of his works. These church leaders and at least some of the people around them think that virginity includes or consists in a perceptibly virginal condition for genital anatomy.

These writers vary, however, in their attitudes toward inspections. The two North Africans, separated by at least a century and a half, share a relatively casual attitude toward gynecological tests. For Cyprian, the method provides a way to reduce the variables of a problematic situation, and for Augustine, it serves as a useful illustration for thinking about medical procedures that can affect the integrity of bodily organs. The harsher words of Ambrose and the sarcasm and shame language of Chrysostom suggest a greater degree of discomfort with the idea of subjecting virgins to physical tests. It is interesting that this testing technique seems more acceptable to writers who are no less emphatic about female modesty, as quickly becomes evident when reading Cyprian's *Dress of Virgins* or Augustine's *Holy Virginity*.

This variation, coupled with other evidence from the sections above, prompts me to propose the following tentative historical sketch for the rise of anatomical understandings of virginity. Before the Common Era, societies of the Mediterranean and Near East wielded the terminology of virginity and womanhood in diverse ways and sought to prove virginity through primarily non-physical means. Some groups noted physiological evidence for female virginity, such as bleeding during sexual initiation; some may have observed the presence of hymen tissue in vaginas, but did not name it or grant it universal status as an organ or virginal membrane (it does not appear in surviving forms of written knowledge). Around the beginning of the Common Era, a shift occurred in at least one pocket of the Roman Empire. Some Romans—whosever views are refuted by Soranus—claimed that virgins' vaginas contain a membrane that closes off the reproductive organs. One hypothesis for this development, offered by Giulia Sissa in a

recent essay, is that the new availability of contraception led Roman men to conceptualize a new bodily mechanism for determining virginity, since confidence about virginal status had formerly rested on the reliable bodily mechanism of sexual intercourse leading to pregnancy.[133]

By the dawn of the third century, the notion of hymenally closed genitals was in circulation in North Africa and was utilized by Tertullian (*Flesh of Christ* 23) to argue for Mary's non-virginal postpartum status and Christ's fully enfleshed human status. One wonders if the comparatively early development of ecclesiastical recognition for vowed virginity in this region precipitated its comparatively early utilization of anatomical configurations of virginity. It is tempting to assign a role to Donatus as a link in the chain between North African hymenal notions and their later dissemination among Christian thinkers and Christian and "pagan" commentators and encyclopedists, but the authenticity of the material is too uncertain.[134]

Midwives' examinations to verify virginity follow a similar course. Much as with the scarce early evidence for ideas about hymens, the late appearance of gynecological virginity tests on the antique scene suggests that what was once an obscure practice gradually became a familiar technique, moving beyond locales in Roman North Africa and Italy to other settings and becoming part of mainstream assumptions about the nature of virginity. The highly significant silence of earlier sources suggests (without definitively proving) that such tests were not conducted previously. The situation and

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[133] Sissa, "Hymen Is a Problem," 96-97 and 103-117.
[134] See my overview in section 5.1 above.

type of examination in the texts from Qumran is uncertain, and other evidence is non-existent. In the middle of the third century, North African Christian bishops could request gynecological inspections for consecrated virgins. By the final decade of the fourth century, virginity inspections were becoming familiar procedures in northern Italy and Antioch. This spread either preceded or coincided with belief in hymens: Christians wrote about Mary's closed womb and about the practice or perils of testing virginity. In the centuries that followed, Jewish, Christian, and "pagan" scholars produced sources that demonstrate the prevalence of the notion of a virginal hymen and the possibility of verifying virginity by investigating the condition of the genitals.

The rise of tests by genital inspection did not automatically replace other ideas about proving virginity, nor prevent the proliferation of other proposed physical methods. We saw that in the Babylonian Talmud (*Ketubot* 10b), one virgin's constricted or sealed state is tested by observing whether fumes can travel from her genitals through her body. In a work called *Female Diseases,* which circulated by the sixth century and is attributed to a female physician named Metrodora, one can discover "whether a woman is a virgin" by putting a fresh lentil into a jar and having the woman urinate upon it, for a virgin's urine will make the lentil puff up; another option is to perform a fumigation with a type of black stone that will cause a non-virginal woman to urinate.[135] Medieval medical sources describe the differing qualities of urine emitted by virgins and "corrupted"

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[135] *Female Diseases* 33, from the Greek text available in *Metrodora. Medicina e cosmesi ad uso delle donne: la antica Sapienza femminile e la cura di sé*, ed. Giorgio del Guerra (Milan: Associazione culturale Mimesis, 1994), 50.

women.[136] Nevertheless, the vaginal channel became a privileged site of virginal signs, a site that received newly intense focus beginning in the late fourth century. As people came to believe that virginal vaginas are perceptibly different from non-virginal vaginas, they also created ways of circumventing detection of past sexual experience.

5.5. Chemical recipes for faking and mimicking virginity

In the centuries when Christians began celebrating Mary's perpetually closed womb, Jewish writers recorded anatomical perspectives on virginity, Christian leaders set down diverse comments on gynecological virginity tests, and medical sources began to describe techniques for testing virginity, another new medical tradition appeared that provides striking evidence of the anatomical turn. Pharmacological recipes, which had long offered instructions for combining and administering ingredients for medicinal and other purposes, came to include recipes for the vagina that were designed to simulate virginity. These recipes show that by very late antiquity, vaginas were thought to have perceptibly different conditions—virginal or deflowered—and, at least for some women or in some situations, it was desirable or necessary to have a virginal vagina.

Three recipes falsely attributed to Galen may stand "at, or near, the beginning of the paper trail" of these concoctions for mimicking virginity, which appear in collections

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[136] For a summary of late medieval sources, which often select from or combine methods and reasoning from earlier periods, see Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, 28-32. Some methods and sources are also discussed in Esther Lastique and Helen Rodnite Lemay, "A Medieval Physician's Guide to Virginity," in *Sex in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, ed. Joyce E. Salisbury (New York and London: Garland, 1991), 56-79. As a fifteenth-century work from the latter essay shows, physiological tests like examining the quality of urine were sometimes linked to the idea that sexual initiation widens sex organs.

across the medieval period.[137] In a helpful discussion of these texts, Ann Ellis Hanson summarizes that the collection containing these recipes was associated with Galen beginning sometime after the mid-fourth century (the time of Oribasius) and later was mistakenly identified as his lost treatise *Remedies Easily Prepared*.[138] Within a chapter on women's diseases, among prescriptions to aid with conception, birth, uterine pain, and lactation, there appears a recipe titled "In order that the violated woman may appear a virgin."[139] The violation terminology (in more wooden translation, a woman "who has been forced," βεβιασμένη) may point to the problem of sexual assault, but there is no indication of why a raped woman would need to make her vagina seem more virginal, nor whom she would need to convince of its virginal condition. The prescribed recipe includes plant substances known to have astringent properties (oak galls and rumex seeds) and was probably intended to dry and tighten vaginal tissue or cause mild swelling that would make the vagina seem narrower, much as companies in today's market advertise "vaginal rejuvenation" through ointments or tightening creams that will make a woman "feel like a virgin again."[140]

The other two virginity imitation recipes attached to Galen's corpus come from a section at the end of the same chapter that lists several recipes under a single heading. Its

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[137] Ann Ellis Hanson, "The Hippocratic *Parthenos* in Sickness and Health," in *Virginity Revisited: Configurations of the Unpossessed Body*, ed. Bonnie MacLachlan and Judith Fletcher (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 40-65, at 57.
[138] Hanson, "Hippocratic *Parthenos*," 56-57.
[139] Pseudo-Galen, *Remedies Easily Prepared* 26.12 (CGOO 14.478).
[140] The existence of several such products is noted in Hanne Blank, *Virgin: The Untouched History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), 87. A 2012 BBC News article, "Virginity Cream Sparks Indian Sex Debate" (August 28, 2012, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-19353039, accessed August 24, 2016) discusses a product and commercial from India that advertise feeling like a virgin: "18 Again Ad" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPayFrCOiZM, accessed August 24, 2016).

label categorizes the prescriptions as ways of keeping the vagina from becoming too "moist"—or perhaps too "relaxed"—during sexual intercourse.[141] Thanks to the steps of the second recipe under this heading, a woman "will be like a virgin during intercourse"; a shorter third recipe similarly concludes with the assurance "she will be like a virgin."[142] Here the detection of past sexual activity may or may not be central; the desirable thing, judging from the ingredients, is that a non-virginal vagina be restored to the tighter, narrower, and/or drier state of a virgin's. This strategy contrasts with some contemporary and later sources' worry that non-virginal brides could try to mask their state by substituting animal blood on a garment or within the vagina in a small bladder.[143] No reconstruction or substitute for hymenal tissue or bleeding is needed. Yet in both the recipe designed for a violated virgin and these recipes for having virgin-like sex, the virginal vagina is assumed (or claimed) to be distinctive enough that a creator or compiler of recipes would anticipate (or could create) a market for drug applications like these.

The gynecological work of a medical author of the mid-sixth century, Aetius of Amida, records a pair of recipes whose ingredients and references to virginity resemble the pseudo-Galenic ones, though they are situated as remedies for women whose vaginal moistness (or possibly laxness) prevents conception. The treatments are included among sections of the work focused on problems with menstrual flow and discharges from the uterus, and appear at the end of a chapter on treatment of fluxes. Attributed to Aspasia,

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[141] μὴ καθυγραίνεσθαι (CGOO 14.485). In a Hippocratic text, the passive voice of καθυγραίνω is thought to mean "relaxed" rather than "well moistened": GEL (Liddell, Scott, Jones, and McKenzie, 1996), p. 856.
[142] Pseudo-Galen, *Remedies Easily Prepared* 26.38 (CGOO 14.486).
[143] For example, in a passage of the Palestinian Talmud mentioned above (*Ketubot* 1:1/25a) or in some of the late medieval sources noted below.

an earlier female physician whose historical identity is elusive, the first of these recipes is introduced as a repeated treatment recommended for women who do not conceive—but it includes the statement that "the woman will be like a virgin"; the second recipe likewise concludes by saying that after applying ground rumex seeds to the vagina, the woman "will be like a virgin."[144] The ingredients and procedures stand in a definite relationship to two of the pseudo-Galenic recipes, though any direct literary relationship is uncertain; they show parallels with the second and third pseudo-Galenic recipes described above, which seek to correct problematic moistness or laxity, but Aetius' references to being like a virgin do not mention intercourse.

Just as elusive as the Aspasia credited with these recipes is the female physician Metrodora, under whose name another set of recipes is transmitted. She lived sometime in the early centuries of the Common Era, and her work *Female Diseases* circulated by the fifth or sixth century.[145] Immediately preceding an entry on testing virginity that relies on urine properties and urination (cited near the conclusion of my subsection 5.4.2),

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[144] *Tetrabiblion* 16.66/67, also known as *Gynecology* 66/67 (when the portion of the work on women's health and ailments appears independently); it is chapter 66 in the available critical Greek edition and chapter 67 in the English translation that is more widely available, which is based on a sixteenth-century Latin translation (see below). My translation is based on the Greek: *Gynaekologie des Aëtios*, ed. Skevos Zervos (Leipzig: Fock, 1901), 95. A critical Greek edition has been in progress for the CMG series for some time; on the shortcomings of the existing edition and difficulties of constructing a new one, see Antonio Garzya, "Problèmes relatifs a l'édition des livres IX-XVI du *Tétrabiblion* d'Aétios d'Amida," *Revue des études anciennes* 86 (1984): 245-257. The Latin-based English translation, which specifies that constriction is what makes the vagina seem virginal, can be found in *Aetios of Amida: The Gynaecology and Obstetrics of the VIth century, A.D.*, trans. James V. Ricci (Philadelphia: Blakiston, 1950), 70.

[145] For background on what is known about Metrodora, see Holt N. Parker, "Mētrodorā (50-400 C.E.?)," in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Natural Scientists: The Greek Tradition and Its Many Heirs*, ed. Paul T. Keyser and Georgia L. Irby-Massie (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 552-553; Marie-Hélène Congourdeau, "'Mètrodôra' et son oeuvre," in *Maladie et société à Byzance: études présentées au 17e congrès international des sciences historiques (Madrid, 1990)*, ed. Evelyne Patlagean (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 1993), 57-61; Aristotle P. Kousis, "Metrodora's Work 'On the Feminine Diseases of the Womb' according to the Greek Codex 75.3 of the Laurentian Library," *Praktika tēs Akadēmias Athēnōn* 20 (1945): 46-68 (discussion and text).

we find a recipe called "In order for a corrupted woman to seem to be a virgin."[146] The prescribed concoction involves a different set of ingredients from those discussed above, but includes a form of alum or other astringent substance that would likely tighten tissue. An earlier entry offers solutions to multiple problems at once, claiming both to hide virginity loss and to dry up the vagina.[147] Some ingredients and phrasing overlap with a pseudo-Galenic recipe for vaginal drying/tightening adjacent to those that mention being virgin-like; the other techniques use either similar substances or the same astringent from the recipe for simulating virginity, often in the form of a rinse. One of these four recipes concludes by saying that use of the rinse an hour before intercourse will disguise the woman's state from her sex partner ("the man will not know").[148]

Such recipes thus traveled widely, at least between medical authors. According to an early modern collection of ancient gynecological sources, methods for disguising virginity loss were included by at least one other late ancient author, Priscian.[149] Metrodora's recipes for mimicking virginity are quite different from most of the recipes found in Pseudo-Galen and Aetius, which are closely related. With collections like Aetius', the recipes' placement at the end of a series raises the possibility that they were appended to the work at a later time, though the author himself may well have packed several recipes together in dense succession and included these supposedly Aspasian

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[146] *Female Diseases* 32 (del Guerra 50).
[147] *Female Diseases* 23. See the texts provided in del Guerra 44-46 and Kousis 54.
[148] The third recipe in *Female Diseases* 23 (del Guerra 46; and see Kousis 54, where the logically necessary negation is included).
[149] Priscian lived around the end of the fourth century and was a student of the North African physician Vindician. I have been unable to find this content in critical editions of Priscian's work, but it was apparently included in Caspar Wolf's sixteenth-century *Harmony of Gynecologies*.

sources himself. As Antonio Garzya points out, the very nature of encyclopedic medical works and the transmission of prescriptions favors additions and modifications by the authors and the later scribes and editors who compile the information; knowledge about remedies, not accurate representation and attribution of author, tends to be primary.[150] This makes it difficult to tell where the paper trail of recipes for virginity imitation truly begins. Across the recipes, virgins' vaginas are thought to be distinctive in ways that might be considered anatomical (in shape, size, or tissue quality) or physiological (dryness as opposed to moistness).

