



Romancing the Virgin: Female Virginity Loss and Love in Popular Literatures in the West

Jodi Ann McAlister, BAS/BA (Hons)



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Department of Modern History, Politics and International Relations
Faculty of Arts
Macquarie University

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Abstract

This thesis is a literary history which seeks to elucidate dominant Western cultural narratives around female virginity loss, and the ways these have evolved. It takes as its primary focus popular literatures authored by women, particularly popular romance fiction and autobiographical stories about virginity loss.

The study of virginity has hitherto failed to meaningfully address the role played by romantic love in scripts for female sexual activity. Sex and love are clearly linked in twentieth century sexual history, leading to the emergence of a paradigm I term “compulsory demisexuality”. The development of this paradigm – which dictates that for women, sex and love are intrinsically linked together, and that sex without love is unnatural and harmful – has affected the way women think about sex.

This is not a study of empirical data: rather, it is a study of stories, and the way their evolution has impacted cultural attitudes. I trace the way in which my texts interact with the paradigm of compulsory demisexuality – alternately upholding, supporting, resisting, and subverting it – and the ways this has changed over time. I contend that romantic love has been key in giving the virgin an active voice when it comes to her sex life, and has been vital in incorporating female pleasure back into sexual narratives. The emergence of compulsory demisexuality has created a space in which women can be free to explore their sexual desires, but it is a space with boundaries. There continues to be considerable cultural emphasis on the idea that virgins must receive the “right” (that is, appropriately romantic) messages about sex. This idea of “rightness” clearly implies female virginity can be lost “wrongly”. Ultimately, I argue that this is a pernicious discourse, and that the virgin needs to be reimagined as a critical, active sexual agent, capable of making sexual decisions which are neither right nor wrong, but simply hers.

Statement of Candidate

I certify that the work in this thesis entitled *Romancing the Virgin: Female Virginity Loss and Love in Popular Literatures in the West* has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of the requirements for a degree to any other university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself have been appropriately acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Jodi Ann McAlister

ID: 42359422

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Chapter One – The Virgin In Love: Virginity and Romantic Love in History, and the Emergence of Compulsory Demisexuality

“The virginity issue... it’s a personal decision and it reflects how I feel right now about myself,” Britney Spears told an interviewer in 2002. “There are so many emotions involved that I would like to be able to wait until I know I’m with the right person and I’m married.”¹ Spears was the most famous of the high profile virgins who emerged in the late 1990s and 2000s, but she was by no means the only one: Jessica Simpson, Julianne Hough, Selena Gomez and Demi Lovato also spoke publicly about their commitment to ongoing virginity, represented, in some cases, by wearing a purity ring.² In 2008, Miley Cyrus said, “I like to think of myself as the girl that no one can get, that no one can keep in their hand. Even at my age, a lot of girls are starting to fall and I think if [staying a virgin] is a commitment girls make, that’s great.”³

The symbolic public deflowering of many of these high profile virgins is a familiar story to anyone acquainted with contemporary pop culture. After her career faltered, Cyrus remade her image in 2013, shedding her virginal aura and transforming herself from Hannah Montana, “every girl in America’s best friend”, to a sexualised star who gyrated in a flesh coloured latex bikini at the MTV Music Video Awards and swung naked on a

¹ “Britney: I’m Not That Innocent,” Fox News, July 8, 2003, available from <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2003/07/08/britney-im-not-that-innocent/>

² Ashley Womble, “V-Card Confessions,” Cosmopolitan, June 7, 2009, available from [http://www.cosmopolitan.com/celebrity/exclusive/v-card-confessions#slide-5](http://www.cosmopolitan.com/celebrity/exclusive/v-card-confessions#slide-5;); “Julianne Hough: No Sex Before Marriage,” In Case You Didn’t Know, March 6, 2008, available from <http://icydk.com/2008/03/06/julianne-hough-no-sex-before-marriage/>; Becky Fuentes, “Demi Lovato & Selena Gomez Q&A,” Yahoo, April 2, 2008, available from <http://voices.yahoo.com/demi-lovato-selena-gomez-q-a-1335961.html?cat=38>

³ Katherine Thomson, “Miley Cyrus on God, Remaking *Sex and the City* and her Purity Ring,” Huffington Post, July 15, 2008, available from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/07/15/miley-cyrus-on-god-remaki_n_112891.html

wrecking ball in the film clip to her song of the same name.⁴ Spears' transformation was not so abrupt – her virginity was perhaps already more sexualised than Cyrus', with her appearance as a sexy schoolgirl in 1998 in her first film clip and the inclusion of lyrics like "I'm not that innocent" in her early works – and her virginity remained a topic of public discussion for many years. "I really wish I never would have said anything to begin with," Spears said at a press conference in 2002, expressing her displeasure at a (yet another) question about her ongoing virginity. The same year, her longtime boyfriend Justin Timberlake, with whom she had recently split, publicly stated that she was not a virgin: "and I should know," he reportedly said.⁵ The virginal image, so successful for Spears early in her career, proved disastrous for her in the longer term, when it could no longer be maintained. In 2003, when she publicly admitted to sleeping with Timberlake, she told an interviewer:

It was two years into my relationship with Justin. And I thought he was the one. But I was wrong. I didn't think he was gonna go on Barbara Walters and sell me out... The most painful thing I've ever experienced was that breakup. We were together so long and I had this vision. You think you're going to spend the rest of your life together.⁶

The cases of Spears and Cyrus are quite different, and both reveal intriguing things about public perception of virginity. When Cyrus's career flagged, she essentially remade herself as an anti-virgin, making a clean break from her virginal image and symbolically

⁴ Ronan Farrow, "My Oh Miley! America's Baddest Bad Girl Doesn't Care What You Think of Her," *W Magazine*, February 3, 2014, available from <http://www.wmagazine.com/people/celebrities/2014/02/miley-cyrus-ronan-farrow/>

⁵ "Britney Is Not a Virgin: Justin Tells," *The Hot Hits*, 2003, available from <http://www.thehothits.com/news/1399/Britney%20Is%20Not%20A%20Virgin:%20Justin%20Tells>

⁶ Jennifer Vineyard, "Britney Talks Sex; Turns out She Really Wasn't That Innocent," *MTV*, July 8, 2003, available from <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1473676/britney-opens-up-about-sex-life.jhtml>. See also: Laura Carpenter, *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005), p. 59.

embracing the “fall” she had condemned five years earlier. The good girl became a bad girl. Spears, on the other hand, mobilised a discourse of true love. Her virginity loss was acceptable, she implicitly argued, because she believed that she was in love with Timberlake, that he was “the one”.

