Wenshan Review of Literature and Culture · Vol 3.2 · June 2010 · 75-96.

The Concept of Virginity and Its Representations in Eighteenth-Century English Literature

Kuo-jung Chen

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the concept of virginity and its representations in eighteenth-century English literature. In the first part, I trace the origins and development of the concept of virginity in the Western civilizations from three different perspectives: Greco-Roman, Christian, and socio-cultural. The Greco-Roman conception of virginity focuses on three Virgin Goddesses—Athena (Minerva), Artemis (Diana), and Hestia (Vesta). The Christian tradition centers on the key ideas of *imitatio Christi*, the Virgin Mary, and asexual cohabitation. In the social-cultural context, the concept of virginity is dominated by patriarchal values and cultural coded references. Moreover, it represents personal and family honor and expresses monetary and practical concerns. The second part of this essay discusses the ramifications of the concept of virginity in eighteenth-century English literature. Virginity may be treated as a butt of joke or disparagement, upheld as a criterion for moral or religious judgment, or treasured as merchandise for the market. In Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* and *Pamela*, virginity is tantamount to female virtue and a warranty of female happiness, but in John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* it becomes an imaginary "Holy Grail" for male fantasy or heroic adventure. When female virginity becomes a matter of life and death, a warranty of family honor and fortune, and a cornerstone of public morality and welfare, how it is represented in literature has constituted a collective historical memory not only of women but of all human beings.

KEY WORDS: the Concept of Virginity, Literary Representations, the Eighteenth Century

* Received: February 24, 2010; Accepted: May 7, 2010
Kuo-jung Chen, Associate Professor, Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, National Chung Cheng University, Chiayi, Taiwan
E-mail: chen.kuojung@gmail.com

貞操觀念與其在十八世紀英國文學中的呈現

陳國榮*

摘　要

本篇論文探討貞操觀念及其在十八世紀英國文學中的呈現。論文共分兩大部分。第一部分從希臘羅馬、基督教、與社會文化三個角度來追溯西方文明中貞操觀念的產生與發展。希臘羅馬的貞操觀念源自三位貞潔女神—雅典娜、阿特密斯、與赫斯媞。基督教的貞操觀念則主要聚焦於耶穌、聖母瑪利亞、及不分性別的共居。在社會文化範疇中，貞操觀念則為父權價值所主導而代表個人及家庭榮譽，同時具有經濟與實際的利益。第二部分探討各種貞操觀念在十八世紀英國文學的呈現方式。貞操可能是被揶揄或貶抑的對象，道德與宗教的判斷標準，也可能是需珍惜的商品。在李查生（Samuel Richardson）的《克羅麗莎》（*Clarissa*）與《潘蜜菈》（*Pamela*）中，貞操等同於女性美德，更是女性幸福的保證。然而在克里蘭（John Cleland）的《芬妮・希爾》（*Fanny Hill*）中，貞操則是種男性想像的「聖杯」，藉以滿足其幻想與英雄奇遇。當女性貞操變成一件生死大事，一個家庭名譽與財富的象徵，甚至整個社會道德與幸福的基柱時，文學中所呈現貞操觀念不僅成為女性更是人類共同的歷史記憶。

關鍵詞：貞操觀念、文學呈現、十八世紀

* 陳國榮，國立中正大學外國語文學系副教授。
E-mail: chen.kuojung@gmail.com

Before we delve into the concept of virginity, a definitional preamble is necessary for the scope of this essay. Though virginity as a sexual criterion can certainly be applied to both males and females, I would focus only on female virginity in order to illustrate female experience in a specific historical context. Such a restriction leads to the second prerequisite: only the concept of virginity before and in the eighteenth century will be included. Such a necessity is evidenced by the drastic changing attitude toward virginity in the course of history, especially in the last century. Aside from temporal condition, spatial stipulation is also added to underscore a Eurocentric/Western view on virginity. The notion of virginity seems to be universal at first glance, but regional (cultural and religious) differences may often present a gap too broad or huge to be bridged or filled. These geographical disparities are manifest even within similar cultures. For instance, as Anne-Marie Sohn points out,

> To take the French for example, in Flanders, Artois, and Picardy virginity was not valued in the least. In Gravelines a virgin could even be referred to as '*rien qu'une merde sur une pelle*' (nothing but shit on a shovel). . . . As for the Normans, they did not criticize the unmarried mother, as they were happy to verify her ability to bear children. . . . There were, by contrast, until the period between the two world wars, areas that were hard on young women who had "erred." In these places even prenuptial conception was criticized, and weighed as an indelible stain on the wife. (263)[1]

Therefore, in any discussion of the concept of virginity, temporal and spatial discrepancies must always be taken into account.