Medieval medical texts preserve several recipes that render a woman's vagina virginal. Some aim at constriction; others include directions for producing defloration-like blood.[151] Somewhat counterintuitively, virginal vaginal qualities are sometimes thought to be advantageous for conceiving, possibly because a state of too much moisture or laxity could be problematic for retaining seed; we saw that the goals of mimicking virginity and counteracting these problems are sometimes combined in the late ancient sources. While modes of testing virginity are diverse in later periods, many discussions of proving virginity, faking virginity, or accurately detecting virginity loss rely on the assumption that virgins and sexually experienced women have perceptibly different genital structures. In these later sources, some recipes are intended for soon-to-be brides who need to fool their husbands into believing that they are virgins; on occasion, the

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[150] Garzya, "Problèmes," especially 251, 253. This is not to say that authorship is unimportant in such works. Oftentimes the pedigree and medical system to which certain ideas or treatments belong affects the writer's attitude toward the information or way of framing it. Later versions of their work, however, are even more likely to adjust or lump together content based on what is found in other works.
[151] Overviews are available in Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, 32-33; Lastique and Lemay, "Medieval Guide," especially p. 65.

recipes are associated with sex work instead.[152] In the initial recipes of late antiquity, the social situation of the non-virginal consumer is less certain.

For whom were the late ancient recipes devised? The varied problems of potential patients make it difficult to draw firm conclusions. Hanson considers the possibility that the pseudo-Galenic recipes were produced for those anxious to ensure that marriages of respectable girls proceeded without doubts about the girls' sexual status.[153] She notes, however, that the collection continues with recipes that claim "to enhance or diminish sexual prowess, and these perhaps suggest the prostitute community, the sex manual, and the like, as sources of and consumers for virginity-simulating prescriptions."[154] In either case, the user's maneuvering—be it deceptive, cosmetic, hygienic and procreative, or aimed at sexual pleasure—often seems to target or benefit a sex partner. The (usually) temporary virginal state promised by the recipes owes its design to medical circles, but there is no clear connection to medical inspections for verifying virginity. Nor does the evidence reveal whether such prescriptions were used by others whose organs could be subjected to scrutiny—slaves and Christian virgins. In the next and final section of this chapter, I consider these various figures in late ancient society for whom it may have been crucially important to have a vagina that seemed virginal enough.

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[152] For example, both of these contexts are invoked in the series of recipes found in the twelfth-century *Trotula* collection (*Treatments for Women* 190-195); see text and translation in *The Trotula*, ed. Monica H. Green (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 144-147 (cf. *Treatments* 231 on 160-161 and accompanying notes on 223, 245).

[153] One of the vaginal recipes adjacent to those that refer to virginity seems to picture a newly married woman as the consumer, and it promises to prevent excessive moisture/laxness throughout her life (CGOO 14.485, first recipe of 26.38). Many others, of course, deal with reproduction, which was a chief concern of respectable marriages.

[154] Hanson, "Hippocratic *Parthenos*," 57.

5.6. Concluding considerations: virginity's value in late ancient social arenas

The developments outlined above are diverse, yet show a remarkable continuity across different cultural and religious groups of late antiquity. Christian sources from multiple regions preserve evidence of a rising practice of genital inspections to verify virginity, along with a burgeoning interest in Mary's closed genital state. Jewish sources reflect on the meaning and bodily signs of female virginity with a new level of detail. Although preexisting medical tradition does not seem to have provided the primary impetus, imagery, or vocabulary for the anatomical turn, it appears that midwives agreed to conduct virginity inspections, that medical authors readily incorporated virginity-simulating prescriptions into their collections of pharmaceutical knowledge, and that some teachers encountered the problem of integrating the virginal hymen into a medical model for the female body in which it had not previously existed. Christian and non-Christian authors who sought to organize other bodies of knowledge through commentaries or encyclopedias eventually grafted the virginal hymen into their etymological discussions of the term *hymenaeus*. For all of these groups and thinkers, the sex organs of virginal women receive an intensity of focus that does not appear in earlier ancient discourse on virginity. I lay out some preliminary and speculative considerations here on the ways different social arenas—marriages, the sex trade, the slave trade, and consecrated Christian virginity—were intertwined with the late ancient turn toward anatomical definitions for virginity.

Recipes for restoring vaginas to a virgin-like state offer tantalizing hints about the anatomizing, medicalizing, and commodification of virginity in late antiquity. As scholars have long observed, premarital virginity was valued and, oftentimes, demanded of marriageable girls. Family honor and marriage prospects relied on it, especially in the upper classes. Prospective husbands were believed to hold exclusive rights of access to their brides' sex organs. In Sissa's recent hypothesis, it is this sense of exclusive possession and desire for assurance that drives the conceptualization of a hymenal seal.[155] Faced with the increasing availability of contraceptive techniques and thus a severing of the tie between illicit sex and the damning evidence of pregnancy, certain Romans of the Imperial period came to view the genital landscape as one in which some tissue was distinctly virginal; a naturally occurring seal over the vagina became the new guarantee of untouched virginity. If this marks one time and place where the notion of a hymen was born, later ancient moments mark its maturation among a wider spread of groups. For marriageable women of late antiquity, it may have been vital to "be like a virgin during intercourse," in the words of the pseudo-Galenic recipe. In a story told in one of the *Erotic Letters* of Aristaenetus, a "pagan" author of the late fifth or early sixth century, the nurse of a girl who has already lost her virginity reassures her, "I will teach you how someone who has become a woman prior to marriage can still seem a virgin to her groom."[156] The expectation of premarital virginity persisted, and the sexual appeal

[155] Sissa, "Hymen Is a Problem," 96-97 and 103-117.
[156] *Erotic Letter* 1.6, based on the Greek provided in *Aristaenetus: Erotic Letters*, ed. Peter Bing and Regina Höschele (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 16.

sometimes associated with virginity could also affect perceptions of a wife's vagina and sexual allure.[157]

The value of female virginity was given monetary expression not only in the financial arrangements attending marriages, but also in two thriving industries of antiquity: the sex trade and the slave trade. These industries were frequently enmeshed, since many sex workers were slaves pimped at a brothel or by a private owner. Further work is needed on whether surviving sources show continuity or a noticeable shift in the valuing of virginity for female sex workers and slaves across antiquity.[158] If Hanson is correct in surmising that some virginity-simulating recipes were devised for prostitutes,[159] the anatomical turn may have brought new energy to efforts at marketing virginity for male clients. The growth within society of a sense of knowledge over what makes vaginas virginal would likely affect men's expectations of purchased sex and the demands on or strategies of sex workers to meet or promote these expectations, at least in situations where men were willing to pay more for sex with a virgin.[160]

Scholars frequently assume that virginity was highly valued on the slave market as well as in sex work. Scattered bits of evidence suggest that this was sometimes the

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[157] Another of Aristaenetus' letters (2.7) presents competing ideas about the relative appeal of virgins or experienced women as lovers. The merits of the experienced woman, who knows her way around the bedroom, are championed by one such character, over against a male character who appreciates the guilelessness and firm breasts of virgins.

[158] For broader information on sex work in antiquity, see Rebecca Flemming, "*Quae corpore quaestum facit*: The Sexual Economy of Female Prostitution in the Roman Empire," *Journal of Roman Studies* 89 (1999): 38-61; Thomas A. McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) and *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World: A Study of Social History and the Brothel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).

[159] Hanson, "Hippocratic *Parthenos*," 57.

[160] On the problem of whether sex workers were conceptualized as workers or as goods in the Roman world, see Flemming, "*Quae corpore quaestum facit*"; see the studies by both Flemming and McGinn on the varied arrangements and agents involved, such as pimps.

case,[161] but we should question our presuppositions about the reasons. There is some evidence that men in ancient societies found a special level of sexual gratification in thinking of themselves as the first to penetrate a girl or woman, which could make virgins desirable as sex workers and as servants with whom male property owners routinely engaged in sex. On the other hand, it is not certain that sex with slaves would follow the same patterns of thinking on and excitement about virginity as sex with free girls or women; the two realms of sexual activity were largely separate categories, legally, socially, and otherwise, and slaves were largely excluded from the systems of honor and shame that structured sexual morality among free persons.[162] Diseases transmitted through sexual intercourse must have existed in antiquity, but ancient ideas about contagion and illness attribute disease to environment, internal balance of elements, or problems with lifestyle and only sometimes to physical contact with ill people, making it unlikely that infections were perceived to spring from sexual activity in particular.[163] Given the economic importance of slaves' procreation, one would think that a female

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[161] Some evidence is difficult to interpret: for example, in the novel *Apollonius, King of Tyre*, a pimp plans to charge a very high rate for the client who deflowers the enslaved noble maiden Tarsias, but—despite her successful and lucrative begging for customers to pay without having sex with her—he also implies she will bring in far more money once she has become a woman than if she remains a virgin (sections 33, 35). In Seneca the Elder's *Declamations*, the lines of argumentation imply that virginity may be sexually appealing to some customers (1.2.2), but also that pimps tend to deflower their workers (1.2.12).

[162] Studies that provide broader background on slavery and slave sexuality in antiquity include Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Chris L. de Wet, *Preaching Bondage: John Chrysostom and the Discourse of Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 220-270; on male slaves in particular, Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 30-38.

[163] See the summation and observations of Mirko D. Grmek, *Diseases in the Ancient Greek World*, translated by Mireille Muellner and Leonard Muellner (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 142-151.

slave's proof of fertility through previous childbearing would be worth more on the market than claims about sexual virginity.[164]

In the earlier legal sources on slave sales collected in the *Digest of Justinian*, virginity is at least sometimes a marker of age rather than of sexual status (19.1.11), and the difference between a virgin and a (more mature?) woman is considered irrelevant for transactions in a set of comments by the jurist Ulpian (18.1.11). Discussion of slaves' hidden defects that must be disclosed by those selling slaves (*Digest* 21.1) includes the female-specific questions of menstrual problems (21.1.15), a history of producing stillborn children (21.1.14), and, surprisingly, vaginal tightness (21.1.14): "It is agreed that a woman (who is) narrow in such a way that she cannot be used as a woman is not considered healthy."[165] Here a narrow vagina is pathologized, not prized as virginal.

Virginity appears to be highly valued for female slaves in a few late ancient sources.[166] Again, one would have to investigate further within surviving documentation

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[164] According to one recent study, the most important source for the slave supply of the Roman Empire was reproduction, leading to high demand for female slaves of reproductive age: Kyle Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World, AD 275-425* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 63, 77.

[165] From comments of Ulpian in *Digest* 21.1.14, based on Latin from *The Digest of Justinian*, ed. Theodor Mommsen, Paul Krueger, and Alan Watson, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 605: *Mulierem ita artam, ut mulier fieri non possit, sanam non videri constat*.

[166] For example, interest in slaves' virginity is apparent in a Talmudic source compared with its Mishnaic precedent. In Mishnah *Ketubot* 3:7, one form of compensation owed for the rape or seduction of a young woman is assessed by calculating the price she would bring on the slave market before the injury (i.e., with a sound body) versus afterward. In the Babylonian Talmud, this explicitly becomes a question of the value of her *virginity*; one suggested calculation is the difference of payments a man would make for virginal and non-virginal slaves (*Ketubot* 40b—and a series of comments that follow deliberate whether that difference in value hinges on a slave's worth as a servant or as a mate for a fellow slave, with an implication that a favorite slave would appreciate his master securing for him a virginal spouse). In the novel *Apollonius, King of Tyre*, a prince desires to purchase or visit the maiden Tarsia in order to take away her virginity (33); part of her appeal, however, is her recognizably noble lineage, despite her sale as a slave. On a list of types of slaves an overly luxurious wealthy man might own, Gregory of Nazianzus includes "young women (who are) pleasures of the eyes," but this says little about the value of their sexual virginity *(Song* 1.2.8, line 148; PG 37.659). Earlier sources show that the beauty of boys as well as girls was valued: for instance, Pliny

on sales and literary references to discern whether this value increases in tandem with the anatomical turn.[167] It is tempting to find a precedent or origin for gynecological virginity inspections in the general bodily inspection of slaves, which seems to have occurred regularly. In the passages discussed above, Ambrose cites the case of a female slave whose conduct was under suspicion and who was inspected by midwives with conflicting results,[168] and Chrysostom compares midwives' inspections of consecrated virgins to what owners do with slaves they purchase. Yet it is unclear whether slaves were subjected to genital virginity examinations at an earlier time than consecrated Christian virgins were, or whether many were examined in this fashion at all at the time of the anatomical turn. Chrysostom may be referring to more general bodily examinations or to a more general interest in sexual status. Sources from throughout antiquity describe the inspection of slaves' entire bodies and health, but not with specific evidence for gynecological verification of virginity.[169]

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the Elder credits a midwife named Salpe with one of the hair removal procedures he describes in *Natural History* 32.135-136, saying that she used it to adorn boys for sale (135; cf. 24.35, 21.170); similarly, Clement of Alexandria talks of slave-dealers beautifying boys through depilation (*Instructor* 3.3.21). Harper writes, "Virginity and beauty were attributes that could be commuted into capital by the seller. They were products that could be bought by consumers," and indeed were (*Slavery*, 293).