The lost virginity of Britney Spears is a pointed example of a contemporary cultural discourse surrounding women’s sexual behaviour. This is a discourse that especially surrounds, but is not limited to, virginity loss, and one that has real-world effects on the sexual lives of women. I have termed this “compulsory demisexuality”: the idea that for women, sex is only socially acceptable and natural when romantic love is involved. I am borrowing here from feminist critic Adrienne Rich’s 1980 article ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’, where she addresses and refutes the “compulsory heterosexuality” that assumes that women are “innately sexually oriented” towards men: that is, the notion that heterosexuality is natural, and to be otherwise is deviant.⁷ Compulsory demisexuality is a discourse that assumes a similar sort of innate orientation, and it is a cultural assumption that forces women to make excuses for and justify their sexual behaviour.

“Demisexuality” is a relatively recent term. Often discussed as a point on the asexuality spectrum, it describes someone who only experiences sexual attraction to a person with whom they have formed a close emotional bond.⁸ The usefulness of the term has been debated, something which Julie Decker addresses:

Some also think that *demisexuality* isn’t a meaningful term because some people – especially women – are rewarded with social approval for having sex only after the emotional bond develops. Since they’re supposedly expected to do this, some

⁷ Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Signs* 5 (1980): p. 632.

⁸ C.J. DeLuzio Chasin, “Reconsidering Asexuality and Its Radical Potential,” *Feminist Studies* 39.2 (2013): p. 422.

critics say demisexual people must think *most* sexual relationships aren't meaningful or don't require emotion, while their own are and do.

But demisexuality isn't about willingness to have sex. It's about capacity to experience sexual attraction... Whether these folks have sex is a choice, but whether they experience sexual attraction is not a choice. Their orientation is not about sex moralism.⁹

Decker's discussion of demisexuality highlights two important things. The first is that demisexuality is a sexual orientation (and one not shared by all), not a moral position. The second is that despite this, demisexuality is often ascribed to women as a whole: it is assumed that it is a natural orientation and/or moral position for women. Just as Rich contended that heterosexuality is culturally encoded as compulsory for women, thus positioning non-heterosexual activity as deviant, I contend that demisexuality is now culturally encoded as compulsory for women. This positions female sexual activity that takes place outside of an emotional relationship – most often a committed romantic relationship – as unnatural, deviant and wrong. Sexual desire and romantic love are tied together in this socially sanctioned image of female sexuality, to the extent where the two are indistinguishable.

Compulsory demisexuality is a historically specific discourse. Angus McLaren argues, “[t]here emerged in the twentieth century a ‘right time’ (usually earlier with each generation) to reach sexual maturity, to lose one’s virginity, to marry, to have children.”¹⁰ As the idea of marriage as the act that makes sex “right” for women faded in the twentieth century, romantic love took its place. In the context of virginity loss, the influence of compulsory demisexuality means that the culturally mandated “right time” for a woman to

⁹ Julie Decker, *The Invisible Orientation* (New York: Carrel Books, 2005), Kindle edition, locations 948-952. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰ Angus McLaren, *Twentieth-Century Sexuality: A History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 220.

lose her virginity is no longer necessarily on her wedding night, but is tied instead to being in love: ideally, she should be in a long-term committed monogamous (and generally heterosexual) romantic relationship. Losing her virginity in any other way means she is losing it at the “wrong” time, which promises negative consequences. This is the discourse Britney Spears attempted to mobilise: losing her virginity to Justin Timberlake was justified, she argued, because she was in love with him. Unlike Miley Cyrus, who embraced a new identity as a bad girl, Spears attempted to reclaim post-virginal good girl status and cast Timberlake in the role of the rake: she loved him, and he betrayed her, not just by breaking her heart, but by “selling her out” and publicly tarnishing her virginal reputation.

The ongoing fascination with the virginity of figures like Spears and Cyrus highlights that although the discourse around the “right time” for virginity loss might have changed, female virginity loss itself is a locus of cultural concern. It is symptomatic of larger societal concerns about women’s bodies and what they do with them. While the shift from marriage to love as legitimating force for female sexual activity is a major shift in sexual politics, the fact that legitimisation is still needed is telling: women need an “excuse” to have sex, while men do not (and have not). The emergence of the discourse of compulsory demisexuality demonstrates the ongoing sexual double standard inherent in Western culture. Sex is still imagined as something that can harm women, perhaps irrevocably, if not undertaken in carefully controlled circumstances. This is nowhere more obvious than in the case of female virginity loss, where, for women, “loss” is arguably the most important word. While the term “virginity loss” is also applied to men, the moment is typically figured more as gain than loss, a moment where a kind of symbolic manhood can be attained. For women, on the other hand, this notion of loss remains pervasive, despite society becoming at least nominally more sexually progressive. While she might gain a

new identity as a woman rather than a girl (although menarche has also been figured as the moment when the girl becomes the woman), there is a sense that the woman is losing something valuable when she first engages in sex. In Western discourse, virginity loss becomes a moment of intense vulnerability for the woman, with the potential to be negatively transformative if she does not lose her virginity at the right time in the right way to the right person. Hence, far more cultural anxiety exists around the female virgin's first sexual partner than the male virgin's: she, unlike him, has something to lose.¹¹

To understand why male and female virginity loss are figured so differently, and to comprehend how women became subject to compulsory demisexuality while men did not, we must examine the historical development of discourse around sex and virginity. Male sexual behaviour has rarely, if ever, been policed as intensely as female sexual behaviour in Western society. The echoes of this continue to resonate, even if the method of policing has shifted substantially. Similarly, the female virgin body has regularly been figured in history as an object in a patriarchal economy of exchange: an economy in which men are the subjects and the owners, not objects themselves. While male virginity has been virtually irrelevant, female virginity has been crucial, imbued with a value virtually independent of the woman herself.