Furthermore, some terms often associated with virginity, such as chastity or celibacy, need to be treated discretely because of their special implications. Ambrose of Milan divided female chastity (*castitas*) into three forms or phases: premarital, marital, and widowed. "Conjugal, widowed, and virginal

[1] Sohn further elaborates on various attitudes toward virginity: "in certain southern rural regions masculine honor and feminine virginity were conflated. . . . The charivaris (noisy rituals that expressed communal disapproval of perceived violators of social norms) that targeted 'loose women' were common in Charente and in Limousin until 1914, in Brittany during the period between the wars, and in Languedoc into the 1950s. . . . In the cities, tolerance prevailed among the populace, which joked that one must lose one's virginity as quickly as possible to avoid being taken for a halfwit. Far from wanting to marry a virgin, many men preferred experienced women" (263). These divergent views reflect the nebulous nature of the concept of virginity.

castitas were, however, ranked according to an ascending order of virtue" (Cooper 1558). Based on such religious precepts, virginity is the highest form of chastity because chastity can also be realized in other aspects/phases of human life. Likewise, according to Thomas Aquinas, *castitas* "sanctifies both the married couple in legitimate sexual union, and the ascetic in sexual renunciation" (Cooper 1558). More importantly, the loss of virginity is essentially irrevocable. As Samuel Pepys writes in his diary (November 18, 1664), one Lord Craven compares monopoly to the irreversible nature of virginity: "if I occupy a wench first, you may occupy her again your heart out you can never have her maidenhead after I have once had it" (1003).[2] Different from virginity's social/cultural values (alongside with its religious implication), celibacy is mainly religion-oriented. Whether it is a temporary abstinence before and during sacred rituals or a permanent avowal for a devout purpose, celibacy is often practiced from a metaphysical perspective. As Daniel Gold points out, "The great traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity, . . . all oriented toward otherworldly goals, have firmly established roles for celibate monks working out their salvation. . . . The reasons offered for celibacy consequently range from concerns for personal physical health to a total rejection of the physical body" (1475). In other words, physical virginity is not a prerequisite to certain forms of chastity (conjugal and widowed) and celibacy (temporary abstinence). With these definitional and restrictive premises in mind, we may now trace the development of the concept of virginity before the eighteenth century and then investigate how it is represented in various literary forms in the eighteenth century.

The Greco-Roman Perspective

The concept of virginity is first and foremost associated with sexual innocence and bodily purity. In his comparison between barbarians and the Greeks, Herodotus reported that "people on the fringes of the Greek world . . . did not prize the virginity of unmarried girls nor consider a wife the sexual partner exclusively of her husband (as did most Greeks), but who practice fraternal polyandry, or promiscuous intercourse" (Pomeroy 353). Virginity and chastity thus become the important measures to differentiate the Greeks from

[2] The modern technology of hymenorrhaphy (hymen reconstruction surgery) certainly makes this issue more complicated. For the purpose and scope of this essay, such a modern medical practice will not be considered.

barbarians. Such a notion is evidenced by the special status granted to virgin boys and girls and by the attributes of the three Virgin Goddesses: Athena (Minerva), Artemis (Diana), and Hestia (Vesta) in the Greco-Roman world.

As Han J. W. Drijvers maintains, "because of their lack or renunciation of sexual experience, virgins are not completely male or female, and consequently defy in a sense gender specificity. . . . This mediating function of virgins makes them particularly appropriate for contact with the supernatural and implies their sacredness" (9607). Virgins are often entrusted with special religious rituals because they are supposed to be in closer contact with divinity and nature owing to their sexual purity. Furthermore, the loss of virginity is considered an irrevocable act and often lamented in an elegiac way, as manifested in a dialogue, written by Sappho of Lesbos, between a bride and her maidenhood:

> Bride : Maidenhood, maidenhood, where have you gone and left me?
> Maidenhood : No more will I come back to you, no more will I come back.
>
> (qtd. in Sultan 208)

Though the loss of virginity may be bewailed, it also indicates a necessary rite of passage through which a young girl enters into mature womanhood. Otherwise, according to early Modern (mis)conception, green sickness ("the disease of maid occasioned by celibacy") will develop in a young virgin and become detrimental to her health.[3]

The three Virgin Goddesses in classical mythology are essential in shaping the western concept of virginity. The name Athena Parthenos literally means Athena the Virgin (thus the Parthenon, the Virgin's Temple). However, Athena's virginity is asexual and different from that of Artemis, the virgin goddess of girls before they marry and of women in their delivery. Athena is "impeccable," "sexually unapproachable," "beautiful with a severe and aloof kind of loveliness that is masculine and striking," and she is usually associated with qualities more important than her virginity. For instance, "Athena is a

[3] This definition is given by *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1811). Green sickness is also known as morbus virgineus ("virgin's disease") or febris amatoria ("lover's fever"). In Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, Capulet cries out to Juliet—"Out, you green-sickness carrion! out, you baggage!" (III.v.156)—when she refuses to marry Paris. For a detailed discussion of green sickness and its (often misconceived) associations with virginity, please refer to Helen King's *The Disease of Virgins: Green Sickness, Chlorosis, and the Problems of Puberty* (London: Routledge, 2004).

goddess of many other specific arts, crafts, and skills (military, political, and domestic), as well as the deification of wisdom and good counsel in a more generic and abstract conception" (Morford and Lenardon 166-67). She is also credited with the invention of weaving, an indispensable female skill. Therefore, Athena is more important in helping young girls to develop their womanly qualities than in being a role model for the preservation of virginity. By contrast, Artemis's virginity tends to be more humane and desirable from a human perspective.