[167] Harper notes that female slaves' value was particularly high in their early teenage years, but he acknowledges that this reflects their productive and reproductive potential as well (*Slavery*, 293); I am not convinced that it gives us a clear indication of sexual virginity fetching a high price. On the elevated price of teenage female slaves and the likelihood that this reflects a valuing of reproductive capacity, see Walter Scheidel, "Reflections on the Differential Valuation of Slaves in Diocletian's Price Edict and in the United States," *Münstersche Beiträge zur antiken Handelsgeschichte* 15.1 (1996): 67-79, at 74 (with n. 24); cf. Keith Bradley, "The Age at Time of Sale of Female Slaves," *Arethusa* 11 (1978): 243-252.

[168] *Letter* 56.8-9.

[169] Seneca the Elder, *Declamations* 1.2.3; Seneca the Younger, *Letter* 80.9; Claudian, *Against Eutropius* 1.35-36; and see the various bodily defects that must be disclosed and might be investigated in *Digest of Justinian* 21.1. Some Talmudic passages make reference to the appraisal of a slave's worth on the market based on soundness of body or bodily defects, and a slave is inspected by her owner for purposes of

In Ambrose's account, however, we see one of the possible consequences of the anatomical turn: slaves' bodies, which were particularly susceptible to scrutiny, exposure, and sexual exploitation, may have gained or lost worth based on owners' or midwives' evaluation of their genital condition. Moreover, in Christian circles, a confluence of newly egalitarian ideals for sexual behavior (i.e., all people should strive to be chaste) with a lack of practical changes to make this possible for slaves (who remained at the mercy and sexual whims of their owners) must have created a heavy burden for those slaves of whom Christian sexual virtue was expected.[170] The unnamed slave mentioned in Ambrose's letter about Indicia may be an example of those whose households or communities came to demand of female slaves a new level of moral sexual agency and a new form of concrete evidence for their sexual virtue.

For the forms of late ancient Christianity best represented in the surviving sources, female virginity took on enormous symbolic value and certain forms of material value, as well. Patristic authors of the late fourth and early fifth centuries exhort women who have taken vows of virginity to worthily embody the orthodox faith, represent the Christian Church to outsiders, and serve as special mediators between humanity and

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determining her maturity and legal age status in *Niddah* 47a of the Babylonian Talmud. Harper points out that Christian writers refer to slave traders selling slaves as a familiar sight (*Slavery*, 99); cf. 226, 250, 293-294, 357 for further sources for and discussion of examinations and interrogations of slaves for sale.

[170] See Harper's discussions concerning slaves and late ancient sexuality in *Slavery*, 281-325, especially 294-295, and concerning late ancient interest in slave morality (136, 211, 273, 309, 334). De Wet discusses Chrysostom's ways of drawing female slaves within the compass of free women's sexual morality (*Preaching Bondage*, 225-239). Some late ancient Christian authors directly address the problem of slaves' lack of control over sexual use of their bodies—for example, Basil of Caesarea (*Letter* 199.49). On the contrast between legal regulations and Christian ideals for free males' behaviors, see Antti Arjava, *Women and Law in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 202-205.

Christ.[171] The purity, integrity, and singular commitment of virgins stands for that of entire Christian communities. On a social level, these authors promoted a tiered system in which celibates ranked higher than non-celibates, both in the present and in the afterlife; the heavenly rewards and splendor of those who embraced lifelong virginity would outshine those of widows, who in turn would surpass the married.[172] Debates over Mary's virginal status after birthing Christ were in part a debate over whether celibacy is indeed of higher spiritual value than marriage, while many who insisted on Mary's ongoing virginity sought to guard Christ's fully divine nature by stressing the virginal nature of his conception and birth.[173] In material terms, consecrated virgins from the aristocracy contributed significant wealth to churches and to monastic and philanthropic projects when they rejected the usual financial commitments of marriage, childrearing, and estate management in favor of marriage to Christ.[174]

The question remains whether these developments within Christianity were a primary catalyst or merely a conspicuous vehicle for the development of anatomical thinking about virginity. The concept of a virginally closed womb was not an invention of biblical literature, and in fact took some effort to integrate with biblical patterns of

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[171] Such themes appear, for example, in Ambrose's treatises on virginity and in Chrysostom's *The Necessity of Guarding Virginity* as well as his treatise *Virginity*. On the mediatory role of the virgin, see Peter Brown, "The Notion of Virginity in the Early Church," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 427-443.
[172] For example, Jerome, *Against Jovinian* 1.3; Augustine, *Holy Virginity* 21-29 (cf. 45-47).
[173] See David G. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Ariel Bybee Laughton, "Virginity Discourse and Ascetic Politics in the Writings of Ambrose of Milan," Ph.D. Dissertation (Duke University, 2010), 61-68.
[174] This was also true of aristocratic widows. On Christian, social, and legal perspectives of ascetic women's financial contributions to Christian causes, see Elizabeth A. Clark, "Ascetic Renunciation and Feminine Advancement: A Paradox of Late Ancient Christianity," *Anglican Theological Review* 63 (1981): 240-257; Arjava, *Women and Law*, 159-161.

language about the womb. Earlier Christian texts exhibit a range of ways to understand virginity, not a monolithic tendency to demand hymenal intactness of virgins.[175] Even so, the clearest late ancient evidence for gynecological virginity inspections and for the idea of sealed-shut wombs first emerges in Christian texts. This may be happenstance, or it may reflect a new flourishing of preexisting Roman notions that found fertile ground among late-fourth- and fifth-century Christians.

Hymenal or other integrity for sex organs becomes highly useful in some Christian writings. It may have lent a sense of certainty in matters that otherwise struck church leaders as far too fluid. Who qualifies for the highest tier of social and spiritual rank? How can the women who occupy this powerful rank be placed under the authority of bishops and other clergy? What will create definitive enough lines between correctly believing, correctly behaving Christians and the proximate groups ("heretics," Jewish and "pagan" neighbors, sexually lax believers) with whom boundaries are easily blurred? The notion of a virginally closed womb offers some solutions and reassurances. In the eyes of a leader like Cyprian, it offered a clear-cut distinction between true and false virgins. For Syagrius, it could help provide resolution in sticky situations where bishops "straddled religious and civil jurisdictions."[176] In the eyes of Ambrose, it served as a naturally occurring symbol of the seclusion that should mark the lives of veiled, disciplined, dedicated virgins as well as the theological purity to which all Christians

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[175] Sissa implies in multiple publications that early Christians as a whole subscribed to the notion of the virginal hymen; most recently, she associates the demand for hymenal integrity with "the threatening pathos of Christian and other monotheistic sexualities" ("Hymen Is a Problem," 88).
[176] Uhalde, *Expectations of Justice*, 70; see 67-76 on bishops' roles as legal judges in matters of sexual morality.

must adhere.[177] The female body that frequently served to symbolize the Church and the soul was dangerously permeable, and the conceptualization of virginity as a state of tangible closure gave that body a new impermeability.[178]

Many of these leaders, however, confronted the problematic limitations of the quest for certainty about virginity itself. Even if an examination by a skilled enough and trustworthy enough midwife grants a measure of knowledge about a virgin's past experience of or abstinence from penile-vaginal intercourse, this does not reveal enough about true virginity. Sexual interaction can take other forms, and virginity, they claim, can be forfeited or compromised by a host of anti-virginal behaviors (intimate glances, immodest dress, inordinate pride, wayward thoughts) or by subscription to the wrong brand of theological beliefs.[179] The writers whose works testify to the practice of virginity inspections each show in one way or another that anatomical virginity has become an important means of reassurance to some Christians, but they also show that testing for it is finally inadequate, since virginity is—*must*—be something more than a state of genital intactness.

This is the great tension of the anatomical turn. For Ambrose, virginity is vividly concrete, but the reliance on this quality for gynecological examinations goes against his conviction that virginity is ultimately moral and spiritual. For late ancient Rabbis, bodily evidence for virginity takes various forms, but virginal status does not always correspond

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[177] See my discussion in chapter 4.5; on the relationship between virginal purity and theological purity in Ambrose's thought, see Laughton, "Virginity Discourse," 15-79.
[178] Cf. Brown, "The Notion of Virginity," 429.
[179] Works that exemplify these warnings include Cyprian's *Dress of Virgins*; Chrysostom's *The Necessity of Guarding Virginity*; Jerome's *Letter* 22 to Eustochium; and Augustine's *Holy Virginity*.

with the presence of evidence. Late antiquity saw a new investment and intensified interest in the state of virginal vaginas, but virginity had long been and would remain a state that encapsulates other features of bodies, minds, behaviors, and social status. In the next chapter, we will consider Augustine's confrontation of the tension between hymenal and moral ways of configuring virginity.

6. Augustine of Hippo and the Problem of Double Integrity

Christian works on virginity became abundant in the fourth century and especially around the turn from the fourth to the fifth century, the time of the anatomical turn in virginity discourse. Authors of this period inherited a host of models for configuring virginity from their broader cultures and from earlier Christian texts. As we saw in chapters four and five, disparate models and elements were often blended. For many authors, virginity includes so many dimensions that it becomes an all-encompassing category for one's way of life: Basil of Ancyra, for instance, says that the virgin's entire "ethos" is divided from the married woman's and that "the deeds pertaining to the virgin will be recognized in everything."[1] Authors who participate in the anatomical turn force together spiritualizing, moral-behavioral models for virginity with belief in its concrete and perceptible presence in female anatomy. Simultaneously, virginity becomes intensely physical in Christian and non-Christian discourse and, in Christian texts, is something that must be maintained and proven in every facet of a woman's appearance and behavior. It is located in a specific place within the body, but it is also located everywhere else in one's being and actions, for it is a matter of the soul. True virginity is complete and apparent devotion of the whole self to the virginal Christian life.

Augustine is one representative of these developments in virginity discourse, and supplies one late ancient Christian answer to a longstanding question in Latin culture: since sexual virtue or chastity (*pudicitia*) entails both physical virginity and moral

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[1] *True Incorruption in Virginity* 21 (PG 30.712-713). The language of division between virgins and women is inspired by his reading of 1 Corinthians 7:32-35.

agency, what is the status of a woman whose physical and moral states do not align? Earlier examples, two scenarios in two different genres from the imperial period, show ways this question was debated, and we will examine these below. Augustine faces the question in the aftermath of the Visigoths' sack of Rome in 410. Many virgins and wives suffered sexual assault during the events; in Roman culture, suicide was, or was seen as, a common response to such attacks.[2] In the opening book of his *City of God*, Augustine devotes a series of chapters to this tragic situation and addresses the matter of how his readers should view the survivors who did not kill themselves after being raped.[3] He discusses the relationship between chastity, purity, holiness, and bodily integrity.

Earlier Latin literature engages with the question of misaligned physical and moral states using the traditional conceptualization of physical chastity as a state of purity from the pollution of sexual corruption.[4] Illicit penetration pollutes the body, whether one is a virgin girl, freeborn boy, married woman, or adult man. Being chaste includes being free from such pollution. The anatomical turn in ancient discourse on virginity brings a new dimension to the question when it concerns virgins. In one sense the

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[2] This is evident both from pre-Christian Roman literature and in Christians' praise of women who killed themselves to avoid assault. On the crucial importance of chastity, see Rebecca Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); on motives for self-killing, see Timothy D. Hill, *Ambitiosa Mors: Suicide and Self in Roman Thought and Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004).

[3] Recent studies that discuss sexual violence in late ancient military contexts and Augustine's or others' responses to it include Melanie Gibson Webb, "Rape and Its Aftermath in Augustine's *City of God*," Ph.D. Dissertation (Princeton Theological Seminary, 2016); Jennifer Collins-Elliott, "'Bespattered with the Mud of Another's Lust': Rape and Physical Embodiment in Christian Literature of the 4th-6th Centuries C.E.," Ph.D. Dissertation (Florida State University, forthcoming); Kathy L. Gaca, "Martial Rape, Pulsating Fear, and the Sexual Maltreatment of Girls (παῖδες), Virgins (παρθένοι), and Women (γυναῖκες) in Antiquity," *American Journal of Philology* 135.3 (2014): 303-357; Helen Morales, "Rape, Violence, Complicity: Colluthus's Abduction of Helen," *Arethusa* 49.1 (2016): 61-92.

[4] See my summaries on varied meanings of "corruption" and bodily virginity in chapters 2.2.2 and 4.1.2.

problem remains the same: What happens to a woman's chastity when her body is corrupted against her will? Now, however, the corruption of defloration is manifest in the condition of a particular body part. Once physical virginity is anchored in the hymen or other structures/features of the vagina, virginity loss not only robs the body of its purity, but alters its features; a deflowered woman's body is tangibly, traceably different from a virgin's body. Her physical state is concretely and intensely physicalized, made (supposedly) observable in such a way that it would be difficult to deny or elide its alteration in favor of her proper behaviors and innocent moral state.

A number of ancient Christian authors imply that virginal purity can be removed against one's will. Whether they subscribe to the notion of a hymen or not, several correlate virginal status with the preservation of the body from the corruption of sexual penetration; this is especially common when they seek to praise exemplary women who were willing to die to preserve their virginity.[5] Basil of Ancyra seems to be a rare exception: he acknowledges situations where virgins have actually been assaulted, and declares that they are still virginally uncorrupt if they remain pure from sexual pleasure.[6] Augustine has often been seen as another exception, a defender of maintained virginity when will and bodily subjection to sex do not align.

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[5] Texts that celebrate the preservation of female virginity and chastity through suicide include Ambrose of Milan, *Virgins* 3.7.32-38; John Chrysostom, *Homily on Pelagia*; Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* 12.3-4, 8.12-14 (with 8.15-17 on suicide by wives to preserve chastity). Jerome of Stridon valorizes self-violence in the name of virginity or chastity in a catalog of chaste non-Christian women (*Against Jovinian* 1.41-46), and says in *Commentary on Jonah* 1.12 that the only exception to the rule against killing oneself during persecution is when chastity (*castitas*) is endangered (SC 323.210). For analysis of diverse ancient and medieval Christian perspectives on whether or not chaste virgins can be raped (with some interpretations that differ from mine), see Joy A. Schroeder, *Dinah's Lament: The Biblical Legacy of Sexual Violence in Christian Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 57-99.
[6] *True Incorruption in Virginity* 52.