What is a Virgin? The Unstable Virgin Body and the Value of "Never Doings"

Defining female virginity is a curiously complex practice. On the surface, it seems simple: a virgin is a woman who has never had penetrative heterosexual, and her virginity is

¹¹ This intersects with discourse of age. Virginity is only valuable to a point: in the aged woman, it is regularly perceived as sad and/or ridiculous (eg. the old maid). Beyond a certain point, virginity is no longer considered valuable, but somehow grotesque. Virginity, it would seem, is tied to desirability, as well as (potentially, at least) fertility, and is at least partially constituted by the potential for its loss.

lost the first time she does.¹² But female virginity is a riddle not so easily solved. What constitutes virginity has fluctuated considerably over history. Virginity has variously been imagined as something inherent in the body and something spiritual and/or mental. Physical penetration is not the only thing that has been imagined as deflowering a woman. Giulia Sissa argues that in ancient Greece, virginity was a sacred state not necessarily tied to the breaking of the hymen or any other physical prerequisite.¹³ In the fifth century AD, St Augustine wrote that if a virgin resisted with all her heart and soul, her rape would not constitute virginity loss.¹⁴ In the twelfth/thirteenth century treatise *Holy Maidenhood*, it was asserted that the virginity of a woman's body was meaningless if her mind was not pure: if she ever thought of sex, she "prostitute[d] [her]self with the devil from hell."¹⁵ A letter to the editor published in *The Universal Spectator* in 1730 condemned the novels of Eliza Haywood and Delarivier Manley for encouraging immorality, claiming that:

And now, as to the Ladies favourite Collection, *Romances*. It grieves me to say it, they ruin more Virgins than *Masquerades* or *Brothels*. They strike at the very Root of all Virtue, by corrupting the Mind: And tho' every *Romance-reading-Nymph* may not proceed to Overt-Acts, I hope you do not think her excusable.¹⁶

We can see in these examples a link between virginity and notions of virtue. The two have been linked with varying strength in Western history – sometimes so much so that they are virtually the same, allowing the virgin to be symbolically deflowered with no male

¹² Laura Carpenter finds that most people assume that first vaginal penetration is analogous to virginity loss, which she reads as evidence of a cultural of assumed heterosexuality. [Carpenter, *Virginity Lost*, p. 44.] See also Stephanie R. Medley-Rath, "Am I Still A Virgin?": What Counts as Sex in 20 Years of *Seventeen*," *Sexuality and Culture* 11.2 (2007): p. 25.

¹³ Giulia Sissa, *Greek Virginity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

¹⁴ Augustine of Hippo, *De Civitate Dei (The City of God)*, trans. Markus Dods (New York, NY: Modern Library, 1950), 1.16.

¹⁵ Anon., "Holy Maidenhood," (c.1190) in *Anchoritic Spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works*, ed. Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), p. 240.

¹⁶ Anon., Letter to the editor, *The Universal Spectator*, 4 July 1730, quoted in Bradford K. Mudge, *Women, Pornography and the British Novel, 1684-1830* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 75. Emphasis in original.

involvement at all. We can still see this link in the contemporary cultural image of the virgin as “good girl”, who complies with the dictates of social sexual morality. The modern good girl virgin is waiting for someone she loves to take her virginity: valuing her virginity is imagined as valuing herself. But what if she does not want to wait for such a man? If she does not place this value on her virginity? How virginal is she then, even if she has never engaged in any sexual acts? How “good” can she possibly be?

While it is generally accepted in the contemporary Western world that virginity is a physical condition and not a spiritual one, the virgin body remains unstable.¹⁷ There is no medical definition of virginity,¹⁸ and even dedicated sex researchers often neglect to define the terms “virgin”, “sex”, or “intercourse”.¹⁹ The twentieth century saw the emergence of the “technical virgin” – the virgin who participates in a variety of sex acts, potentially including oral and anal sex, but who does not permit vaginal penetration (often because she is waiting for someone she loves on whom to bestow her virginity).²⁰ Additionally, the growing awareness of queer sexualities has proved complicating for notions of virginity: if virginity is lost at first heterosexual, how do queer people lose their virginity? If queer people cannot participate in this discourse of sexual morality, can they ever be truly “good”?²¹ Is there one type of virginity? Are there many? Who determines when virginity is lost? And if virginity cannot be defined, how can it possibly remain so significant?

¹⁷ Laura Carpenter argues that the firm location of virginity in the body is a relatively modern development. However, it should not be assumed that *all* moral/spiritual elements have been removed from discourse around virginity. [Carpenter, *Virginity Lost*, p. 30, p. 47.]

¹⁸ Jessica Valenti, *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession With Virginity Is Hurting Young Women* (Seal Press, 2010), p. 20.

¹⁹ Medley-Rath, “Am I Still A Virgin?” p. 26. See also: Stuart Michaels & Alain Giami, “The Polls – Review. Sexual Acts and Sexual Relationships: Asking About Sex in Surveys,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 63.3 (1999): pp. 401-420.

²⁰ Carpenter, *Virginity Lost*, p. 34; Medley-Rath, “Am I Still A Virgin?”, p. 26; Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think about Marrying* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 31-32; Kathleen Sweeney, *Maiden USA: Girl Icons Come of Age* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 23.

²¹ Campaigns for marriage equality have drawn heavily on ideas of love. While this is linking ideas of love and marriage rather than love and sex, we can see here further evidence of how love is culturally linked to legitimacy.

Part of virginity's ineffability comes from the fact that is defined not by *doing*, but by *not doing*. The word "virgin" occupies a strange linguistic category: as Jamie Mullaney notes, it is perhaps the only word in English to refer not only to *not* doing something, but to having *never* done something.²² Virginity becomes a reification of an absence: "never having sex" is turned into something tangible, a valuable object. Embedded is an idea of irretrievability – once virginity is lost, it is lost forever.²³ But how does one "lose" something which is an absence?