In discussing Titian's "Diana and Actaeon," Helen McDonald aptly presents both the human/sensual and the divine/chaste sides of Diana:

> As Goddess of Hunting she presides over the welfare of small animals, while her association with Chastity suggests sexuality. In the social sphere of the seventeenth century there was a related contradiction: virginity was prized only until marriage was achieved, and it was the hope of marriage that made women chaste. In representation there is a further contradiction: the chaste Diana, a Goddess and therefore immortal, is seen to have the body and sensuality of a mortal woman. . . . Her small lap-dog is an obvious contrast to Actaeon's hunting dog, and refers, symbolically, to the chastity of the Goddess, while the accoutrements of the bath—the mirror, the vase, perfume, towels and veils—all relate metonymically to the erotic presentation of Diana's body. (69)

Though Acteaon unwittingly chances upon Diana's bathing, she relentlessly transforms him into a deer to be chased and devoured by his own hounds. In such a description of Diana, inviolable chastity coexists with sexual attraction, and erotic arousal with forbidden adoration. As James Allan Evans notes, "Everywhere in Greece it was the custom for girls of marriageable age to dance and sing in choruses at festivals in honor of Artemis, and this was one place where young men could become acquainted with unmarried girls. There was a darker side to Artemis, however. Girls who failed to remain pure for whatever reason encountered her wrath" (301). Consequently, the notion of virginity entails both the chaste and the sensual simultaneously; sexual initiation and physical restraint must go hand in hand.

The importance of Vesta (Hestia) lies not so much in her own virginity

as in the practice of her followers, the Vestal Virgins, who are six in number and "the highest religious officials in Rome" (O'Neal and Jones 230). The Vestal Virgins must keep their virginity for thirty years and are punishable with live burial if they break their vows.[4] However, it is important to note that the Greeks have no Vestal Virgins. Though the two names of the goddess—Vesta and Hestia—are sometimes interchangeable, they present different notions of virginity. As Jennifer Larson remarks, "The perpetual virginity of Hestia, whose name simply means 'hearth,' reflects the Greek belief that fire and the fireplace must be kept pure and inviolate. The hearth was the center of domestic cult; it symbolized the integrity of the individual household, and by extension, the chastity of the resident women" (160-61). Therefore, the concept of virginity as symbolized by Vesta (Hestia) is extended from the virginity of the unmarried (the Vestal Virgins) to the chastity of the married (the wives and their hearths). Such a notion is handed down to the western culture and exerts a profound influence on the construction of female identity.

Fig. 1 Titian's *Diana and Actaeon* (1556-1559)

[4] According to Isaac Asimov, "in eleven hundred years only twenty cases of violation of that rule were recorded" (33).

The Christian Perspective

The concept of virginity in the Christian tradition focuses mainly on three key ideas: *imitatio Christi*, the Virgin Mary, and asexual cohabitation. These key notions culminate in the triumph of spiritual ideals over bodily desires and aim at the reclamation of a paradise lost. At the early stage of Christianity, the concept of *imitatio Christi* is not only based on Christ himself being a virgin (and thus his followers should also be virgins) but also extended "to include those who had been sexually active but now chose to abstain"; more importantly, such a status "is actually a reversion of the fateful division of humankind into sexually active males and females after the Fall, which started with the creation of Eve from Adam" (Drijvers 9607). Therefore, the life of a virgin is "described as becoming children who do not yet know sexual shame" and "characterized as angelical life (*bios aggelikos*)" (Drijvers 9608). A life of sexual innocence may also reflect "a present experience of future life in the kingdom of heaven" (Camelot 547).

The dogma of Mary's virginity in the Christian tradition includes three major notions: "the virginal conception of Jesus by Mary without any human father, the virginal birth of the child from the womb of His mother without injury to the bodily integrity of Mary, and Mary's observance of virginity afterward throughout her earthly life" (Owens and Jelly 532). These notions testify to the principal ideas of virginity from the Christian perspective: asexual life, physical integrity, and marital chastity. As P. T. Camelot maintains, "Moral theology distinguishes a triple element in virginity: physical integrity; the absence of all voluntary and complete venereal pleasure in the past; and, as regards the future, a determination to abstain perpetually from such pleasure" (546). Therefore, the virginity of Mary probably exerts a more profound influence than Christ's virginity does on the Western concept of virginity. As Edward Gibbon points out in *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*:

> One of the most subtile disputants of the Manichaean school has pressed the danger and indecency of supposing, that the God of the Christians, in the state of a human foetus, emerged at the end of nine months from a female womb. The pious horror of his antagonists provoked them to disclaim all sensual circumstances of conception and delivery; to maintain that the

> divinity passed through Mary like a sunbeam through a plate of glass; and to assert, that the seal of her virginity remained unbroken even at the moment when she became the mother of Christ. (Ch. 47, pt. 1)

Consequently, Mary's bodily integrity has become as important as her spiritual virginity in order to meet the corresponding holiness of Christ's physical virginity.

The actualization of the concept of virginity in its extreme form is manifested in the monastic life and religious celibacy.[5] Asexual cohabitation is first practiced in the monastery where monks and virgins used to live together, only to be segregated later for disciplinary considerations. However, such an asexual life can be observed not only by virgins who wish to keep their bodily integrity but also by those who, in spite of "accidental and involuntary loss of physical integrity" still has their virginity "which is most essentially in the will, intact" (Camelot 546). Such an emphasis on the moral or spiritual aspect of virginity will stimulate some heated debates.

