

Virgin Territory: Configuring Female Virginity in Early Christianity

By J. K. Lillis (2023)

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Reviewed by Jeannie Sellick

If scholars of the early Christian Mediterranean have ever had to answer the question of what constituted virginity in the ancient world, then they are surely familiar with the refrain, 'it's complicated.' Ancient virginity is *messy*. It is messy and complex and, often, contradictory. A major triumph of Julia Kelto Lillis' groundbreaking monograph, *Virgin Territory: Configuring Female Virginity in Early Christianity*, is that it simultaneously captures the dizzyingly complicated discourse that surrounds ancient virginity, while also making it accessible for readers.

Broadly speaking, *Virgin Territory* argues that while understandings of female virginity in antiquity were diverse and unstable, by the late fourth century we can trace within Christian sources a crystalizing 'perceptibility turn' – a phrase Lillis uses to describe the notion that women's virginity could be perceived and verified anatomically (p. 19). While this argument may seem relatively straightforward, the genius of Lillis' work is how she shows that, even in the midst of this perceptibility turn, the instability and diversity of ways virginity was conceptualized never dissipated. It is through Lillis' attention to the plurality of definitions and conceptualizations that she tracks the development of this perceptibility turn.

In fact, Lillis perfectly sets the stage for this diversity in her introduction. She begins by problematizing the modern notion that virginity is definably stable, self-evident, and universal. Modern classifications of virginity largely define it as sexual inexperience and, as Lillis notes, much of the modern

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literature about virginity concerns vaginal testing and reconstruction, both of which mark female virginity through the presence of an intact hymen or hymenal tissue (pp. 6–7). However, both prongs of this definition fall apart when we consider both the evolving conversation around what constitutes sexual activity (p. 13) and the variability of hymen tissue that makes it an unreliable method of confirming virginity (pp. 15–17). Moreover, Lillis points to the real-life stakes of this project. Definitions of female virginity play a significant role in shaping modern healthcare, legal systems, sex and gender norms, and religious practice (pp. 5–11). While the core of Lillis' work rests in the late ancient Mediterranean, the introduction imbues the entire book with an inescapable and tangible significance that can be felt from the first page to the final sentence.

Part One, 'Virginity with and without Virginal Anatomy,' explores the history of how the female virgin body was understood in antiquity. The first chapter of this section examines how virginity was 'tested or perceived' among ancient groups and authors (p. 23). Lillis takes readers on a journey through a wonderfully broad range of sources from the ancient Mediterranean: Greco-Roman medical literature, plays and novels, Midrash and Talmud, and early Christian biblical interpretations. This examination reveals the vastly diverse conceptualizations of female virginity. From incongruent definitions of the word 'virgin' to a lack of consensus on virgin anatomy, Lillis' survey challenges the notion that women's virginity could always be anatomically perceived and tested (p. 56). It is here that Lillis takes the hymen to task. Notions of the hymen or hymen-like membranes as *the* or even *a* defining feature of virginity are noticeably rare in the source material. In fact, within medical literature, no source 'before the seventh century CE claims that virgins have a special membrane or other anatomical feature that sets them apart' (p. 27).

For scholars of ancient sexuality, in particular those acquainted with Lillis' previous work on the *Protevangelium of James* (2016), the relatively late advent of the hymen is not in itself surprising. In this new work, Lillis takes her observation further and highlights the fact that Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian literature all begin to develop an understanding of female virginity as something that could be anatomically perceived and tested in the late fourth century. Lillis refers to this development as the 'perceptibility turn' (p. 56), and centers the figure of Mary of Nazareth as a concrete illustration of this movement in the second chapter. Drawing on narratives, treatises, and homilies that span the second through the fifth centuries, Lillis shows that by tracking diverse perceptions of Mary's post-childbearing body we can also track the eventual move toward an anatomical model of virginity. While Lillis refuses to give a single reason

for the perceptibility turn – she recognizes that proposing one would be ‘too simplistic’ (p. 56) – she consistently grounds her authors within their own social, political, and theological landscape, in order to posit the utility of their individual definitions.

The second part of the book, ‘Christian Conceptualization of Virginity in the Fourth Century,’ offers two chapters that explore the diverse conceptualizations of female virginity in the century leading up to the perceptibility turn. In an ingenious move, Lillis decides to highlight this diversity by limiting her analysis to the writings of four fourth-century authors. Two, Basil of Ancyra and Gregory of Nyssa, were influential Greek theologians in Asia Minor, while Ephrem of Nisibis was a prolific Syriac hymnographer. The fourth, Ambrose of Milan, was a Latin-speaking bishop whose work would become foundational for the Western Church. Lillis is very clear that these authors are not blanket representatives of their geographic and temporal locations, even as she positions the writings of each within their own broader social, political, and theological landscape. Although their agendas, theology, and commitments may have diverged, all four men found female virginity a prime tool with which to wage war against their opponents, to think through theological issues, or to shore up their own authority.