In this chapter, I advance a different reading of Augustine's position. The preponderance of scholarly opinion focuses on his privileging of the mind or soul over the body, such that violence against the body does not impair a person's holiness. I agree that in Augustine's reasoning, the will receives primacy for questions of chastity, and chastity cannot be destroyed against one's will. What usually escapes notice is this: he never affirms that virgins who have suffered rape are still virgins. Readers have assumed that this affirmation is implied by his discussion of chastity (i.e., a virgin who is declared chaste must still be a virgin); his failure to explicitly address the question of retained virginity, one could reason, is due to the fact that he is speaking about both virginal and non-virginal victims of sexual assault—not only consecrated and yet-to-marry virgins, but also wives and widows—and thus would naturally use broad terms like "chastity" that are pertinent to all these groups.[7] Yet his terminology for virginity in this and other works suggests that the virginal state may in fact be compromised by the crimes perpetrated upon virgins' bodies during the sack of Rome. A close analysis of his terms in *City of God* 1.16-28 and elsewhere raises the lurking suspicion that for Augustine, raped virgins may be chaste, but they are no longer virgins. If my interpretation is correct, Augustine's configuration of virginity in *City of God* takes the polarization of bodily and spiritual virginity in late ancient Christian thought to a new extreme.

[7] He introduces the disturbing circumstances in *City of God* 1.16, explaining that wives, virgins, and even consecrated virgins were attacked, and he addresses virgins, widows, and wives in 1.28.

6.1. Earlier Roman reflection on the alignment of physical and moral chastity

Two sources from the Imperial period that deal with forced sex provide helpful examples of deliberations over physical and moral chastity in Latin culture. The scenarios and problems they raise were familiar to Augustine, and his consideration in *City of God* shows that he shares a number of concepts and assumptions with these earlier non-Christian authors, even as he distances himself from some of their lines of reasoning. One source asks to what extent a virgin's purity hinges on her physically pure state through the avoidance of illicit sex. The other asks whether a married woman who suffers rape can be deemed pure when she is morally innocent. Each source offers more than one answer to the question.

Seneca the Elder's *Declamations* 1.2 sets out a fanciful scenario for the purposes of argumentative exercise. The branch of declamation known as *controversiae* was a form of rhetorical training in which students created legal arguments for difficult and often somewhat theatrical situations based on an imaginary law. *Declamations* 1.2 collects arguments for and against a virgin's eligibility for special religious service after she has undergone ordeals similar to those of ancient romance novels: she is kidnapped by pirates and sold to a pimp, manages to avoid having sex with customers by negotiating with them, and kills a soldier who refuses to negotiate and intends to rape her. Based on a law that a priestess must be extremely chaste and pure, sample arguments are listed that could persuade an audience of her purity or loss of purity in the course of these events.

Only some of the arguments against her suitability for religious service question whether she succeeded in keeping her body sexually unpenetrated. Most draw attention

to external sources of impurity around her, located in her surroundings or the indecent attention focused upon her by prospective buyers and customers. Her opponents imply that her purity was compromised by the company she was forced to keep—pirates, a pimp, and sex workers—or by the blood of her victim; her desire to remain pure preserved her from sexual intercourse, but led to these other forms of pollution, making her pure enough for marriage but not for a priesthood. Some characterize her killing of the soldier as bold and thus unchaste, insisting that chastity involves far more than preserving physical virginity by avoiding sex. Arguments in favor of her purity and eligibility for priesthood emphasize her resolute chastity or claim that she was able to persevere because she had the gods on her side.

Rebecca Langlands has observed that such arguments are not ethical exercises that *explore* tensions and areas of uncertainty in Roman law and culture, but are rhetorical exercises that *exploit* tensions and uncertainties for the sake of persuasion, to help students grow in rhetorical prowess.[8] They do not promote specific positions on a legal and cultural problem but offer as wide a range as possible of potential positions. With the question of virginal purity, they capitalize on the multiple dimensions of virginity found in Roman culture, variously imagining the girl as spared from or subjected to physical sexual pollution, valiantly protective of her purity, or polluted against her will by impure spaces, immodest interaction, or murder, which are antithetical to chastity. The notions of purity and chastity proved useful for declamatory exercises precisely because they involved physical and moral levels that do not always align.

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[8] Langlands, *Sexual Morality*, 252.

Declamations 1.2 expects an audience both to appreciate the girl's exercise of moral agency in circumstances beyond her control and to understand that pollution can be seen as a mechanistic rather than moral matter.

The problem of moral and physical alignment and the possibility of involuntary pollution are pointedly and sometimes poignantly raised by the story of Lucretia. The version of Lucretia's story told by Livy in *History of Rome* 1.57-59 shows awareness of the problem and articulates two different perspectives. In this telling, Lucretia, a virtuous Roman matron, is raped by a local prince and chooses to commit suicide despite the protestations of her husband, father, and trusted friends of the family. She claims that she has lost her *pudicitia* and must die; they try to dissuade her by placing the blame with the perpetrator and saying that the mind, not the body, commits wrong (1.58).[9] Lucretia agrees that she is not guilty and that her mind remains innocent, but she insists that because of the violation of her body, she still must pay the penalty of death.[10]

Lucretia and the men of her family hold different perspectives on whether her *pudicitia*, her chastity or sexual virtue and honor, is a strictly moral state or also a state of physical purity from the corrupting pollution of illicit sex. Her surpassing chastity (*castitas*), not just her beauty, attracts her attacker (1.57),[11] and she is forced to choose between two different fates that each would destroy sexual honor: the rapist threatens that if she does not submit, he will kill both her and a slave, place them in bed together, and claim to have discovered them committing adultery (1.58). Although Lucretia

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[9] LCL 114.202.
[10] "Only (my) body is violated; (my) soul (*animus*) is innocent (*insons*)… Although I acquit myself of sin, I do not exempt (myself) from penalty (*ego me etsi peccato absolvo, supplicio non libero*)" (LCL 114.202).
[11] LCL 114.200.

chooses bodily pollution through rape over the alternative scenario, in which she would have no opportunity to rectify the shame brought upon herself and her family, she still believes that the bodily pollution demands violent counteraction.[12] Since she is morally innocent, the male characters urge her not to kill herself. For Livy's Lucretia, however, chastity can be undone against one's will. Bodily violation and its damage to honor must be rectified, regardless of her own intentions or inability to prevent the violation.

Seneca and Livy testify to tensions in Roman thought over whether chastity is rooted in the will or depends on a body whose contamination is sometimes beyond one's control. Augustine's position in *City of God* aligns with those who, like the relatives in Livy's narrative, understand *pudicitia* to be fundamentally moral. As we will see below, he argues against the traditional idea that pollution can occur involuntarily.[13] Yet because of the anatomical nature of virginity in his thought, his discussion of chastity and bodily integrity leaves room for the unsettling possibility that a raped virgin whose chastity is intact and who remains pure from pollution may still have lost her virginity.

6.2. Augustine's terminology of virginal integrity in other works and passages

In this section, I demonstrate the tight link between virginity and bodily integrity in Augustine's thought. His vocabulary in our sources repeatedly binds the two:

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[12] On Livy's and Augustine's interpretations of Lucretia's motives and the significance of honor and shame in *City of God*, see J. Warren Smith, "The Witness of Death and the Witness of Conscience: Augustine and the Shaming of Roman Virtue" (chapter 7 in "Ambrose, Augustine, and the Perfection of Virtue," pre-publication book manuscript, 2016).

[13] The traditional idea persists among other Latin Christian authors; we saw hints of Ambrose's approach to the question in chapter 4.4 above, and Tertullian of Carthage refers to Lucretia's death as a washing with blood of flesh that had been stained against her will (*Exhortation to Chastity* 13; cf. *Monogamy* 17).

virginity is or requires bodily integrity. In sources we will survey in the next section, the preservation of chastity, a broader category than virginity, relies upon the integrity of the soul rather than that of the body. None of these texts reflects on the problem of how virginity fits into the larger schema of preserved chastity, which can concern men and married women as well as virgins. We are left with uncertainty about how to reconcile the anatomical prerequisites of virginity with a moral configuration of chastity.

It takes only a small selection of Augustine's works to see how closely intertwined are virginity and bodily integrity in his thought. While many pertinent passages occur in homilies that cannot be assigned secure dates, the consistency between works diminishes the need to create a chronological arc for his virginity discourse.[14] The anatomical nature of virginal integrity is perhaps clearest when he writes about Mary. In the passages I cited in chapter 5, he depicts Mary's womb as remaining closed in childbirth, and her closed womb is compared with the locked doors that Jesus was able to enter after the resurrection (John 20:19, 26);[15] he calls this closed genital state "integrity" and "virginity's integrity" or "the integrity of virginity" (*virginitatis integritas*).[16] Several sermons that celebrate Mary's virginal motherhood use the term *integritas* for her virginity, either interchangeably with "virginity" or to denote virginity's essential bodily characteristic(s). According to multiple Christmas sermons, she, as a virgin even in

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[14] On the difficulty of dating Augustine's sermons, see Geoffrey D. Dunn, "The Functions of Mary in the Christmas Homilies of Augustine of Hippo," *Studia Patristica* 44 (2010): 433-446. The treatise *Holy Virginity* is dated to around 401.
[15] *Homily* 191.2; *Homily* 247.2; *Letter* 137.2; *City of God* 22.8.
[16] *Homily* 191.2 (NBA 32/1.46); *Homily* 192.1 (NBA 32/1.50).

giving birth, gained fecundity without losing integrity.[17] Fecundity and virginity are paired in the same way in other passages.[18] In the nativity she "gave forth with fertile organs and intact genitals (*genitalibus integris*)."[19] Christ "did not take away [his mother's] virginity in any way" during childbirth because he was able to give her both a good thing from marriage and a better thing belonging to virgins: "fecundity in marriage is indeed a good thing, but integrity in consecration is a better one."[20] Throughout these works, Augustine seems to find it theologically crucial that Mary's anatomical virginity be affirmed. Although he elevates the soul or mind above the body in some portrayals of Mary's virginal childbearing role,[21] it appears that her genitally intact state is also necessary, and that this integrity is a synonym for or essential feature of virginity.

While Mary is exceptional in some respects, she is not disconnected from other virgins in Augustine's writings, but is treated as exemplary. The sermons quoted above set her up as a model and companion in chaste integrity for consecrated virgins and the entire Church.[22] On the heels of statements about Mary becoming fertile without losing integrity, Augustine urges holy virgins to rejoice that they can spiritually marry Christ, conceive, and give birth without losing virginity.[23] Those who are virgins "by body" and "by flesh" embrace the same gift that Christ gave his mother, and their "integrity of

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[17] *Homily* 184.1 (NBA 32/1.2-4); *Homily* 189.2 (NBA 32/1.30-32); *Homily* 190.3 (NBA 32/1.40). See *Homily* 195.2 on Mary's and the Church's "perpetual integrity and uncorrupted fecundity" (NBA 32/1.68); cf. *Homily* 195.1 (NBA 32/1.66).
[18] For instance, in *Homily* 192.4 (NBA 32/1.48).
[19] *Homily* 186.1 (NBA 32/1.12). Similarly, *Homily* 193.1 says that she remained *integra* after giving birth (NBA 32/1.56), and *Homily* 215.3 says that her child kept her organs *integra* (NBA 32/1.238).
[20] *Homily* 188.4 (NBA 32/1.28).
[21] For instance, in *Homily* 72A.7.
[22] See, for example, *Homily* 192.2.
[23] *Homily* 184.2 (NBA 32/1.4).

flesh" will augment their minds' fertile production of virtues.[24] Likewise, in the treatise *Holy Virginity*, Augustine makes Mary a model for consecrated female virgins, who share with her the dedication of their bodies to virginal integrity.[25] In this treatise, he explains that even physical virginity is spiritual as well, for one cannot maintain integrity of flesh without a chaste soul; the virgin's combination of bodily and spiritual virginity is superior to the chastity of married motherhood.[26] Virginity also has heavenly benefits, since "virginal integrity… in corruptible flesh is a preparatory practice of perpetual incorruptibility."[27] Integrity is the central meaning or characteristic of Christian virgins' virginity, not only Mary's.