The Socio-cultural Perspective

From an anthropological or socio-cultural perspective, the concept of virginity assumes a much wider significance than the Greco-Roman and Christian conceptions do. Such a concept has been extended from a personal will to a socio-cultural reality, endowed with patriarchal values and cultural coded references. At the personal level, "A virgin's chastity foretold its own fulfilment at the next, married, stage of life in harmonious domesticity and the production of legitimate offspring" (Cooper 1558). At the social level, a young woman's virginity may symbolize familial or even communal honor.[6] Moreover, female virginity also involves monetary and practical concerns. As

[5] These mainly Catholic notions of virginity are severely attacked by some Protestant reformers. As Stephen Hause and William Maltby point out, "Beginning with Luther and Zwingli, they rejected the ideal of clerical celibacy and declared that a Christian marriage was the ideal basis for a godly life. They specifically attacked medieval writings that either condemned women as temptresses or extolled virginity as the highest of female callings, and drew attractive and sentimental portraits of the virtuous wife" (269). However, as manifested in various forms of eighteenth-century English literature, such a liberal notion of virginity seems not persuasive and pervasive in both fictional and real lives.

[6] A young girl's virginity may become a symbol of the whole group to which she belongs as in some parts of India, and the chief's daughter's virginity may even signify "the integrity of the whole society" as in some Pacific islands (Drijvers 9607). Though not so excessive in its applications, the Western concept of virginity is not much different in its implications.

Jon P. Mitchell argues, "Shame is directly related to honour, in that a reduction of the shame of a household's women becomes a direct reflection on the honour of its men. The man whose wife is adulterous, or who fails to demonstrate the virginity of his new bride, is dishonoured" (424). The monetary consideration is also manifest in the *Bible*: "And if a man entice a maid that is not betrothed, and lie with her, he shall surely endow her to be his wife. If her father utterly refuse to give her unto him, he shall pay money according to the dowry of virgins" (King James Version, Exod. 16-17). Sometimes, a betrothed young woman who loses her virginity is even punished by death: "If a damsel that is a virgin be betrothed unto an husband, and a man find her in the city, and lie with her; Then ye shall bring them both out unto the gate of that city, and ye shall stone them with stones that they die" (Deut. 22-24). However, if the young woman is violated against her will in the field, only the ravished (i.e. the victim) will be put to death. Eventually, the concept of virginity (and its connotations of integrity and sanctity) is even elevated from the personal and social levels to the national one, as symbolized by Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen, in England and Joan of Arc, "la Pucelle," in France.[7]

The perceived value of virginity thus leads to a wide range of euphuistic and coded references in literature. For instance, several flowers are associated with virginity. The lily is used by Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, Pope, and Blake to represent virginity because of its white color and supposed purity; the (white) rose and the violet also symbolize virginity owing to their purity and sweet perfume.[8] Consequently, the term *defloration* indicates both masculine dominance and feminine subjection as well as sexual conflicts. The act of defloration is sometimes even regarded as the privilege of the patriarch.[9]

---

[7] Elizabeth I's virginity has always been an issue of intense debate. As Asimov observes, "Non-marriage need not necessarily be equated with virginity, of course, and Elizabeth had had several favorites (including the Earl of Essex at the time the play [Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream] was written) but her subjects accepted her virginity as fact. . . . As the years passed and she grew too old to have children anyway, the best had to be made of it, and Elizabeth's reputed virginity became a source of pride" (33). Joan of Arc's virginity is an essential warranty of her divine power. As Deborah A. Fraioli remarks, "Before placing faith in her, Charles subjected her to a formal examination by theologians, which included a test of her virginity"; and "her virginity, in fact, had to be verified by, among others, the dauphin's mother-in-law, Yolanda of Aragon, to eliminate the possibility of sorcery" (80, 98).

[8] Sigmund Freud also raises an interesting issue concerning the association of the violet with virginity. As he explains in The Interpretation of Dreams, "The dream had made use of the great chance similarity between the words 'violet' and 'violate'—the difference in their pronunciation lies merely in the different stress upon their final syllables—in order to express 'in the language of flowers' the dreamer's thoughts on the violence of defloration (another term that employs flower symbolism) and possibly also a masochistic trait in her character" (495).

[9] Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* (*Le nozze di Figaro*, 1786) provides a famous

As Nancy J. Chodorow points out,

> In "The Taboo of Virginity," Freud suggests that women other than mothers, vengeful recently deflorated ex-virgins, might castrate a man or take his penis. In the ex-virgins' case, this would be in revenge for their painful defloration. Therefore, in many cultures, the custom is *jus primae noctis*: the right of strong, powerful, older men to perform a bride's defloration. (242-43)

Therefore, the concept of virginity is not simply limited to a woman's purity and honor, but it also engages gender power and sexual contests, as pointed out by Simone de Beauvoir's virginity myths, "in which virginity is prized in young women but feared as unmastered sexuality in older women" (Fallaize 89). Virginity thus embodies inherent contradictions: it is to be praised or condemned according to different contexts.

Literary Representations

In eighteenth-century English literature, the usage of the term *virginity* generally falls into three broad categories: mockery/disparagement, morality/religion, and merchandise/transaction. However, these allotments are not necessarily mutually exclusive and often reflect certain aspects of patriarchal ideology. Such divisions also reveal more or less the legacy and influence of the concept of virginity in the Western civilizations before the eighteenth century.

