

The hymen is a problem, still. Virginity, Imperforation, and Contraception, from Greece to Rome

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The project of this special issue of EuGeStA is to go back to basics, and update our knowledge of denominations, definitions and semantic fields, in light of recent scholarship on gender and sexuality, in Greek and Roman societies. The intent is to refresh our awareness of the *language* that shaped those representations. The presupposition is that language opens the way to our understanding of culture. This is particularly true when talking about virginity¹.

Virginity is an important marker of gender, since the social control of chastity, before and out of wedlock, concerns women, not men. Virginity is a touchstone in any society's arrangement of norms, theories and behaviors that involve sex and eroticism. If we endorse Michel Foucault's

1 — I am grateful to Jacqueline Fabre-Serris, who organized the International conference *Sexe et genre: questions de dénomination*, held at the Fondation Hardt, on October 26-27, 2012, and to the participants in those lively discussions. Their comments and feedback helped me clarify the language and the arguments of this paper. I would like to thank also the anonymous reviewers for EuGeStA, for their constructive input.

definition of sexuality in *The Use of Pleasure*, as “the correlation, in a culture, between domains of knowledge, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity”, virginity occupies a strategic place at the intersection of medical knowledge, kinship rules, moral values and the subjective experience of desire, pleasure, prohibitions and transgressions². If we prefer to map sexuality, as I do, by charting discourses and representations of pleasures, desires, bodies and institutions, again, virginity appears to be at the junction of these coordinates. Virginity is relevant in regard to marriage and the family; it involves a corporeal condition; it requires abstention from, or, at least control of erotic drives; it entails a particular regime of pleasure and pain. Furthermore, if we are interested in the dynamic transfers of knowledge and language, virginity poses a challenge: it is a matter of inquiry into anatomy and physiology, but it offers a recurrent, dramatic theme in fictional narratives and the theater, from Homer and Hesiod, to tragedy, comedy, poetry and the novel. Virginity is everywhere.

In this reflection on antiquity, I am operating with the following, gendered and “conservative”, definition of female virginity: inexperience of full vaginal intercourse with a male³. This definition might sound exceedingly positivistic, but I believe that it captures the essential, without being misleading. A very interesting sociological line of inquiry on sexual behavior has produced serious criticism of the idea that virginity is “a given”, and has resulted, instead, in the contention that it should be considered as a “variable social concept”⁴. The variability of the concept,

2 — Foucault 1984: 10: “The project was a history of sexuality as experience – if, by « experience », we mean the correlation, in a culture, between domains of knowledge, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity” (my translation of: “*Le projet était une histoire de la sexualité comme expérience –, si on entend par expérience la corrélation, dans une culture, entre domaines de savoir, types de normativité et formes de subjectivité*”). Note that the definition of « sexuality » applies to a culture, meaning « any culture », obviously including the cultures of Greece and Rome, which are the subject of the last two volumes of the *History of Sexuality*. It is, therefore, a transcultural definition, not exclusively appropriate to one historical location (the European modern period, after the Council of Trent), as overzealous readers of the first volume (*La volonté de savoir*, Paris 1976), have argued. Foucault changed radically his project, from a focus on the modern and contemporary *dispositif de sexualité*, to a genealogy over a long period of time, beginning in classical antiquity. Accordingly, he also changed his definition of what he continued to call *sexualité*. In the same *Introduction* to the second volume, Foucault made explicit that the coinage of the term “sexuality” in the nineteenth century, was a fact that one should neither underestimate nor over-interpret (Foucault, 1984a, p. 9).

3 — We ought to question, and not take for granted, the heterosexual tenor of this definition. For a discussion of the dominant, heterosexual paradigm within which we tend to study virginity (focusing on the controversy about the hymen), see Kelly 2000: 103-125. The semantic field of *parthenia* directs us toward females, unpenetrated by males. For the connection between *parthenia*, female homoeroticism, and marriage, see Calame 1977 and 1997; and Boehringer 2007. For the extension of the word *parthenos* to a boy, more to the point to his *psyche*, see Cairns 1997. On male virginity, see also the scholarship on the Greek novel, mentioned *infra*, note 19. For an overview of contemporary perceptions of virginity, across gender divides, sexual identities and sexual preferences, see Carpenter 2005 and 2009.

4 — Berger and Wenger 1973.

for different people in different contexts, cannot be studied experimentally, in an ancient society. But on the basis of our evidence, we can observe that the loss of virginity is associated not to courtship, flirtation, kisses, caresses, or other erotic acts, but to successful genital coition – as it is the case for 81.3% of the individuals involved in Berger and Wegner’s inquiry, conducted in the United States in 1973. This minimal definition has the advantage of not involving the hymen – unfortunately named after the Greek word that means “membrane” –, which is a source of infinite misunderstanding.

In western medicine, the existence of a physical sign of virginity has always been, to say the least, controversial. Even under the pen of its most zealous and systematic defenders, the theorists of legal medicine, in the nineteenth century, we find an exceedingly prudent awareness that this anatomical notion is highly contested. In the *Elements of Medical Jurisprudence*, Theodric Romeyn Beck, the first American doctor who laid down the modern principles and rationale of the discipline (1823), we read that “The physical signs of virginity have been the subject of keen discussion among anatomists and physiologists, and none of them has led to greater enquiry, than the existence of the hymen”. As if applying a principle of deontological precaution, Beck warns his colleagues: “The general sense of the profession is certainly decidedly opposed to considering it as a non-natural appearance. The following circumstances, however, require to be noted, before we form an opinion concerning it as a sign of virginity. It may be wanting from original mal-conformation, or it may be destroyed by disease or some other cause, and yet the female be pure”⁵. The hymen exists, in other words, but it is not there.

I will come back to this crucial moment in the history of virginity, but, for the time being, before discussing what the ancient Greeks meant by “*parthenia*”, I want to clarify what I think about “virginity”. It is significant to me that even those physicians who most cared for a piece of corporeal evidence capable of exposing rape, sexual abuse or, simply, copulation, felt obliged to express such a serious doubt. The evidence at stake was highly desirable for their practice, but they knew that the semiotic power of the “lunular fold” was, at best, intermittent. In current research on female sexuality, this honesty is finally being replaced by something less ambiguous, and much more assertive. The Swedish medical community has taken an official step, to disconnect the acknowledgement that women may present a membranous structure around the opening of their vagina, from any intimation that the integrity (or the breakage) of such structure bears witness to sexual status. The “vaginal

5 — Beck and Dunlop 1825: 51-52.

corona", as the membranous structure is now called, has nothing to do with the evidence of sexual activity⁶. The credibility of the "hymen" is demystified. We do not need to include a pseudo-Hellenic physical sign, in our definition of virginity.

Unlearned in the works of Aphrodite

At first sight, the condition of a woman who has not yet experienced heterosexual, vaginal penetration might appear uncomplicated⁷. Most probably, that woman will be young, not married, and living in her parents' house. She will be chaste and tightly supervised. Hesiod portrays the archetypal "parthenic" existence. In a glacial, wintery day, the violent Northern wind, Boreas, sweeps through everything, but "it does not blow through the soft-skinned virgin (*parthenike*) who stays indoors with her dear mother, nor knowing as yet the works of much-golden Aphrodite (οὐ πω ἔργα ἰδυῖα πολυχρύσου Ἀφροδίτης), and who washes her delicate body and anoints herself richly with oil and lies down in an inner room within the house..."⁸. Unlearned in the *erga* of the goddess who brings love and sensuality to mortals and immortals, a *parthenike* is not supposed to have sex with a man, and yet she makes herself beautiful. Hesiod's vignette does not mention sexual desire, but it captures the erotic potential of the virginal state⁹. Much later, Aristotle, will go into details on puberty and the preparedness of an adolescent's body for sex. It is at that age that young females need guardianship, because they feel the erotic drive more than at any other time. Unless they are controlled, they will enjoy the pleasures of Aphrodite and become sexually avid, partly because of the memory of pleasure, and partly because intercourse enlarges the ducts that carry the fluids involved in generation (menstrual blood, for Aristotle)¹⁰.

Properly brought up, a young woman will abstain from sex. A pivotal event awaits her, which will change her life: marriage¹¹. In the archaic

6 — See the information circulated by RFSU (*Riksförbundet för sexuell upplysning* or *Swedish Association for Sexuality Education*): http://www.rfsu.se/Bildbank/Dokument/Praktikor/praktika-Vaginal_corona2009.pdf. On the description of the hymen in the *Grey's Anatomy* (up to the 1995 edition), see Wogan-Browne 2003.

7 — Christianson and Eriksson 2011: 167. For the contextualization of this gynecological debate, in Muslim societies, see Hegazy and Al-Rukban 2012: 114.

8 — Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 519-524. The adjective *parthenike*, "virginal", is used instead of the noun *parthenos*, virgin, also in *Iliad*, 18, 567; *Odyssey* 11, 39, and, perhaps, 7, 30.

9 — On the attractiveness of virgins, even on the tragic stage and in sacrificial situations, see Scodel 1996.

10 — Aristotle, *History of Animals*, 7, 581b 11-21. See also Soranos, *Gynecology*, 1, 33: "Virgins who have not been brought up wisely and lack education arouse in themselves premature desires". On the crucial supervision of female sexuality, see Schneider 1971 and Cooper 2002: 91.

11 — For a very selective sample of scholarship on marriage, the wedding, and virginity in

and classical period, a young Greek woman would be involved in ritual performances, in preparation for marriage¹². “The citizen girl”, writes Elaine Fantham, “normally anticipated only one pattern of life: marriage to a fellow citizen chosen for her by her father or the kinsman legally responsible for her, the *kyrios*; the prerequisites were her chastity and a dowry, which would attract a husband from the same financial class, and decide the degree of prestige she herself enjoyed in her marriage”¹³.

This picture, however, is deceptively idyllic. Firstly, most of the narratives about pubescent females are less than uneventful. Seductions, rapes, abductions, clandestine affairs, punishments by furious fathers, unwanted pregnancies, death, metamorphosis, immolation in sacrifice: this is the material of myths, plays, poems and novels. For all the normativity at work in an ancient patriarchal society, it seems that women entered the domain of fiction as disruptive characters, most often through no fault of their own. The sexual vicissitudes of teen-age females who, because of their physiological beauty and sexual energy, were not only especially desirable, but also themselves capable of intense desire, requires a more nuanced understanding of desire and pleasure. Secondly – and even more challenging – is the question of their physical state. Beyond youthfulness and attractiveness, soft skin, essential oils and humoral exuberance, what do we know about their bodies? If their sexual behavior is so important, and if they are so vulnerable to male lust, while being under parental control, we might expect the Greeks to have found a working solution to the dilemma of what Simon Goldhill calls the “*knowability* of chastity, the *testability* of chastity”¹⁴. The “linkage of sex and knowledge”¹⁵, Goldhill argues, typically frames discourses and narratives about female sexuality. On the same line, Kathleen Coyne Kelly discusses the “ontology” of virginity, even the “epistemology of virginity”¹⁶. Finally, we encounter our first, major problem with the word “*parthenos*”. What does it mean, exactly? What is *parthenia*? To understand what the Ancients thought about the state of the female body, before heterosexual intercourse, the very first challenge is meta-linguistic. We have to find, or provide, viable definitions which fit the use of the terms, in different contexts. Those definitions already involve the problem of “testability” and “ontology”.

The first section of this paper will discuss this vocabulary. More precisely, I will revisit the arguments made in *Le Corps virginal*, a book

ancient Greece, see Schmitt Pantel 1977; Vernant 1980; Lyghounis 1992; Sinos and Oakley 1993; Vêrilhac and Vial 1998; Ferrari 2003.

12 — Calame 1977: 244 and 1997.

13 — Fantham 1975: 48.

14 — Goldhill 1995: 121.

15 — Goldhill 1995: 122.

16 — Kelly 2000: 5, 22, 105. See also Kelly and Leslie 1999.

written between 1983 and 1986, and translated into English, as *Greek Virginity*, in 1990. I will put a number of those arguments to the test, in view of subsequent reactions and comments. The second section of the paper will advance a new hypothesis on the medical knowledge that lay in the background, or in the vicinity, of specific statements (and omissions) concerning virginity, to be found in our sources. The two sections are connected. While re-examining the terminology, I will argue that, when ancient medicine initiates the discussion on the existence of a virginal membrane in the female pudenda (what, in a number of modern European languages, we call *hymen*), it does so in the context of a growing concern about signs. The crucial point is the *semiotic* function of the seal that is, or is not, naturally present in every woman's vagina. What matters is the dilemma of visible-versus-invisible copulation; detectable-versus-undetectable sexual acts. This explains the maddening incoherence of the language. But it also explains the lack of urgency that a culture – although keenly concerned about female chastity, before, outside and during wedlock – was capable of demonstrating when dealing with the control of such chastity. In this context, as well as in the narratives about extra-marital sex, it appears that the Greeks were content to count upon a different kind of sign. What bears testimony to the heterosexual activity of a woman is pregnancy. This transformation of the body was much more reliable than a fractured tissue, much more stable than an ephemeral stain of blood.

The ancient Greeks believed that coition between a woman and a man was fecund, most of the time. As long as they could trust the conception of a child as the effect of copulation, thus as a certain indication of its cause, things were simple. A technical interruption of the chain of events, therefore, was to disturb that trust. This way of interfering with nature was contraception. The same physician who engages in a thorough discussion of the anatomy of an un-penetrated woman, Soranos of Ephesus (II century CE), pays much greater attention than previous medical writers to the circumstances and the signs of penetration, on the one hand, and provides an extensive collection of contraceptive remedies (not just abortifacients), on the other hand. This occurs, probably, not by chance. The transition from a representation of virginity as sexual inexperience, but without the anatomical support of the hymen, to the need to pin down sexual integrity via a concrete *signaculum*, to be found in the genital apparatus, appears to be correlated to the increasing awareness (and the pharmacological ability to act on it), that heterosexual coition might go unobserved.

Parthenia: a semantic field

In *Greek Virginity*, I had argued that, in order to capture the peculiar crystallization of the ideas about *parthenia*, we need to interlace three problematic aspects of the situation of a woman, before heterosexual, vaginal intercourse. These are: language, the body and social status. Without repeating the whole argument, thus without presenting and discussing the entire corpus of primary sources, I will try to clarify the major points.

Terminology is crucially important because the usage of the words *parthenos*, *parthenia*, *pseudo-parthenos*, *parthenios*, and *parthenias* is confusing. This confusion is simply a matter of fact. On the one hand, the noun *parthenia* denotes a condition that can be taken, λαμβάνειν, (Eschines, Letter 10), and taken away, ἀφελέσθαι (Pollux, *Onomastikon*, 3, 42). It is a treasure that can be protected, φυλάσσειν (*Greek Anthology*, 9, 44). A metaphorical sentence, like the one we encounter in Pindar, “to loosen the bridle of *parthenia*”, implies this same meaning¹⁷. There is ample evidence, therefore, that if a *parthenos* is endowed with *parthenia*, she possesses “something”. To complicate the semantic picture, *parthenia* may seem to be there, although sometimes it is not, or not any longer. The evidence includes the word *pseudo-parthenos*, in Herodotus’ narrative on the young women who, in Libya, fight to determine who is still a true *parthenos* and who is a false one¹⁸; the ordeals of virginity in Greek novels¹⁹, and the definition of the word *parthenios* or *parthenias*, as the child of a “seemingly” *parthenos*.

This semantic divergence places us in a tight spot. On the one hand, since *parthenia* can be taken, lost, or protected, in a sexual act, a woman who may either preserve *parthenia*, or be deprived of it, is supposed to have a quality that must be sexual, and cannot be a mere social status. On the other hand, since a *parthenios* or *parthenias* is defined as the offspring of a *parthenos*²⁰, this ought to imply that a woman can have sex, bear a child, and still be denominated *parthenos*. In the *Iliad*, Hermes seduces Polymele, who then gives birth to Eudoros, a swift and valiant warrior. Eudoros is a *parthenios*. The short, and yet detailed, narrative tells us about his mother seduction by the god, their swift and clandestine (λάθρα) embrace, his birth, his mother’s marriage to a mortal man

17 — Pindar, *Isthmian* 8, 100: λύοι κεν χαλινὸν ὑφ’ ἥρωϊ παρθενίας. See also *Olympian* 6, 31: κρύψε δὲ παρθενίαν ὠδίνα κόλποις; *Pythian* 3, 34.

18 — Herodotus, 6, 180.

