THE VIRGIN AND THE BRIDE

Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity

KATE COOPER

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Preface

This book proposes a fresh answer to one of the most interesting questions of ancient history: why did the early Christians alight on the ideal of virginity, and why did the Romans come to adopt it as their own, even when they saw that its triumph would undermine the very fabric of ancient society? It is a question that has troubled the historical profession since Gibbon, and no satisfactory answer has yet been found.

The attempt here has been to take the question from an unexpected point of view. Instead of focusing on the innovators, the Christians themselves, I have tried to imagine the outlook of the literate Roman, to understand how she or he would have perceived the questions of sexual morality and religious allegiance at stake in such a dramatic change. The reason for the Christians' seemingly inexplicable success seems to lie in the way the political and moral theorists of the Roman empire understood the relationship of sexual morality to civic virtue. Unwittingly, they had left an unstable link in the system for judging a man's fitness for public office. Enormous symbolic importance was vested in his private life and his susceptibility to womanly influence, a point which may sound disarmingly familiar to modern readers. The weakness of this system was that it privileged sexual self-restraint as an index of moral authority at the same time as public men were encouraged to father legitimate heirs as vigorously as they could. The early Christians broke the paradox by picturing their own moral heroes as

men who eschewed earthly heirs for an otherworldly family, and won the empire itself for their pains. The female figure of the virgin was the cultural icon by which they broadcast their message.

A few readers will be disappointed that I have steered clear of some of the more familiar landmarks: for example, to mention only the most glaring omission, the Virgin Mary has no place here, despite the rise of her cult precisely during the period under study. I have tried resolutely to cleave to the unfamiliar as a starting point, and to the perspective of the kind of ancient person who, while serious enough in his or her ethical commitments, was not given to religious enthusiasms. What would she, or he, have thought of the changing dynamics of gender, sexual morality, and religious ideology brought on by the rise of Christianity?

While I have tried to give even attention, insofar as possible, to pagan and Christian points of view, I should offer two caveats. The first is that I have consistently used the term "pagan" despite the fact that it is anachronistic and inexact. The pagans thought of themselves as "Romans," "Hellenes," "followers of religion"—all terms that might also, in some circumstances, describe a Jew or a Christian—but they simply did not think the Jews or Christians important enough to invent a name for members of their society who had nothing in common other than the fact that they did not worship the God of Israel. Similarly, I have referred to "the Christians" where it is clear that there were numerous opposing definitions of Christianity, many of whose adherents rejected one another as heretical or not Christian at all. This causes particular difficulty when we come to the late fourth century when many Christians, long dismissed by historians as "half-hearted" because they rejected the self-righteousness of certain proponents of virginity, may in fact have held tolerance and religious pluralism to be an aspect of the Christian virtue of charity.

I have tried to cast this study in terms that would be accessible to a broad readership whose primary interest might be in history, gender studies, classics, or religion, to name only the most obvious areas. This cross-disciplinary approach has many advantages, and I hope it allows me to tell a story that offers unexpected insights to all concerned. At the same time, it has the disadvantage that if I were to present at every point the documentation and scholarly debate which each specialist in

turn might crave, the specialists from other areas, not to mention the student or general reader, would find it difficult going. Because of this, the notes have been kept to a minimum, in part by the practice of limiting successive references to the same primary source to an indication in the main body of the text of the section number from which the particular quotation is drawn. Similarly, the bibliography refers only to the primary sources and secondary literature cited in the text, rather than to the broader reading that has influenced my thinking. Where I have cited from an existing translation of a text I have given the source at the first citation; otherwise, all translations are my own.

Just as a book reflects a lifetime of reading, so it is an attempt to capture an echo of evenings and afternoons spent in conversation, of letters exchanged, of ideas discovered and defended among friends. Although none bears responsibility for shortcomings the reader may find in what follows, I owe a great many debts to the colleagues whose delight in ancient history has sustained my own. The first is to John Gager, Janet Martin, and Peter Brown, who jointly supervised the doctoral dissertation at Princeton University from which this book, somewhat obliquely, draws its origin. To the last, I owe a special debt of gratitude for taking pains well beyond the call of duty.