As Butt of Mockery or Disparagement

In its crudest sense, the idea of virginity in a woman echoes certain conventional idea of '*rien qu'une merde sur une pelle*' (nothing but shit on a shovel), as mentioned earlier. Under such circumstances, virginity is taken lightly and treated as butt of joke or disparagement. Sexual discrimination against unmarried women often accompanies such attitude. Horace Walpole in a letter to Hannah More (1787) writes, "You fancied that Mrs. Yearsley was a spurious issue of a muse; and to be sure, with all their immortal virginity, the

---

example. Count Almaviva's hope to retain *droit du seigneur* (the lord's right) not only underscores his patristic attitude virginity but also causes a class war between him and his resourceful and subversive valet, Figaro.

parish of Parnassus has been sadly charged with their bantlings; and, as nobody knows the fathers, no wonder some of the misses have turned out woful reprobates!" (Letter 306).[10] Such a harsh criticism reflects common prejudice against female intellectuality and pokes fun at unmarried women writers. The generally positive adjective *immortal* becomes a term of derision or derogation, ubiquitous in similar contexts. In *The Journal to Stella*, Jonathan Swift mentions the death of an old gentlewoman, who in her will requests the parson, the clerk, and all the pallbearers (eight men and eight maids) to take "their oaths of virginity"; as a result, "the poor woman still lies unburied, and so must do till the general resurrection" (Letter 19). When Grizzle Pickle (Peregrine's aunt) in Tobias Smollett's *Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* finds

> her importance in the family greatly diminished, her attractions neglected by all the male sex in the neighbourhood, and the withering hand of time hang threatening over her head, [she] began to feel the horror of eternal virginity, and, in a sort of desperation, resolved at any rate to rescue herself from that reproachful and uncomfortable situation. (22)

In these contexts, virginity is no longer an asset but a negative attribute one might be ashamed of.

Such ridicule of a (potential) spinster, feeling "the horror of eternal virginity" and seeking desperately a husband, is quite common in eighteenth-century literary works. Lady Wishfort's craze for a husband makes her an easy victim to fortune-hunters in William Congreve's *The Way of the World*. Young and romantic Lydia Languish laments in fear in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Rivals*: "O, that I should live to hear myself called Spinster!" (V.i.471). In a rather sympathetic discussion of women's condition in *The Rambler* 39 (1730), Samuel Johnson states succinctly women's ambivalent attitudes towards marriage: "Unblest, still doom'd to wed with misery" (251). Because of the common attitude "to treat old maids as the refuse of the world," marriage, though depriving women of many advantages and often

[10] "Ann Yearsley [1752-1806], known also as 'Lactilla' or 'the Poetical Milkwoman of Bristol,' was one of a small number of successful eighteenth-century working-class writers. Her contribution to the anti-slavery debate was a celebrated poem, 'A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave-Trade,' which appeared in 1788" (Carey, "Ann Yearsley").

"forced upon them by authority or violence, by persuasion or importunity," can provide them "a certain security from the reproach and solicitude of antiquated virginity" (253). Simone de Beauvoir's virginity myths, in which virginity in old women would become "unmastered sexuality," evidently reflect these disparaging opinions, as shown by the apparently respectful but actually derogatory "immortal," "eternal," or "antiquated."

Likewise, a Miss Notable in Sarah Fielding's novel *The Cry: A New Dramatic Fable* (1754, written with Jane Collier) equates virginity with female unattractiveness: "I would venture a good wager . . . that Potiphar's wife [who tries to seduce Joseph] was about as handsome as my maiden aunt; for indeed, that is the only circumstance which in my opinion can make that old story probable. And it is the fate I believe of all ugly women . . . to meet with nothing but chaste and innocent men" (68). Therefore, whether it is Mrs. Slipslop in *Joseph Andrews*, "who having made a small Slip in her Youth had continued a good Maid ever since" (Fielding 26), or Mrs. Grizzle in *Peregrine Pickle*, whose very wan complexion "was the effects of her virginity and mortification" (3), virginity has become a burden to be relieved and an object of nasty derision. Even when the old abbess of Andoüillets cries out in fear of being raped—"O my virginity! Virginity!" (7.23)—in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, the reader may not feel alarmed sympathetic ally but may react with a wry smile. Since the "immortal" or "eternal" virginity in some cases is equated to the undesirable in the male-dominated sexual world, the loss of virginity sometimes ironically paves the way for female liberation.[11] In Francis Coventry's *The History of Pompey the Little*, the heroine gains a new life after her husband's death: "She now began the world anew on her own foundation, and set sail down the stream of pleasure, without the fears of virginity to check her, or the influence of a husband to controul her" (42). Among the pervasively negative attitudes towards female virginity, a silver lining becomes paradoxically all the more radiant in the last case.

[11] Though from a different perspective, the Wife of Bath's unorthodox and cynical view on sexual organs in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* on sexual organs perhaps corresponds quite well to such a liberal attitude toward virginity:

> Telle me also, to what conclusion
> Were membres maad of generacion, . . .
> Glose whoso wole, and seye bothe up and doun
> That they were maked for purgacioun
> Of uryne, and oure bothe thynges smale
> Were eek to knowe a femele from a male,
> And for noon other cause—say ye no? (115-16, 119-23)