19 — In Greek novels, virginity is crucial as a feature of the plots, and in the construction of characters. Virginity, Reardon wrote in 1969, “normally forms the primary motif of the Greek novel” (Reardon 1969: 300). Since then, the narrative, adventurous, and potentially comic, representation of virginity, in the novel, has received great, and excellent, attention. See Winkler 1990; Zeitlin 1990; Konstan 1994; Goldhill 1995; and Brethes 2007: 104-115, 249-268.

20 — Pollux, *Onomastikon*, *sub verbo parthenias*.

who wooed her generously, and, finally, the “adoption”, so to speak, of the child by his loving maternal grand-father²¹. A less happily-ending story is that of the Spartan *Partheniai*. These were the sons of unmarried young women, who, during a war, had been forced to have sex, in order to procreate children for the city. Once the demographic emergency was over, these boys were singled out as “virginal”, and mistreated. They plotted against the city, left Sparta, and founded Taras²². Taken at face value, these stories might lead us to think that the noun *parthenos* is compatible with sexual activity, thus bears a social, not sexual, meaning: that of “unmarried woman”.

Ultimately, we have to decide: a *parthenos* must be either an unwed, or a vaginally un-penetrated, young woman. The utterances and the definitions to be found in our sources generate this semantic quandary. We can extricate ourselves out of it, by reading carefully the work of ancient lexicographers.

The terms *parthenios* and *parthenias*, we learn, refer to the “child of an unmarried woman”, but more precisely of a woman who is believed to be a *parthenos*. *Sub verbo* “*parthenios*”, we find consistent definitions, explicitly based on such belief. Pollux’ *Onomastikon* (III, 21) explains that, if a child is called *parthenias*, this is because “he was born of a woman who is supposed to be a *parthenos*”, ἐκ τῆς δοκούσης εἶναι παρθένου. In Hesychius, we read that *parthenioi* are called that way, “because we believe that those who engender them are still *parthenoi*”, ἀπό τοῦ δοκεῖν ἔτι παρθένους εἶναι. The *Suidas* defines *partheneios* as “the one who was engendered by what appears to be still a *parthenos*”, ἐκ παρθένου ἔτι δοκούσης. We also see similar definitions in the *Scholia* to the *Iliad*, IV, 499, and to Pindar, *Olympian*, II, 48, but the verb meaning “to believe” is not δοκεῖν, but νομίζειν. A *parthenios* is the child of a woman “still believed” (ἔτι νομιζομένης) to be a *parthenos*. These glosses agree that there is a quality – that of being a *parthenos* – which can be still taken for granted and attributed to a woman, even when it is no longer the case. The adverb ἔτι, “still”, points to a time-sensitive error. We keep believing that the woman is, *still now*, ἔτι, what she has ceased to be. This cannot mean that we were misinformed as to the date of her wedding. The woman is not any longer what she continues to appear to be, not because she got married, but because she had clandestine sex – as her maternity, now, demonstrates. As Hesychius and the *scholion* to Pindar specify, the sexual encounter occurred secretly: λάθρα, κρυφᾶ. We find this detail also in the Homeric tale I just commented: Polymele and Hermes went to bed, and made love λάθρα. Their issue, Eudoros, was a *parthenios*, the

21 — Homer, *Iliad*, 16, 179-192; *parthenios*: 180.

22 — Strabo, 6, 3, 3. See Qviller 1996; Ebbot 2003: 59-72; and Kennel 2010: 43-44.

child of a woman who was supposed to be a *parthenos*. The appearance – or say: the reputation, the social status – of the woman was misleading. It is, again, in this semantic context, secrecy, that the fact of giving birth can be qualified as “virginal labour”, παρθενία ὥδις²³.

Once she has factored in the clandestine circumstances of a *parthenos*' sexual activity, however, the modern scholar is still left with a nagging question: why? Why call those children *parthenioi*? For two reasons. The first one is cognitive inertia: we did not know yet that their mother was not a *parthenos* any longer. Through those children (and to put a label on *them*), we continue to intimate that their mother was, supposedly, a virgin. This applies to Eudoros. The second is sheer, culturally coded, sarcasm. The alleged virginity of their unmarried mother will now stick to her children, forever. It is not meant as a compliment. As the ethnographic context shows, when we look at the vicissitudes of the Spartan *Partheniai*, for instance, this denomination was not a plain, taxonomic, genealogical term, but an insulting label: a stigma²⁴.

A bit of comparison can help. In Italian, the insult “son of a bitch”, can be rendered as *figlio di puttana*, “son of a prostitute”, but also as *figlio di buona donna*, “son of a good woman”. This is a euphemism by antiphrasis. At the denotative level, to be a *buona donna* is a perfectly honorable thing, of course, but to be addressed, or labeled, as the issue thereof, for a man or a woman, might be ironically flattering, (in certain circles) but it is, most often, offensive. There is an obvious semantic reversal in this turn of phrase, which comes across as a piece of cruel mockery. As the Italian linguist Gianna Marcato nicely put it, the speaker who makes use of expressions such as *figlio di buona donna*, *figlio di puttana*, or, in Roman dialect, *fijo de na mignotta*, might express either admiration, invective, or indignation. These connotations cannot be clearly distinguished, independently of the context and the speaker's intentions²⁵. The same logic applies to the Spanish expression *hijo de su madre*, “son of his mother”. Again, in purely descriptive terms, to be the son of his own mother is just a fact, true for all human beings, but to be categorized as such, in a patrilineal society, carries contemptuous innuendos: most obviously the *hijo de su madre*, lacks a legitimate father, which alludes to the woman's

23 — Pindar, *Olympian* 6, 31: Pitana, pregnant of Poseidon, « concealed the virginal labour (or the child, product of the labor) in her folds », κρύψε δὲ παρθενίαν ὥδινα κόλποις. She gave birth to a girl, Evadne who, in turn, had sex with Apollo, and delivered Iamos, “under a dark thicket”. The baby was hidden (55). In *Pythian* 3, Coronis, who already bears Apollo's child, has sex with a stranger, unbeknownst of her father, κρύβδαν πατρός. Apollo dispatches Artemis to burn her to ashes, but, in extremis, he extracts his baby son from the corpse. Interestingly, Coronis is called *parthenos*, when seen as a girl who lives among people who ignore her sexual vicissitudes (34), but “mother”, when Apollo speaks about her (42). Pindar qualifies the Muses as “Elikonian virgins” (*Isthmian* 8, 57).

24 — Strabo, 6, 3, 3.

25 — Cortelazzo 1988: 98.

sexual activity, out of wedlock. In this context, female extramarital sex is a matter of prohibition and, if discovered, of shame. Reassigned to the line of descent of his mother, the boy becomes the embodiment of her improper behavior, which reflects on his honor. This miniature reminder of one's place in the kinship system is meant to be not a lesson in anthropology, but a slight.

It would be highly inadequate to ground an interpretation, upon a comparative parallel. But we already know that, in certain contexts, to brand a young man as "virginal", a *parthenios* or a *parthenias*, was most unflattering. The Spartans boys, born out of wedlock, for instance, were "called" *partheniai*. They were stigmatized. Fatherless, they belonged genealogically to their mother – allegedly a virgin. Ion, as we will see in a moment, dreads to discover that he is a *nothos*, and a *partheneuma*, a bastard, a piece of virginal business. Language is culture.

Parthenia: a physical condition

Anatomy is crucially important. The abstract noun *parthenia* designates "something", but what exactly? It would be easy to pin down *parthenia* to a body part –, a membranous structure – as "we" might expect. But, for a Greek physician, in a virgin's vagina, there was no tangible, observable, recognizable anatomical piece, the presence of which signified integrity (as far as heterosexual copulation is concerned), the breakage of which would constitute irrefutable proof that a penis had been inserted. What we call the "hymen" did not exist. Until Soranos of Ephesus, a methodist doctor, active in Rome at the beginning of II century CE, ancient medicine never once mentioned the existence of a *natural* occlusion of the female pudenda. In his *Gynecology*, Soranos does mention a virginal membrane. He does so, however, not to describe its shape and explain its function, but only in order to deny its very existence. It was, he claimed, merely a false belief²⁶.

Medical knowledge is a touchstone of what ordinary people might have thought about the body. Coupled with the silence of the literary sources, its testimony makes for a strong argument about Greek culture, in the long run. The ancient Greeks could talk about defloration, and even about the associated bleeding, but the blood could go unnoticed and be easily cleaned up. What they could not rely upon was a *semiotic organ*, the presence or absence of which, would tell if a woman had experienced, or not, the introduction of a penis in her vagina. What was missing was a simple, stable, binary, on/off, signal.

26 — Soranos, *Gynecology*, 16-17.

For the historian of sexuality, this peculiarity is quite striking. Peter Green explains it away, as a predictable matter of the division of labor. “Surely it indicates instead that actual birthing and obstetrics were restricted to female midwives, who, being lower class and women, were ignored by the medical theorists”²⁷. For a Marxist scholar, things may perhaps be that simple. No need to read the texts. Unfortunately, the whole discussion on virginity and female sexuality, in Soranos’ *Gynecology*, is conducted with the explicit intent of training midwives, by examining, valorizing, and improving their expertise. It also includes evidence from dissection and the insertion of the probe into the vagina. The competence of midwives, and the interest of physicians in that competence, has been extensively studied, in recent years²⁸, so that it is rash, to say the least, to liquidate the silence on what we call “hymen”, and the denial of its existence, in such crude terms. Completely at odds with this oversimplification, the great specialist of Soranos, Owsei Tempkin, found his arguments on virginity to be “surprising”²⁹. Indeed they are.

This surprise strongly reinforces our appreciation of the relativity of erotic cultures³⁰. It also challenges us. The ancient Greeks could conceive of a negative sexual condition, for a female who had never been involved in vaginal, penetrative sex. The absence of a detectable, familiar, obvious piece of evidence for such condition, however, contributes to the elusiveness of the terminology. There was “something” called *parthenia*: something that was defined negatively, as inexperience of intercourse, but the effects of that inexperience could be described in positive terms. Loosing virginity meant to loose a general physical condition. Soranos offers a lengthy discussion not only of a virgin’s vagina, but also of the side effects of *parthenia*, for the entire body. *Parthenia* was a condition whose healthy, or unhealthy, consequences were a matter of debate. He saw the benefits of its prolonged, and even permanent, preservation. While denying the existence of the hymen, therefore, he contended that

27 — Green 2009.

28 — Dean-Jones 1996; King 1998.

29 — Temkin 1991: XXXIX: [Soranos’] “denial of the existence of the hymen is surprising”. There are scholars who cannot cope with the surprise, and try various maneuvers in order to either minimize or, purely and simply, deny the evidence. Yvonne Knibiehler, while summarizing *Greek Virginity*, speculates : « En quoi consiste ce que nous appelons la « toilette intime » ? Il n’est pas exclu que les filles aient introduit des pessaires dans leur vagin, assouplissant ou éliminant ainsi l’« hymen », cela expliquerait que la fameuse membrane paraisse ignorée des anciens » (2012: 29). True, we cannot rule out that Greek girls routinely destroyed their hymens though self-medication – but we do not have the slightest allusion to this either. I will discuss Ann Hanson’ arguments *infra*.

30 — In order to understand the concern for female virginity, in any society, comparison is the way to go. Even more than history, anthropology shows that not all societies attribute value to female sexual integrity. For an overview of the correlation between virginity (valued or ignored) and practices of marriage, see Schlegel 1991. Studies on virginity in ancient societies include: Wegner 1988: 20-40; Knight 2001; Cooper 2002: 91-92; and Wassen 2005: 80-89.

virginity was healthful, thus agreeing with those for whom the emission of seed was harmful, and weakening³¹. All living beings, human and non-human, females and males, were better off by abstaining from intercourse, and cultivating *parthenia*. And yet, *parthenia* did not materialize in situ, as a transversal membrane, naturally closing the female pudendum.

Parthenia: a social condition

Social status is crucially important. A number of authoritative classical scholars have claimed that a *parthenos* was an unmarried young woman – nothing more³². This cannot be the case. The social circumstances of virginity have to be understood in connection with terminology and anatomy.

The utterances of the term *parthenos* lead to the inescapable conclusion that the dual opposition of “marriage versus non-marriage” is just not adequate as a comprehensive definition of *parthenos*. To be, or not to be, a *parthenos* is a matter of “sex versus non-sex”³³. Hesiod’s *parthenike*, lounging at home on a winter’s day, is ignorant of the works of Aphrodite, not of the domestic arrangements of conjugal life. The shepherd girl who, in a poem by Ps-Theocritus’, *Oaristys*, cheerfully announces: “I came here a *parthenos*, I leave being a *gyne*”³⁴, has just made love for the first time, unbeknownst to her father, outdoors in the fields. Under the circumstances, the line does not mean: “There we are, we have contracted mar-

31 — Soranos, *Gynecology*, 1, 30-33. On Soranos’ arguments on the wholesomeness of virginity, see Manuli 1983; Pinault 1992, and King 2004: 47-48.

32 — See Calame 1977: 65; Sissa 1987: 100-103; Loraux 1993: 162; Grimal 2007: 433-484. Bonnie MacLachlan notes that “The Greek *parthenos* was a social, not a physiological, term and denoted a girl not yet bound to a man. This explains literary signs of distress in young brides and the determination of certain Olympian goddesses to retain their virginity and, hence, enjoy a measurable degree of autonomy” (2006: 166-168).

33 — One of the most bizarre comment ever written on *Greek Virginity* is that I allegedly share the purely sociological definition of virginity! While engaging in interesting comments on the word *hupoparthenos* (to be found in Aristophanes, fr. 140 Kassel & Austin 1983-2001) which she understands (rightly, in my opinion) as designating a half-virgin woman, or a « virgin below », Edoarda Barra declares: “Je ne suis donc pas l’interprétation de Giulia Sissa (selon laquelle la virginité n’a rien à voir avec la question de l’hymen et de la défloration sexuelle et désigne en général une classe d’âge) ni celle de Claude Calame, pour qui la *parthenia* désignerait un statut non marital”. Did Barra read the book, or, at least, the entire introduction? I wish she had, for her sake, so that she would have found a corpus of sources and a set of arguments about virginity, defloration and the non-existence of the hymen. She would have been alerted to the specific challenge that Greek erotic culture launches to us: how to understand the compatibility of two facts, no hymen, and yet a fully embodied virginity; how to make sense of a sexual inexperience that does not materialize as a piece of skin; how to think virginity out of the hymeneal box, so to speak. Instead, Barra launches into an unnecessarily belligerent claim about the sexual nature of *parthenia*, and the representation of the vagina and the mouth, quoting a couple of texts and proudly rediscovering the wheel. See Barra 2010, especially 57.

34 — Pseudo-Theocritus, *Oaristys*, 65. A similar joke on the metamorphosis of a *parthenos* into a *gyne* can be read in Diogenes Laërtius: IX, 42.

riage!” It can only mean, in that context: “We had sex. I am not a virgin any longer”. In an analogous language, Democritus is supposed to have rightly guessed that a young woman (who had accompanied Hippocrates on a two-days visit to the philosopher’s house), the first day was a *kore*, the day after, a *gyne*³⁵. They had not celebrated their wedding during the night.

Medical language confirms the corporeal reality of the virginal condition. The anonymous writer of *Diseases of Virgins*, as Helen King tells us, accounts for a disorder that strikes “girls who, despite being ‘ripe for marriage’ remain unmarried. In the body of a girl of this age there is a greater quantity of blood than usual ‘because of food and the growth of the body’. This blood, moving towards the womb ready to leave the body, is unable to escape because the ‘mouth of exit’ is not open”³⁶. What matters are the repercussions of non-marriage on the body, because no-marriage means no-sex. As I just mentioned, Soranos explains that *parthenia* is highly recommendable, in opposition to the damages caused by the emission of seed, and by maternity. The entire discussion involves arguments about semen, menstruations, defloration, pregnancy, strength, weakness, movement and other physical alterations³⁷. In both texts, the point is the impact, positive or negative, of heterosexual – and, crucially, prolific, coition – upon the female body.

Marriage, wedding, and furtive love

That marriage remains the reference point in this entire discussion is clearly true, but we must distinguish between different levels of relevance. Marriage is social, but also sexual. Marriage is the destination of a woman, but this does not amount to a mere change of juridical status. It is the condition of an acceptable, and highly valorized, sexual activity; it is the end of her pre-marital chastity; it is the context of her fidelity. A wife is expected to be sexually active and to deliver children. This is why she is healthier than a lingering virgin, for the Hippocratic writer of *Diseases of Virgins*, or why she is more prone to health problems, for Soranos. What is at stake is the proper function of her genital apparatus, within the proper societal arrangement. A woman ought to marry and remain sexually faithful to her husband. Marriage is incompatible with prolonged virginity, in other words, because of the imperative to perform conjugal sex. Any Greek phrase about *parthenia* pre-supposes that we are talking about an unmarried woman. It is from such a woman *only*, that

35 — Diogenes Laërtius: IX, 42.