I am similarly grateful to a small band of scholars writing in the area of gender in late antiquity who have read part or all of the manuscript, and who have often made available to me works in progress of their own: Virginia Burrus, Susanna Elm, Simon Goldhill, Vasiliki Limberis, and Judith Perkins. Of this group, Elizabeth Clark and Averil Cameron are to be thanked not only for thoughtful criticism but also for the leadership which they have provided for a generation of younger scholars. Others have read drafts of part or all of the book and have helped me to understand the broader context into which the study fits: Mary Douglas, Leigh Gibson, Judith Herrin, David Hunter, Ann Kuttner, Robert Lamberton, Henrietta Leyser, Felice Lifshitz, Richard Lim, Robert Markus, John Petruccione, Francesco Scorza Barcellona, Jeffrey Stout, Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, and Vincent Wimbush. I owe warm thanks to Herbert Bloch for a memorable afternoon spent discussing the funerary inscriptions of Fabia Aconia Paulina and Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, and to Robbi and Kent Cooper for constantly asking hard questions.

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Finally, I have relied on the wisdom and sense of humor of one indispensable critic, editor, and interlocutor: my husband, Conrad Leyser. In more ways than can be catalogued, this book is the fruit of our trustful partnership, and it is to him that I dedicate it, with heartfelt thanks.

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Private Lives, Public Meanings

"The first without compunction violates his wife, his serving-women, and his attendants, whether young *(paedagogia, capillati)* or old *(exoleti);* the second, no longer having the power to give orders outside, in the wider society, no longer has the strength to give them at all: of necessity, he invents for himself a conjugal and sexual morality."[1]

With this memorable characterization of the psychology of the Roman senator before and after the Augustan revolution, Paul Veyne introduced, nearly twenty years ago, the notion that it was not compassionate Christian apostles but dispirited pagan senators who first proposed a moral dimension to the exercise of patriarchal power in the ancient world, an easing of the austere idea of family life that had prevailed in the Roman republic. Veyne's purposes were frankly polemical. He felt that the early Christians had been given credit for a moral legacy when in fact Christianity was not responsible and the legacy was not necessarily good.

No concession was to be made to the self-interested rationalizations offered by latterday apologists for early Christianity, but neither did heroes emerge on the side of the pagans. A change had indeed taken place around the turn of the eras, and its architect was not Jesus but Augustus. Yet the change was merely an unintended by-product of the Roman Senate's cowardice in facing a single man's claim to dominance. Put simply, the male Roman aristocrat had invented a rhetoric of con-

jugal love to compensate for his emasculation in the public realm. This was explained as an attempt to elicit affection from his wife as from his inferiors, where before he had exacted fearful subservience.

Having lost his standing in public, Veyne argued, the exemplary Roman man no longer had heart for the routine domestic self-assertion of an earlier age, when patriarchs had been known unflinchingly to hand over spouses and offspring to capital punishment, and their license to punish as they saw fit within the household was virtually limitless.[2] So the now-compromised public figure settled down in private to cultivate affectionate ties with those he had once dominated: the Roman ideal of love within marriage was born. The mitigation of patriarchal dominance was not only not a triumph of early Christian ethics; it was no triumph at all. This reading was Nietzschean in its irony. If the argument was undermined by a diffuse and unsystematic treatment of the evidence drawn from ancient sources,[3] it was carried by the quasi-pornographic magnetism both of the sources themselves and of Veyne's alarming sympathy for the psychology of sexual dominance.

Veyne's argument was compounded dramatically by its influence on Michel Foucault, then at work on his monumental *History of Sexuality*.[4] Foucault adapted Veyne's psychosexual insight into the aristocratic Roman man in the direction of a fully psychologized reading of the ancient idea of *erōs*. For Foucault, the period from Augustus to Marcus Aurelius was distinguished by anxiety about pleasure and domination in the minds of eminent men. A secure sense of the right to exact submission (including sexual submission) from one's subordinates had given way to an uneasy consciousness of one's own duties to others. The philosophical ideal came to rest in marriage as a friendship of equals, the result of a transfusion of aristocratic *maîtrise de soi* from the task of controlling others to that of fulfilling their expectations.

Much is owed to both writers by any subsequent traveler into the cultural territory they charted.[5] What follows will engage only indirectly with their work. But their vivid evocations of the contours of the ancient imagination have exerted such influence that the reader may find it useful to know in advance what major differences in the landscape this book will find.