Some passages configure virginity as integrity of the mind rather than the body. These are passages that address a wider audience of Christians, who as members of the Church, Augustine says, both are and give birth to Christ's bodily members while remaining virginal in a spiritual, moral, and intellectual sense.[28] Because virginity is integrity, Augustine describes integrity of faith and of the mind and heart as a kind of virginity. "Why are we concerned about the integrity [of the Church] if she is not a virgin?"[29] He does not count all faithful and chaste Christians as virgins in terms of their individual status; rather, they live out chastity (*pudicitia*) in a variety of ways—for

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[24] *Homily* 191.3-4 (NBA 32/1.46-48).
[25] *Holy Virginity*, especially sections 2, 4, and 11. For an example of the juxtaposition of "virginal integrity" with marital fecundity and the interchangeability of "virginity" and "integrity" frequently found in this work, see section 7 (CSEL 41.240-241).
[26] *Holy Virginity* 8 (cf. 11). Augustine aims to strike a balance in this treatise that refutes both Jovinian's equalizing of marriage and celibacy and Manichean rejection of marriage.
[27] *Holy Virginity* 12/13 (CSEL 41.245; this section and some others have rival numbering systems).
[28] For example, *Homily* 72A.7-8, *Homily* 192.2, and *Holy Virginity* 5-6.
[29] *Holy Virginity* 2 (CSEL 41.236).

women, as wives, widows, or virgins.[30] Together Christians comprise a corporate body whose virginity is embodied in a fleshly way by some members and not others.[31] Like many authors, Augustine can speak of a collective, figural, and spiritual sort of virginity that applies to all Christians while holding fast to classifications by which the individually and officially virginal belong in a distinct group.[32] "Few (women) have virginity in body; all ought to have (virginity) in heart."[33] Meanwhile, he goes to great lengths to warn virgins that, their superior lifestyle notwithstanding, they do not have a monopoly on pleasing God or on God's good gifts.[34]

The same correlation between virginity and integrity, including genital integrity, is evident in *City of God*. We will see one prominent instance from book 1 in another section below. A list in 1.27 perpetuates Augustine's usual equation of virginity and integrity in juxtaposing the diverse forms of chaste living enjoined upon baptized Christians, namely, "virginal integrity or widowly continence or that faithfulness of the marital bed."[35] Passages elsewhere in the work link virginity with undamaged genitals and virginity loss with forceful penetration that alters genitals. In 6.9, where Augustine refers to Roman traditions concerning the consummation of a marriage, virginity and its loss depend entirely on the husband's use of force against his timid bride. Defloration seems to be an act of inevitable theft and injury: the weak and fearful young woman's

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[30] *Homily* 196.2 (NBA 32/1.72).
[31] *Holy Virginity* 2, 6, 11/12; *Homily* 191.3; *Homily* 213.8.
[32] See especially *Homily* 93.
[33] *Homily* 93.3/4 (NBA 30/2.140); cf. the concluding sentences of *Homily* 188.4 and *Homily* 195.2.
[34] *Holy Virginity* 31-56.
[35] *...studemus accendere siue ad virginalem integritatem sive ad continentiam vidualem sive ad ipsam tori coniugalis fidem* (CCSL 47.28).

virginity must be taken away (from the verb *aufero*), and "a woman does not cease to be a virgin without force (*vis*)."[36] Augustine's purpose is to mock non-Christians' association of various deities with this act, but one is left wondering whether he envisions alternative approaches to marital defloration in a fallen world. Things would have been different, however, if sin had not intervened in Eden. According to 14.26, in a world without sin human reproduction would have proceeded in a tranquil fashion—without lust usurping control over body parts that should belong to the soul, and without violence between bridegroom and bride. Augustine writes that a husband, by sheer force of will, could have inseminated his wife without lustful excitement and "with no corruption of the body's integrity," sending semen into her uterus "with the integrity of the female genital (organ) preserved," just as menses flow from a virgin without destroying integrity.[37] As he sees it, the integrity of the female virgin's body includes genital intactness that could have persisted in a prelapsarian version of sex but is now destined for destruction in the forceful encounter of the marriage bed. New wives' virginity is or requires a physical integrity that is taken away by husbands' exertion of physical power.

Within and beyond *City of God*, then, virginity is integrity. This integrity is or includes the womb remaining closed up with hymen tissue.[38] Chastity is a broader category where integrity of the soul reigns supreme, and the next sources show that the

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[36] CCSL 47.179. The notion of force is ambiguous here; while the key sense may simply be of action or powerful motion (here, the effort and effect of penetration), Augustine's appeal to the classic image of a reluctant bride flirts with the sense of compulsion that the term can also convey in English.
[37] CCSL 48.449.
[38] As I noted above and in chapter 5.1, Augustine understands that the hymenally closed womb is not so sealed as to prevent menstrual bleeding. It is clear in *City of God* 14.26 and in his comments about deflorative perforation in 6.9 that he pictures something like a hymen barring the genital organs.

chaste state of the body rests with the mind. Virginity, however, is a state that combines physical and spiritual integrity. The equivalence of virginity and bodily integrity in Augustine's works implies that the loss of bodily integrity is a loss of virginity as well.

6.3. Preserved chastity and threatened virginity in Augustine's other works

Two works besides *City of God* deal with the problem of whether chastity, or sexual honor and virtue (*pudicitia*), can be taken by force. In both works, Augustine prioritizes integrity of the soul over that of the body: the body might be damaged, but it should not be seen as polluted when the victim has been made an object of sin without being a willing participant in sinning. The pertinent passages are instructive for seeing continuities in Augustine's thought on this matter, yet they do not clarify his views on whether a sexually assaulted virgin is still a virgin. A passage from *Holy Virginity*, on the other hand, suggests that virginity can in fact be destroyed against one's will.

The treatise *Lying*, which dates to about 395, posits men as potential victims of bodily violation who are concerned to preserve their *pudicitia*.[39] Several chapters discuss whether it is ethical to tell a lie if lying would prevent the great evil of having one's body violated. Augustine argues that lying defiles the soul, the integrity of which matters far more than that of the body. Bodily goods are temporary, while the soul's integrity and the truth embraced by the chaste mind last forever. Unlike bodily *integritas*, however, the body's *pudicitia* should not be thought of as merely a temporal good, since it depends

[39] Presumably Augustine intends for his ethical reasoning to apply to both men and women, but he uses masculine examples; defilement of the body includes no terms specific to women but includes being made to "suffer womanish things," i.e., as a passive male sex partner (*Lying* 9 and 10; CSEL 41.434, 436).

upon the soul's integrity and cannot be removed against one's will.[40] When an enemy lustfully attacks a chaste person's body, he can accomplish violence but not corruption—"or if every ordeal (like this) *is* corruption, (then) not all corruption is dishonorable, but (is so) to the extent that lust has procured or agreed to it."[41] This means that *pudicitia* remains undamaged: the chaste victim is still chaste and has lost nothing of his virtue or honor (or should lose nothing of them in his own or others' eyes, since God has judged him innocent). "No one violates the body's *pudicitia* when the soul does not agree to and allow (it)."[42] According to Augustine, the polluting consequences of sexual violence do not take effect when the soul keeps its chastity (*castitas*);[43] integrity of mind, not of body, dictates the un/chaste state of both, and this integrity is based on moral innocence or culpability. In these discussions, we gain insight into Augustine's reasoning on sexual violence and the preservation of *pudicitia*, but not into whether or not bodily integrity is essential for virgins.

In *Letter* 111, addressed to a priest named Victorianus and probably written in 409, Augustine gives an initial response to the problem of women's sexual vulnerability as war captives during "barbarian" invasions. In this work he describes the capture of chaste women as lamentable, but remains somewhat optimistic about their fate, relaying a story about the abduction of a consecrated virgin who was restored safely to her family

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[40] *Lying* 7 (CSEL 41.427-429). On the complex assignation of temporal or eternal import to these modes of integrity and chastity, see especially the sentence that bridges 427-428 and a later statement on 428: while the body's *pudicitia* "should not be counted among temporal things," *integritas* of body and soul are contrasted by saying that "integrity of soul, which can be preserved into eternity, should be put before integrity of body."

[41] *Lying* 7 (CSEL 41.428).

[42] *Lying* 19 (CSEL 41.460).

[43] While the body's chastity is called *pudicitia*, the soul's is called *castitas* in these passages of *Lying*: see, for example, the repeated parallels in chapter 20 (CSEL 41.462-463).

after God struck her captors with illness and healed them by the girl's prayers.[44] Even so, he considers the possibility that not all will be so fortunate. God, he declares, will either protect captive women's chaste members from their enemies' lust or assign culpability only to the perpetrator, not the victim. If the soul and mind remain pure by not consenting to the act, the event is an act of violence that injures members of the body but cannot harm the body's *pudicitia*.[45] Through the chaste integrity of her mind, the violated woman will remain free from sin and in possession of her chastity. The message is similar to that of *Lying* and to what we will find in *City of God*: pollution and purity should be correlated with sin and innocence rather than with the damaged/intact or touched/untouched state of parts of the body by which Roman culture traditionally measured sexual honor. Once again, though, it is a message about chastity more broadly (*pudicitia*) and does not give a specific verdict on the virginal or non-virginal status of the violated virgin.

Lying and *Letter* 111 anticipate Augustine's reasoning in *City of God*, declaring that *pudicitia* is determined by the soul and not by the body's members. *Virginitas*, on the other hand, is so firmly anchored in the body that violence poses a threat to it. In *Holy Virginity* 4, Augustine claims that Mary vowed herself to lifelong virginity prior to the annunciation. Since Israelite custom demanded marriage, she was espoused to a righteous man who "would not take away by violence what she had already vowed" to God, but would protect it.[46] This rationalization implies that Mary's virginity would be

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[44] *Letter* 111.7.
[45] *Letter* 111.9 (CCSL 31B.102).
[46] *Holy Virginity* 4 (CSEL 41.238).

destroyed by force if a husband raped her, however chaste she might be. Chastity survives assault, but virginity is a bodily possession that can be stolen.

6.4. The terminology of *City of God* 1.16-29: resilient chastity, vanished virginity

In *City of God*, we find Augustine arguing that the raped woman's body can remain chaste, but is it still virginal if it has lost the genital integrity that is part and parcel of female virginity? The author never assures us of this. He names several positive things that cannot be stolen against a victim's will, gesturing toward nearly every corollary of spiritual chastity that one could invoke—but virginity is not named. True virginity requires chastity of mind and a resolute will, but if it also requires bodily integrity—as the passages in the previous sections suggest—then assaulted virgins have lost their virginity after all.

Augustine opens his discussion of sexual assault and chastity with a series of affirmations that place chastity under the control of the will. "Virtue, by which life is lived uprightly, commands the parts of the body from its seat in the mind, and the body is made holy by the exercise of a holy will"; so long as this holy will is unshaken, "whatever another person may have done concerning the body, or upon the body, that one would not be able to avoid without one's own sinning, is irrelevant in terms of guilt for the one undergoing (it)."[47] A caveat about the risk of experiencing pleasure introduces a problem to which he returns in 1.19. Each of these statements frames his discussion

[47] *City of God* 1.16 (CCSL 47.18).

around the matter of moral culpability. Virtue and holiness are a matter of the mind and are determined by the state of the will.

Augustine proceeds in 1.17 by considering the actions of women who sought to avoid assault through suicide or who, in contrast, chose to avoid the sin of killing themselves despite the risk of assault. Subsequent chapters of book 1 lay out an ethical argument against suicide, portraying it as self-murder. Problematization of attempts to justify suicide is also the focus of 1.19, where he takes issue with Lucretia's valorized example. Citing argumentation from declamation exercises that "there were two, and (yet) only one committed adultery," Augustine momentarily speculates on the possibility that Lucretia secretly assented to sexual intercourse, but he ultimately affirms her chastity and innocence.[48] Her suicide is a different matter. By his reasoning, she wrongly believed that it was necessary to kill herself to prove that she did not consent. In this and other sections of book 1, Augustine defends rape victims' decision not to kill themselves, though he also tries to rationalize the attacks in ways we will see shortly. Throughout these chapters, his discussion remains focused on the determination of sin and innocence.

1.18 contains an extended argument for the innocence of rape survivors and the prioritization of moral over bodily status. First Augustine turns to an objection that would naturally arise from common Roman notions of purity and pollution: "it is feared that another person's lust pollutes (the rape victim)."[49] On the contrary, he says, "it will not pollute if it is another person's; if it does pollute, it will not be another person's," but

[48] CCSL 47.20-21.
[49] CCSL 47.18.

the victim's, as well. The victim incurs pollution only by sharing in the sin of the rapist through consent. Augustine states again that "chastity (*pudicitia*) is a virtue of the mind."[50] He explains that a person exercises control over the mind's approval but not over the events that affect the flesh. If chastity could be destroyed (from *perdo*) by someone else's lustful and forceful use of one's body, it would not belong among the goods that guide moral life but would merely "be counted among goods of the body, of the sort that strength, beauty, sound health, and other things of this kind are."[51] As a good of the mind, chastity cannot be removed by force, and "when the good of holy continence (*continentia*) does not cede to the uncleanness of fleshly concupiscence, the body itself is also sanctified."[52]

Having established that bodily holiness is not affected by external forms of pollution, Augustine next uses several illustrations to argue that it remains unaffected by injuries to bodily integrity, emphasizing that a person's holiness (*sanctitas*) of mind and of body depends on the state of the mind.[53] He mentions bodily wounds and surgical procedures as cases of injury that do not (or should not be thought to) affect bodily holiness. Similarly, he employs an example discussed in my previous chapter of a virginity inspection gone wrong, which is followed by a discussion of an inverse situation: a woman who pledges herself to continence but then decides to have sex is corrupted in mind—and thus has lost the holiness of her body—even before the act. All these examples support the argument that the holiness of the body as well as of the mind

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[50] Ibid.
[51] CCSL 47.19.
[52] Ibid.
[53] These are listed within 1.18 (CCSL 47.19).

depends on the mind, such that for those who intend continence, "the violence of another person's lust does not take away (*aufero*) the holiness of the body."[54] In the case of that virginity inspection, bodily integrity is lost, but the body's holiness remains:

> It is not by this that the body is holy, (by the fact) that its parts are intact… For example, a midwife, when investigating a certain virgin's integrity by hand, destroyed (it), whether by spite or lack of skill or accidentally. I don't imagine anyone to think so foolishly that they would consider anything to have been lost (from) her (sanctity), even from the sanctity of that very body, even though the integrity of that body part has been lost.[55]

His wording specifies that this midwife has destroyed (*perdo*) the virgin's *integritas* and that genital *integritas* has been lost (*pereo*), while no one—in more wooden translation—should picture "anything to have been lost for her from the sanctity even of her body." Her *sanctitas* cannot be destroyed against her will, but her bodily integrity is gone. The virgin victim of rape likewise retains her holiness, but has lost the defining bodily feature of virginity.