36 — King 2004: 50.

37 — Soranos, *Gynecology*, 1, 30-33.

we (when we embrace the standpoint of Greek society and its norms) expect perfect chastity. When we talk about a *parthenos*, therefore, we postulate that she is “ripe for marriage”, and still unmarried, but we also presume that she should be chaste. If she has been properly brought up, she ought to be sexually intact³⁸. A wife, by contrast, must procreate, since that is the purpose of marriage³⁹. Therefore having sex is what she is supposed to do. Social *expectations about gender*, not merely social status, are of the essence. Gender is relevant. Sex is relevant. More to the point: gender is the dynamic template of how a female, as opposed to a male, should handle sex before and after marriage. Gender sets the limits and the norms of sexual life⁴⁰.

The viewpoint of the observer/speaker on gender – her or his assumptions, and standards – is involved in the use of the language. Language is culture.

Let me unravel this critical point. *Parthenos* denotes, firstly, a social situation: “to be not-married”. Marriage, γάμος, is the result of a transaction between the woman’s male tutor and her future husband. One man gives her in marriage to another. In the language of anthropology, marriage is a complex, pivotal phenomenon. It entails the circulation of women, in view of the formation of households; the multiplication of bonds that involve groups of kin; the creation of cultural (as opposed to natural) relations. In most societies, the agreement, and the beginning of the couple’s cohabitation are marked by a ritual: a wedding. This is not intended merely for entertainment. Through the nuptial feast, marriage becomes emphatically and ostentatiously visible, for the entire community. In ancient Greece, such a spectacle consists of a parade, a meal and a party, in which the alliance between the two families is put on display. A wedding is a social occasion. And yet it includes allusions to the forthcoming sexual encounter. The unveiling of the bride before the guests, precedes the retreat of the couple to the bedroom, accompanied by nuptial songs⁴¹. Marriage as a social transaction, therefore, requires a social

38 — *Ibid.*, 1, 33: “Virgins who have not been brought up wisely and lack education arouse in themselves premature desires”.

39 — *Ibid.*, 1, 34.

40 — On gender, see Joan Scott’s classic essay (Scott 1986). For an update on the use of the category in Classical Studies, see Sebillotte Cuchet 2012. From a theoretical point of view, I agree with Brooke Holmes’ approach to gender and, more generally, to the body in Greek culture. Like Holmes, I think that the opposition/separation of sex and gender is highly misleading. The challenge is for us to understand the relevance of multiple forms of knowledge, and the co-existence / competition of their explanatory voices, in different texts and contexts. See also Holmes 2010 and 2013.

41 — Sissa 1987: 116-120. For a very useful overview of the ritual patterns, the poetic performances and the content of the nuptial songs (such as: the praise of the bride and the groom, their beauty and skills, their illustrious families; the invocation of divinities; the allusion to the bed and the bedroom), see Lyghounis 1991. Lyghounis emphasizes the continuity from the archaic to the

performance, and this social performance makes explicit allusions to sex. Defloration is made public. Eros is part of the event.

By recognizing the erotic dimension of a wedding, we do justice not only to our sources (textual and visual), but also to the goal of marriage. Marriage is a social fact, of course, but why? Because it allows a man to acquire a brother-in-law, as Claude Lévi-Strauss wickedly claimed. But first of all, in so many Greek texts, men and women get married in order to produce children, a process that, in nature (as it is acknowledged in most societies), has to start with a penis being inserted into a vagina. All over the world, through dances, music, speeches, jokes, garments, kisses, flowers, colors, broken china and other symbolic actions, nuptial rites cheerfully announce that this is beginning to happen, in real time, that very night. It is the logic of social reproduction that involves the body. It is society that, under the circumstances, works through sex. Now, if we place a virgin in this context, we can see that her body lies at the core of this social/sexual logic. Her transition from *parthenos* to *gyne* is the point of the whole spectacular set up. The wedding-night, Goldhill points out, is seen as “a specifically bodily transformation”⁴². Through the wedding, a young woman becomes married, both physically, and visibly. Vice versa, as long as she is unmarried, she is also unwed. Because of what we just said, this fact is usually well known: no ceremony, no wedding-night, no husband, no new residence, and no children. A lot of ostensible symbolization, and a lot of real consequences are missing – and it shows. From a woman who still has to undergo the bridal celebration and who has not become the legitimate wife of a man, we expect that she should be what she seems to be: a virgin⁴³.

The problem is that things might be – and frequently were – different. While not having a husband, that young woman might have had sex. We just do not know. And this ignorance matters, in terms of gender asymmetry. No one cares about a groom’s inexperience, except perhaps in view of poor erotic competence. Everyone is concerned with a bride’s *parthenia*. In our literary sources, from the archaic to the classical period, because of the compelling moral norms, sexual activity is completely unacceptable for a woman, out of wedlock. Because it should not exist, it must remain clandestine. Let me offer four examples: Creusa, Callisto, Iole, Hero.

Hellenistic period; she also acknowledges the visual and spectacular dimension of the feast. She fails to mention the unveiling, however, and plays down the theme of the fertility wished to the couple. For a meticulous description of the ritual, especially the action inside the bedroom, see Magnien 1936.

42 — Goldhill 1995: 37.

43 — On the presumption of virginity, see Foscett 2002: 47. See also Wegner 1988: 22-23, for a similar logic.

In Euripides' *Ion*, Apollo seduces young Creusa. This has to be kept secret. In this case, the young woman succeeds in covering up not only the furtive sexual act with the god, but also its macroscopic consequences: the birth of a son, Ion. Creusa becomes pregnant, conceals her pregnancy, manages to give birth in secret and, by the same logic, exposes the baby. During her alleged *parthenia*, she even finds a way to hide from her mother the confection of the swaddling clothes, which she will recognize in due time⁴⁴. Upon this revelation, Ion realizes that he is the child of what, through all these vicissitudes, still seemed to be a *parthenos* – an unmarried/unwed girl, living as such, in her parents' house. When he hears for the first time the story of his life, the boy is horrified at the thought of his status: he will be, he fears, a *partheneuma*. This word is yet another variation on *parthenos*. We can understand its meaning as: "a virginal something", or, more expressively, as: "a piece of virginal business". "Oh calamity!", exclaims the young man, "He [my father] engendered me as your bastard piece of virginal business!" ὦμοι: νόθον με παρθένευσ' ἔτικτε σόν⁴⁵. In a formula that captures the oxymoron of the situation, Ion rudely addresses his mother: "You, Mother, look: isn't it that you have fallen into hidden marriages, those diseases that happen to virgins?" (ὄρα σύ, μήτηρ: μὴ σφαλεῖς ἃ παρθένοις ἐγγίγνεται νοσήματ' ἐς κρυπτοὺς γάμους)⁴⁶. To which Creusa replies with an account of all the secrecy that surrounded Ion's conception. The narrative is all about obscurity and silence: "My nuptial song, my son, did not engender your face in the middle of torches and choruses! (οὐχ ὑπὸ λαμπάδων οὐδὲ χορευμάτων ὑμέναιος ἐμός, τέκνον, ἔτικτε σὸν κάρα)⁴⁷. This instant of fright crowns the scene in which mother and child properly introduce themselves to each other.

In our second example, the story of Callisto, the transformation of the body cannot be ignored for long. Zeus, metamorphosed into Artemis, seduced Callisto, a follower of the virgin goddess herself. The woman tries to veil her swelling belly, but, when she is obliged to undress and to bath, together with her companions, her pregnancy is exposed. Our most ancient source, a fragment attributed to Hesiod says that "when she was seduced by Zeus, she continued some time undetected by the goddess, but afterwards, when she was already with child, was seen by her bathing and so discovered"⁴⁸. In Ovid's version, there are "a thousand signs" of Callisto's condition: *mille notae*. Callisto lowers her eyes, remains silent,

44 — Euripides, *Ion*, 1489-1495.

45 — *Ibid.*, 1474.

46 — *Ibid.*, 1524. Cf.: 1484: "I went to bed, and it was a hidden bed", κρυπτόμενον λέχος ἡνύασθην.

47 — *Ibid.*, 1474-1476.

48 — Pseudo-Eratosthenes, *Catasterismi*, frag. 1.

and blushes (*oculos attollit humo... silet et laesi dat signa rubore pudoris*). “How difficult it is”, the poet claims, “not to betray such a crime, with the face!” (*Heu, quam difficile est crimen non prodere vultu!*). Only the nymphs can detect those signs. Diana, a virgin, cannot understand what has happened, until the girl, heavy with child and ready to give birth, appears in the nude. Then, “together with the naked body, the crime came to light” (*nudo patuit cum corpore crimen*)⁴⁹. I will come back to the Roman context, in a moment.

Our third example, Iole, illustrates the sheer indecipherability of a woman’s sexual experience, when one does not know if she is married or not – and there is no child in view. Did she have sex? In Sophocles’ *Trachinian Women*, when Heracles comes home with a group of captives, one of whom strikingly beautiful and exceptionally dignified, Deianira, his wife, understands immediately what is going on, and tries to figure out Iole’s circumstances. “O pitiful young woman, who are you? Are you without husband/without a man, or are you a mother? By your appearance, you have no experience of all these things, but you are noble”. (ὦ δυστάλαινα, τίς ποτ’ εἰ νεανίδων; ἄνανδρος ἢ τεκνοῦσσα; πρὸς μὲν γὰρ φύσιν πάντων ἄπειρος τῶνδε, γενναία δέ τις)⁵⁰. As Paula Debnar points out, “The alternatives (“without husband” or “mother”) imply that “these things” include sexual matters. Marriage means, among other things, the loss of sexual innocence, and Deianira thinks Iole is a virgin. She soon discovers her error: “I have received a girl [κόρη] – no, I think this no longer, but a woman joined in wedlock [ἐξευγμένην]” (536-37)”⁵¹. It is especially pertinent to raise this question in the context of the theater: how visible could be the virginal status (understood as “sexual matters”) of a woman, on the stage, for the characters and for the spectators of a play? The answer is: as long as the symptoms of pregnancy do not show, the sexual status of an unmarried woman is a mystery. Should a “hidden marriage” had taken place, at least for a while, it remains invisible. We do not know if the young woman is still “inexperienced in the works of much-golden Aphrodite”, but we take it for granted. We keep calling her a “*parthenos*”, or a *kore*, but only because, like Deianira, we mistake her for what we mean by “*parthenos*”, or *kore*. She looks like that⁵². We cannot call a woman whose sexual activity we know about, *parthenos*.

The same implication is at work in a poem attributed to Musaios (5th century CE), *Hero and Leander*. A beautiful virgin, priestess of

49 — Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 2, 401-465. See O’Byrhim 1990 and Boehringer 2007: 72-88.

50 — Sophocles, *Trachinian Women*, 308-309.

51 — Debnar 2010, especially 129.

52 — Debnar 2010: 129.

Aphrodite, Hero, and a charming young man, Leander, fall in love with each other, at first sight. As a minister of the goddess, Hero dwells not with her parents, but, all by herself, in a tall tower, right by the sea. Proper marriage is not an option. The youths become lovers. Since they live on the opposite sides of the Hellespont, night after night, Leander crosses the channel, swimming in the pitch black, and agitated, water. Hero waits feverishly for him, and welcomes him in her bedroom. Over the Summer, their furtive passion grows stronger and stronger, and it continues, unfortunately, into the Fall. The change of season and an increasingly inclement weather, make Leander's assignations more and more hazardous. One night, he drowns; his body is washed ashore. Hero throws herself from the tower, and joins him in death. Musaios' description of the lovers' first night fits beautifully the template of the "hidden marriage". As it is the case in Euripides' *Ion*, and in Ps-Theocritus' *Oaristys*, all the negatives are in order: no songs, no torches, no publicity at all. "It was a wedding, but with no choruses. It was a matrimonial bed, but without hymns. No poet invoked with songs Hera, ζυγίη "the yoking one". The splendor of the torches did not lighten the thalamus and the bed. No one launched into a jumping dance. The father and the venerable mother did not sing the *hymenaios*. Silence, instead, after having prepared the bed, in the hours just before the marriage, installed the baldaquin. Darkness adorned the bride. It was a wedding without the songs of *hymenaios*. Night was their γαμοστόλος (the one who prepares the wedding), and Dawn never saw Leander as a groom, in a well known bed"⁵³. The outcome of this "clandestine marriage" is death, after a daily life of ruse and dishonesty. "In order to deceive her parents, Hero wears a deeply folded *peplos*, so that she is a virgin during the day, and a woman at night" (Ἡρώ δ' ἑλκεσίπεπλος ἐοὺς λήθουσα τοκῆας παρθένος ἡματίη, νυχίη γυνή)⁵⁴. The poem does not explain why she would wrap herself in this particular kind of *peplos* – the ἑλκεσίπεπλος was a garment especially ample and presenting a deep fold in the front⁵⁵ – but, since the point is for Hero to conceal from her parents her unofficial, nocturnal transformation from *parthenos* to *gyne*, we can reckon that her body is changing. Something is happening.

This is also why ingenious interpretations of Penelope, in the *Odyssey*, or of Helen, in Euripides' homonymous play, as "parthenaic figures"

53 — Musaios, *Hero and Leander*, 264-283: ἦν γάμος, ἀλλ' ἀχόρευτος· ἔην λέχος, ἀλλ' ἄτερ ὕμνων. οὐ ζυγίην Ἥρην τις ἐπευφήμησεν αἰείδων, οὐ δαίδων ἤστραπτε σέλας θαλαμηπόλον εὐνὴν οὐδὲ πολυσκάρθμῳ τις ἐπεσκίρτησε χορείη, οὐχ ὕμναιον αἶεide πατήρ καὶ πότνια μήτηρ. ἀλλὰ λέχος στορέσασα τελεσιγάμοισιν ἐν ὥραις σιγῇ παστὸν ἔπηξεν, ἐνυμφοκόμησε δ' ὁμίχλῃ καὶ γάμος ἦν ἀπάνευθεν αἰδομένων ὕμναιων. νύξ μὲν ἔην κείνοισι γαμοστόλος οὐδέ ποτ' ἥως νυμφίον εἶδε Λέανδρον ἀριγνώτοις ἐνὶ λέκτροις.

54 — *Ibid.*, 286-287.

55 — On different kinds of *peplos*, see Cleland, Davies and Llewellyn-Jones 2007.

can only rely on the assumption that a *parthenos* is just an un-married woman, so that any prospective wife, including a woman who envisions a re-marriage, can be considered a *parthenos*. This mistaken assumption encourages interesting associations of ideas, unfortunately unsupported by the texts⁵⁶. There are, to my knowledge, no mentions of wives, or widows or separated women, or blatantly pregnant women, as *parthenoi*. By contrast, we do have references to children, born of an unmarried woman *believed to be a parthenos*. It is, as we have seen, a matter of *doxa*. Such belief is made possible by the kind of subterfuges we just examined.

Lexical games

Does my examination of the vocabulary, with its cultural implications, and its pragmatic usage, sound like sophistry? Peter Burian thought so. In his review of *Greek Virginity*, he wrote: “Sissa rightly insists that *parthenos* cannot be merely a status designation for a pubescent but still unmarried girl without reference to sexual activity. She then, however, plays elaborate lexical games designed to show that lack of sexual activity need not be part of the definition either. But, to dispute her primary example, the fact that the child of a woman raped or seduced (especially by a god) may be called *parthenias* need not imply that the mother is still a *parthenos*. Sissa gets around the difficulty, despite the explicit evidence of one of the sources she cites (Pollux’s definition of *parthenias* as the child “of a seeming parthenos”) with a sophistry: “The word does not contradict the mother’s virginity but means that the newborn is there despite the mother’s status and that the child was conceived behind a misleading appearance that deceived society”⁵⁷. The argument, Burian claims with no qualms, is inconclusive. But it is Pollux who plays a “lexical game”: the denomination of a child as *parthenias* must refer to his mother as *parthenos*, if not he would not be called *parthenias*. This is the point. This is the lemma we have to justify. And this we can only do with the help of Pollux (and Hesychius, and Suidas), by saying that we were wrong about the virginity of the mother, and that the designation of the child derives from that erroneous belief. Because the mother seemed to be a *parthenos*, the child is called a *parthenias*. Again, it is not a compliment. It is actually the language itself that is playing sophistic games. For instance, language voices a culture’s expectations about gender. And, worse, it might do so, through euphemism by antiphrasis, in other words: ironically. A woman must not have sex out of wedlock; if she does, her children will be bastards, and this will remind everyone of their mother’s alleged virginity.