Anke Bernau calls virginity a "question".²⁴ Hanne Blank describes it as "an abstract, but an abstract so meaningful... we have organised our Western culture around it".²⁵ Lloyd Davis contends that, "[v]irginity exemplifies paradoxes of the body".²⁶ Jocelyn Wogan-Browne says that virginity is a "dynamic stasis", constantly in the process of redefinition.²⁷ All these highlight the difficulty of defining precisely what virginity is. In her long history, the virgin has stood for both perfect chastity and the promise of fertility; been constructed as sexually desiring and as passionless; had her virginity used to both give and deny her a voice; and been imagined variously as both whole and lacking. Virginity is a fluid discourse, one which has evolved and changed through history. As Wogan-Browne argues, its instability may be a feature, not a bug, its shifting goalposts designed to keep women in a state of subjection to patriarchy. When women have moved to mobilise discourses of virginity for their own ends, patriarchy has swiftly moved to counter – for example, in early Christianity, women who remained perpetual virgins used their maintained virginity as a way of claiming a religious voice. Very quickly, silence

²² Jamie Mullaney, "Like A Virgin: Temptation, Resistance, and the Construction of Identities Based on 'Not Doings'," *Qualitative Sociology* 24.1 (2001): p. 6.

²³ *ibid*, pp. 6-7.

²⁴ Anke Bernau, *Virgins: A Cultural History* (London: Granta, 2007), p. xii.

²⁵ Hanne Blank, *Virgin: The Untouched History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 256.

²⁶ Lloyd Davis, "The Virgin Body as Victorian Text," in *Virginal Sexuality and Textuality in Victorian Literature*, ed. Lloyd Davis (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), p. 3.

²⁷ Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives & Women's Literary Culture c.1150-1300: Virginity and its Authorisations* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 41

became associated with ideal female virginity, and the “bride of Christ” discourse for nuns appeared, probably as a way of signifying that virgins were still beholden to a man.²⁸ However, while the instability of virginity may have served to keep women under the thumb of patriarchy, it also ensured that the virgin became a problematic and even suspicious figure: as Hsu-Ming Teo notes, “virgins were historically troubling because they encoded a paradox of cultural desires and fears.”²⁹

The difficulty of defining virginity necessarily raises questions for virginity loss: if virginity itself is unstable and difficult to determine, how does one know when it is lost? Arguably, virginity loss is the moment when virginity becomes clearest: it is most obvious when it is threatened, most valuable at the point it disappears. Virginity loss has historically been the moment when women are initiated into patriarchy. Maintained virginity has, at various points in history, allowed women to symbolically opt out of the system: for example, Sarah Salih claims that medieval perpetual virgins were “removed from the heterosexual economy, the system by which gender is produced as necessarily binary through the practices of marriage and exchange”.³⁰ However, where virginity is lost, the woman’s position in respect to men has traditionally been fixed: as the wife and thus figurative property of a man, if she lost her virginity the “right” way (post-maritally), or, if she lost it in the “wrong” way, as a woman who had broken the rules of propriety and who would, depending on the time period, suffer potentially severe social consequences.³¹ While the deflowered woman might have some potential for autonomy if she became a

²⁸ Bernau, *Virgins*, p. 44; John Bugge, *Virginitas: an Essay in the History of a Medieval Ideal* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), pp. 66-67; Maud Burnett McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins: From Thecla to Joan of Arc* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 50; Joyce E. Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins* (London and New York: Verso, 1992), p. 57. Salisbury’s book in particular is devoted to discussing a number of independent, vocal, virginal women in early Christianity.

²⁹ Hsu-Ming Teo, *Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2012), p. 63.

³⁰ Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge and Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2001), p. 9.

³¹ It should be noted here that this is a middle-class discourse: while it might in theory apply to a whole society, the practical application – especially for the working classes – might differ considerably.

widow, the moment of virginity loss would seem to be one where patriarchy made itself plain and male ownership of the female body was firmly established. Importantly, it was male penetration of the virginal female body that fixed the position of the woman:

“[v]irginity in the woman, then, is determined not by the *having* of something, as demonstrated by the unruptured hymen, but by the act of a male,” Jon Stratton argues.³² If the virgin was, according to Sherry Ortner, “an elite female among females, withheld, untouched, exclusive”, then by penetrating her, the man removed this inscribed value (whether moral, commercial, or novel) and reduced her to the position of object.³³

Kathleen Coyne Kelly writes that the ideal virgin is:

in a holding pattern destined to bestow her virginity on the right man at the right time. Such a virgin is an advertisement for the proper functioning of the sex/gender system, inspiring women to be her and men to have her. And, I would argue, it seems that she is most visible – and most definitively heterosexual – when her virginity is endangered; that is, when we are forced to contemplate loss of her virginity.³⁴

Coyne Kelly is discussing the literary and hagiographic trope of the raped or almost raped virgin here, but we can also apply this thinking to the notion of virginity loss more broadly. If the virgin is, as Luce Irigaray contends, “[n]ot yet a woman in their [patriarchal] terms... Not yet penetrated or possessed by them... A virgin is but the future for their exchanges, their commerce, and their transports,”³⁵ then virginity loss becomes the moment when woman’s position in a patriarchal economy is solidified. The discourse of female sexual passionlessness that arose in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would seem to

³² Jon Stratton, *The Virgin Text: Fiction, Sexuality, and Ideology* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), p. 18. Emphasis in original.

³³ Sherry B. Ortner, “The Virgin and the State,” *Feminist Studies* 4.3 (1978): p. 32.

³⁴ Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 137.