In 1.28, Augustine offers possible rationales for why God has allowed the sexual assault of Christians to occur. In this section, he admits that something is lost through rape; whatever this ambiguous thing is, it means that attacked women lose something of their former status and their grounds for impressing fellow Christians. One of the possible reasons for God to permit rape, he explains, is pride on the part of chaste women. Augustine tells victims who had become too proud, "Don't marvel that you've lost this thing with which you sought to please humans and have retained that which

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[54] Ibid. As earlier in this and other chapters, I am giving lexical rather than inflected forms for terms.
[55] *Neque enim eo corpus sanctum est, quod eius membra sunt integra… Obstetrix virginis cuiusdam integritatem manu velut explorans sive malevolentia sive inscitia sive casu, dum inspicit, perdidit. Non opinor quemquam tam stulte sapere, ut huic perisse aliquid existimet etiam de ipsius corporis sanctitate, quamvis membri illius integritate iam perdita* (CCSL 47:19).

cannot be displayed to humans."[56] In other words, their misdirected desire for others to admire their virginal status has been forcibly redirected to a focus on their inwardly chaste state before God. Similarly, others who might have become prideful were saved from this by the humiliation of rape, having had "something (*quiddam*) carried off by force" from them now to prevent losing their virtuous modesty later.[57] He next clarifies that these proud or potentially proud virgins, widows, and wives have not lost their chastity or continence, and he does not give a name to what it is that they *have* lost. He reiterates his points from 1.17-18 with statements bordering on a further rationale: by their experience of violence, those who mistakenly believed that continence (*continentia*), chastity (*castitas*), and holiness (*sanctitas*) were goods of the body and susceptible to theft will now observe their inner innocence, thereby learning that they still possess these goods and please God.[58]

Augustine thus names with a range of terms the interrelated goods that are salvaged or unassailable in the face of rape. These terms recur throughout sections of book 1: *pudicitia*, *sanctitas*, *castitas*, *continentia*.[59] The author emphatically categorizes these as goods that are determined by the will and state of the mind, not by the state of the body. Virginity, surprisingly enough, does not belong among these higher goods, for it entails a lesser good belonging to the body. Bodily integrity, as we have seen, is at the core of virginity and indispensable to virginal status; virginity requires both the virtue

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[56] CCSL 47.29.
[57] Ibid.
[58] CCSL 47.29-30.
[59] These are the sorts of goods that all Christians should strive to possess: in a sermon on the creed, Augustine teaches that while few Christians are virgins in their flesh, all should be virgins in faith, with *castitas, puritas,* and *sanctitas* (*Homily* 213.8, NBA 32/1.212).

pudicitia and the bodily good of *integritas*. Augustine's vocabulary for invincible goods of the soul is limited to the terms above not only because married and previously married victims of sexual assault must be acknowledged too, but also because virginity requires a bodily good as well as spiritual ones.

This conclusion fits well with the verbs and logic surrounding virginity and chastity in *City of God*. Eternal goods like chastity[60] and holiness cannot be destroyed (*perdo*) or taken away (*aufero*) by unwilled acts against the body, but virginity is taken away (*aufero*) from a reluctant bride on her wedding night (6.9), and a virgin's integrity is destroyed (*perdo*) if a midwife ruptures her hymen (1.18). Augustine notably treats rape as an act of violence by an offender and an injury for a victim rather than a primarily sexual act;[61] we might say in today's language that he treats rape as sexual violence rather than a violent form of sex. According to 6.9 and 14.26, however, ordinary defloration in a fallen world is also an instance of violence and injury. While rape is an act of violence against virginal and non-virginal women alike, for virgins, it includes a form of damage to the body that licit sex would also cause. The damage of "opening the womb"[62] has implications for sexual status that other types of injuries do not. Regardless of a virgin's moral innocence and Augustine's categorization of rape as predominantly violent rather than predominantly sexual, in his eyes, the loss of genital integrity most likely signifies loss of virginity.

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[60] Webb makes the interesting point that *pudicitia*, or at least its tie to shame (*pudor*), falls out of view when Augustine turns to depicting the heavenly city in *City of God* ("Rape and Its Aftermath," 79-80)—but he also hesitates to count it as a temporal good, at least at the time of writing *Lying* 7 (as discussed above); it seems to belong among the qualities and virtues that lead toward eternal life and last forever.
[61] This is compellingly argued in Webb, "Rape and Its Aftermath," 58-99.
[62] See my chapter 5.2.

Augustine never confirms or denies holding the belief that raped virgins are no longer virgins. His entire discussion frames moral status and the eternal goods shared by all chaste women as the matters that need to be discussed; on the question of retained virginity he remains silent. He says *something* has been lost by assaulted women (1.28) and calls an injury to a virgin's genitals a destruction of bodily integrity (1.18). The tight link between bodily integrity and virginal status in this and other works suggests that virginity itself requires intact genitals and is destroyed by sexual violence as well as by the quotidian violence of licit deflorative penetration. A raped virgin's damaged body can remain pure, chaste, and holy, but it seems that for Augustine, it has lost its virginity.

6.5. Conclusion: the consequences of anatomized virginity

Augustine's discourse on virginity and chastity leave troubling questions unanswered. On the one hand, his focus on the will and moral innocence provide warrant for humane and pastorally effective responses to devastating events like wartime rape, as well as potential justification for maintaining a consecrated woman's special status in the church in spite of her experience of assault. The significance of this stance should not be underestimated: against common perspectives held by Christian and non-Christian Romans, Augustine insists that virtue, holiness, and sexual honor cannot be involuntarily lost from women's bodies. Raped women need not undergo any punishment or perform any expiation to rid themselves of their attackers' pollution; the holy mind sanctifies the body. On the other hand, Augustine seems not quite able to say that raped virgins are still virgins. They have indeed lost something in the encounter, leaving the question of

their status in the church open. According to *Holy Virginity*, other gifts of holiness are attainable by those who have lost virginity, but its loss is irrevocable.[63]

Moreover, his morality-centered reasoning dismisses the importance of bodies in a situation where bodily trauma might not be easily dismissed by the women themselves. Much as Augustine rewrites Roman history and revises the story of salvation history in *City of God*, he revises the history of what has happened to particular women who suffered assault; in doing so, he "nearly (but not quite) writes the human body out of history" for these women.[64] He deems bodily integrity inconsequential for virgins' and other women's moral state and for the purposes of discerning God's favor toward and protection of Christians in times of crisis. Yet closed wombs and intact flesh are consistently invested with enormous importance when Augustine discusses Mary or the life of consecrated virginity. In stating in *Homily* 191.3-4 that integrity of flesh serves to augment one's production of virtue, he exhibits a conviction that the state of the body can have a positive impact on the state of the soul. In his discussions of assaulted women in *City of God*, he rejects the body's power to shape the soul. If he indeed believes that virginity can be lost involuntarily, this is one way—and not a very reassuring one—in which the body continues to matter in the first book of *City of God*, and the viewpoint falls startlingly close to those of authors who celebrated "martyrdoms" of female saints who killed themselves to preserve virginity. Neither *City of God* nor another work

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[63] *Holy Virginity* 29.
[64] Borrowing a turn of phrase that Virginia Burrus applies to Augustine's broader historical project in this work: Virginia Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 129.

explains how or if he resolved the disjunction between his moral view of chastity and his moral and anatomical view of virginity.

A chief claim of the discussions in *City of God* 1.16-29 and *Lying* is that others' lust, through damage to the body, affects only earthly and transitory goods and has no effect on eternal ones; virtue is what matters. Yet consecrated virgins' integrity has eternal implications in *Holy Virginity*. It anticipates the future incorruptibility of the body, and those who possess it reap a greater reward in the afterlife, receiving greater glory than those who have lost it.[65] If hymen tissue is among the parts of the body that will be restored to a state of wholeness and beauty in the resurrection (see *City of God* 22.18-21), its earthly intactness or rupture nevertheless has consequences for eternity.

These points of tension aptly capture the difficulty Christian writers faced when they configured virginity as both ultimately spiritual and tangibly physical. Augustine followed other writers (Ambrose, Jerome, and Chrysostom among them) in pushing virginity toward the outer poles of a body-soul continuum simultaneously. The anatomical turn discussed in chapter 5 allowed authors and church leaders to ground theological certainties in the concrete and evident reality of Mary's closed womb and to render consecrated virgins' sexual status knowable. The price of this anatomization of virginity is that virginity risks ceasing to be relevant for the larger categories in which it had always played a part for Christians (holiness, purity, chastity, moral conduct). It cannot be placed among spiritual goods intact; it is in part a matter of the soul, but it is also a matter of the body, in whose sphere it remains vulnerable to unwanted injury,

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[65] *Holy Virginity* 12/13 and 21-29 (cf. 45/46-46/47).

sexual or non-sexual—even to destruction by a careless midwife. When Christian writers claim to prioritize virginity's spiritual significance while also locating it in (or making it depend upon) bodily integrity, the dual emphases form a discursive rift that must be crossed each time a writer needs virginity to become one kind of good or the other. As the tensions in Augustine's thought show, the spiritualizing and anatomizing of virginity leaves the virginal status of those with misaligned will and body uncertain and threatens to detach virginity, as a state of bodily integrity, from the all-important virtue of chastity.

7. Conclusion

7.1. The findings of this study

Female virginity was clearly a cherished concept among many early Christians and their neighbors. Groups throughout the ancient Mediterranean world spoke of "virgins" in contrast to "women" and gave virgins an important place on the maps they drew of human society and human relations with the divine. For the forms of Christianity best represented in surviving sources, virginity became a means of expressing the nature of Christ, an avenue for developing a manifest likeness to God, a site for consolidating authority and group identity, a paradigm for individual and corporate salvation, and a profound image of future redemption.

This concept, however, was not uniform. Many in academia have mistakenly treated it as such. Scholars both inside and outside the field of early Christian studies have assumed that early Christians held a general consensus in their understandings of virginity, even if its meanings were more varied for thinkers before them or groups around them. As I have shown in this dissertation, ancient writings on virginity—Christian and non-Christian alike—construe virginity in varying ways that do not amount to a monolithic conceptualization. The term "virginity" (παρθενία, *virginitas*, ܒܬܘܠܝܘܬ) encompassed a range of meanings in antiquity. As scholars of classical studies and Hebrew Bible have long noted, the "virgins" of ancient texts are sometimes set apart from "women" by their age, marital status, or other categories instead of, or in addition to, inexperience with penile-vaginal intercourse. Even when female "virginity" refers

to—or includes—sexual inexperience, scholars' tendency to treat the concept as a familiar one is undercut by the frequent absence of familiar notions like hymens and gynecological virginity tests. Ancient discussions and depictions of virginity must be interpreted on a case-by-case basis, and this applies equally to Christian and non-Christian sources.

In the case of early Christians, many of whom built upon or reacted to one another's work while also drawing on broader cultural resources shared with non-Christians, the range is startling. Mary's virginity at Christ's birth is defined in a number of ways; common vocabulary and notions of "bodily" virginity in fourth-century authors turn out to refer to several distinct things. By the end of the fourth century and opening of the fifth, Christian authors were in the practice of amalgamating increasing numbers of elements from earlier models, and greater commonalities can be found in their works. Texts from this period contain a growing number of shared themes and newly pervasive assumptions about the anatomical qualities that allow virgin women to be described as genitally "closed" and to be inspected for purposes of verifying virginity. Although some of their configurations of virginity show a closer conformity than what we saw in my juxtaposition of Basil of Ancyra, Gregory of Nyssa, Ephrem the Syrian, and Ambrose of Milan, authors of this period continued to speak to their unique contexts and specific problems.[1] Meanwhile, the late ancient shift toward anatomical views of virginity that Christians shared with "pagans" and Jews was expressed through varied assumptions in

[1] For examples of diverse agendas, see David G. Hunter, "The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church: Reading Psalm 45 in Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine," *Church History* 69.2 (2000): 281-303.

different groups and genres; sources diverge over *how* virginity perceptibly exists in the genitals. Even the conformity of a widespread, cross-cultural development in understandings of sexual virginity is marked by diversity.

Augustine's discussions of virginity and chastity in *City of God* exemplify tensions inherent to Christian virginity discourse of the anatomical turn. Whereas the fourth-century authors we examined in chapter 4 gravitated toward different places on spectrums of "body" and "soul" and "keeping" or "acquiring" for configuring virginity (and diverged in their understandings of those poles, especially their sense of what "virginity of the body" means), those who took up anatomical definitions were hard-pressed to preserve the spiritual aspects of their configurations. The mechanistic quality and masculine agency of anatomical defloration could not always be reconciled easily with the rich theological and moral significance that virginity continued to hold—and this significance continued to grow with the institutional growth of Christian ascetic practices and Mary's increasing prominence in Christology and devotion. "Body" and "soul" poles underwent development together and had to relate in new ways. Such shifts underscore that virginity is not a stable, universal, or self-evident concept, but a multiplicitous, contextually specific, discursively fashioned one.

Female virginity remained a powerful concept and topic of eager inquiry in the centuries following those discussed in this dissertation. A glance at the number of pertinent studies in Anglophone scholarship alone reveals how historically significant

scholars have found virginity to be.[2] After late antiquity, Christians continued crafting moral, theological, and practical dimensions for virginity. Medical and legal professionals continued to produce and debate varying notions about virginal female bodies and their proofs, up to and throughout the modern period.[3] Today, in my own context within the United States, news and publications from across the country and around the world continue to feature female virginity as a significant concept and topic of discussion. In my final section below, I observe some connections between ancient and present-day concerns with female virginity and provide a cursory look at the concept's persisting importance.

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[2] Examples include a widely cited piece by John Bugge, *Virginitas: An Essay in the History of a Medieval Ideal* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975); *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed. Maria Vassilaki (Aldershot, Hants; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005); *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium: Texts and Images*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Mary B. Cunningham (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011); Marie H. Loughlin, *Hymeneutics: Interpreting Virginity on the Early Modern Stage* (London: Associated University Presses, 1997); essays in *Masculinities, Violence, Childhood: Attending to Early Modern Women—and Men*, ed. Amy E. Leonard and Karen L. Nelson (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011); Ulrike Strasser, *State of Virginity: Gender, Religion, and Politics in an Early Modern Catholic State* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004); and other post-antiquity studies cited in my introduction (chapter section 1.2).