As Moral Criterion or Religious Conviction

At the other extreme of the spectrum, the idea of virginity is regarded as moral standard or religious faith, based mainly on the Greco-Roman tradition of the Virgin Goddesses and the Christian idea of the Virgin Mary. Virginity is considered holy or sacred, something worth the sacrifice of one's life. In Hannah Woolley's *The Gentlewoman's Companion: or, A Guide to the Female Sex*, female virginity is of paramount importance. She mentions how "seven Milesian Virgins . . . deprived themselves of life, lest hostile force should deprive them of their honour" and, as a contrast, how two maidens in Leucra, in their father's absence, entertain two young men and are made drunk and deflowered. They "in the next morning conceiving a mutual sorrow for their lost Virginity, became resolute Actors in their bloody Tragedy" (101). In a story by Joseph Addison in *The Coverley Papers*, the concept of pre-marital virginity is extended to post-marital chastity. After the death of her husband, Glaphyra is soon married to his brother. When she tries to embrace her first husband in a dream, he repels and scolds her: "Was not I the husband of thy virginity? Have I not children by thee? How couldst thou forget our loves so far as to enter into a second marriage, and after that into a third, nay to take for thy husband a man who has so shamefully crept into the bed of his brother?" (No. 110). Glaphyra suffers from the shock and dies not long after this nightmarish experience. Though Addison tries to use the story to prove the immortality of the soul, the idea of virginity as something for sole possession is too prominent to be ignored.

Similarly, a young girl's virginity may represent not only a family asset ("a willing victim at the altar") but also a sacrifice for a divine purpose. According to such a strict conception of virginity, Edward Gibbon raises "a nice question of casuistry" about the loss of one's virginity in *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: "Whether those tender victims, who had inflexibly refused their consent to the violation which they sustained, had lost, by their misfortune, the glorious crown of virginity" (Ch. 31, pt. 4). In other words, there should be some distinctions between moral and physical virginity. Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* brings such an issue to a climatic discussion in making the eponymous heroine determined to die after being raped by Robert Lovelace. Quoting from *Ecclesiasticus*, with his own added comments (in italics), John Harlowe (Clarissa's uncle) points out the moral danger the whole family will be exposed to because of a dishonored daughter:

> In her virginity, lest she should be defiled, and gotten with child in her father's house (*and I don't make the words, mind that*). . . . Keep a sure watch over a shameless daughter (*yet no watch could hold you!*), lest she make thee a laughing stock to thine enemies (*as you have made us all to this cursed Lovelace*), and a byword in the city, and a reproach among the people, and make thee ashamed before the multitude. (1196)

The loss of virginity not only causes personal destruction but also brings public shame on the family. However, as Gibbon mentions, the forced loss of virginity in a woman is not considered loss of moral virginity from a religious or spiritual standpoint. John Belford's high praise of Clarissa after her ravishment serves as a clear contrast both to the Harlowe family's bitter reproach and to the rakes' moral degeneration. As he writes to Lovelace,

> What woman, nice in her person, and of purity in her mind and manners, did she know what miry wallowers the generality of men of our class are in themselves, and constantly trough and sty with, but would detest the thoughts of associating with such filthy sensualists, whose favourite taste carries them to mingle with the dregs of stews, brothels, and common-sewers? (1393)

Interestingly, most occurrences of the term *purity* in the novel are associated with Clarissa's attributes and personality. The loss of physical virginity, in Richardson's opinion, is certainly not equal to one's moral dishonor. Such a view is echoed almost 150 years later by Thomas Hardy in his choice of *A Pure Woman* as the subtitle of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, in which the titular heroine also suffers from a similar traumatic experience.

As Merchandise for Sale

Virginity as a merchandise to be preserved or displayed for the highest bid has seen common representations in various forms of literature in the eighteenth century. This idea stipulates that the loss of virginity can be compensated materially (e.g. by monetary payment), as mentioned earlier from the examples in the Bible, and virginity can also be regarded as valuables to be transacted commercially. As Gibbon points out, "the reward of virginity [for the Lombards] might equal the fourth part of the husband's

substance. Some cautious maidens, indeed were wise enough to stipulate beforehand a present, which they were too sure of not deserving."[12] In Aphra Behn's *The Unfortunate Happy Lady: A True History*, Gracelove confesses to Philadelphia, "the intended Victim": "Don't you know then, that you are in a naughty House, and that old Beldam is a rank Procuress, to whom I am to give Two hundred Guineas for your Maidenhead?" (38). In both cases, a price is set for virginity in a blunt and straightforward way. In a circuitous manner, Samuel Richardson's Pamela also keeps her virginity as the greatest asset in the marriage market, and such value systems are severely attacked by Henry Fielding in his hilarious and sarcastic *Shamela* (a pun on the heroine's name with both shame and sham). Fielding makes Shamela confess on her wedding night: "I behaved with as much Bashfulness as the purest Virgin in the World could have done. The most difficult Task for me was to blush; however, by holding my Breath, and squeezing my Cheeks with my Handkerchief, I did pretty well" (297). Virginity is too important an asset to be slighted whether one still possesses it or not.