Most important, while a watershed is still in view between the classical and the early medieval aristocrat's language for describing marriage and

sexuality, the decisive change of terrain has moved again, back to the later Roman empire, although it no longer takes the shape of the triumph of early Christian ethics that Veyne labored so heroically to dislodge. Veyne saw the transformation of marriage as unrelated to religious change, where his predecessors had been inclined to see it as the inevitable result of Christianization. We will see that, over the first few centuries of the common era, pagans and Christians alike drew on a moral language of marital concord that had existed at least from the time of Augustus. The watershed lies in the introduction of an apologetic language of Christian moral superiority which deliberately misrepresented Christians as standing apart from this moral consensus. I will argue that this misrepresentation would have been understood by ancient readers as a distortion of reality for the purposes of argument.

Throughout this book an unfamiliar coloring has also been applied to the conventions of representation. The emphasis is on self-presentation as a medium for negotiating one's standing within a social group. The conventions by which literary and philosophical discussions of marital harmony reflected—or attempted to influence—social reality were governed at least in part by the self-interest of the speaker, a point that seems at times to have escaped Veyne and Foucault. Philosophers might debate the best view of marriage not because of a change in the structure of the aristocratic family but because of a jostling for position among schools.[6] Emperors would make known (or invent) an ideal of the imperial family's harmony as a vital component in the propaganda of imperial power.[7]

The representation of marital concord served an important rhetorical function, supporting the claims put forward by aristocratic men in competition with one another by implying their ethical fitness for responsibility. This rhetorical economy had cultural roots at least as old as the *Odyssey*. Men's struggle with one another for dominance was abetted by the suggestion of each that his own household was known for its concord while the other's was not. Equally, it was well understood that a man's claim to power was in fact a claim on behalf of his household and family line.

The decisive shift at the end of antiquity was not a change in the social reality of aristocratic marriage,[8] but the introduction of a competing moral language, the Christian rhetoric of virginity. The social

and cultural repercussions of this challenge to rhetorical convention—its admission of a new group of men to a new kind of power—will be explored in detail in the chapters that follow.

Finally, the issue of gender receives explicit attention in these pages, as it did not in the work of Veyne and Foucault. There is no need to add here to the well-deserved criticism of Foucault for attempting to frame a history of sexuality without reference to the experience or self-understanding of the female part of the human race.[9] But my task is to integrate attention to gender even if it is only intermittently possible to approach the problem of female experience, a limitation imposed by the scarcity of first-hand accounts (and even of second-hand descriptions before the late fourth century). An attempt to understand the conventions by which gender-specific characteristics were assigned to women and to men, and the rhetorical ends that such conventions could serve, will tell us something about the relations between men and women, and at least as much again about the competition for power between men and other men. Again, the focus is on representation.

Where Foucault's *History of Sexuality* emphasized anxiety about pleasure, what follows will emphasize concern for self-representation. Just as our distinction between "public" and "private" might have baffled ancient men and women accustomed to perceiving the household as both the index and the end of men's struggle for position within the city, so their distinction between "rhetoric" and "reality" would have been constructed very differently from ours. In a society premised on honor and shame, rhetoric *was* reality.

This means that the symbolic language of gender would not have been internalized in the way a modern reader might expect. The male and female members of a household would have been seen, and would have understood themselves, as two representative dimensions, two *personae,* by which a household might project its quality and claim its rightful standing. If selfhood was, as is suggested here, understood through identification with family honor, its gender construction would have functioned very differently from that of an atomistic modern society. The quasi-Victorian notion of the private sphere which informs much contemporary writing on gender does little to render the self-understanding of the members of an ancient household. The key tension

explored in our ancient texts is the tension between the interests of the household and those of the city.

Private Pleasures and the Public Man

Plutarch, whose writings in the late first and early second centuries figure significantly in Foucault's *History of Sexuality,* remains a virtually unexplored source of information on the crafting of public men's reputations by a deft use of gender-related conventions and commonplaces. His dictum that wives should follow their husbands' choice of gods is well known,[10] but his substantive illustrations of how concord between man and wife served as an emblem of *sōphrosynē,* the self-mastery that made men reliable citizens, have yet to be studied. Plutarch is a particularly rich source on this matter because of the link between his philosophical investigations and his historical writings. The treatment of a single area in both genres by the same author allows us privileged access to the question of how philosophy reflected the concrete social conditions chronicled by the historian. Thus the ideal of marital concord appears simultaneously in Plutarch's writings as a rhetorical motif in the politics of self-representation and as a narrative resolution for the philosophical problem of pleasure and instability.