56 — Swift 2009.

57 — Burian 1992: 642.

We can now offer a definition of *parthenos*, which gives account of all the linguistic uses. A *parthenos* is a woman whose marital status (non-married) is patent, but whose required sexual condition (unless she becomes pregnant, and until pregnancy becomes evident) remains uncertain.

This uncertainty, joined to the pressure of social norms, is the cause for all our difficulties. A proper definition of *parthenos* must start from the social status, non-marriage, but it must mention the inability to verify precisely what matters: the woman's sexual condition. A definition must include both levels, the social and the sexual; the visible and the invisible. Otherwise, we make either a reductionist, "sociological", anti-Christian gesture (a *parthenos* is a non married young woman, period), or we take for granted that there must be a sexual, anatomical reality that the Greeks could not possibly miss (a *parthenos* has a stopper). The former stance was typical of a certain kind of classical scholar, working in the eighties: inclining toward a sociologically-oriented, emphatically secular, leftist approach to sexuality and gender, such a scholar would make a point of rejecting any possible confusion between ancient and Christian virginity⁵⁸. The result was a normative disembodiment of virginity. The latter position betrays uncritical persistence in projecting upon ancient medical texts a modern idea, which is taken for granted: material virginity is a natural membrane. This kind of scholar is generally reluctant to accept this particular case of dissonance, between the Greeks and us. Between those who deny the relevance of corporeal virginity, and those who maintain the existence of the hymen, we have to restate that neither is true.

Lamentable and inadequate

Whereas Peter Burian, although unimpressed by my (allegedly) lexical games, thoroughly understands the gist of my arguments, I found my most unsympathetic, disingenuous, and intellectually alien, reader in Bonnie MacLachlan. Over the years, review after review, MacLachlan has seized every opportunity to express her disapproval of books, treating virginity in antiquity. *Greek Virginity* reaps the prize: inadequate, lamentable. No contempt to spare. After summarizing the discussion on visibility, comes the verdict: "Sissa's solution may be a tidy one, but it is not an adequate one. It contradicts, for example, the evidence which she cites for the popular belief that *parthenia* could be retained after sexual experience with a man, even when this was not kept hidden. The best known example drawn from myth is the belief associated with an annual ritual at Nauplia in which Hera restores her virginity by a bath in a spring. From the medical writers we hear of doctors inserting perfumed pessaries into

58 — Calame 1977: 65; Loraux 1993: 162.

women's vaginas to freshen them up, to "make a violated woman look like a virgin" (121). Sissa's model of virginity, the Pythia of Delphi, was a *parthenos* who, while hidden from public view during her performance, like other *parthenoi* who were giving birth, was one who, in Sissa's words, "like any other woman, could at any time recover her vaginal closure" (170)⁵⁹.

The point of the argument was that our sources present us with a recurrent theme: what characterizes the virginal condition of a feminine body is its closure. But this closure is not a body part, a piece of skin the breakage of which is irreversible, and, therefore, significant. The way the Greeks thought of the closure of a virgin body is compatible with the idea of reversibility. Reversibility, however, cannot be exactly the same thing, in fictional and social circumstances. In a ritual context, as it is the case for the annual restitution of Hera's virginity at Nauplia, or for the Pythia at Delphi, the mythological, theological – or, let us say: symbolic – imagination at work in Greek culture, postulates as possible and actually happening the fact that a female body can be opened and closed, again and again. In her multiple narrative representations since the *Iliad*, as the sister and spouse of the great Zeus, Hera, the mighty queen of the Olympian gods, and the protective goddess of cities such as Argos, is an iconic mother and an ardent, jealous lover of her husband. In one of the places where she is worshipped, Nauplia, the locals have invented one more variation on her divine life: they say that, each year, Hera becomes virgin again, by bathing in a source, called Canathus⁶⁰. The Pythia, priestess of Apollo in his most famous oracular sanctuary, Delphi, has to be a virgin. But every time she sits on the tripod where she is supposed to receive the inspiration of the god, and utter his responses through her own voice, she performs the role of a bride – a virgin bride. This is how Plutarch tries to make sense of the Delphic protocol. Now, these are a myth, and a ritual. These are the transformations of the body of a goddess, and of an oracular prophet, dressed up like a young girl. Neither the bath, nor the installation of the Pythia on the tripod is meant to be as empirically effective as the application of a pessary, or a fumigation. On the contrary: these supernatural performances of reversibility coexist, in Greek society, with less playful practices, such as human marriage and childbirth. No mortal wife restores her *parthenia*, periodically, by taking a reverginating soak. There are cyclical rites for immortal goddesses, and rites of passage, for mortal women. A bride ceases to be a *parthenos*: she becomes a woman/wife/mother. Her body will have to be open, receptive

59 — MacLachlan 1994: 77.

60 — Pausanias, 2, 38, 2: ἐνταῦθα τὴν Ἡραν φασὶν Ἀργεῖοι κατὰ ἔτος λουμένην παρθένον γίνεσθαι.

and pervious. Another kind of anatomical elasticity is now in order: that of her womb. And she will have to make love.

Now, since I read the evidence in order to understand cultural representations, I do pay attention to context-related instantiations of shared knowledge, trans-textual assumptions and circulating beliefs. I place the specificity of individual texts in comparison with general presuppositions, which emerge from the ethnographic background – in other words: from other texts. Many different situations in which a female body is supposed to be capable of opening and closing again, I argued, presuppose a common premise. 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. Virginity is lost, either cheerfully or regretfully, but this event has not been made into an anatomical drama. This is, therefore, the guiding idea that fits multiple texts, in their respective contexts: the Greeks failed to obsess about the phallus making irruption through a closed door, rupturing the precious *claustrum*, destroying a seal, the sacred *signaculum* – once and forever. For all their sexism and exclusionary political theory, they decided not to cultivate the threatening pathos of Christian and other monotheistic sexualities: the dread of going all the way, and passing the point of non-return – except through surgery, as it happens still, and even more than ever, today.

In conclusion: there is one idea running through these different discourses, in the same culture. But a tradition about a goddess or a priestess is not exactly the same thing as the daily life of ordinary people. We have to think both. Where is the contradiction?

Bonnie MacLachlan exposes a glaring lacuna: I fail to talk about the autonomy that virginity, in her opinion, affords women. I did not talk about autonomy, because I could not disagree more on this conception of virginity, which MacLachlan restates in the “Introduction” to the book she has co-edited with Judith Fletcher, *Virginity Revisited. Configurations of the Unpossessed Body*⁶¹. For human females, virginity entails obedience to the parents, attractiveness in the eyes of lusty men and gods, and expectation of marriage. In the narrative logic of Greek mythology, farouche virgins (such as Atlanta, or Daphne) end up seduced, married, raped, or metamorphosed. As Hesiod tells us, a virgin is a soft-skinned creature, to be kept indoors, under the tender loving care of her mother. Which autonomy? Divine virginity is the privilege of three goddesses who are, indeed, powerful: Athena, Artemis and Hestia. Of course, they are strong and

61 — “Mastery over one’s passions, praised by Aristotle as *autarkeia*, and practiced by the Born Again Virgins of America offers enhanced self-esteem”. The Christian martyrs follow suit. See MacLachlan and Fletcher 2007: 4.

capable of defending themselves. They are immortal and superhuman! So are Hera, Demeter, Thetis or Aphrodite⁶².

Finally, MacLachlan accuses me of not exploring the connection of virginity and death. She is right. I have no excuse.

A jug – or a wallet?

To the arguments on the semantic field of *parthenos*, we should now add a brief discussion of two issues: the words actually used in medical texts, to describe imperforation; the hypothesis that a pathological impediment might be as normal as what we call “hymen”. What is at stake here is, once again, the use of language.

In her extensive work on ancient Greek gynecology, Ann Ellis Hanson has repeatedly argued that the female womb and sexual apparatus was thought to be equipped with a lid: a stopper. This would be the Greek equivalent, or precursor, of the hymen, to be found in modern anatomy. Ann Hanson made this argument also in the review she kindly wrote of *Greek Virginity*. “While Sissa is right to insist that Greek virginity lacks a hymen of defloration, however, there is evidence in Greek and Roman writers for a folk anatomy that imagined an unseen closing at the mouth of a young girl’s uterus, obstructing menses until they broke through at menarche or were liberated by first coitus, whichever came first”⁶³. With all due respect for Ann Hanson (whose work I enormously admire, and read with great benefit), I fail to understand what this evidence is. Hanson had advanced this argument in *Before Sexuality*, the collective volume, edited by David Halperin, Jack Winkler and Froma Zeitlin (Princeton, 1990), where my first piece on virginity (originally published in *Annales ESC*, in 1984) was also included⁶⁴. My article made the demonstration that the hymen did not exist in ancient medicine. The juxtaposition of the two essays in the same volume created what Caroline Bicks called a “controversy”⁶⁵. A *bona fide* scholar, whose special expertise lies out of

62 — Here too, MacLachlan insists that Hera owes her force and energy to the Nauplian ritual, in which (through a bath) her virginity was restored once a year. In her opinion, this ensured « renewed potency in the sexual encounter between the primary divine couple » (MacLachlan and Fletcher 2007: 4). Nothing connects this local tradition, rapidly mentioned by Pausanias, with the status of Zeus’ formidable and seductive wife. In the *Iliad*, to mention a foundational text, Hera acts as a forceful strategist, as a threatening contender for authority on Olympus, as a mother, as a jealous spouse, and as an astute, successful, erotic partner. To lure Zeus and make love, she asks Aphrodite to lend her a magic bra. No revigorating and revigorating bath!

63 — Hanson 1992: 170.

64 — Hanson 1990; Sissa 1989 and 1990b.

65 — Bicks 2003: 71; K. C. Kelly 2000: 6-7: “Ann Hanson agrees with Sissa (on the uterus as a vessel), but argues that classical medical descriptions of the entrance of the uterus as a closed mouth, a set of pursed lips, are shadowed by another image, that of the uterus closed off by an imperforate membrane: uterus as a sealed vessel. She says that this concept – the uterus as ‘an upside-down jug’

Classics, is probably tempted to trust the claim about “folk anatomy”. There must be both medical and non-medical texts, which mention a closing device, analogous to the modern hymen – only placed just before the cervix, not at the rim of the vagina. There are no such texts.

Although I myself placed the analogy between a vessel and the womb (and between the two “mouths” and “necks” of the feminine body), at the heart of *Greek Virginity* – so much so that the first and third chapters are a lengthy discussion of the ethnographic context – I still cannot not quote a single source that describes a virginal stopper. Neither Ann Hanson does. “While no explicit statement exists in the *Corpus* or elsewhere, Hanson wrote, there is evidence on the point not considered by Sissa”⁶⁶. When I first read this damning sentence, I was eager to discover what I had unconsciously missed. I was soon relieved. The evidence of “folk anatomy” was nothing but a series of literary passages, which invite us to see the virginal body as analogous to a city, a vase or other enclosed space. This cultural contextualization is valuable (and actually it complements, or overlaps with mine), but the point is: an enclosed space does not require a lid. A body unlearned in the works of Aphrodite is closed, indeed, but not plugged. This is a crucial detail, because a uterine, or vaginal, plug places female chastity in a perspective of anatomical vulnerability, irreversible breakage, and semiotic knowability – precisely what the hymen is supposed to do. But this is *not* the ancient Greek perspective. It is therefore worthy clarifying, once again, the state of the question, especially for the sake of the historians of virginity, who might be misled by this artificial cloud. The evidence, for once, is clear.

with a stopper – may be what is left of a pre-Hippocratic, popular (vs. learned) anatomy. As support for such idea, she cites a variety of literary allusions, as well as the existence of classical amulets...”. Kelly also mentions the sketch of the womb as an “upside-down amphora, with a distinctive neck and flattened rim”, from a Medieval manuscript, which Hanson includes in her “evidence”. No trace of a stopper on that inverted bottle! Zervos 2005: 91: “Hanson on the other hand, views the question of the hymen from the broader perspective of the images of the sexual organs of virgin girls on the popular level and in the medical writers. She argues that according to the Hippocratic work, *Diseases of Young Girls*, the uterus of a young girl is ‘a sealed-off space to be opened by the first intercourse’. Further there exists a ‘seal or stopper at the mouth of the young girl’s uterus’ causing blockage of the fluids that at the onset of puberty must be discharged to prevent serious illness”. There is no “broader perspective” conducive to evidence, about this conjectural seal or stopper. There is no mention of such device in *Diseases of Young Girls*. See also Ferguson 2011: 13: “Hanson presents evidence for a belief held both by medical practitioners and by “ordinary” people that the uterus was (like) a jug or vessel sealed at one end by a hymeneal stopper”. Mary Foskett concludes her comparison between Hanson’s and my account of Hippocratic evidence by writing: “Yet the exact images that the medical writers intended to convey remain cloudy. The question remains whether the vagina, in particular, was sealed by a hymen or not. Sissa argues that the Greek writers posited the hymen (membrane) only as an anomaly, a pathological condition” (Foskett 2002: 34). I am trying, once again, to dissipate that cloud.

66 — Hanson 1990: 324.

Let me summarize the argument: what we have, in the Hippocratic corpus, is a deafening silence about any such thing as a membrane that obstructs *naturally* the female sex. The writer of *Nature of Women*, 67 tells us: “If a woman does not receive the semen, although her menses are occurring according to nature, a membrane (μῆνιγξ) is in the way of the (sc. uterus’s) mouth: this can also happen from other causes. You will recognize it as follows: if you palpate internally with a finger, you will touch the obstacle (πρόβλημα)”. The insertion, deeply into the vagina, of a pessary made of resin, flower of copper and honey, followed by a douche of white wine in which myrtle has boiled, should take care of it. The same problem (in the literal meaning of the Greek word, πρόβλημα, which is “hindrance”, “impediment”) is described in *Diseases of Women*, 1, 20: a μῆνιγξ can be found sometimes, as an anomaly that hinders conception. It will have to be promptly removed either with the application of a pessary, or – and this is a more brutal variation – surgically: “to cut out the tunic is better”, περιελεῖν δὲ τὸν χιτῶνα ἄμεινον. Again, the short treatise on *Barrenness* includes, among many causes of sterility, the following: “When a woman is unable to receive the semen, there is every possibility that a membrane (μῆνιγξ) has grown in the mouth of the uterus. You must take some verdigris, bull’s gall and snake oil, mix these together, and then take a piece of wool and soak it with the mixture”. This suppository will have to be applied during the night; a bath in hot water and myrtle will be taken during the day. Finally, let her have intercourse⁶⁷!

This prescription, in my opinion, is crucial and unequivocal: if an obstacle, a πρόβλημα (be it a piece of membranous tissue, called μῆνιγξ, or χιτῶν) hinders the flux of semen into a woman’s body, the physician must intervene, to remove it. The author of *Diseases of Virgins* is even more explicit. Virgins ripe for marriage are exposed to suffer pain and madness, “*whenever* the mouth of the exit is not open”, ὁκόταν οὖν τὸ στόμα τῆς ἐξόδου μὴ ᾗ ἀνεστομωμένον. In that case, the blood that accumulates in the womb moves to the chest, causing all sorts of symptoms. If we read this clinical prose with narratological attention, we are struck by the time-frame of the description. Menstrual blood flows to the uterus at puberty, and fills it up: this is a physiological transformation, which takes place in all young women, all the time. A pathological condition will ensue, only in the eventuality – whenever (ὁκόταν) – the *stoma* happens to be closed. Should this be the case, then “more blood would flow in, due to the food and the growth of the body”. Not having a way out, this blood rushes to the heart and the diaphragm. The conjunction ὁκόταν, which introduces the temporal, and hypothetical, clause – “whenever the mouth of the exit

67 — Hippocrates, *Nature of Women*, 67; *Barrenness*, 11 (translation by P. Potter, modified).

is not open" (ὁκόταν οὖν τό στόμα τῆς ἐξόδου μὴ ἦ ἀνεστομωμένον) – is formed of ὁκότε (which means ὅποτε, "when"), plus ἄν (which adds a connotation of mere possibility). It carries a strong conditional force, and it is followed by a subjunctive (ὁκόταν... ἦ)⁶⁸.