However, the concept of virginity with its added value in the marketplace is nowhere so prominent as in John Cleland's *Fanny Hill, or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, a classical erotic novel which simultaneously flaunts and flouts the concept of virginity. The first appearance of the term *virginity* in *Fanny Hill* is not concerned with moral integrity or personal modesty but with its market value. As Fanny tells the reader, Mother Brown has demanded from a "liquorish old goat" "fifty guineas peremptory for the liberty of attempting me, and a hundred more at the complete gratification of his desires, in the triumph over my virginity" (33). A down payment has to be made before the actual exchange of merchandise. Virginity also becomes, paradoxically, "that darling treasure, that hidden mine so eagerly sought after by the men, and which they never dig for, but to destroy" (58). Therefore, as a marketing strategy, Mrs. Brown has to keep Fanny from the "customers" until she, as Fanny candidly confesses, "had secured a good market for my maidenhead, which I had at least all the appearances having brought into her Ladyship's service" (24-25). Even before the actual transaction, she has to be displayed for inspection and assessment. As Fanny reflects, Mrs. Brown

[12] This comment appears at Footnote 136 (compiled by Rev. H. H. Milman) of Chapter 31, Part 5 of the Gutenberg Project edition of Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

> had already a chapman for me in the house, before whom my charms were to pass in review; for he had not only, in course, insisted on a previous sight of the premises, but also on immediate surrender to him, in case of his agreeing for me; concluding very wisely that such a place as I was in was of the hottest to trust the keeping of such a perishable commodity in as a maidenhead. (29)

This episode not only dramatizes vividly virginity as a commodity on the seamy side of society but also its fragile and irreversible nature. Though in a more elegant and sophisticated way, Pamela's "virtue" (virginity in a euphuistic sense) is "rewarded" by her marriage to Mr. B—, such a practice is not unlike Cleland's blunt presentation of virginity as goods. Not surprisingly, in the bourgeois society, the family fortune and "honor" often depend upon the daughter's preservation of her virginity.

Because of the perishable nature of such a delicate commodity in the business (marriage of convenience or sexual trade), some measures are necessary to keep it perfectly intact or to preserve its appearance at least if lost. (The upper classes prefer convent education owing to its provision of a secluded environment from external temptations.) Therefore, just like the dishonest traders' repackaging of old merchandise as new product, *Fanny Hill* unabashedly flaunts with her false virginity. Phrases like "my pretences to virginity" (59), "a fictitious maidenhead" (116), "my titular maidenhead" (121), "a counterfeit maidenhead" (154), "the appearance of my virginity" (160), "a false virtue" (160), or "the signs of my virginity" (164) are used forthright throughout the novel, not unlike the scandalous narratives of misdemeanors and crimes in Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* or Henry Fielding's *Jonathan Wild*. Moreover, if deception, trick, or stratagem is allowed in political maneuvers or commercial exchanges, it is also legitimate for a vulnerable woman to resort to whatever resources she can have for her day-to-day survival and economic gains.[13] To be a part of the game of male

[13] What Derek Pearsall says about Wife of Bath's exploitation of her first three husbands in *The Canterbury Tales* can also be applied to the discussion of women's underprivileged conditions in the economic world. As he maintains, "the nature of her first three marriages, to rich old men, is such as to suggest that she is not so much preying upon men as using those powers that she has in order to win herself a measure of independence in a world that is unfair to her sex" and it is not difficult for us "to recognise a certain rough legitimacy in the way the Wife has turned the economic tables on her would-be exploiters" (73). Fanny Hill's deceitful measures are not much different from the Wife of Bath's stratagems.

fantasy or heroic adventure, a young woman needs only to play up to her role correspondingly. Therefore, Fanny dismisses the idea of virginity contemptuously, "all my looks and gestures ever breath[e] nothing but that innocence which the men so ardently require in us, for no other end than to feast themselves with the pleasures of destroying it, and which they are so grievously, with all their skill, subject to mistakes in" (159). As Bradford Mudge maintains,

> The generous Mrs. Cole proposes a lucrative deception: the sale of Fanny's ''fictitious maidenhead'' to one ''Mr. Norbert,'' a slightly dissipated young man of fertile imagination for whom female chastity is the Holy Grail of sexual fetishes. . . . Norbert's fantasy is, according to Fanny, entirely solipsistic. His adoration of innocence has less to do with women than with his own need to be the conquering hero, the all powerful ravisher of virgins and other defenseless creatures. (250-51)

In such contexts, the concept of virginity merely serves as an ideal of male fantasy. Though such idealization of female virginity occurs in a crude form of commercial exchange in the sex trade, it is not much different from the association of female virginity with euphemistic and coded references to the purity of lily, rose, and violet in literary works.

Conclusion[14]

Voltaire once said, "It is an infantile superstition of the human spirit that virginity would be thought a virtue and not the barrier that separates ignorance from knowledge." Such a materialistic view, though regardless of its spiritual connotations, perhaps rings true in the modern society. Virginity becomes more and more a mere physical attribute and might prove a hindrance to female liberation. Therefore, the idea expressed by the heroine in Francis Coventry's History of Pompey the Little (1751)—"without the fears of virginity to check her"—presents an antedated version of the pop singer Madonna's bold declaration that "I always thought of losing my virginity as a career move." From such a perspective, the loss of virginity constitutes a rite of passage

[14] All quotes about virginity in this conclusion, unless otherwise noted, are taken from Thinkexist.com.

through which women can not only get rid of the old shackles but also reach self-actualization. However, the emphasis on the concept of virginity throughout the Western history also leads to a cynical attitude that is aptly expressed by Gerald Barzen: "Virginity for some women is the only virtue." Finally, as the Austrian writer and journalist Karl Kraus maintains, "Virginity is the ideal of those who want to deflower." Whether it is eulogized metaphorically in relation to various flowers in literary works for their imaginary purity or preserved idealistically as a "Holy Grail" for male fantasy and adventure, the concept of virginity in the eighteenth-century English literature records genuinely and dialectically a history of female experiential memory.