[3] In Jocelyn Wogan-Browne's words, "the hymen is not a constant of bodily knowledge, but appears and disappears at various periods from the Greeks to twentieth-century [and now twenty-first-century] medicine. Not only does its visibility to specific enquiry depend on who needs whom to have a hymen for what purpose, but so, too, do general and scientific beliefs about its presence or absence, nature and appearance" ("Virginity Now and Then: A Response to *Medieval Virginities*," in *Medieval Virginities*, ed. Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans, and Sarah Salih [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003], 234-253, at 242). A sweep of sources for the debates are gathered in Hanne Blank, *Virgin: The Untouched History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), chapters 4-6 (though her descriptions of ancient and medieval sources are occasionally questionable); the medieval period is discussed in Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); on the Renaissance and early modern period, see Loughlin, *Hymeneutics*, 27-52 and Corinne Harol's chapter entitled "The Hymen and Its Discontents: Medical Discourses on Virginity," in Corinne Harol, *Enlightened Virginity in Eighteenth-Century Literature* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 59-84. See also the fascinating nineteenth-century notice "The Physical Signs of Virginity," *The British Medical Journal* 1.1775 (1895): 27 and Giulia Sissa's consideration of the impact of legal systems upon medical knowledge in Giulia Sissa, "The Hymen Is a Problem, Still. Virginity, Imperforation, and Contraception, from Greece to Rome," *Eugesta* 3 (2013): 67-123, at 96-103. For a very recent assessment of the scientific and cultural complexity of discourse on hymen tissue, see Hanna Cinthio, "'You Go Home and Tell That to My Dad!' Conflicting Claims and Understandings on Hymen and Virginity," *Sexuality & Culture* 19 (2015): 172-189.

7.2. Virginity's meanings and significance in the present day: brief observations

In today's discussions of female virginity, Christian and Muslim traditions get a lot of press, and one finds adherents of religious traditions placing a premium on virginity in many cultures around the globe. Pro-virginity policies for U.S. sex education, seen in the sharp rise in federal funding for abstinence-only programs between the 1980s and the early 2000s, are closely associated with Christian sexual morality.[4] Yet as Laura Carpenter and others have shown, in highly secularized contexts, too, virginity continues to matter in one way or another.[5] Despite growing acknowledgment that "the idea of 'virginity' is a cultural thing, a societal norm that varies from place to place and belief

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[4] See Anke Bernau, *Virgins: A Cultural History* (London: Granta, 2007), 168-185; Laura C. Carpenter, *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), chapters 6 and 7; cf. Blank, *Virgin*, 247-249.

[5] Laura C. Carpenter, "The Ambiguity of 'Having Sex': The Subjective Experience of Virginity Loss in the United States," *The Journal of Sex Research* 38.2 (2001): 127-139; "Gender and the Meaning and Experience of Virginity Loss in the Contemporary United States," *Gender & Society* 16.3 (2002): 345-365; *Virginity Lost*. Carpenter comments, "It is noteworthy that younger respondents appear to be redefining virginity loss rather than choosing to abandon the concept of virginity altogether. Their decisions stand as testimony to the continuing social significance of the categories of virgin and nonvirgin in the face of a changing sexual landscape" ("Ambiguity," 132). The continuing salience of categories like "virginity" and "virginity loss" for American women of the late twentieth century is evident in a published compilation of women's personal accounts of sexual initiation: Karen Bouris, *The First Time: Women Speak out about 'Losing Their Virginity'* (Berkeley: Conari Press, 1993); see also Peggy Orenstein, *Girls & Sex: Navigating the Complicated New Landscape* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), 78. Scholars of various fields have noted virginity's ongoing significance for personal identity, social organization, and artistic expression, even in parts of the U.S. or Europe where it has supposedly become obsolete. Some works for popular audiences claim that we need the idea of virginity for personal well-being; for example, Wendy Shalit, who promotes strict modesty standards from Orthodox Jewish traditions as an avenue for feminism, comments that "in an age where our virginity is supposed to mean nothing… we literally cannot explain what has happened to us" when we begin to have sex (*A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* [New York: Free Press, 1999], 12). In Anke Bernau's words: "Protean in nature, virginity's proliferation of meanings and desires ensures its ongoing presence in Western culture. Virginity is never lost" (*Virgins*, xv).

system to belief system,"[6] it is an idea that persists and retains importance in its diverse forms, with or without connections to religious commitments.

When one turns to studies of virginity and its meaning in the United States today, interesting connections with ancient themes emerge. Carpenter classifies recent perspectives on virginity with three broad categories based on overarching metaphors: virginity loss is viewed as the giving of a gift (virginity here being something positive and valuable), the shedding of a stigma (framing virginity as undesirable and embarrassing), or a rite of passage (where virginity and sexual initiation are steps in a maturation process). Although not all of the participants in her study came from Christian backgrounds, some echoes of early Christian themes can be heard in their descriptions of virginity. Those who understand virginity as a gift emphasize that it is an innate possession and should be saved until it can be given to the right person in the right circumstance, such as a loving, long-term relationship. Others, viewing virginity loss as an important step in maturation and a learning experience, focus on what is gained by moving from one state to another, from virginity to greater knowledge about sex and self. While these perspectives are substantially different in configuration and ideals from ancient Christian discourse, the variation bears some resemblance to the varying gravitation of ancient authors toward the "keeping" or "acquiring" poles on the spectrum

[6] This passing comment in a short Us Weekly article about a television episode (November 2, 2016, http://www.usmagazine.com/entertainment/news/jane-the-virgins-lost-virginity-what-we-loved-and-didnt-w448028, accessed January 30, 2017) aligns with Carpenter's findings on recent American thought about virginity (see previous note). Among other things, Carpenter highlights complexities that the new visibility of lesbian, bisexual, and gay experiences has brought to shifting understandings of sexual initiation in U.S. culture: penile-vaginal penetration has lost some of its former centrality for conceptualizing sexual virginity loss. On subjective, individualized definitions for virginity loss among young American women, see Hanne Blank, "The Process-Oriented Virgin," in *Yes Means Yes! Visions of Female Sexual Power and a World without Rape*, ed. Jaclyn Friedman and Jessica Valenti (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008), 287-298.

I employed in chapter 4. Virginity is a flexible concept, and what makes it meaningful can vary widely in a given cultural context, both in antiquity and today; in the example above, emphasis can fall on retaining what one already has or on gaining something new. (Perhaps some version of Carpenter's stigma category, where virginity is an embarrassing quality that should be lost as soon as possible, would have resonated with male audiences to whom late ancient preachers attempted to sell a new single standard for sexual morality among women and men.)[7]

Other points of connection and contrast can be drawn when comparing ancient and current *Christian* articulations of why female virginity matters. Particularly famous in scholarship and news media of the 2000s are the phenomena known collectively as "the purity movement," prominent among American evangelical Christians. One feature of this movement that has fascinated outsiders is the idea of "renewed" or "secondary" virginity, a return to a virginal state after losing one's virginity, usually achieved through repentance and entailing a commitment to abstain from sex until marriage.[8] (Publications promoting a secular version of renewed virginity or committed celibacy—whether temporary or long-term—also hit bookshelves around the turn of the millennium.[9]) Like those ancient authors who describe virginity as a divine quality to be acquired and

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[7] Several sermons by John Chrysostom or Augustine, for example, show the preacher encouraging men in his audience to practice a level of chastity similar to women's and higher than what is expected from them by the moral standards of non-Christian society.

[8] For instance, Lakita Garth writes that "you will never be able to get your virginity back physically, but you can regain it emotionally, psychologically, relationally and spiritually" (*The Naked Truth* [Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2007], 143-144). Brief discussions with sources are included in Bernau, *Virgins*, 69 and 194; Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, 120-121 and 174; cf. Carpenter, *Virginity Lost*, 53-54.

[9] For example, Wendy Keller, *The Cult of the Born-Again Virgin: How Single Women Can Reclaim Their Sexual Power* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 1999); Donna Marie Williams, *Sensual Celibacy: The Sexy Woman's Guide to Using Abstinence for Recharging Your Spirit, Discovering Your Passion, Achieving Greater Intimacy in Your Next Relationship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

lifestyle to be achieved, present-day Christians advocating secondary virginity emphasize God's loving transformation of sinful humans into people of holiness and renewed purity. Evangelical articulations of this teaching take the ancient logic a step further than ancient authors do: whereas early Christian texts celebrate a corporate restoration of virginity for the people of God or even describe a revirginizing of the soul while insisting that individual virgins' virginity cannot be regained once it is lost,[10] some Christians today proclaim that because of virginity's fundamentally spiritual nature, individual Christians can become virgins again. Not all purity movement literature, however, moves in this direction.[11] Many evangelical publications aimed at girls or young women stress the necessity of remaining virginal until marriage, taking a dire tone somewhat reminiscent of Jerome's *Letter* 22 to Eustochium from the end of the fourth century.[12] Most evangelical discourse treats marriage as the norm and lifelong virginity as an exceptional calling,[13] but recent books from evangelical and mainline traditions discuss singleness as

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[10] Space precludes a fuller treatment of this topic here. See my brief comments in chapter section 4.1.2.

[11] A recent study explores diverse stances toward sexuality and American culture found in various genres written by and for evangelical Christians: Amy DeRogatis, *Saving Sex: Sexuality and Salvation in American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). DeRogatis draws a contrast between mainstream evangelical literature that urges girls and young women living with their parents to stay pure (chapter 1) and the messages of two African-American preachers whose primary audiences are single adult women (chapter 5). The preachers proclaim that past pollution through sex "can be overcome through the transformative act of dedicating the soul to God" (147); in purity literature, on the other hand, virginity is "something that can be lost forever and leaves a terrible stain that will negatively impact the rest of women's lives" (142). In DeRogatis' view, mainstream purity literature problematically implies that losing virginity before marriage irreparably damages a woman's worth, spousal relationship, and the well-being of her future children: see *Saving Sex*, 10-41 (especially the bleak conclusions on 39-40), 141.

[12] Jerome lays out extensive instructions for maintaining virginity and avoiding problematic desires or influences, even warning Eustochium that virginity can be lost by the wrong kinds of thoughts and that God cannot restore a fallen virgin (see *Letter* 22.5).

[13] Among Protestant Christians in the U.S., virginity often serves as a virtuous prelude to marriage—and in purity literature, marriage often becomes the "happy ending" of a fairy tale, complete with beautiful princesses and valiant princes or knights (see examples in DeRogatis, *Saving Sex*, 14-27). According to

a purposeful lifestyle that (as ancient Christian writers claimed) is linked with heavenly or eschatological life and uniquely allows for wholehearted service to God.[14] Like early Christian authors, many present-day Protestant writers encourage Christians not to reduce virginity or purity to abstinence from sex; instead, it should be an all-encompassing commitment.[15]

Protestants, of course, are not the only contemporary Christians with a stake in the meanings of virginity. The holistic quality and identity-forging potential that can attach to virginity take various forms in different church traditions, some of which claim a more direct continuity with practices from early Christian history. Orthodox and Catholic Christians historically have valued not only premarital virginity, but also the calling of some to permanent celibacy as clergy, monks or nuns, or laypeople. In U.S. scholarship and popular culture, Orthodox Christian reflection on virginity receives relatively little attention, but Roman Catholic models for virginity and celibacy remain conspicuous. Diverse Catholic ways of embracing premarital and lifelong female virginity have

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DeRogatis, women who do not live "happily ever after" with a husband are thought to have a special but relatively unusual calling (*Saving Sex*, 35-38).

[14] See Kathryn Wehr, "Virginity, Singleness and Celibacy: Late Fourth-Century and Recent Evangelical Visions of Unmarried Christians," *Theology and Sexuality* 17.1 (2011): 75-99. Wehr (whose scope goes beyond the U.S.) puts some of these publications into conversation with patristic authors and draws on ancient reflection about virginity as a resource for Protestants.

[15] Wehr, "Virginity, Singleness and Celibacy," 82-91, 94-96 (with encouragement for today's celibate Christians to consider renewing ascetic practices or other special disciplines); DeRogatis, *Saving Sex*, 13, 22-25, 28-30, 39-40. DeRogatis points out that in some evangelical circles, virginity involves a whole person, her frame of mind, and her entire lifestyle, and that in some cases there is also a whole industry of faith-based resources available to guide her in the form of books, magazines, blogs, and events (*Saving Sex*, 13, 28, 30). These resources sometimes utilize motifs similar to those of ancient sources—for instance, by locating one's most important romantic connection in a relationship with Christ, by redefining feminine beauty, or by stressing the importance of vigilance to maintain purity (see two pertinent examples in *Saving Sex*, 20-27; the comparison to ancient Christian sources is my own observation).

recently made fresh inroads into popular culture and news media;[16] for example, considerable news coverage converged around a 2015 wedding-like consecration ceremony in which a woman from Indiana became an official "bride" of Christ.[17]

As Carpenter has highlighted, being a "virgin" can have a positive, negative, or neutral valence for women in the U.S. today. For many scholars and feminist thinkers, the valuing of virginity in present-day societies has an inherently negative impact on women's well-being. Critiques of the purity movement, for example, range in tone from vitriolic to tragic.[18] Adherents of the purity movement often cast their positions as boldly countercultural and liberative for women, but since their stand against culture entails submission to male authority figures and (sometimes) "traditional" gender roles, feminist scholars tend to be unconvinced. On the other hand, it is clear that some women do find virginity a useful concept that expresses freedom and self-worth. From Catholic nuns and evangelical feminists (of various stripes) to teens for whom virginity becomes a positive alternative to social pressures concerning sex, many women have experienced

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[16] The CW network's television show *Jane the Virgin* foregrounds premarital virginity, depicting a young Catholic woman who is accidentally impregnated through artificial insemination. Like a "Dear Abby" letter on virginal impregnation cited by Bouris (*First Time*, 184-185), the series evokes circumstances early Christians envisioned for the Virgin Mary and prompts reflection on the definitions and criteria of virginity. An appreciative Protestant portrayal of Roman Catholic monastic celibacy appears in a widely read book by Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 116-123, 249-263.