All this might sound pedantic, but a larger picture is at stake. Firstly, if all healthy girls were closed, then puberty per se would be a cause of disease. Adolescents ought to be married imperatively and, above all, immediately, as soon as they *begin* to menstruate, or, more to the point, in order to be able to menstruate – lest they become mad. No time to waste! Think of Homer's Nausicaa, or Hesiod's *parthenike*, or the innumerable *parthenoi* we encounter in literary, or ritual representations. They would have to be not delicate, attractive and graceful, but full of rotten blood, lethargic, delirious and suicidal. Secondly, if coition were the only remedy to this kind of sickening virginity, as it is prescribed here, *parthenoi* could hardly survive, without a man. Indeed, the Hippocratic physician urges his patients to make love, and conceive. He does not recommend, however, that all *parthenoi* (being naturally closed) must be given in marriage, at age twelve⁶⁹. He can hardly mean that only vaginal penetration would open up the impervious cervix of all females. It means, in the logic and the syntax of the whole passage, that, "whenever (ὁκόταν) they suffer in this way", young women ought to have sex with a man. This therapy presupposes that an obstructed uterus cannot be the norm. Thirdly, this

68 — Hippocrates, *Diseases of Virgins*, lines 10-15 (VIII 466 L). The conjunction ὁκόταν is repeated at lines 17, 28, 40, 42. Flemming and Hanson (1998: 252) translate ὁκόταν by "when": "Yet, when (ὁκόταν) the mouth of the exit is not opened and more and more blood flows due to their nourishment and the increase of their body, then the blood, not having a way to flow out, rushes from the quantity towards the heart and the diaphragm [...]. When (ὁκόταν) these parts are filled... When (ὁκόταν) these things occur in this way" (251). But: "whenever young girls suffer this kind of malady..."

69 — For a discussion of this crucial point, see Bonnet-Cadilhac 1993: 147-163, especially 158 : « La situation à Rome est bien connue où des fillettes souvent encore nubiles, étaient données en mariage pour des raisons d'alliance familiale. En revanche, nous devons reconnaître notre ignorance à propos de la Grèce. Les auteurs ne s'accordent pas, bien que la plupart suggèrent un âge du mariage un peu plus tardif car les témoignages que nous possédons sont bien pauvres (entre 12 et 18 ans pour Foley 1981: 129; après 14 ans pour A. Rousselle 1983: 47). Dans Xénophon, *Économique*, 7, 5; 7, 14, Ischomaque a épousé une adolescente de 14 ans élevée volontairement dans une totale ignorance du mariage. La femme du marché des senteurs, qui meurt en couches, en a 17: *Epidémies* III, 1, 12 LIII 63"). Mais aucun médecin du Corpus Hippocratique ne s'inquiète des dommages causés par la défloration ou la grossesse chez les filles non pubères, ni ne leur préconise des rapports sexuels comme traitement. Sans doute existait-il de nombreuses variations selon les cités et les époques qui ne nous permettent pas de savoir si notre auteur se fait le témoin d'un changement des mentalités". Bonnet-Cadilhac argues that this text ought to be understood as "post-Aristotelian", i.e. cardio-centered, hemato-centered and teleonomic. I would add that, in this logic, menstrual blood percolates into the womb, in order to flow out. The *telos* is evacuation, and the female body is made accordingly: the uterus is equipped with a *stoma*. If all women were born unopened, nature would have failed to adapt anatomy to physiology. Once again, the whole process is hindered *whenever* the exit is barred, which means not always.

text tells us that the uterine *stoma* might be unopened, but it fails to mention any plugging device whatsoever – seal, lid, or stopper. The retention of the menses is caused by a malfunction of the *stoma* itself. This is consistent with the prescription of an erotic, thus mechanical, cure (coition, followed by pregnancy) in this case, as opposed to the medical, or surgical procedure, recommended whenever a μῆνιγξ, prevents clear passage through the mouth of the womb, as in the passages I have discussed a moment ago. Pace Hanson, in conclusion, *Diseases of Virgins* does not say that the uterus of young girls was normally “sealed off”, by a stopper. Neither of these claims is correct.

Nowhere – neither in *Nature of Women*, 67; *Barreness*, 11; *Diseases of Women*, 1, 20; nor in *Diseases of Virgins* –, does a Hippocratic writer ever hint to a healthy version of the problematic membrane. The same deafening silence continues in Aristotle’s biological works, and in Galen’s meticulous descriptions of the parts of the bodies – only to be broken by Soranos of Ephesus, in his *Gynecology*, where, as we have seen, Soranos mentions this unattributed belief only to reject it as false, *pseudos*. Soranos admits that a few unfortunate young women may present a membrane (which he calls by yet another generic term for “membrane”, ὑμῆν, *hymen*) that seals the vagina, but this causes a pathological condition: to be imperforated (ἄτρητος). Imperforation, *atresia*. Imperforation is not, Soranos insists, a thicker version of a normal membrane (as some people erroneously believe). There is no normal membrane⁷⁰. My conclusion from this passage; from the Hippocratic writings; from the silence of Aristotle and Galen (when they thoroughly describe the female pudenda) is that ancient medical writers did not include a stopper in the anatomy of a healthy young woman. From their point of view, a piece of fine skin – call it ὑμῆν, μῆνιγξ, or χιτών – could only be a problem. Historiographical, literary and mythological evidence concords with this, since, in narratives about virginity, *parthenia* can only be detected through ordeals, whereas its loss can go unobserved – if there is no pregnancy.

Ann Hanson objected that, in the *Hippocratic corpus*, as well as in popular knowledge, the womb is represented as a jug, the shape of which includes a neck and a mouth, equipped with a lid. In Ann Hanson’s opinion, this is a membrane that, without being exactly the same thing as the hymen identified in modern anatomy, must, nevertheless, act as a stopper. Visual evidence includes a drawing of the uterus in Muscio’s manuscript⁷¹, and amulets in the shape of a locked uterus. The drawing shows a bottle upside-down, it is true, but equipped with ears and, definitely, with no stopper. The amulets might be more conclusive, but we should

70 — Soranos, *Gynecology*, 1, 17.

71 — See Temkin 1991: 8-9, figure 1. Temkin dates this drawing at 900 CE.

know what they are supposed to mean in their ritual context (magic wishful thinking?). The decisive medical proof, for Hanson, is a text I have discussed earlier, *The Diseases of Virgins*. This mentions an impediment to the menstrual flux, and recommends intercourse and pregnancy in order to remedy this situation. In Hanson's essay of 1990, in *Before Sexuality*, I was accused of ignoring precisely this fact (the seal placed in the *stoma* of the uterus) and of conflating the neck of the womb and the vulva. At the end of her essay, Hanson writes: "The writer of *Diseases of Young Girls* seems to imagine a young girl's uterus as a sealed-off space to be opened by the first intercourse, whenever accumulated menses fail to appear at the expected time, and thereby cause disease. The image of a wallet with purse-string differs from the image of an upside-down jug: the latter requires a lid or stopper, to prevent its contents from exiting"⁷². A young girl's uterus, Hanson concludes, "was, *perhaps*, sealed", as the physiology of the upside-down jug, and the confidence in the therapeutic effect of marriage, and popular representations "suggest" (*ibidem*: my emphasis).

First comment: as Hanson herself writes, the blockage of the menses is a *disease*. For all the reasons (textual, grammatical and cultural) I have examined in detail, an unopened uterus could only be abnormal.

Second comment: if the womb resembles a carafe on its head, then we definitely need a plug. And a pretty solid one, I would imagine. By choosing to reconstruct the Hippocratic uterus, via the analogy of an inverted jug, we rule out a different analogy: that of a container that is capable of opening and closing, all by itself. The latter is a more appropriate model, I contend, since ancient physiology allows for just such vitality and reversibility. Ancient physicians could trust what we would call the "elasticity" of the neck of the womb, because of what they described as the "softness" and firmness of its tissue. An elastic neck made the uterus into a lively and springy pouch, endowed with an innate faculty to open up and close down, and equipped with a *stoma*, a mouth, which could alternate those micro-movements, without the need for any mechanical device. For Soranos, the orifice lies in the middle of the vagina, on the neck of the womb. It has the size of the auditory channel. It is soft and fleshy, "similar to the spongy texture of the lung, or the softness of the tongue". It dilates routinely "as in the desire of intercourse for the reception of the semen, and in the menses for the excretion of the blood, and in pregnancy". Over time, it becomes callous and resembles the head of an octopus⁷³. I reckon that Soranos, who, after Herophilus, could compare the neck of the womb to a chewy calamaro, would also agree. All the analogical, metaphorical models of the womb converge toward the thought that it

72 — Hanson 1990: 330.

73 — Soranos, *Gynecology*, 1, 10.

was outfitted with a tiny, mobile mouth. Plato's *Timaeus* compares the uterus to a lively animal. No mention of a plug. More generally, the neck is similar to the tip of the penis. Like the penis, the uterus emits semen; as its head is wrapped into the foreskin, the cervix is surrounded by the vagina. In the terms of this similarity, a penis capped by a membranous cover would be strange. Indeed, ancient physicians contemplate the possibility of a plugged penis, together with the occurrence of an impervious anus. In all these cases, observed in newborn infants, membranes impede the free movement of what is supposed to circulate through the concerned organs. It is a problem. Surgery is in order⁷⁴.

As medical texts make clear, the womb is self-contained, and perfectly capable of dilating and tightening, as needed. From the first menstruation to pregnancy and delivery, and back to normal, the uterine mouth narrows and relaxes. In the teleological thinking of ancient medicine, this ability fits the comprehensive function of the genital apparatus: procreation. Fluids and bodies must pass through that channel, which has to open up when it is suitable, without gaping forever. No need of an extraneous aid! At puberty, such impediment would hinder the flux of menstrual blood. Since procreation is so essential to woman's social life and woman's health, the normal and healthy uterus of a woman is, consistently, apt to open and close⁷⁵.

Unexpectedly, corroboration of this understanding of the texts comes from Ann Hanson herself. In her contribution to the above-mentioned collective volume, edited by Bonnie MacLachlan and Judith Fletcher⁷⁶, Hanson writes that "Hippocratics saw the uterus as an up-turned jar", with its bottom on top and its mouth at the bottom turned in a downward direction. The uterine mouth in the mature woman learned to purse its lips and close, when its contents were to be retained, but to open the lips again at the proper time in order to release what was within⁷⁷. So, the

74 — Soranos d'Ephèse, *Maladies des femmes*, texte établi, traduit et commenté par P. Bruguère, D. Gourevitch et Y. Malinas, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1990, p. 86, notes 102 and 103. « Ainsi la sage-femme examine l'intégrité morphologique, la liberté des orifices, la souplesse des membres et la sensibilité tactile [...]. Soranos vérifie la perméabilité des ouvertures... ». The openings to be checked are: ears, nostrils, pharynx, urethra, anus (Soranos, *Gynecology*, 2, 5). The commentators to this edition of Soranos point out that the imperforation of the female sex is not mentioned in this passage. They refer, by contrast to Paul of Aegina, who details the blockage of this orifice too (VI, 23; 54; 72; 81). Soranos pays attention to the imperforation the vagina and vulva, from the standpoint of the mother's body (not the newborn baby) in several passages: 1, 17; 3, 7; 3, 9; 4, 7; 4, 17. On the imperforation of the anus, see Tsoucalasa, Gentimib, Kousoulisa, Karamanou, and Androutsosa 2012: 241-242. On the imperforation of the gland, see Laios, Karamanou, and Androutsos 2012.

75 — As a corollary question: if, in order to prevent the collapse of its contents, the womb needed a cap, then how could it bear the weight of a baby? In the logic of the stopper, pregnancy would require quite a hymen to keep that *stoma* shut.

76 — MacLachlan and Fletcher 2007.

77 — MacLachlan and Fletcher 2007: 48.

womb is a reversible pouch, after all. I could not agree more! Hippocratic physicians, however, believed in a “fantasy membrane”. Again, after reading and re-reading the texts, I still do not see any compelling new evidence, in favor of the “fantasy membrane”. There is neither obstructing *meninx*, nor *hymen*. There is, occasionally, imperforation. The physician will have to cut it off, as the passage from *Diseases of Women*, 1, 20 so imperiously instructs. Unfortunately, in her excellent English translation of *Diseases of Women* 1, Ann Hanson omits this particular passage, and fails to comment on it⁷⁸.

Let me add that Soranos heavily-handedly confirms the same idea: atresia is pathological and needs surgical attention⁷⁹. Neither does he offer evidence for a learning curve on the part of the neck of the womb. The uterine mouth is described as a sinewy piece of flesh, apt to receive the masculine seed, and to close again, once its precious content has been sheltered inside⁸⁰. Nowhere, do I read that this aptitude would have been acquired in time. Due to aging and to the repeated transit of blood, semen and children, Soranos argues, the mouth becomes more “callous”⁸¹. I am not surprised, since, in his logic (as well as in that of Hippocratic gynecology), women were supposed to get married and conceive when still young: ideally at fourteen years old⁸². It precisely is for adolescents, not for mature women, that the *stoma* of the womb had to function properly, opening and closing all by itself.

Physical signs

After this update on the definition of virginity, and on the need to embed the challenge of “knowability”, as Goldhill put it, in this very definition, I will now focus on the critical moment, when the existence of a congenital – and, most important, normal – vaginal seal became a matter of medical knowledge, or, at least, of medical controversy. What happened, when Soranos pointed out the circulation of false beliefs about an allegedly natural membrane, and explained the correct causes of blood shedding in defloration? In Michel Foucault’s language, we need to figure out why, in a certain culture, material virginity became a source of anxiety. In ancient Greece, virginity, as sexual inexperience, had been

78 — Hanson 1975. See especially page 579, where Hanson explains that she skipped chapters 11–20.

79 — Soranos, *Gynecology*, 1, 17; 3, 7; 3, 9; 3, 18; 4, 7; 4, 17.

80 — See, for instance: Hippocrates, *Aphorisms*, 5, 51; *On Generation*, 5, 1; Aristotle, *History of Animals*, 583b 29; Galen, *De usu partium*, 14, 3, 146 K.

81 — Soranos, *Gynecology*, 1, 10.

82 — *Ibid.*, 1, 33. Callosity (*peritulosis*) is among the causes of the blockage of menstruation in 3, 7.

a narrative motif; in Rome, in the second century CE, virginity as the objective, positive, tangible state of a female body, became a problem. My working hypothesis is that something changed in the practice of medicine, so that people – more precisely: men – ceased to trust the tempo of the female body. That body ceased to be considered trustworthy. This occurred not in a vacuum, but in a moral and political climate, in which sexuality and procreation had become significantly, and legally, more important than before.

Let us now go back, for a moment, to the definition of *parthenos*. A *parthenos*, I said, is a woman whose marital status (non-married) is patent, but whose required sexual condition (unless she becomes pregnant, and until pregnancy becomes evident) remains uncertain. To maintain this double-layered, intrinsically skeptical, characterization is profoundly counterintuitive. It takes an effort of imagination, of retrospective science-fiction, so to speak, to place ourselves in a position, where we suspend our belief on the familiar device that, in most of contemporary anatomy (but less and less so)⁸³, bridges the invisible and the visible of virginity. This suspension of belief is not frivolous idle talk. It is justified by historical awareness and current medical knowledge.

From a historical standpoint, the hymen – or so tell us the most adamant theorists of its existence, forensic doctors in the XIX century – is nothing but the physical sign of virginity, or, in French, “*le signe physique de la virginité*”⁸⁴. The hymen is defined, in other words, as a semiotic piece of anatomy⁸⁵. This is how Theodric Beck, the pioneer of legal medicine in the United States whom I have briefly quoted at the beginning of this paper, presents the state of the question, in 1825:

“The physical signs of virginity have been the subject of keen discussion among anatomists and physiologists, and none of them has led to greater enquiry, than the existence of the hymen. This is understood to be a membrane of a semilunar, or occasionally of a circular shape, which closes the orifice of the vagina, leaving however an aperture sufficiently large to permit the menses to pass. A great difference of opinion has existed concerning its presence. Some distinguished physiologists have denied its existence altogether, or, in the cases where it is found, consider it a non-natural or morbid occurrence. Among these, may be enumerated, Ambrose Paré, Palfyn, Pinseus, Columbus, Dionis, and Buffon. “Columbus”, says Zacchias”, did not observe it in more than one or two instances; and Fallopius in not more than three females out of thousands

83 — For a passionate book, largely based on *Greek virginity*, that argues along the same lines, see Blank 2008.

84 — Devilliers 1840, *passim*; Tardieu (1857) 1862: 20.