Works Cited

Addison, Joseph, et al. *The Coverley Papers*. Champaign, Ill: Gutenberg Project, 2004.

Asimov, Isaac. *Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare: A Guide to Understanding and Enjoying the Works of Shakespeare*. New York: Wings Books, 2003. Print.

Behn, Aphra. *The Unfortunate Happy Lady: A True Story*. London: Briscoe, 1698. [Early English Books Online]

Camelot, P. T. "Virginity." *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 14. Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2003. 544-48. Print.

Carey, Brycchan. "Ann Yearsley." *British Abolitionists*. 2001. Web. 11 Jan. 2010.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales*. *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987. 3-328. Print.

Chodorow, Nancy J. "Freud on Women." *The Cambridge Companion to Freud*. Ed. Jerome Neu. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. 224-48. Print.

Cleland, John. *Fanny Hill, or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994. Print.

Cooper, Kate. "Chastity." *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. Lindsay Jones. Vol. 3. Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2005. 1557-60. Print.

Coventry, Francis. *The History of Pompey the Little, or the Life and Adventures of a Lap-dog*. London: Dodsley, 1773. [Eighteenth Century Collections Online]

Drijvers, Han J. W. "Virginity." *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. Lindsay Jones. Vol. 14. Farmington Hills, MI.: Thomson Gale, 2005. 9606-09. Print.

Evans, James Allan. "Religion." *Arts and Humanities through the Era: Ancient Greece and Rome*. Ed. James Allan Evans. Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2005. 282-345. Print.

Fallaize, Elizabeth. "Simone de Beauvoir and the Demystification of Woman." *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*. Ed. Gill Plain and Susan Sellers. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. 85-99. Print.

Fielding, Henry. Joseph Andrews *with* Shamela *and Related Writings*. Ed. Homer Goldberg. New York: Norton, 1987. Print.

Fielding, Sarah. *The Cry: A New Dramatic Fable*. Dublin: George Faulkner, 1754. [Eighteenth Century Collections Online]

Fraioli, Deborah A. *Joan of Arc and the Hundred Years War*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2005. Print.
Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Trans. James Strachey. London: Penguin, 1991. Print.
Gibbon, Edward. *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Spring Lake, MI: eBookMall, 2001.
Gold, Daniel. "Celibacy." *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. Lindsay Jones. Vol. 3. Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2005. 1474-78. Print.
Grose, Francis. *1811 Dictionary of Vulgar Tongue*. Champaign, Ill: Gutenberg Project, 2004.
Hause, Stephen and William Maltby. *Western Civilization: A History of European Society*. New York: Wadworth, 2004. Print.
Johnson, Samuel. *The Rambler*. Troy, NY: Pafraets Press, 1903.
Larson, Jennifer. *Ancient Greek Cults: A Guide*. London: Routledge, 2007. Print.
McDonald, Helen. *Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art*. London: Routledge, 2000. Print.
Mitchell, Jon P. "Shame and Honour." *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*. Ed. Alan Barnard and Jonathan Spencer. London: Routledge, 1996. 423-35. Print.
Morford, Mark P. O. and Robert J. Lenardon. *Classical Mythology*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004. Print.
Mudge, Bradford. "John Cleland." *Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature*. Ed. Gaëtan Brulotte and John Phillips. New York: Routledge, 2006. 247-54. Print.
O'Neal, Michael J. and J. Sydney Jones. *World Religions: Almanac*. Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2007. Print.
Owens, L. G., and F. M. Jelly. "Virgin Birth." *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 14. Farmington Hills, MI: Thomason Gale, 2003. 532-39. Print.
Pepys, Samuel. *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*. Ed. Henry B. Wheatley. Vol. 1. New York: Random House, 1946. Print.
Pearsall, Derek. *The Canterbury Tales*. London: Routledge, 1985. Print.
Pomeroy, Sarah B. "Women and Ethnicity in Classical Greece: Changing the Paradigms." *A Companion to the Classical Greek World*. Ed. Konrad H. Kinzl. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006. 350-66. Print.
Richardson, Samuel. *Clarissa, or, The History of a Young Lady*.

Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985. Print.
Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet*. Ed. Brian Gibbons. London: Methuen, 1980. Print.
Sheridan, Richard Brinsley. *The Rivals*. *Eighteenth-Century Plays*. New York: The Modern Library, 1952. 409-84. Print.
Smollett, Tobias. *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle*. Dublin: Henry Saunders, et al, 1763. [Eighteenth Century Collections Online]
Sohn, Anne-Marie. "Illegitimacy and Concubinage." Trans. Sylvia J. Cannizzaro. *Encyclopedia of European Social History from 1350 to 2000*. Ed. Peter N. Stearns. Vol. 4. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001. 259-67. Print.
Sultan, Nancy. "Music." *Arts and Humanities through the Era: Ancient Greece and Rome*. Ed. James Allan Evans. Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2005. 182-233. Print.
Sterne, Laurence. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent.* New York: Norton, 1980. Print.
Swift, Jonathan. *The Journal to Stella*. Champaign, Ill: Gutenberg Project, 2003.
The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998. Print.
Walpole, Horace. *The Letters of Horace Walpole*. Vol. 4. Champaign, Ill: Gutenberg Project, 2004.
Woolley, Hannah. *The Gentlewoman's Companion: or, A Guide to the Female Sex*. Atlanta: Emory Women Writers Research Project, 2005.