This section first dives into how each author conceptualizes virginity vis-à-vis the body and the soul. Do these men argue that virginity is purely anatomical? Purely spiritual? Or does each envision a more complex relationship between the two? While all four authors view virginity as something multidimensional that resides in a combination of the body and soul, each one places ‘differing amounts of emphasis on the virginal body and virginal soul’ (p. 103). Basil is the most prominent advocate for virginity of the soul, arguing that while ‘true virginity is a property of the soul,’ it is aided by safeguards of bodily virginity such as ascetic practice (p. 105). Gregory also privileges a virgin soul, but interestingly views virginity as something that is not preserved but rather *achieved* by attending to things of the soul rather than the body. At the other end of the spectrum, the work of Ephrem largely locates virginity in the body. His *Hymns on the Nativity* and *Hymns on Virginity* depict virginity as a pearl or dove that virgins must protect at all times. Ambrose offers the most integrated model of the virgin soul/body. In his earlier works, Ambrose argues that while a virginal body is a prerequisite for true virginity, a virgin soul is also necessary. His later works, however, intimately tie together virginity of the soul and body as the inseparable elements required for true virginity.

In the following chapter, Lillis continues to explore the nuance of each author by focusing on their shared imagery. While each author draws from

a similar well of imagery (water, the Song of Songs, fountains), they deploy these metaphors with their own flavor. One surprising place of agreement, however, concerns the irreversibility of lost virginity. Despite having different understandings of what constitutes virginity for individual women, they all ‘appear to agree that virginity is regained by Christians in spiritual and corporate senses but not corporal or practical senses for the individual. Those who have lost their standing as virgins in their social and ecclesial communities do not regain it’ (p. 153).

The third and final part, ‘The Cost of Anatomized Virginity for Late Ancient Christians,’ pulls back from the detailed focus on individual writers and instead turns to the societal level. Here, Lillis shifts her focus to the societal consequences of rising ideas in the perceptibility turn regarding anatomical virginity. While there were practical advantages for Christian thinkers in adopting this perceptibility turn – chiefly that it provided a way for virgins’ sexual status to be confirmed – Lillis also points out the costs of defining virginity anatomically, costs felt both by the women whose bodies were being publicly dissected and the men who had led the push toward it. By promoting an anatomical model, men like Ambrose inadvertently made the bodies of virginal women a matter of public discourse. The ‘sealed’ or ‘closed off’ vaginas of virgins became an object that could be readily discussed, imagined, and even viewed by midwives. As Lillis writes, ‘by ascribing to virgins a genital barrier that epitomizes purity and renders boundaries solid and knowable, Christian thinkers inadvertently made female virginity more precarious than ever’ (p. 195).

Lillis closes the body of her book with a short yet powerful chapter on how the perceptibility turn affected the question of whether a virgin who has survived rape can still be considered a virgin. As her test case for this, Lillis focuses on Augustine’s discussion in *City of God* concerning the female survivors of sexual assault during the sack of Rome. Here, Lillis breaks from the recent trend of scholars reading Augustine’s statements as defending female virgins’ continued virginity after rape. Rather, she argues that while Augustine sees a woman’s *chastity* as intact, he does not believe that a virgin who has been raped maintains her virginity (p. 199). She does this by carefully parsing out the difference between virginity and chastity in Augustine’s works. Unlike virginity, chastity is a state available to all women who avoid ‘illicit’ sex, and Augustine locates it in the mind or soul rather than the body. In Augustine’s *City of God*, he argues that *pudicitia* or chastity is ‘fundamentally moral’ – it cannot be lost involuntarily (p. 202). But, as Lillis shows, Augustine’s stance on *virginity* is that it is anatomical – it requires ‘bodily integrity’ (p. 206). Because chastity resides in the soul, it cannot be destroyed against one’s will; but since, for Augustine, virginity

resides in the body, a virgin who is raped loses her status as a virgin. This chapter, dense and complex yet clear and concise, beautifully showcases the meticulous nature of Lillis' work as a scholar. She intricately examines the Augustinian corpus with such a fine-toothed comb that even readers who disagree with her interpretation will surely be impressed.

Throughout her work, Lillis is careful to remind readers not to get swept away by the late fourth century 'turn.' Even when there was a growing consensus about the fact that a woman's virginity could be perceived, there continued to be different theories about *how* it could be perceived. As Lillis aptly puts it in her conclusion, 'even the conformity of a widespread, cross-cultural development in understandings of sexual virginity was marked by diversity' (p. 218). This reminder highlights another strength of the book. Lillis' work provides a rare example of scholarly work that is both able to make (and prove) a strong argument, while simultaneously showing the limitations of that very claim. She illustrates that while there comes to be a growing consensus about perceivable virginity, exactly *how* that virginity could be perceived remained highly variable. Additionally, while Lillis does give a few nods toward male virginity, she is clear that her argument is largely limited to female virgins. In the hands of a different author, this reality may have weakened or detracted from the overall argument, but *Virgin Territory* is a masterclass in nuance. In her writing, Lillis is able to capture the complex, messy, and, at times, contradictory nature of how female virginity was conceptualized in late antiquity.

Virgin Territory is an invaluable publication for anyone doing work on gender, sexuality, asceticism, ecclesial authority, or medical literature in early Christianity. This book pairs nicely with other recent works on virginity and the body, in particular Sissel Undheim's *Borderline Virginites* (2017) and Michael Rosenberg's *Signs of Virginity* (2018), both of which Lillis explicitly engages. While some of the depth may be more challenging for undergraduate audiences, the payoff makes this a challenge worth taking up. Most importantly, Lillis' work not only fundamentally shifts the analysis of female virginity in late antiquity, but also challenges conventional readings of patristic discussions on asceticism and the body. The depth, nuance, and care with which Lillis treats her source material is a model for how scholars can responsibly write about sex and gender in a time and place that is not our own.

References

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