[17] Jessica Hayes reflects on her vocation in a brief OSV Newsweekly article, "Consecrated Virginity Allows Living 'in the World' While Giving Oneself Fully to Christ" (April 12, 2015, https://www.osv.com/OSVNewsweekly/InFocus/Article/TabId/721/ArtMID/13629/ArticleID/17233/Consecrated-virginity-allows-living-%E2%80%98in-the-world%E2%80%99-while-giving-oneself-fully-to-Christ.aspx, accessed January 30, 2017). For a succinct news story, see USA Today's article by Marc Cugnon, "Woman Marries Jesus Christ, Becomes Consecrated Virgin" (August 19, 2015, http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2015/08/19/indiana-woman-marries-jesus-consecrated-virgin/31982911/, accessed January 30, 2017).

[18] See a publication for popular audiences by Jessica Valenti, *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity Is Hurting Young Women* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2009); and see Breanne Fahs, "Daddy's Little Girls: On the Perils of Chastity Clubs, Purity Balls, and Ritualized Abstinence," *Frontiers* 31.3 (2010): 116-142 and DeRogatis, *Saving Sex*, 38-39.

virginity as empowering. The difficulties of diagnosing the situation—or of finding a standpoint from which one can claim to render a useful diagnosis as a feminist thinker—apply to historical work on virgins, as well. Scholars of biblical studies and early Christianity have noticed features of texts like the *Acts of Thecla* that prompt us to ask whether something rather proto-feminist was afoot when early Christian women opted for lifelong virginity. (After initial hopeful enthusiasm, the answer has tended to hover between "not really" and "yes, sort of").[19] Others have registered a complex interplay of forms of power in the case of medieval and early modern virgins.[20]

More problematic for those against *or* for women's embrace of virginity is the status of the hymen in modern thought. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century developments in medical science and in popular thinking about empirical evidence strengthened the widespread belief that hymen tissue can be used to verify virginity. Problems with this belief are acknowledged in present-day discourse when sex education resources reiterate

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[19] See Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd C. Penner, *Contextualizing Gender in Early Christian Discourse: Thinking Beyond Thecla* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), with an initial summary of the arc of scholarly discussions on 11-17. Scholars' perspectives and approaches with the *Acts of Thecla* have been diverse. See Peter Dunn, "Women's Liberation, the *Acts of Paul*, and other Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles," *Apocrypha* 4 (1993): 245-261; Virginia Burrus, "Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10.1 (1994): 27-51; Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Shelly Matthews, "Thinking of Thecla: Issues in Feminist Historiography," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 17.2 (2001): 39-55; Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses: Religion, Gender, and History in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 117-152; Susan E. Hylen, *A Modest Apostle: Thecla and the History of Women in the Early Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[20] "If patriarchy creates a need for virgins, the perspective shifts when virgins themselves theorize the process," complying with a controlling ideology and yet occupying "unexpected positions of articulation" that "disconcert" the ideological culture: Kathryn Schwartz, "The Wrong Question: Thinking through Virginity," *differences* 13.2 (2002): 1-34, at 7. See also Maud Burnett McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc* (New York: Palgrave Press, 2003).

the non-sexual, mundane ways a girl might lose her hymen[21] and in medical research that scrutinizes the dubious practice of examining the hymen to detect sexual abuse.[22] Some want societies to reject the notion of the hymen as archaic and oppressive.[23] Since virginity is understood to be far more than a matter of hymenal integrity in American Christian circles, those who want to invest hymen tissue with spiritual significance may stumble upon problems and tensions similar to those of Augustine's virginity discourse.

Even so, the idea of a virginal hymen and the belief that virginity can be medically verified continue to exercise great influence within and beyond religious traditions. An article in the *Journal of Transcultural Nursing* describes angst among Muslim families in Turkey if a daughter's hymen must be torn for surgical purposes.[24] While anatomical integrity is often subordinated to spiritual purity in evangelical Christian literature on chastity, at least one author testifies that God's gracious restoration

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[21] See Blank, *Virgin*, 222.

[22] See Diane F. Merritt, "Vulvar and Genital Trauma in Pediatric and Adolescent Gynecology," *Current Opinion in Obstetrics and Gynecology* 16.5 (2004): 371-381; Jim Anderst, Nancy Kellogg, and Inkyung Jung, "Reports of Repetitive Penile-Genital Penetration Often Have No Definitive Evidence of Penetration," *Pediatrics* 124.3 (2009): 403-409. Further literature is cited in my introduction.

[23] Prominent efforts to dispense with the idea of hymens among the general public have been made in Sweden and elsewhere in northern Europe. See Monica Christianson and Carola Eriksson, "A Girl Thing: Perceptions concerning the Word 'Hymen' among Young Swedish Women and Men," *Journal of Midwifery & Women's Health* 56.2 (2011): 167-172; Bianca R. van Moorst, Rik H. W. van Lunsen, Dorenda K. E. van Dijken, and Concetta M. Salvatore, "Backgrounds of Women Applying for Hymen Reconstruction, the Effects of Counselling on Myths and Misunderstandings about Virginity, and the Results of Hymen Reconstruction," *The European Journal of Contraception and Reproductive Health Care* 17 (2012): 93-105. See Cinthio, "'You Go Home and Tell That to My Dad!'" on the inadequacy of merely publicizing scientific data or making changes in sex education to alter cultural investment in hymens.

[24] Şengül Yaman and Sultan Ayaz, "Hymen Tearing in the Treatment of Vaginal Agenesis: Implications on Women in Turkey," *Journal of Transcultural Nursing* 25.3 (2014): 303-306. Analysis of virginity tests in Turkey is offered in Ayse Parla, "The 'Honor' of the State: Virginity Examinations in Turkey," *Feminist Studies* 27.1 (2001): 65-89.

of lost virginity can include miraculous hymen restoration.[25] Diverse personal accounts of virginity loss from women in the U.S. reflect on how the experience of hymenal rupture differed from what the storyteller expected.[26] Meanwhile, virginity tests are conducted in a wide range of cultural contexts. In recent years, inspections have made news in contexts as different as employment screenings for female law enforcement in Indonesia,[27] traditional Zulu practices in South Africa,[28] and physicians' issuing of virginity certificates in Canada.[29] Hymens are surgically reconstructed in so-called Eastern and Western nations alike,[30] and a German company recently released an

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[25] Kris Vallotton, *Purity: The New Moral Revolution* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, 2008), 179-180.
[26] Bouris, *First Time*.
[27] See the Human Rights Watch article "Indonesia: 'Virginity Tests' for Female Police" (November 17, 2014, https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/11/17/indonesia-virginity-tests-female-police, accessed January 28, 2017); cf. an Al Jazeera news story titled "Indonesia Urged to End Military Recruit Virginity Tests" (May 14, 2015, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/indonesia-urged-military-recruit-virginity-tests-150515023046467.html, accessed January 28, 2017).
[28] In addition to numerous news reports, scholarly analyses of South African virginity testing have multiplied in the past decade. See, for example, Louise Vincent, "Virginity Testing in South Africa: Re-Traditioning the Postcolony," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 8.1 (2006): 17-30; Erika R. George, "Virginity Testing and South Africa's HIV/AIDS Crisis: Beyond Rights, Universalism and Cultural Relativism toward Health Capabilities," *California Law Review* 96.6 (2008): 1448-1514; Anette Wickström, "Virginity Testing as a Local Public Health Initiative: A 'Preventive Ritual' More than a 'Diagnostic Measure,'" *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16.3 (2010): 532-550; Kevin G. Behrens, "Virginity Testing in South Africa: A Cultural Concession Taken Too Far?" *South African Journal of Philosophy* 33.2 (2014): 177-187.
[29] Charlie Fidelman, "Stop Doing Virginity Tests, MDs Told," *The Montreal Gazette* (October 12, 2013). Virginity tests continue to feature in the news: stories from within the past three years describe Swedish doctors conducting virginity tests on unwilling minors at the request of their parents (2015) and a parliament member calling for female virginity tests as part of university admissions in Egypt (2016).
[30] See, for example, Dilek Cindoglu, "Virginity Tests and Artificial Virginity in Modern Turkish Medicine," *Women's Studies International Forum* 20.2 (1997): 253-261; Hannah Roberts, "Reconstructing Virginity in Guatemala," *Lancet* 367 (2006): 1227-1228; Vishwa Prakash, "Hymenoplasty—How to Do," *Indian Journal of Surgery* 71 (2009): 221-223; Rebecca J. Cook and Bernard M. Dickens, "Hymen Reconstruction: Ethical and Legal Issues," *International Journal of Gynecology and Obstetrics* 109 (2009): 266-269; Michael P. Goodman, "Female Genital Cosmetic and Plastic Surgery: A Review," *Journal of Sexual Medicine* 8.6 (2011): 1813-1825; Pablo de Lora, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Health Care? The Case for Re-virgination," *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 36.2 (2015): 141-166. Several further studies appear in the *The European Journal of Contraception and Reproductive Health Care*. Various websites advertise hymenoplasty in the U.S. and Canada. In her discussion of the fetishization of virginity

artificial hymen "designed to fake virginity."[31] For various societies—for young women or their parents or potential husbands—hymenal virginity continues to be crucial to the enterprise of ideal femininity.

Much as with the late ancient anatomical turn, present-day virginity can entail other desirable genital features, as well. With or without the objective of faking virginity, cosmetic surgeries to achieve more attractive sex organs—such as labia reductions—are on the rise.[32] Many of the procedures seem "linked intimately to the idealization of virginity and the myriad qualities it still represents: youth, inexperience, purity, tightness. …It is worth noting that most of these procedures are aimed at making the vagina look and feel plumper, neater and tighter—in other words, to make it look more like that of a young girl."[33] Alongside this growing market for customized, virgin-like vaginas, virginity is commodified through its fetishization in pornography[34] and its high value in sex work: several young women have allegedly tried to use this to their advantage by

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and surgical restoration, Anke Bernau critiques the Western tendency to draw a sharp distinction between allegedly oppressive and mutilating non-Western practices like female circumcision and practices like hymenoplasty that are marketed as personally beneficial: "The implication is that the concept of 'individual choice'—representative of Western ideals—is somehow not cultural, as if Western women exist in a vacuum where they are entirely free agents. Other cultures demand unreasonably that women be virgins on their wedding night; we just happen to like the idea for entirely personal reasons" (*Virgins*, 28; broader discussion on 25-29, with notes on 190-191).

[31] This Virginia Care product is described on the website http://www.artificial-hymen.info/virginia-care-artificial-hymen/ (accessed January 20, 2017).

[32] Goodman, "Female Genital Cosmetic and Plastic Surgery"; see also the brief BBC News articles "New Warning on 'Perfect Vaginas'" (November 11, 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/mobile/health/8352711.stm, accessed January 22, 2017) and "The Rise in Women Seeking a Perfect Vagina," (July 24, 2012, http://www.bbc.com/news/health-18947106, accessed January 22, 2017). Cf. Simone Weil Davis, "Loose Lips Sink Ships," *Feminist Studies* 28.1 (2002): 7-35.

[33] Bernau, *Virgins*, 28-29.

[34] See the summaries and examples included in Blank's discussion of the eroticization of virginity (*Virgin*, 192-215).

auctioning off their virginity for thousands of dollars (some news coverage reports bids in the millions).[35] Virginity is not only a precious commodity for respectable marriages, with its loss before marriage terribly costly for some; it is also purchasable for exorbitant rates, whether by patients seeking surgeries to manufacture it or by clients paying for the privilege of being a virgin's first sex partner.

The discourses analyzed in this dissertation remind us that despite such entrenched ideas about physical virginity and its value, there is both diversity of belief and possibility of dissent.[36] The fetishization of virginity and desirability of virgin-like sex organs are not timeless; they are situated in particular historical contexts. The variability of hymen tissue has engendered opposing positions on the question of its existence and jeopardizes attempts to declare its universal significance. In antiquity, a gynecologist could study the intricacies of female reproductive anatomy without believing that sexual intercourse instantly marks or changes the female body. An ancient Christian author could prize bodily virginity without believing in hymens; another could both believe in hymens and object to the use of genital inspections for providing legal evidence. Other Christians could value virginity while resisting its elevation above faithful marital sexuality, insisting instead that equality in Christ should be paramount. The legacy of anatomical virginity and medical virginity testing is a legacy of ongoing diversity and dissent, marked by variation and controversy in all periods of these notions'

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[35] Famous cases include auctions held by or for Rosie Reid (2004), Natalie Dylan (2008), and Katherine Stone (2016).

[36] On the complexity and difficulty of deliberately transforming engrained cultural beliefs about virginity and hymens, see Cinthio, "'You Go Home and Tell That to My Dad!'" On the other hand, the transformation of beliefs across time and between generations is evident in Carpenter's study, as well as in the historical diversity of virginity conceptualizations.

existence and up to the present moment. The construction of virginity is always a conversation and often a debate, and there is always room for dissent.

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Biography

Julia Kelto Lillis was born on August 16, 1982 in Traverse City, Michigan. She received a B.A. from St. Olaf College in 2004, majoring in Music, Greek, and Ancient Studies. She completed her M.Div. degree (2008) and Th.M. degree (Church History, 2009) at Princeton Theological Seminary. At Duke University, she specialized in Early Christianity with secondary specializations in New Testament and in Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies. During the doctoral program, she published two articles: "Paradox *in Partu*: Verifying Virginity in the *Protevangelium of James*" (*Journal of Early Christian Studies*) and "Who Opens the Womb? Fertility and Virginity in Patristic Texts" (*Studia Patristica*). Her doctoral studies were supported by fellowships from Duke's Graduate Program in Religion (2009-2014), the James B. Duke fund (2009-2013), and the Dolores Zohrab Liebmann fund (2014-2017); an Ernestine Friedl gender studies research award (2013) and a North American Patristics Society dissertation research grant (2014); Kearns summer research fellowships (2012, 2014, 2016), and various conference travel grants from Duke University. She received a 2015 Dean's Award for Excellence in Teaching, and her article "Paradox *in Partu*" was awarded the American Society of Church History's Jane Dempsey Douglass Prize as the year's best published essay on the role of women in the history of Christianity.