³⁵ Luce Irigaray, “When Our Lips Speak Together,” *Signs* 6.1 (1980): p. 74.

reinforce this: the notion that women were not supposed to enjoy sex but merely accept it as part of their wifely duty created an unequal sexual relationship which reinforced the man's view of the woman as object, something which existed simply to service him and the broader patrilineal family. She becomes a body who transmits property.³⁶

One thing seems to have remained historically constant: virginity, no matter how unstable a concept it is, is valuable. It has regularly been figured as a commodity, something to which the idea of its loss is important: as Margaret Ferguson notes, "...the virgin item's cultural value lies partly in the fact that it has *not yet* been used."³⁷ This is true even in the case of perpetual virgins like those that Salih contended could use virginity to remove themselves from the heterosexual economy: the perpetual virgin almost certainly was part of a religious institution, her virginity symbolically "belonging" to the church. The religious virgin's virginity was valuable because it remained perpetually unexchanged, a good removed from the market.³⁸ In this sense, she was still participating in the patriarchal economy, her virginity the possession of a divine patriarch. Virginity, it would seem, is not a good that can be possessed by a woman, even though it is her body in which it is inherent.

Before the twentieth century, virginity seems to have largely functioned as a good yet to be claimed in a patriarchal heterosexual economy. The virgin's body was fetishised, virginity valued more than the virgin herself, and its loss was a delicacy to be savoured by the deflowerer.³⁹ We can especially see this in evidence in the increasingly industrialised

³⁶ Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception, 1800-1975* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 84.

³⁷ Margaret Ferguson, "Foreword," in *Menacing Virgins: Representing Virginity in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Marina Leslie (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1999), p. 7.

³⁸ Kathleen Coyne Kelly, "Useful Virgins in Medieval Hagiography," in *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*, ed. Cindy L. Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), p. 152.

³⁹ Stratton, *Virgin Text*, p. xviii.

society of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁴⁰ In John Cleland's 1749 pornographic novel *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, Fanny Hill, a prostitute, fakes her virginity to fool a customer prepared to pay top dollar for a virgin. In 1760, one London book reported that a virgin could be purchased for sex for fifty pounds, an exorbitant sum.⁴¹ This trade in virgins appears to have continued in the nineteenth century: in 1885, W.T. Stead published a series of articles in the *Pall Mall Gazette* about the practice of purchasing (very young) virgins after he went undercover and purchased one himself.⁴² Deflowering was also a common and repetitive trope in Victorian pornography: for example, in 'Sub-Umbra', a pornographic serial in the magazine *The Pearl*, hero Walter enjoys deflowering virgins, and each new instalment brings a new defloration.⁴³ Here, we see virginity fetishised outside the patriarchal economy of marriage, something which Stratton argues is symptomatic of a bourgeois obsession with "new, not secondhand, goods."⁴⁴

This association of virginity and value also intersects with other discourses of class. Evidence suggests that prohibitions on premarital sex in the medieval period were probably less strict for lower-class rural girls than for their upper-class urban peers, with concern over virginity emanating from employers rather than fathers (although sources also suggest that many girls from these classes were financially compensated if they were deflowered out of wedlock, implying that virginity for these girls was still considered to have an

⁴⁰ Blank notes that a low status girl in need of money could trade her virginity, whether real or faked, while Stratton notes several further examples of the commercialisation of female sexuality in general and virginity in particular – evidence suggests that there was one prostitute for every five men in eighteenth century London; the Parisian style brothel was introduced; and virginity itself assumed a price. [Blank, *Virgin*, pp. 202-205; Stratton, *Virgin Text*, pp. 17-20.]

⁴¹ Stratton, *Virgin Text*, p. 19.

⁴² Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin De Siècle* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 112; Richard Phillips, *Sex, Politics and Empire: A Postcolonial Geography* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 32-34; Lisa Z. Sigel, *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815-1914* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), pp. 114-115.

⁴³ Anon., "Sub-Umbra, or Life Among the She-Noodles," *The Pearl: A Journal of Facetiae and Voluptuous Reading* 1 (July 1879), available from http://www.horntip.com/html/books_&_MSS/1870s/1879-1880_the_pearl_journal/issue_01_-_july_1879/index.htm

⁴⁴ Stratton, *Virgin Text*, p. xviii

intrinsic value).⁴⁵ However, by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the rise of capitalism ensuring that virginity was increasingly commoditised, even the virginities of low class girls seems to have been esteemed as a treasure. Walter, author of erotic memoir *My Secret Life*, lamented that,

few of the tens of thousands of whores in London gave their virginities to gentlemen... Their own low class lads had them. The street boys' dirty pricks went up their little cunts first. This is greatly to be regretted, for street boys cannot appreciate the treasures they destroy. A virginity taken by a street boy of sixteen is a pearl cast to a swine.⁴⁶

Virginity cannot be adequately appreciated, Walter seems to suggest, except by one who has some sense of its worth. Even a low class girl's virginity is valuable, a "treasure" – although she (and her low class deflowerer) might not realise it. We see something similar in Samuel Richardson's popular 1740 novel *Pamela*. The eponymous character is a heroine with no treasure but her virginity. In a world where she might trade it for significant financial gain (something she has ample opportunity to do), Pamela maintains her virginity, and does not surrender it until the correct price is paid: marriage. Her master Mr B realises, after several failed attempts to rape her, that she is a "sound investment"⁴⁷: her estimation of her virginity's worth signals the promise of post-marital chastity, and, despite the fact she is "closer to a dairymaid than to a princess",⁴⁸ she becomes marriageable. However, Pamela's knowledge of the worth of her virginity also makes her a suspicious figure – is not the virgin supposed to be innocent? In his parody *Shamela*, Henry Fielding

⁴⁵ Kim M. Philips, *Medieval Maidens: Young Women and Gender in England, c. 1270-c. 1540* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 148-50.

⁴⁶ Walter. *My Secret Life*. Vol. 5, Chapter XVI, available from <http://www.my-secret-life.com/sex-diary-0516.php>

⁴⁷ Bram Dijkstra, "The Androgyne in Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature," *Comparative Literature* 26.1 (1974): pp. 65-66.

⁴⁸ Corrinne Harol, *Enlightened Virginity in Eighteenth-Century Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 11.

casts her as knowing and manipulative, using her (faked) virginity for her own financial gain. Pamela, it would seem, is not quite virginal enough, because she knows how much her virginity is worth and thus is determined to protect it, highlighting once again the paradoxical and contradictory discourses which surround virginity.