85 — This is another reason for disagreeing with Hanson, who speaks of the uterine membrane, as unseen and unseeable (MacLachlan and Fletcher 2007: 48).

whom he dissected". Paré", says Mahon, "considers the presence of the hymen as contrary to nature; and states, that he searched for it in vain in females from three to twelve years of age. Those, on the contrary, who, from dissection, have believed in its presence previous to sexual intercourse, or some other cause destroying it, are Fabricius, Albinus, Ruysch, Morgagni, Haller, Diemerbroek, Heister, Riolan, Sabatier, Cuvier, and I may add Denman. Haller appears to have observed it in persons of all ages. Cuvier has not only found it in females, but also in mammiferous animals; and thus gives strong evidence of its existence by analogy. Gavard, who appears to have dissected a great number of subjects at the Hospital de la Salpêtrière, and also in the dissecting-room of Desault, states that he constantly found this membrane in the fetus, and in children newly born. In others of a more advanced age he also observed it; and in particular in a female fifty years old, whom he was called to sound, he found it untouched; so also, in another, whom he attended with Prof. Dubois. The weight of testimony is thus evidently in favor of the affirmative of this question; and the general sense of the profession is certainly decidedly opposed to considering it as a non-natural appearance. The following circumstances, however, required to be noted, before we form an opinion concerning it as a sign of virginity. It may be wanting from original mal-conformation, or it may be destroyed by disease or some other cause, and yet the female be pure"⁸⁶.

I have reproduced here the entire argument, because I wish to stress how professionally worried, and historically aware, a doctor could be, at the very moment when he laid the foundations of legal medicine. Medical jurisprudence was intended to establish positive proofs, in the body, in order to corroborate arguments made in the law courts. When allegations of rape had to be confirmed, or denied, the hymen was badly needed. The abuse of young females, but also the destiny of men, perhaps falsely accused by some unscrupulous woman, were at stake. To be able to certify virginity, or the absence thereof, was one of the most important missions of a legal physician. And yet, Beck had to admit, a physician had to be extremely careful.

If we briefly look at the anatomists Beck himself mentions, in his historical aperçu, we can see that those who deny the existence of the hymen are very keen on not wanting to corroborate a prejudice, the judicial consequences of which might result in "iniquitous decisions", as Velpeau (whom Beck fails to quote), put it⁸⁷. Paolo Zacchia (1584-1659), a doctor and a lawyer, whose career culminated with his appointment as *archiatra pontificius*, or "pontifical chief doctor", of two Popes,

86 — Beck and Dunlop 1825: 51-52.

87 — Velpeau 1830, tranl. by Page and Meigs 1852: 93.

is considered the founding father of forensic medicine⁸⁸. His *Questiones medico-legales*, a monumental collection of arguments on the major matters of judicial cases that required the opinion of a *peritus*, contains a long section on rape, and virginity. Zacchia accused his predecessors (except a few enlightened physicians, such as Riolan) of understanding the hymen as a transversal membrane, to be found in different places within the vagina. This was wrong, in his view, and explained why some excellent *Fisici* could declare the hymen non-existent, in healthy women. Zacchia contended that all human females were equipped with something else: what he called a “true hymen”, which was nothing but the aggregation of four triangular skins, shaped like petals of myrtle. These were the “myrtiform caruncles”, which could be observed in all women. After vaginal sex, these bits of flesh were still visible, but separated⁸⁹. Zacchia was exceedingly concerned with the responsibility of a medical expert, in cases such as the request for the annulment of a marriage based on non-consumption (because of alleged *impotentia coeundi* by either party, which, for a woman, included imperforation), or the accusation of rape. These matters were critical in terms of Christian morality, the Canon Law, and in the actual trials in the Tribunal of the Sacra Rota. In the classical language of skepticism, the *archiatra* claimed that the *signa* and the *notae virginitatis* were difficult to collect. The hymen (i.e. the myrtle-shaped caruncles) could be lacerated in many ways, including – and this happened very easily, *facillime* – by the woman herself⁹⁰. In practice, Zacchia recommended paying attention to many other indicators, such as the state of the vagina, to be examined immediately after the supposed loss of virginity⁹¹.

Today, as I also hinted at the beginning, precaution is being replaced by pure and simple rejection. “In medicine, write Monica Christianson and Carola Eriksson, the hymen is described as a round structure of mucous membrane surrounding the inner part of the vaginal orifice that becomes irregular after penetration. However, this “fact” has seldom been

88 — On Zacchia, see Bajada 1988 and Duffin 2011. On the emergence of legal medicine in Europe, in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, see Pastore 2004. On the involvement of midwives and doctors, in trials regarding virginity, rape and pregnancy, see Pastore 2004: 129-148; 211-237. On physicians consulted to examine a young woman's imperforation, in a politically sensitive situation, in the same period, see Finucci 2011.

89 — Zacchia, *Questiones medico-legales*, 4, 2, 2, 4-6. See also Bajada 1988: 137-138.

90 — Zacchia, *Questiones medico-legales*, 4, 2, 1, 6 ; 4, 2, 1, 14. The very definition of virginity had to include awareness of these possibilities, therefore it had to mention that « *virginitas* » was not any condition of physical integrity, but *quaedam muliebrum vasorum integritas, ex coniunctione viri non maculata* (14). From a juridical point of view, virginity could only be lost for cause of penetration by a man (...*ex ipsa sola iudicium fieri possit destructionis virginitatis per maris coniunctione*).

91 — Zacchia, *Consilia*, 3, 34. A man accused of rape had a small, thin, truncated penis incapable of erection, while the woman's genitals presented characteristics incompatible with a recent loss of virginity.

questioned. Some researchers claim that the hymen is an embryological remnant of mesoderm that ruptures during the later stage of embryo development, indicating that the hymen normally does not exist after birth. Others emphasize that female growth makes the vaginal orifice elastic, which implies that the first sexual intercourse seldom leaves any visible changes. Myhre, Berntzen, and Bratlid demonstrated that the opening of the vagina among non-abused girls varies and that penetration seldom causes any physical damage. *Consequently, a clinician cannot tell if penetration has occurred or not, despite the fact that they sometimes are called on to do so* (my emphasis) [...]. The hymen's biological function is unclear, but different unsustainable explanations have been suggested"⁹².

In Sweden, RFSU (*Riksförbundet för sexuell upplysning or Swedish Association for Sexuality Education*), has recently declared that there is no hymen, only a "vaginal crown", the significance of which, in regard to sexual activity is purely and simply nil. On the official website, an instructional booklet begins with the following: "Known by the established term "hymen", the vaginal corona is the subject of many myths and misunderstandings. The most important of these is the notion that a woman's vaginal opening is covered by a membrane that ruptures on penetration. This is incorrect. There is no such membrane. RFSU wishes to dispel the myths and promote knowledge of the true facts. In this booklet, we aim to give you a more accurate idea of what you will find just inside the vaginal opening of every woman". Notice the logic of the argument: if, instead of trying to translate an undefined word, you start from a functional definition, then you draw the conclusion that "there is no *such* membrane"⁹³. There is just a fold that you call "vaginal corona".

The recent, and current, history of this changing consensus is enlightening for us. To look at legal medicine is helpful, because it is in that epistemological and institutional context – at the intersection of medical knowledge and juridical norms, in order to pass judgments in the law courts –, that the medical profession, in Europe and the United States, definitely inclined toward consensus about the existence of signs of virginity. After centuries of controversy among anatomists, the demands of the judicial procedure called for a final decision. It is at the interface of law and anatomy, and in view of their expected role as experts, in sum, that modern and contemporary physicians frame the debate about the existence of the hymen. Should they agree to play such role? Do they have sufficient certainty, on which to ground their assessments? Christianson and Eriksson marshal their arguments in order to conclude: "A clinician cannot tell if penetration has occurred or not, despite the fact that they

92 — Christianson and Eriksson 2011: 167.

93 — http://www.rfsu.se/Bildbank/Dokument/Praktikor/praktika-Vaginal_corona2009.pdf.

sometimes are called on to do so". At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Theodric Beck navigated through the same dilemma, with an obvious inclination to take the opposite direction. His predecessors, including Paolo Zacchia, showed various degrees of skepticism. A history of the hymen has to be written not merely to track down intertextual debates, from doctor to doctor, but in order to map the demands imposed upon medical knowledge by social expectations, *and legal systems*⁹⁴.

Forensic medicine also helps us focus on gender. Gender is everything here. The hymen is a "girl thing". In one, and only one, of the gendered bodies, it is believed today, can we find a physical sign of virginity: intact, it constitutes the proof that vaginal sex has never occurred; fractured, it is proof that penetration has taken place. But this assumption that the female body bears traces, or reveals clues of sexual activity is arbitrary. It is not the case that the male body *per se* fails to present evidence of such activity, especially penetration. When, in the same years of the nineteenth century – and in the same project, formalizing legal medicine – the semiotic imperative to detect sodomy became compelling, doctors started to identify a host of unequivocal signs to be decoded, in the penis as well as in the male's anal region. In that case, what mattered was less the first time, than repetition and habit. But the principle remains the same. When questioned, a human body, female or male, can be very eloquent. When the will-to-know an erotic body matters socially – when a inquisitive correlation of knowledge, norms and subjection takes shape in a culture, Michel Foucault would say; or when issues of desire, pleasure, and bodies involve judiciary institutions (as I prefer to say) – then the ostentatious nature of the male genitals and the malleable contour of the anus will show the appropriate *signes* that betray the practice of sodomy⁹⁵. In France, the same physician who defined the *membrane hymen* as a *signe physique de virginité*, and discussed it at length, in his classical *Étude médico-légale sur les attentats aux mœurs*, Ambroise Tardieu, could triumphantly announce that he had collected an infallible repertoire of the signs of *pédérastie*⁹⁶. Hymens and funnel-shaped anuses (*anus infundibulaires*) belong to the same domain of knowledge, that of

94 — We can find an exemplary synthesis of a history, written in this perspective, in Fischer-Homberger 1977. I had committed a purely intertextual, and selective, reconstruction of the controversy about material virginity, from Soranos, to Buffon, via sixteenth-century anatomy (Sissa 1990b). Today, I would completely reframe the question, by situating those texts in specific genres of medical writing, with a privileged attention to forensic medicine.

95 — I had examined an Athenian version of the will-to-know the indicators of an erotic life, engraved on the male body, in Sissa 1999.

96 — Tardieu Paris (1857) 1862. The third section was published as : « La Pédérastie » [1857], in Carlier et Tardieu 1981. Tardieu's meticulous descriptions of the alterations observed in the anus and the penis of active and passive *pédérastes* became a reference for forensic medicine. See Fauconney 1905: 59-70. For a critical *aperçu*, see Aron and Kempf 1978.

the legally-relevant, physical evidence of sexual acts⁹⁷. When thinking of heterosexual intercourse, however, we have grown so accustomed to the idea of an anatomical materialization of the invisible condition “no-penetration”, only in the female body, (whereas the male genitals remain silent), that we resist admitting that, in a culture, no such corporeal signifier might be unavailable.

As far as ancient societies are concerned, the demonstrandum is not whether the ancient Greeks failed to discover “the hymen”, as they failed to discover blood circulation, or the spermatozoids, or ovulation. What we have to determine is how, when, and why western science came to theorize the existence of a physical *sign* of virginity. The debates about this particular piece of anatomy, the *hymen*, always involved not just a morphologic, but a semiotic concern. This is why the attempts to explain the silence of ancient medicine on the hymen, although ingenious and pertinent, do not seem sufficient to me. Historians have tried to find extenuating circumstances. The author of an extremely useful history of female anatomy (*L'Utero attraverso i secoli*), Felice La Torre, thought that the Greeks did not practice the dissection of human corpses⁹⁸. In light of the comparative historical overview of forensic medicine, I would like to advance a different hypothesis: in Greek erotic culture, woman's chastity was required for marriage, fidelity, and the procreation of legitimate children. There was a social demand for virginity, therefore. But there was no institutional demand for the *signs* of virginity. Hippocratic medicine, that is, never had to identify a dedicated piece of anatomy, which could signify: “penetration did (or did not) occur in this vagina”. Hippocratic physicians never had to be involved in judicial procedure, as expert witnesses. They were never asked to provide a “medico-legal” theory of clues and traces of sexual activities, to be detected in the genitals, by a *peritus*.

In the law courts of classical Athens, sexual activity was sometimes at stake. A man could be accused of participating in political life, although he had engaged in prostitution. The law did not sanction that sexual behavior per se, but barred from the exercise of democratic citizenship a man who had cultivated it. Should he appear in popular assemblies,

97 — It is not just medicine, but *legal* medicine, that creates the intellectual environment in which sexuality became a powerfully normative, institutionalized form of knowledge. Michel Foucault ignored it completely. For an exemplary study of homosexuality in this perspective, see Beachy 2010.

98 — La Torre 1917. La Torre discusses the limits of Galen's anatomical knowledge, based on his inability to dissect human corpses. La Torre then reports the results of dissections of chimpanzees, performed by a professor of anatomy, at the University of Modena, Dr Sperino. « *L'orifizio della vagina e l'imene presentano nel Cimpanzé alcune particolarità [...] non si vede né imene, né caruncule mirtiformi, come nella donna [...]. E' per questo, aggiungo io, che molti scrittori del 500, 600 e più in giù hanno sostenuto di non avere mai trovato l'imene, figlia dell'immaginazione; essi si basavano sopra ciò che s'era visto nelle scimmie!* » (144-145).

such man was liable to legal pursuit, and, as a result of a trial, he could incur the loss of civic rights, *atimia*. Aeschines' speech *Against Timarchos* presents this kind of prosecution. Timarchos' life-style, but also the condition of his body, and the acts he was used to, are exposed, and discussed before the judges. Aeschines is eager to prove that Timarchos "had abused his male body committing feminine abuse" (which can only mean that he used his male body as if it were a woman's body): τὸν ἄνδρα μὲν καὶ ἄρρενα τὸ σῶμα, γυναικεῖα δὲ ἁμαρτήματα ἡμαρτηκότα⁹⁹. But no expert witness was called to give an opinion. Reputation and gossip took care of the evidence¹⁰⁰. A woman could be part of a law suit, in which her pretense to be a proper youth (not a whore, as the prosecutor contended) was a matter of debate. Again, as the pseudo-Demosthenic speech *Against Neaira* intimates, hearsay was the only proof.

Ancient physical signs

This is quite remarkable. But it is not to say that ancient medicine failed to provide *any* kind of semiotic knowledge, useful to detect sexual activity. It did. There was incontestable evidence of the loss of virginity, which did not require any special, local, invasive examination of the female genitals. It was pregnancy.

Pregnancy established a massive semiotic asymmetry between females and males, but it was a different kind of lop-sidedness: not hymen versus no-hymen, but the conception of a baby in one body, versus an inconsequential burst of pleasure, for the other. Under the circumstances, child-bearing was the unequivocal, glaring proof that heterosexual intercourse had occurred, where it really mattered: the female body. And it mattered there, precisely because, in that body only, the consequences of coition were so significant. What to do with the baby? Who was the father? Would another man marry the girl? For a married woman, fertility was a blessing. Out of wedlock, it was a nightmare.

In traditional representations of the difference between the sexes, women existed in view of procreation. Hesiod and Plato tell us (more or less seriously) that, added to an originally male human kind, female bodies were immediately put to work, to assure reproduction. A female, hyper-gendered body was ready-made for generation.

In the Hippocratic corpus, pregnancy is described as a direct development of coition, unless a woman wishes to expel the embryo. Since both women and men emit semen, whenever this happens, the two fluids will mix up, and coagulate to form a child. Should a woman want to forestall

99 — Aeschines, *Against Timarchos*, 185.

100 — *Ibid.*, 189.

pregnancy, she must counteract this process, actively and deliberately. “When a woman has intercourse, if she is not going to conceive, then it is her practice to expel the sperm produced by both partners whenever she wishes to do so. If however she is going to conceive, the sperm is not expelled, but remains in the womb. For when the womb has received the sperm it closes up and retains it, because the moisture causes the womb’s orifice to contract. Then both what is provided by the man and what is provided by the woman is mixed together. If the woman is experienced in matters of childbirth, and takes note when the sperm is retained, she will know the precise day on which she has conceived”¹⁰¹. Let us read this passage as a piece of narrative. There is process that unfolds automatically, starting from the sexual act: the seminal fluids mix up, the womb inhales the mixture; the mouth of the womb closes hermetically; the development of a new life begins, inside this sealed container. Left to nature, therefore, the uterus functions spontaneously and mechanically. If a woman does not want to have a child, however, she can interrupt that sequence, by throwing the mixture of semen out of her body. This expulsion, *The Nature of child* tells us, requires jumping vigorously, and hitting the gluts with the heels¹⁰². Abortion halts, violently, a physiological process. Such a process is not a fragile chain of events, but a stubborn growth. It is set in motion, furthermore, most of the time, the peak of fertility being allegedly reached, in the first days after period, when the womb is nice and clean¹⁰³. Only an altered state of the womb – caused by excessive cold, density, dryness or, vice versa, excessive humidity – prevents conception¹⁰⁴. A woman can test her fertility by applying an aromatic fumigation to her vagina, and checking whether the smell comes through her mouth and nostrils¹⁰⁵. In conclusion: whenever the female body is not disturbed, or unduly blocked (by imperforation, for instance), it performs. Pregnancy follows coition.