In his *Erōtikos,* Plutarch reviews the philosophical lore on pleasure and reputation, engaging the seriousness of the debate on the pleasures without missing its humor.[11] What he emphasizes is the question of male self-control and trustworthiness. The dialogue is designed as a reenactment of Plato's *Symposium* and its debate over the relationship between the spiritually ennobling pursuit of the beautiful and the passionate urges of the body. Plutarch mocks Plato's idea that the philosopher can be induced to renounce pleasure in favor of a transcendent *erōs:* the pursuit of such an ideal can only result in hypocrisy.[12] Instead, the man of reason will acknowledge the inevitable and find a way to put pleasure at the service of philosophy. We will see later that Plutarch is the first in a tradition of ironic restagings of the *Symposium* and its debate on desire.

Plutarch's ironic view of the debate appears in the very setting of his dialogue: while Plato's *Symposium* takes its occasion from a banquet in

praise of the god Eros, the story that frames the *Erōtikos* is an instance of *erōs* gone awry. Ismenodora, a wealthy widow, has been asked by the family of the noble youth Bacchon to find him an appropriate bride. The difference in age that disqualifies Ismenodora herself as a bride for the boy qualifies her as a matrimonial go-between, but a cross-gender intrigue develops as Ismenodora's sexual interest in Bacchon is criticized by her male age-peers, who themselves are attracted to the boy. Having fallen in love with her charge, Ismenodora abandons her duties on behalf of his family and kidnaps the boy with a view to marrying him herself. This mix-up provides a parodic introduction to the thesis that the pursuit of private desires endangers the fulfillment of social contracts. Yet, while Ismenodora's passion furnishes the comic impetus of the dialogue, Plutarch is not so much concerned with female desire as with male desire: with passion as a corridor through which objects of desire exert power over men. The ostensible interest in Ismenodora's agency as a desiring subject clothes an investigation of women as objects of desire.

It is in an atmosphere of pleasant raillery that two camps of Bacchon's middle-aged male friends take up the question of desire and pleasure, one group arguing for pederasty as the ideal form of *erōs* (because, according to the Platonic view, it scorns pleasure as it pursues the Beautiful), and the other arguing that heterosexual love is more sublime because it allows for the union of Aphrodite (goddess of the pleasures) and Eros. Plutarch clearly favors the second view. The character who serves as the author's spokesman[13] explains that the Platonic construction of pleasure and desire assumes that the only love object able to inspire the *erōs* that enables the soul is the kind of young man whose dignity would be violated were he pressed to serve another's pleasure (*Erōtikos* 768E). Here Plutarch sees the irony of a sexuality defined by dominance, so that only one partner can take pleasure at a time, and offers his own solution to the conundrum. For a man to take pleasure with his own wife is certainly licit and congruent with female nature, which is defined as being able to experience sexual submission without dishonor. So men might reconcile pleasure and ennobling friendship through conjugal love if they would perceive women's capacity for spiritual excellence (and thus for friendship). Even the beloved's power to beguile the lover could serve the purpose of philosophy:

> Just as poetry, adding to prose meaning the delights of song and meter and rhythm, makes its educational power more forceful and its capacity for doing harm more irresistible; just so has nature endowed woman with charm of aspect, persuasiveness of voice, and seductive physical beauty, and has thus given the licentious woman great advantages for pleasure and deceit, but to the chaste *(tēi sōphroni)*, great resources also for gaining the goodwill and friendship of her husband. (*Erōtikos* 769B-C)

Plutarch suggests that pleasure does persuade, but to see its persuasion as necessarily evil is to miss an opportunity for promoting the common good.

At stake here is the ability of the beloved to sway the lover by charm (and the promise of sexual pleasure) rather than by reason. Plutarch takes the position that the wise man's strategy should be to find a loveable wife and teach her philosophy. In this way, the inevitable influence of pleasure will be an influence on behalf of philosophy rather than against it, exactly the view Plutarch offers when it comes to giving practical advice on how to educate a young wife in his *Conjugal Precepts.* The like-mindedness of man and wife becomes the guarantee of philosophy's place in the household. To support this harnessing of conjugal pleasures to high purpose, Plutarch invokes the legislation of Solon prescribing sexual intercourse between spouses at least once every ten days, "as cities from time to time renew their treaties by a libation" (*Erōtikos* 769B).

In Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* we see more concretely why the ancients saw in pleasure a threat to community. In addition, we begin to understand how public men could use their consciousness of this potential spur to divided loyalties as a weapon in the competition over standing and allegiance. Plutarch represents the tension between public duty and private pleasure as an area in which all political men routinely faced accusations levied by rivals. Writing as a historian, Plutarch himself hands on these accusations when he wishes to encourage the reader's suspicion of a man's character, and deflects them when he wants the reader to believe in the man's good faith and fitness for public office. In the *Life of Pompey* Plutarch is on the defensive. He reports the charges of sexual excess made against the man, but attempts to dismiss them as unjustified accusations invented by Pompey's enemies. In the *Life of*

Antony, however, it is Plutarch himself who accuses his subject of dissolution brought on by unchecked lust and a woman's charm. Given the centrality of Pompey and Antony as military opponents of Julius Caesar and Octavian, it is clear that Plutarch perceived these private matters as bearing on the most significant of public events, the Roman transition from republic to empire.

The *Life of Pompey* paints its hero as constantly troubled by charges of immoderation from his political opponononents, but it adduces the charges in a random manner, as if to suggest that the annoyance was nothing more than a routine hazard of public life. The implication, of course, is that the accusations were unfounded: despite Pompey's numerous marriages, we are assured that he was not particularly susceptible to feminine charms. Plutarch reports that Pompey was beloved for his *sōphrosynē,* and that no Roman ever enjoyed such well-deserved good will from his compatriots (1.4). Early in the *Life* we encounter Pompey taking care to protect his reputation from groundless slurs by especially circumspect conduct. But the effort is in vain: "still he could not escape the censures of his enemies: he was accused of neglecting and betraying many public interests on account of married women."[14]

If we pay closer attention, however, we see that Plutarch is being disingenuous, for many of the accusations levied at Pompey took their origin in his political marriages. His repudiation of Antistia and marriage to Aemilia in order to strengthen his political alliance with Sulla (newly proclaimed dictator)[15] elicit defensive explanation: "This marriage was the act of a tyrant, and befitted the needs of Sulla rather than the nature and habits of Pompey" (9.3). What elicited the criticism may have been the seeming insincerity of the short-lived matches or the tendency of repeated honeymoons to distract the statesman from his responsibilities. To be appraised as abetting the social order, a marriage (whether pleasureless or passionate) had to be seen as establishing a lasting social contract between families.

We can see in the case of Pompey's marriage to Julia, the daughter of Julius Caesar, the multiple lines of attack against a marriage that did not establish a solid dynastic allegiance. As he narrates a scene of battle between Pompey and Caesar after Julia's death, Plutarch summarizes the comments of Pompey's critics: "the family alliance which had been made [between the two men], and the charms of Julia, along with the

marriage, were now seen to have been from the first the deceitful and suspect pledges of a partnership based in self-interest; there was no real friendship [between Pompey and Caesar] in it" (70.7). Affection between spouses was not enough to protect the men contracting the match from this kind of criticism.

Indeed, conjugal feeling was not necessarily a social good; it was only perceived in that light where it induced the spouses toward responsible behavior in their relationships outside the marriage. Plutarch reports that Pompey's marriage to Julia was seen as immoderately affectionate:

> he incurred . . . jealous ill-will *(phthonon)* because, handing over his provinces and his armies to legates who were his old friends, he himself went about in Italy from one pleasure-spot to another, keeping company with his wife, either because he loved her, or because she loved him so that he could not bear to leave her. (53.1)

Similarly, Plutarch records criticism of Pompey as he celebrates another marriage, this time to Cornelia, criticism in which the nuptial merriment is explicitly linked to an abandonment of his more sober duty toward the city of Rome (55.4–5). But Plutarch does not choose to specify Pompey himself as responsible for the political vulnerability caused by his irregular married life. A faithful and affectionate marriage of long standing would have served as a shield against the insinuations to which all political men were exposed, as Plutarch well knew, but to side with Pompey's accusers even to the degree of holding him responsible for the instability of his married life would undermine the broader reading of the man.

In the *Life of Antony*, however, Plutarch himself stands as the accuser. His treatment of Antony's politically disastrous attachment to the Ptolemaic queen of Egypt, Cleopatra VII, is a case study in the addiction by which a man subverts his political and military obligations, succumbing to the whims of the woman by whom he is bewitched. Antony's intemperate and self-destructive behavior is shown to have had repercussions not only for his public standing but for the Roman state itself.

Antony is already romantically entangled with Cleopatra, and already in an unsteady relationship with his political ally and rival Octavian, when a marriage alliance is proposed between the two men through Octavian's sister Octavia. All parties are aware that the tension between Antony and Octavian poses the risk of civil war, and with hindsight the