The commercialisation of virginity which emerged primarily in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can still be observed today. Virginity auctions, in which young women auction off their virginity to the highest bidder, appear regularly online. (Some of these young women are lesbians who have hitherto had an active sex life – however, the moment of first penetration by a penis is still enough to command a significant price.) This is despite the fact that virginity loss has been nominally uncoupled from a patriarchal economy in which marriage marks the “right time” for a girl to lose her virginity. Female virginity is still imagined as intrinsically valuable, “never doing” continuing to be reified as a treasure. Importantly, the discourse of “loss” continues to be prevalent: virginity can be given away, thrown away, stolen, or, as in the case of virginity auctions, sold.

What is different, however, is the value of virginity. Virginity no longer holds significant value in the Western world in a dynastic sense: certainly, in mainstream Western culture, fathers do not make a practice of using virgin daughters like currency in order to establish homosocial bonds. The value of virginity is no longer social, and the virgin is no longer imagined as an object in a patriarchal marketplace. Instead, with the decline of the marriage economy and the rise of the notion of compulsory demisexuality, the value of virginity is imagined to be individual, important to the virgin herself. “Virgin” has become a sexual identity in its own right, constructed as active, rather than passive – something which is particularly true, as I will discuss in the following section on religion, in

the sexual culture of the United States.⁴⁹ “Not doing” becomes an active resistance to a tempting or desirable behaviour: sex.⁵⁰ The modern good girl virgin is waiting not passively, but actively: she must resist false loves to find the true one, resist those who desire merely her body to find one who also desires her soul. Waiting is imagined as a kind of quest. She is no longer the prize, but a quester.⁵¹ Romantic love is her reward: she must find the Prince Charming who will cherish her and who will not betray her before she surrenders her virginity. She no longer has the guarantee of marriage to ensure he will not leave her: she must rely on his love to bind him to her. Therefore, love becomes the force which makes sex permissible and acceptable for the woman. While the idea that a virgin and her deflowerer must remain together forever has become less popular with the decoupling of marriage and virginity loss, this Prince Charming should remain with her for at least a time: he must be committed to her and love her to deserve the gift of her virginity, because it is a gift she can never reclaim. She can never return to a state of never-having-done: she has gifted the reified absence of virginity to her lover, and must hope he is worthy of it. Virginity, this unstable concept in which so many strange contradictions inhere, is thus regularly figured as a major milestone in a young woman’s romantic and sexual narratives.

I Love You: The Virgin Claims a Voice

The history of virginity is long and complex. There are no clean breaks, no moments when one view of virginity became another, no (as Michel Foucault might put it) ruptures. The same is true of the broader history of sex and the body, against which

⁴⁹ We could argue that this also has a historical basis, drawing on “warrior maiden” figures like Joan of Arc.

⁵⁰ Mullaney, “Like a Virgin,” p. 4.

⁵¹ This is in stark contrast to earlier narratives: in thirteenth century allegorical romance *Le Roman de la Rose*, for example, the virgin was represented by a rose, plucked by a Lover once he overcame Reason, Jealousy and Resistance. Here, she was literally an object.

virginity necessarily must be considered. However, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there were major discursive changes which deeply affected the way both sex and virginity were viewed – to borrow Thomas Laqueur’s words, “human sexual nature changed.”⁵² This also marks the period when romantic love and the ideal of the companionate marriage became socially popular ideals. Tied to this is the rise of the novel, itself tied to ideas of the self. All of these combine to shape and change the history of sex, and lead to the twentieth century emergence of the ideas of compulsory demisexuality and the active virgin. To understand how and why these ideas emerged, and the ways in which they influence the contemporary view of virginity loss, we must first explore the historical background. This background is long and complex, and so a full exploration is not possible here. Therefore, I have chosen to begin my discussion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a period in which what we might think of as a modern sexual culture begins to form. As such, I am not taking into account much of the excellent scholarship extant on the history of the emotions, as much of this focuses on emotional history prior to this period, and as my focus is on the development of cultural discourse rather than on recuperating emotions into history. This may prove a fruitful area for scholarly inquiry in the future.

The virgin body has historically been, as I explored above, unstable. It was not alone in this. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a dramatic overhaul in perceptions of the body, something which particularly affected the way women’s bodies were viewed. As Laqueur explains, in the late eighteenth century, the way sex and gender were understood changed, moving from a “one-sex” model, where women were considered inferior versions of men, to a “two-sex” model, where men and women were figured as

⁵² Thomas Walter Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 3.

completely different: essentially, as opposites.⁵³ There were many consequences of this shift, but the most notable for the purposes of this thesis was the pathologisation of female sexual desire and pleasure. If the man was active and desiring, then the woman, as his opposite, must be passive and passionless. In the one-sex model, it was regularly assumed that both parties needed to orgasm for conception to occur. In the new two-sex model, only the man's pleasure was necessary, and so female pleasure became problematised and cast as abnormal.⁵⁴ Medical writing shifted away from concern about illnesses supposedly caused by maintained virginity (such as chlorosis)⁵⁵ to those caused by too much sex.⁵⁶ Victorian gynaecologist William Acton (in)famously claimed that women were not "much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind".⁵⁷ The virgin was supposed to marry, but sex was the price she had to pay for children: maternal love was her defining passion. Women who enjoyed sex were considered deviant – tellingly, the term nymphomaniac was invented in the nineteenth century.⁵⁸ Chastity was no longer figured as resisting temptation, but was encoded into the cultural understanding of female nature. The virgin should *want* to remain a virgin (which perhaps explains why writers like the Marquis de Sade were so invested in describing and eroticising her physical and spiritual defilement).⁵⁹ However, those women who rejected childbearing and motherhood in favour of maintained virginity were also deviant. Chastity was fetishised, but maintained virginity pathologised,

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 5-6.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 3; Kim Philips & Barry Reay, "Introduction," in *Sexualities in History: A Reader*, ed. Kim Philips and Barry Reay (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 10.