Aristotle offers the most systematic vision of generation. Sexual difference exists in view of procreation. By definition, a female is the one who engenders in her body, whereas a male engenders in another. Across

101 — Hippocrates, *On Nature of the Child*, 5 (Lonie 1981).

102 — *Ibid.*

103 — *Ibid.*, Aristotle, *History of Animals*, 7, 2, 582b 11. By encouraging couples to expect pregnancy in that particular time-frame, this mistake might have acted as an involuntary contraceptive. In the second century CE, Soranus still gives the same indication, which means that no experience, gained via trial-and-error, ever helped change the belief.

104 — Hippocrates, *Aphorisms*, 5, 62. Note that these alterations cause either the closing down of the mouth of the womb (if it is hard, it is shut, 54), or its relaxation. It is a matter of transit. In his *Commentary On Hippocrates, On the Nature of Man*, 47-49, Galen quotes this passage, and endorses the principle that generation requires a well-balanced harmony of qualities, in the womb as well as in the seed itself. Women become infertile for very specific reasons.

105 — Hippocrates, *Aphorisms*, 5, 59.

all species, females and males feel the powerful attraction of pleasure and desire, which draw them to copulate¹⁰⁶. Among human beings, desire and pleasure begin to be felt at puberty, when the seminal fluid (*sperma*) appears in the male, while menstruation (the female contribution to procreation) starts in the female. Sexual activity, therefore, is anchored to generation. The subjective sensations of delight, and the quest for more of it, compel adolescents to an intense erotic activity, unless, as I mentioned earlier, they are tightly supervised. Coition between a female and a male is described narratively, as a physiological process that unfolds in a timely fashion. "When the uterus has taken in the semen, immediately (εὐθὺς), it closes in most women, until the seventh month. At the eighth month they open up. The embryo, if it is viable, comes down during the eighth month"¹⁰⁷. Once the semen has been propelled into the female body, when it is taken into the uterus, and time goes by, a membrane grows around¹⁰⁸. In *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle insists on the "automatic" progress of embryogenesis¹⁰⁹.

Soranos sums up this cause-effect when he says, with his exemplary concision, that the first sexual relation is not the same thing for a man and for a woman, precisely because, for the former, it amounts to an instantaneous discharge of semen, whereas, for the latter, it entails the formation of a child¹¹⁰. This asymmetry makes sex radically different for the two genders. A female body is not just one that receives the male seed: it hosts a burgeoning embryo for nine months. Loss of virginity means the acquisition of a new life, inside. It causes a corporeal transformation, so visible that even a virgin goddess, like Diana in Callisto's story, could not fail to recognize it.

The signs of pregnancy were numerous and conspicuous. Aristotle mentions the dry condition of the vagina immediately after coition; the enlargement of the woman's loins (which may occur swiftly (εὐθὺς), and the modification of the region of the groin; the baby's movements, on the right side, after forty days. This tends to show that it is a boy. Girls sit usually on the left side, and move later and slower¹¹¹. After conception, women feel heavy in their entire body, their vision can be obscured, and they suffer headache. These symptoms appear after 10 days, depending on the concomitant excretions. Nausea and vomiting are also part of this

106 — Aristotle, *History of Animals*, 6, 18, 571b 7-10.

107 — *Ibid.*, 7, 4, 583b 29-32.

108 — *Ibid.*, 7, 7, 586a 15-19.

109 — I had discussed the model of *automata*, in Aristotle's description of this process in « La génération automatique », in Sissa 1997.

110 — Soranos, *Gynecology*, 1, 33.

111 — Aristotle, *History of Animals*, 7, 3, 583a 14-583b 9.

clinical picture¹¹². Soranos shows an even keener interest in signs – signs of approaching menstruation, of conception, of the gender of the fetus, of impending abortion, of imminent parturition (all except virginity, by the way). About pregnancy, he has a vast repertoire at hand:

“One must work out the evidence for conception from the many signs lumped together and by their differentiation. For instance from the facts: that at the end of intercourse, the woman has been conscious of a shivering sensation, that the orifice of the uterus is closed but soft to the touch and lacking in resistance (for in coldness and inflammation it closes too, but there is roughness and hardness) that the vagina is not kept moist by the seed... Later on also from the facts: that the monthly catharsis is held back or appears only slightly, that the loins feel rather heavy, that imperceptibly the breast swell, which is accompanied by a certain painful feeling, that the stomach is upset, that the vessels on the breast appear prominent and livid and the region below the eyes greenish, that sometimes darkish splotches spread over the region above the eyes and so-called freckles develop. And still later, from the appearance of the pica and from the swelling of the abdomen in proportion to the passage of time; and then from the fact that the gravida perceives the movement of the fetus”¹¹³.

Signs of pregnancy included subjective sensations, only felt by the woman herself; modifications of the genitals that only someone intimately close to her, or a medical practitioner, could check and identify; blatant and easily recognizable symptoms; and, finally, the massive swelling of the belly. Abundant, diverse, involving different parts of the body, and manifesting themselves over time, from the first days after conception, these *semeia* were, indeed, reliable. One could hardly miss all of them. And those who wanted to keep an eye on a woman's sexual activity had an embarrassment of riches. To the socially ostentatious spectacle of marriage and wedding, we have to add the physically evident display of the maternal body. It is this body that Hero, Creusa, or Callisto tried to conceal. They lost their *parthenia*; they were still believed to be *parthenoi*; their *parthenioi* would show up.

In the *Hippocratic corpus*, in Aristotle's biology, and in the works of later physicians, the female body is shaped to procreate and, only if it procreates, can it be healthy. Sex is the norm. And sex shows. The immediate outcome of coition between a woman and a man is the conception of a child. When the female body functions properly – no humoral unba-

112 — *Ibid.*, 584a 2-9.

113 — Soranos, *Gynecology*, 1, 44-45. For a discussions of signs of conception, in the novel and other literary genres, see Goldhill 1995: 122, 156-158.

lance, no excessive abstinence, and no imperforation – it responds to sex with pregnancy.

Contraception

Focused on procreation as the scope of marriage, ancient medical discourse corroborates the belief that copulation was usually fecund. This is highly significant for our question. The time during which a woman might be still unmarried, and yet sexually active – the time during which one could doubt if a *parthenos* was sexually a *parthenos*, that is – was very short. If it is believed that pregnancy is the regular, most probable outcome of sex, sooner than later the truth will be exposed. It is only a matter of patience. Even in a society deeply concerned with the control of women's sexuality, fathers and husbands can wait a few days, at most a couple of weeks. If they trust nature's time keeping, then the scrutiny of their daughters and brides' genitalia, in search for signs of defloration is just futile. As long as a woman is not pregnant, she must very probably be chaste. And those who care about her chastity can confidently wait because, should a fetus begin to grow in her body, there will be a lot to see. The *symptoms of pregnancy* will cry out the *loss of virginity*. When the causal connection of coition and conception is thought to be stable, therefore, the elusiveness of virginity, which seems to be the inevitable corollary of belief in the hymen, is preempted. There is presumption of innocence, so to speak, joined to the trust in a natural phenomenon. This, let me insist, occurs in a cultural context. Let us remember the emphasis placed by Hesiod, Herodotus, and Aristotle upon the parental surveillance of *parthenoi*, on the one hand, and the narratives of amorous subterfuges, on the other hand. If they are properly brought up, and successfully supervised, young women are expected to be chaste. Time will tell if they have failed to live up to these expectations. In the meantime, men could marry, in perfect good faith, a bride who had had a clandestine sexual encounter – as happens, for instance, in Euripides' *Ion*, and in the stories of Polydore and Polymele, in the *Iliad*¹¹⁴. Pregnancy was the only detectable sign, available to those in charge of a woman's sexuality¹¹⁵.

This is why contraception must have had a highly significant impact on ancient sexuality. If a technical intervention is known to interfere with the expected temporal sequence; if such technique is made accessible to women, then sexuality has to change. The result will not be only fewer children conceived, as historians of demography argue, but a new situation

114 — Homer, *Iliad*, 16, 175-190.

115 — See for instance Apollonios of Rhodes, 4, 1105-1205; Diodorus, IV, 33, 7-9, on Auge. For a discussions of signs of conception, see see Goldhill 1995: 122; 156-158.

of “knowability”. Vaginal sex can go unobserved. Maternity ceases to be a fatality. Women might protect themselves unbeknownst to their fathers, and, if they are married, also to their husband. Physicians and midwives now have a different role to play. Knowledge, norms and subjectivity are affected. Desire, pleasure, body and institutions are reconfigured.

Birth control is documented in ancient medicine¹¹⁶. The Hippocratic corpus mentions abortion. This is prohibited by the *Oath*, and yet medical writers describe women’s attempts to interrupt their pregnancy, and also give recipes for abortifacients¹¹⁷. As we have seen, *On the Nature of the Child* includes the advice given to a young woman to leap violently, in order to eject a seed of six days¹¹⁸. The Hippocratic writers, therefore, prescribe substances, or mechanical maneuvers, to prevent the growth of an implanted embryo. In *Diseases of Women*, we find this prescription: “If a woman does not want to be pregnant, misy as much as a bean, dissolved in water; have her drink that. For a year, so to speak, she does not conceive”¹¹⁹. The same potion also appears in *Nature of Women*¹²⁰. This can be considered a contraceptive, ἀτοκίον. Aristotle says that if a woman does not want to conceive, she ought to prepare her genitals to this effect,

116 — Here is a concise synthesis by K. Kapparis, “Athenian law said nothing on either contraception or abortion, presumably because Athens, like most Greek city-states, preferred a rather limited and manageable population, and therefore had no good reason to resist such practices on a collective scale. In fact Plato and Aristotle recommend abortion in their utopian states as a method of population control (Plato, *Republic*, 460a-461c; Aristotle, *Politics*, 1335b 19-26). However, as it happens today, some individuals might feel strongly against such practices. In the early 4th century one case over an induced abortion ended up in court as a homicide procedure, but it seems that it was a long shot and led to nothing (Lys. Fr 10 Thalheim). Athenian women could attempt contraception and abortion without fear of the law. Contraception of course would be safer, but unfortunately, since the ancient world did not exactly understand how the process of conception works, contemporary contraceptive methods often were nothing more than wishful thinking. *Abortion might thus appear to be an inescapable necessity and a drastic last resort, especially for prostitutes, unmarried women and women who had conceived outside wedlock or with men other than their husbands*. The Hippocratic corpus contains plentiful advice on oral drugs, pessaries, mechanical methods, and even a surgical procedure in order to induce an abortion (see especially the study “Diseases of Women”). See Kapparis 2003. I would add that the prevalence of abortion over contraception was not just a matter of empirical experience. In this logic, we should expect that abortion always trumped contraception, which remained a wishful-thinking, until the Pill.

117 — *Diseases of Women*, 1, 78 offers a long catalog of recipes for the expulsion of dead or damaged fetuses, which cannot be treated, purely and simply, as abortives. On contraception, see: Nardi 1971; Noonan 1986 (see p. 13 for Noonan’s insistence on the fact that the only contraceptive mentioned in the Hippocratic corpus is a potion, not a local application); Riddle 1992; King 1998; Van De Walle 1999; Kapparis 2002. King thoroughly criticizes Riddle’s chemical approach to ancient pharmacology. Van De Walle (1999: 118) argues that “In the Hippocratic treatises *On Women’s Diseases* and *On the Nature of Women*, there are many recipes that have sometimes be interpreted (for instance by Riddle) as being abortifacients, but which are in fact clearly designated to as remedies to induce menstruation, to extract a dead foetus or placenta, or to accelerate a difficult labour”. I agree with both objections.

118 — Hippocrates, *On Nature of the Child*, 13.

119 — Hippocrates, *Diseases of Women*, 1, 76.

120 — Hippocrates, *Nature of Women*, 98.

by smearing cedar oil, copper ore and incense, diluted in oil, in the place where the semen falls (the vagina)¹²¹. These remedies, however, are rare.

Soranos, in contrast, places a completely new focus on *contraceptives*. Firstly, he distinguishes their function from that of abortifacients: “A contraceptive differs from an abortive for the first does not let conception take place, while the latter destroys what has been conceived. Let us, therefore, call the one “abortive” (*phthorion*) and the other contraceptive (*atokion*). And an “expulsive” (*ekbolion*) some people say is synonymous with an abortive; others however say that there is a difference”¹²². Secondly, he emphasizes his preference for contraception, over abortion. “It is much more advantageous not to conceive than to destroy the embryo”¹²³. Thirdly, he dispenses advice on how to prevent conception. This chapter goes from indications of time (avoid the period of fertility, i.e. the days immediately after menstruation), to the prescription of techniques of breath and movement. Above all, he recommends local anointments, intended to forestall the proper progression of the male seed into the cavity of the womb. Various agents are to be spread on the neck of the uterus: olive oil, honey, cedar resin, juice of the balsam tree, white lead, salve, myrtle oil, alum, galbanum. A tuft of wool, inserted into the mouth of the womb will also do. Suppositories that contract and condense can also be applied before coitus¹²⁴. All these treatments will cause the mouth of the uterus to tighten and close up, so that the male’s semen is prevented from reaching the interior of the womb. Should however the semen have already found its way into the womb, a different repertoire of plants (mostly) – irritating, instead of contracting – will have to be used. These, “not only do not allow the seed of the man to remain in the cavity of the uterus, but draw forth as well another fluid from it”¹²⁵. Soranos mention here a dozen of pungent pessaries, which will hinder the ability of the uterus to retain the semen. These irritating pessaries are contraceptives, but also abortives. Pomegranate peel is a frequently recurring ingredient¹²⁶. The final section of this systematic guide to birth control, logically, deals with what can be done when the conception has already taken place, during the first thirty days of pregnancy. Here we have an array of methods: walking, jumping, massage, injections, baths, being bled, diuretics, purgations, fumigations. The uterus must relax and be irritated at the same time¹²⁷.

121 — Aristotle, *History of Animals*, 7, 3, 583a 19-24.

122 — Soranos, *Gynecology*, 1, 19.

123 — *Ibid.*, 1, 61.

124 — *Ibid.*, 1, 61-62.

125 — *Ibid.*, 1, 61.

126 — *Ibid.*, 1, 62-63.

127 — *Ibid.*, 1, 64-65.

Conception, Helen King warns us, was a much less punctual and neatly defined phenomenon, for ancient physicians, than it is for western modern science. It was not the “successful implantation of the blastocyst in the uterine lining”, of course, but it was not the instantaneous encounter of the female and the male contributions to generation either. It was, King argues, an “extended process”, involving the mixture of the two seminal fluids, and the slow development of the embryo. Since this was “a gradual process taking place over several months, the line between abortion and contraception was drawn at a point different from our own”¹²⁸. While recognizing this cultural and biomedical distance, however, we can draw a line between contraception and abortion: the former was meant to prevent the whole process, the latter was intended to interrupt its progression.

Soranos’ attention to contraception displays a keen interest, great ingenuity and massive knowledge. If we look at the history of ancient pharmacology, spanning Hippocratic medicine to Byzantine gynecology, it is in his *Gynaecia* that the most significant surge in the quantity of prescriptions and in the emphasis placed on their usage occurs. This is a real turning point. “In the beginning of the second century A.D.” writes Keith Hopkins, “The great doctor Soranus, a Greek who practiced in Rome, advanced in his *Gynaecia* both technique and theory to a level surpassed only in the last hundred years. After him, the tradition is to be found partially in Oribasius, and more fully in the work of Caelius Aurelianus in the fifth century A.D. and of Aëtius in the sixth”¹²⁹.

Soranos’ exceptional attention to fertility control and, perhaps, family limitation, must be set against the background of roman sexuality. In the groundbreaking article I have just quoted, “Contraception in the Roman Empire” (1965), Keith Hopkins argued that, although the Augustan legislation on marriage was intended, among other things, to remedy the demographic decline of upper-class Roman families, the use of contraception and abortion must have reached its peak in the Early Empire¹³⁰. Before Soranos, Pliny the Elder and Pedanius Dioscorides (first century CE) mention herbs, pessaries and potions¹³¹. Literary allusions to contraception, Hopkins pointed out, are to be found in Juvenal and Tacitus¹³². The availability of different methods of limiting natural fertility, on the one hand, explains the demographic fact that upper-class families were small (three children), but the limited evidence of their

128 — King 1998: 114.

129 — Hopkins 1965: 131.

130 — Hopkins 1965: 149-150.

131 — Hopkins 1965: 130-131.