⁵⁵ Chlorosis (or "greensickness") was a disease imagined to be suffered by virgins that caused them to turn green, due to the intact hymen preventing the evacuation of fluids from the body. Marriage was the recommended cure. [Bernau, *Virgins*, p. 12; Blank, *Virgin*, pp. 65-70; Harol, *Enlightened Virginity*, pp. 60-63.]

⁵⁶ Bernau, *Virgins*, p. 19.

⁵⁷ William Acton, "The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs, in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life, Considered in their Physiological, Social and Moral Relations" (1857), quoted in Stephen Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), p. 31.

⁵⁸ Kimberley Reynolds and Nicola Humble. *Victorian Heroines: Representations of Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), p. 13.

⁵⁹ Teo, *Desert Passions*, p. 64.

associated with the man-like *viragint* or New Woman, a figure that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century.⁶⁰

It should be noted that there is also a racial dimension to this. While white women were figured as passionless, black women, especially in the United States, were regularly cast – and often continue to be cast – as hypersexual. This emphasised their position as inferior and as somehow abnormal and animal – could the black girl ever qualify as a virgin, a good girl? These racist ideas continue to affect black girls and women today.⁶¹

Essentially, there was a growing sense in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the woman who lost her virginity outside of wedlock – who not only succumbed to temptation, but was tempted at all – was no longer merely foolish, naive or misguided, but perverse. While the growing commercialisation of virginity suggests an emphasis on virginity as a physical condition, this view of the non-desiring female body ensured that virginity was also seen as a condition of the mind and spirit, encompassing this new passionlessness. Corrinne Harol argues that in the eighteenth century medical and scientific authorities abdicated responsibility over virginity, leading to virginity signifying,

not merely chastity but a number of intangible qualities that come to be associated with moral virtue... a characteristic that justifies making distinctions among people... virginity's value inheres in its ability to predict not only chastity but virtue more broadly conceived.⁶²

⁶⁰ Bernau, *Virgins*, pp. 20-21.

⁶¹ John d'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 46; Alesha E. Doan and Jean Calterone Williams, *The Politics of Virginity: Abstinence in Sex Education* (Westport: Praeger, 2008), p. 38; Valenti, *Purity Myth*, p. 30; Debbie Weekes, "Where My Girls At? Black Girls and the Construction of the Sexual," in *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 141-154.

⁶² Harol, *Enlightened Virginity*, pp. 8-9.

It is this discourse which gives rise to characters like Pamela, as well as Richardson's other famous virgin heroine, Clarissa, who is raped and, unable to reconcile her virginal mind with her violated body, essentially dies of cognitive dissonance. These were the forerunners for a new kind of virgin. The "true" virgin does not – cannot – desire. She is so innocent she does not understand what desire is. This is the hallmark of virtue, what makes her a "good girl". (This idea of virtue obviously has religious overtones, the implications of which I will discuss a little further in the next section.) The only difference between the virgin and the wife in the Victorian period was their marital status: both were considered to have approximately the same interest in sex, which was none. Marriage becomes not only the only legitimate way for a woman to have sex, but the only acceptable circumstances in which she is tempted to do so: not because she desires her husband, but because she desires to become a mother.⁶³

The idea of female passionlessness can be read as figuratively removing whatever modicum of sexual agency women possessed. If she was a good girl and not perverse, sex would never be something she would actively choose or initiate: therefore, virgins who lost their virginity outside of wedlock must be morally corrupt, drawing a sharp line between the good girls and the bad. It would also seem to remove agency from women in other ways: if all sex is undesirable, then surely the virgin would have little opinion about to whom she was married, because sex would be equally unpleasant no matter whom the partner. However, at approximately the same time as female desire was being socially pathologised, a new discourse was gaining popularity: the discourse of romantic love.

It would be too simplistic to draw a line directly between the pathologisation of one and the rise of the other, but the discourse of romantic love did seem to offer a modicum of agency to women at the same time that the pathologisation of female pleasure appeared to

⁶³ Bernau, *Virgins*, p. 20.

remove it. Represented in many media, but perhaps most importantly the novel, ideas of romantic love shaped a new social ideal: the companionate marriage – that is, marriage based on love rather than on a financial or dynastic alliance. This marriage takes place, sometimes explicitly, outside of the realm of economic concern. Sometimes it takes place contrary to economic concerns: for example, marrying Elizabeth Bennet is not a good economic decision for Fitzwilliam Darcy – he suffers for it, financially and socially – but, because they are in love, it is the right decision. Indeed, *Pride and Prejudice* offers us a relatively clear example of the way virtuous womanhood was perceived: Lydia desires Wickham, and this nearly leads her to ruin and disaster, while Elizabeth loves Darcy, and her virtue is never in doubt. While desire might not be permitted, romantic love was. Central to the idea of romantic love is the notion of choice: not just the man choosing the woman, but the woman choosing the man. The key choice in *Pride and Prejudice* is not Darcy deciding he loves Elizabeth – she turns down his first proposal, telling him that he is the last man she could ever marry, because she does not love him, and she cannot foresee ever loving him, despite the lure of his wealth. The key choice is Elizabeth's: while social propriety prevents her from proposing herself, her consent to marriage is vital. She must choose Darcy.

Numerous scholars have argued that Western romantic love in the nineteenth century was constructed as something as less sexual than spiritual.⁶⁴ Stephen Seidman describes Victorian love as “essentially a spiritual phenomenon involving moral and religious affinities and bonds”.⁶⁵ This is unsurprising, given the pathologisation of female desire: the passionless woman cannot be expected to make her choice on the basis of

⁶⁴ See: Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); Steven Seidman, *Romantic Longings: Love in America, 1830-1980* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1991); Teo, *Desert Passions*.