132 — Juvenal, 6, 595-597; Tacitus, *De Germania*, 19.

usage, on the other hand, is puzzling. Medical knowledge seems to be undermined by the confusion between contraception and abortion. "This confusion of abortion with contraception", Hopkins concludes, "And the failure to make the distinction between them explicit may colour all our evidence. Actual use of contraceptives may be lost in general references to means of remaining child-less or to abortifacients. Alternatively of course the near silence of the literary sources may reflect the infrequency of the use of contraceptives. We cannot tell. In any case it is certain that references to willful abortion and abortifacients and to infanticide are many times more frequent than references to contraception"¹³³. This higher frequency, for Hopkins, speaks to the visibility of the desired effect, immediately after the application of an abortive and the killing of a baby. Prevention of pregnancy, he argues, is much less easy to check. The formers' "success or failure can be seen very quickly", whereas the latter "cannot immediately gauged according to their effectiveness"¹³⁴.

We now know that, in Roman literature, there are many more allusions to contraception. In an engaging article, "Laser-Quests Unnoticed Allusions to Contraception in a Poet and a *Princeps*?", Nick Fisher discusses Catullus, but also Seneca, Ovid, Plutarch and a letter by Augustus himself to Maecenas, quoted by Macrobius¹³⁵. Contraception appears to be much more pervasive, than it was previously thought. But the point made by Keith Hopkins on the doubtful reliability of a contraceptive (as opposed to a medication or a maneuver that would cause the expulsion of the embryo) remains relevant. There is something elusive about the application of a tuft of wool, or the smearing of olive oil, deep inside the vagina. Not only is there no certainty that it will work; there is no sure means to know if it has ever been placed there at all. Only the woman who did it would know.

The debate on Roman demography has taken a polemical turn with Bruce Frier's works on Roman Egypt, and his criticism of John Riddle's book on *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance* (1992). Like Hopkins, Riddle was inclined to take seriously the critical mass of evidence, to be found in the works of medical writers. His focus, however, was on the chemical effectiveness of the ingredients and the mixtures at hand. This pharmaceutical knowledge was, for Riddle, the result of a tradition of experiments performed by women, and transmitted informally. Physicians must have taken those recipes from that source. The hypothesis of a trial-and-error, ingenious, experimental method fits Riddle's major thesis: most of the prescriptions to be found

133 — Hopkins 1965: 139.

134 — Hopkins 1965: 138.

135 — Fisher 1996: 73-96.

in Pliny, Dioscorides, or Soranos, when put to the test of modern pharmacology, are revealed to be positively efficient¹³⁶. The ancient Greeks and Romans did use sound contraception, therefore, as the size of their families also demonstrates. Bruce Frier takes exception to the entire argument. He contends that, like all societies before the so called “fertility transition”, the Romans failed to implement family limitation¹³⁷. Indeed, there was a body of knowledge on different methods of birth control, but this must not be confused with *family* planning. In order to justify the interest for contraceptives and abortifacients, on behalf of medical writers, Frier concludes that: “The most economical assumption may be that such accurate knowledge as Romans possessed about birth control originated chiefly in nonmarital sex (where the need was most urgent), and spread from there into upper-class marriage (where it may have assisted in promoting individualistic practices of family limitation) and perhaps also into lower-class marriage (playing at most a subsidiary role within a regime of natural fertility)”¹³⁸.

I cannot enter into the discussion about demography in the Roman Empire. But I see a culturally meaningful picture, emerging from our sources, as well as from these scholarly debates. Birth control was marginal in Greece. In the *Hippocratic corpus*, the vivid portrait of the young woman, who jumps up and down kicking her buttocks, is an isolated vignette¹³⁹. The recipes for the expulsion of a crippled fetus, in *Diseases of Women*, 1, 78 form a striking corpus, but they seem to concern the removal of an already non-viable embryo. They stand out, in contrast to the many cases of impeded fertility, discussed in the same treatise (*Diseases of Women*, 1, 10-25): this is a gallery of women receiving fumigations, pessaries, and manual interventions intended to re-establish the proper position, openness and elasticity of their womb, so that they will be able to conceive and carry on their pregnancy. The advice given in *Nature of Women* 98 and *Diseases of Women*, 1, 76, comes across as disproportionately immaterial, in the context of a systematic therapy of fertility. In Aristotle's *History of Animals*, the one passage that recommends cedar oil, white lead and frankincense to be smeared on the genitals, if a woman does not wish to conceive¹⁴⁰, carries a minimal weight, against the background of a corpus of biological works (*History of Animals*, *Parts of Animals*, *Generation of Animals*), in which, as I said, the sexes are defined as principles of generation. Generation is the end not only of sexual

136 — Riddle 1992: 155-165.

137 — Riddle 1992: 328-330.

138 — Frier 1994: 332.

139 — Hippocrates, *On Nature of the Child*, 13.

140 — Aristotle, *History of Animals*, 7, 3, 583a 19-24.

activity, but of the very existence of female and male bodies. In literary texts, we encounter stories of (often unsuccessfully) exposed babies, but not, to my knowledge, the kind of allusions to contraceptive plants, that we find in Roman poetry, as Nick Fisher has shown¹⁴¹. This discretion does not mean that actual individuals ignored empirical practices – we cannot know – but it must be the symptom of a lesser concern for such practices. There is feeble discursive curiosity, in classical Greece, for anti-fertility techniques.

From Greece to Rome

In Rome, things are different. Medical as well as fictional texts place a new focus on birth control. The ingenuity in identifying the most diverse ingredients, endowed with the power to hinder the transit of the semen into the uterus, grows exponentially. Even if we do not agree with John Riddle's scenario of female resourceful researchers, testing leaves and fruits, and handing on their expertise generation after generation, we have to admit that contraceptives are intended for the female body, and they are meant to act in the vagina, on the neck of the womb. Their handling, or consumption, is left to women. Whereas abortion is the expulsion of a conceived embryo, contraceptives are meant to intercept the male semen, when it is still on its way into the womb. The usage of plugs, constrictives, or oily substances that line the vagina (or facilitate the sliding of the semen?) betray the intent to apply a mechanical action¹⁴². Conception has to be forestalled, not at the source of male semen, therefore, but in the very place where the two seminal fluids are expected to mix. Soranos mentions a sort of *coitus interruptus*, it is true. But it is, again, the woman who should take care of it. « During the sexual act, at the critical moment of coitus when the man is about to discharge the seed, the woman must hold her breath and draw herself away a little, so that the seed may not be hurled too deep into the cavity of the uterus ». She then can try to expel the semen from the vagina, by sneezing, cleaning, squatting, and drinking something cold. Lucretius recommends to women not to undulate

141 — I agree with Helen King's criticism of John Riddle's contention that the pomegranate offered to Persephone in Hades, in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, must be intended as a contraceptive. (King 1998: 115-130).

142 — See the thoughtful considerations of Plinio Prioreschi « Among the large number of agents applied intravaginally as contraceptives, the possibility that some may have created a chemical milieu unsuitable for the spermatozoa cannot be excluded. In this case they would have had a contraceptive action independent of their capacity to obstruct the *ostium uteri*. As the physician was not aware of such chemical property, however, the use of such drugs would have been random » (1998: 656). Prioreschi criticizes the correlation between the use of contraceptives and the decrease of fertility in the Roman Empire, but his argument is relevant for us too. What mattered was, in the Roman practice, the purpose of blocking the mouth of the womb.

during intercourse, so that the semen's trajectory into the womb will not be deviated, seem to follow the same logic¹⁴³.

To highlight the gendered nature of contraceptive procedures is crucial. We are talking about cultures where men cared about social reproduction, but in which women appeared to be expert in the manipulation of *pharmaka*, which could be used to thwart that intent. "The myth of effective plant-based contraceptives", writes Helen King, "may thus be a male expression of a fear that women hold the knowledge which could enable them to control the fertility of the household"¹⁴⁴. In Rome, as Amy Richlin has argued, Pliny offers an overview of practices attributed to women, as patients as well as healers. This is culturally significant. "Pliny's connection between female practitioners, abortifacients, and love potions is common in literary and legal texts. Apart from whatever doctors may have done, Roman writers portray a market of female consumers whose needs are met by women who concoct potions". These include aphrodisiacs, anti-aphrodisiacs, emmenagogues, conception aids, abortifacients. Pliny mentions also an anti-contraceptive, to be applied to a woman who might not want to conceive. Hairs from the tail of a she-mule, plucked during coition with the stallion, and knotted together while the woman and the man are having intercourse, will promote conception. The prescription is brief, but we can certainly see an allusion to a conflict, here: "a woman unwilling to conceive is forced to", Richlin comments¹⁴⁵. The fear that women might resist pregnancy and maternity must have increased significantly, in the background of Soranos' medical thought.

It is women who interfere with nature. It is up to women to protect themselves, rationally and technically, against the irrepressible vitality of male ejaculation. To highlight the gendered nature of contraceptive procedures is crucial. This is what allows us to understand the connection between contraception and virginity. To preempt conception, the mouth of the womb has to be closed. Women try to stimulate the *stoma* to contract, but they also inflict upon themselves a sort of artificial, temporary imperforation. Virginity, if it were embodied in a transversal membrane, located more or less deeply in the vagina, would be a contraceptive. Imperforation is, indeed, a "stopper" – one that must be removed, in order to make a female body open and fecund. But, with the help of a physician, a woman might fabricate that obstacle, again and again. A woman might make herself, not a virgin, but an imperforated, impossible mother.

143 — Soranos, *Gynecology*, 1, 61 ; Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, 4, 1262-1276.

144 — King 1998: 137.

145 — Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, 30, 142. Richlin 1997: 210.

If now we go back to Soranos, we can see how his *Gynecology* reflects the coexistence, in Roman culture, of two important aspects of sexuality, which were either insignificant, or marginal, in ancient Greece: the hymen, and contraception. On the one hand, Soranos promotes obstetrical knowledge, without idolizing maternity, not even from a medical point of view; he reports its risks for a woman's health, and, for this reason, he approves of prolonged virginity. On the other hand, however, he mentions, and discusses in detail, the belief that there is a congenital membrane, sealing the female pudenda. Such belief is unattributed and erroneous, for Soranos, but it is there – in Rome, that is – and it must be significant enough, in his opinion, to deserve his careful, polemical discussion. This same text, therefore, makes the case for these interrelated points: the demystification of the maternal destiny of a woman; the defense of virginity as healthy; the awareness of a *new* theory of virginity, which is wrong; and an impressive collection of contraceptives. These lines of thought converge.

Reading the whole book, is to realize that, in this Greco-Roman world, of the second century CE, maternity has become a very different experience, from what it was in archaic and classical Greek culture. Back then, from Homer to Theocritus, the poets would sing of inexorable pregnancies, after sex. From Aphrodite and Anchises conceiving Aeneas, in one session of rapturous lovemaking, in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, to the many Homeric narratives of divine loves, intercourse between mortals and immortals is prolific. Hermes sees Polymele, falls in love, goes up to her chamber in secret, “and she gave him a goodly son, Eudorus”¹⁴⁶. The embraces of a god are never in vain, proudly announces Poseidon to his lover, Tyro, whose virginal girdle he has just undone, and to whom he has made beautiful love. Greetings, *ô* woman! (χαῖρε, γυνή)! Illustrious children are already on the way¹⁴⁷. But this is not only the power of divine sex. Except in rare cases, which are matter of puzzlement and dramatic concern – think of Laïos’ or Aegeus’ visit to the Delphic oracle to inquiry about their lack of children –, human coition tends to produce offspring. As we could see in Sophocles’ *Trachinian Women*, a woman was either without a man/husband, or with child, ἀνάνδρος ἢ τεκνοῦσσα¹⁴⁸. In the *Oaristys*, by Pseudo-Theocritus, as we have also seen, a charming shepherd yields to Daphnis’ courtship; they make love; and she exclaims: “I came here a *parthenos*, I am going away as a *gyne*!”. Her rustic lover

146 — Homer, *Iliad*, 16, 179-186.

147 — Homer, *Odyssey*, 11, 249-250.

148 — Sophocles, *Trachinian Women*, 308-309.

replies that, as a matter of fact, she is now a woman *and a mother*¹⁴⁹. As with the gods, it all happens at once.

This representation of sexuality is fictional, to be sure, but it is consistent and compatible with medical knowledge. Physicians' main mission was to encourage, and even prescribe regular intercourse; to facilitate procreation and fertility; to remedy any possible impairment and obstacle, which might hinder conception in the female body. Again, Hippocratic gynecology was all about that. Physicians knew how to practice abortion (although it was prohibited by the *Oath*) and prescribed abortifacients, but they did not bestow, on their patients and readers, the kind of expertise about *preventing conception*, which Soranos so emphatically displays. In that, now remote, erotic culture, men could still count on the cause/effect sequence: sex – conception – pregnancy. It was just a matter of patience. With the banalization of contraception, to which Soranos bears witness, that trust was no longer possible. If everyone knows that so many contraceptive methods are at hand, pregnancy can no longer be relied upon. More to the point, if women can apply contraceptives to their own body, unbeknownst to their parents, lovers and husbands, pregnancy becomes a form of feminine self-help. In Juvenal's sarcastic words, there are no women in labor in the gilded beds of the rich. The *artes* and the *medicamina* they can afford, and choose to use, help them become sterile (*steriles facit*), or kill the embryos in the belly. The husband ought to offer the potion himself, lest he will raise an Ethiopian child¹⁵⁰! Husbands, in other words, should suspect their women, and can only compete with them, in preempting generation.

In this Greco-Roman world, virginity too has become very different. As I had outlined in *Greek Virginity*, Roman culture, in literature as well as in religious life, strongly encourages us to think that a virgin body was naturally equipped with an internal obstacle. The divinities, and *indigitamenta* involved in the wedding night, Augustine tells us, quoting Varro, were Jugatinus, Domidicus, Domitius, Virginiensis, Subigo, Prema, Pertunda, Venus and Priapus. They were there to help the bride, who was afraid of the new situation, to be easily deprived of her virginity (*illis cooperantibus ut sine ulla difficultate virginitas auferatur*). Pertunda, the embodiment of the action of *pertundere*, "to transperce", was there to accomplish the final act that, Augustine protested, ought to be left to the groom. "Let her blush; let her go forth. Let the husband himself do something. It is disgraceful that any one but himself should do that from which she gets her name. But perhaps she is tolerated because she is said

149 — Ps.-Theocritus, *Oaristys*, 65-66.

150 — Juvenal, Satire, 6, 594-600. Cf. Ovid, *Heroides*, XI, 39-47, on a woman's attempt to produce an abortion, with the complicity of her nurse.

to be a goddess, and not a god. For if she were believed to be a male, and were called Pertundus, the husband would demand more help against him for the chastity of his wife than the newly-delivered woman against Silvanus"¹⁵¹. I cannot discuss Roman virginity, in this paper, which is already far too long¹⁵². This will be the next step, in the development of this argument.

A *parthenos* (or, now, a *virgo*) might well have lost her *parthenia* – and, with a prescription from a physician like Soranos, she might have applied, before making love, one of those contracting ointments, or she might have inserted a pessary. Who knows? In such circumstances, it becomes very reassuring, for men¹⁵³, to believe that, by nature, there exists a thin membrane, across the vagina, which breaks, once and forever, at the first intercourse, and thus certifies that that *virgo/parthenos* is exactly what her denomination says that she should be.

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151 — Augustine, *The City of God*, 6, 9. "Erubescat, eat foras; agat aliquid et maritus. Valde inhonestum est, ut, quod vocatur illa, impleat quisquam nisi ille. Sed forte ideo toleratur, quia dea dicitur esse, non deus. Nam si masculus crederetur et Pertundus vocaretur, maius contra pro uxoris pudicitia posceret maritus auxilium quam feta contra Silvanum". Augustine goes on evoking the ritual of having the bride sit on Priapus' huge and immensely shameful phallus "Sed quid hoc dicam, cum ibi sit et Priapus nimius masculus, super cuius immanissimum et turpissimum fascinum sedere nova nupta iubebatur, more honestissimo et religiosissimo matronarum?".

152 — For a few essential pieces of scholarship on Roman virginity, see Hallett 1984; Roskam 2000; Parker 2004; Osgood 2006; Van Haepere 2008; and Hersch 2010.

153 — For a converging argument on the uncertainty linked to the use of contraceptives, in a culture where men were in charge of procreation, but in which women appeared to be expert in the manipulation of *pharmaka*, see King 1998: 137: "The myth of effective plant-based contraceptives may thus be a male expression of a fear that women hold the knowledge which could enable them to control the fertility of the household". That fear must have increased significantly, in the background of Soranos' medical thought.

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