⁶⁵ Seidman, *Romantic Longings*, p. 18.

sexual attraction. Love was also considered mysterious and opaque, the romantic relationship constructed as an intensely private and intimate one in which lovers revealed their true selves to a single beloved.⁶⁶ What is particularly interesting about this is that the woman is expected to possess a self – she is a subject with a voice, capable of making a choice, not merely an object in a heterosexual marketplace. It would be foolish to claim that romantic love created a partnership between two equals: the policing of female behaviour ensures that women were still rendered publicly subordinate. Perhaps more importantly, women were financially dependent on their husbands – the patriarchal economy could not be escaped so easily. However, the ideal of romantic love imbued women with some potential for decision-making. While this was probably much more fraught in practice than in theory – it is hard to imagine that economic concerns in matrimony disappeared – the fact that it did happen in theory is important. The cultural perception of womanhood was shifting. While virginity might still be an important economic object, the virgin was symbolically endowed with the power to choose where to bestow it. We can see here the forerunner of the modern active virgin: no longer the prize in a knight's quest, but a quester in her own right, searching for true love.

The virgin was not the original heroine of the romance narrative. In *courtoisie*, the courtly love discourse which emerged in the twelfth and thirteen centuries, the figure of the lover's adoration was typically a married woman whom he could not hope to obtain.⁶⁷ Romantic love and marriage were separated – if love were acted upon, it had the potential to be socially destructive.⁶⁸ Conversely, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as the discourse of the companionate marriage emerged as a social ideal, romantic love began to

⁶⁶ Lystra, *Searching the Heart*, pp. 6-7.

⁶⁷ Clive Staples Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁶⁸ Arthurian mythology, a perennially popular romantic subject, provides a good example of this: Lancelot may safely express romantic love to the married and unobtainable Guinevere, but when their love is actually consummated, it proves to be disastrous. Also see: Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), p. 8.

be figured as more constructive, as the building block of the marriage and the family, rather than as the force that might annihilate it. With this shift, although the chaste wife and mother was figured as the ideal version of womanhood in the Victorian period, the heroine of the romance narrative became the virgin. The romantic novel became the journey of this virgin heroine towards matrimony and chaste motherhood.⁶⁹

This arguably endowed virginity with even more significance, because the woman took a real role in choosing her partner. If a woman lost her virginity post-maritally in a companionate marriage, she was losing it to the man she loved, the man she had chosen. It might be too much to expect female sexual pleasure, absent from the discourse as it was, but one might assume that if a woman married a partner who had genuine affection for her, he might be more considerate in bed. This was an issue that affected many women: social purity advocates in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century repeatedly condemned careless husbands as sexual brutes and/or blunderers who cruelly inflicted their desires on an innocent wife.⁷⁰ However, the implications of virginity loss went beyond the bedroom – the emphasis on companionate marriage and a woman choosing her own husband meant that if she chose unwisely, it was her fault.⁷¹ This extends even beyond marriage: Karen Lystra also suggests that the ideology of romantic love might also have been mobilised as a justification for premarital sex,⁷² and Jeffrey Weeks notes that a considerable amount of illegitimate births in this time might have been a result of “Marriage Frustrated, not

⁶⁹ Reynolds and Humble, *Victorian Heroines*, p. 113.

⁷⁰ Christina Simmons, “Modern Sexuality and the Myth of Victorian Representation,” in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, ed. Kathy Peiss, Christina Simmons and Robert A. Padgug (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), pp. 162-163.

⁷¹ We can see an example of this in Sarah Grand’s 1893 novel *The Heavenly Twins*. Evadne Frayling marries Major George Colquhoun, and finds out he has syphilis after the ceremony but before the marriage is consummated. She refuses to sleep with him and eventually he dies, leaving her free to pursue a second marriage with a man she loves, in which she is rewarded with children. Her friend Edith Beale, however, sleeps with her syphilitic husband Sir Mosley Menteith despite Evadne’s warnings, contracts syphilis herself, and dies horribly.

⁷² Lystra, *Searching the Heart*, p. 69.

Promiscuity Rampant”.⁷³ Love might give the virgin a more active role in choosing her lover, but it also emphasised her responsibility for the consequences. She had choices, but she must choose correctly.

I have made several references to the romantic novel throughout this brief overview of the emergent discourse of love in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This is not without reason. This was the period in which notions of the self and the individual begin to gain cultural prominence, which can be linked to the rise of the novel as a prominent literary form.⁷⁴ This is particularly significant for women, and it surely cannot be coincidental that in this period, female writers became increasingly popular and women – particularly virgin heroines – are regularly central characters. Romantic love gave women a voice, albeit a small one, and in the novel, we can see this voice asserted – often to the displeasure of patriarchal society. The vocal woman encodes the potential for subversion. Several early female novelists (sometimes retroactively removed from the canon) such as Aphra Behn, Eliza Haywood, and Delarivier Manley used the form to express alternative femininities and to resist social narratives. Manley in particular resisted the dominant discourse of virginity, criticising overly virtuous heroines and writing that,

It wou’d in no wise be probable that a Young Woman fondly beloved by a Man of great Merit, and for whom she had Reciprocal Tenderness, finding herself at all Times alone with him... cou’d always resist his addresses.⁷⁵

Is it surprising, then, that the letter from the editor published in *The Universal Spectator* I quoted from earlier in this chapter decried the works of authors like Manley as ruining

⁷³ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulations of Sexuality since 1800* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1981), p. 63.

⁷⁴ Josephine Donovan, *Women and the Rise of the Novel, 1405-1726* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. 1.

⁷⁵ Delarivier Manley, “Preface,” in *The Secret History of Queen Zarah and the Zaraziens* (1705), quoted in Donovan, *Women and the Rise of the Novel*, p. 2.

more virgins than brothels? The novel becomes dangerous for women, the female reader somehow symbolically deflowered (by the phallic pen – albeit wielded by a woman?). The novel was hastily remade in a more “moral” form by male authors like Samuel Richardson in *Pamela*, which Nancy Armstrong has argued is a conduct-book in novel form.⁷⁶ Despite this, social anxiety about women reading (and writing) persisted: possibly because it hinted at a female subjectivity deeply discomforting and potentially destabilising to the patriarchy in a society where innocence and passionlessness were part of the virginal ideal. (This still persists today, as I will explore in the final chapter of this thesis when I discuss the figure of the virginal reader.) The romantic narrative, as in the works of Jane Austen or Fanny Burney, was popular, and outwardly, it would seem to uphold societal ideals: virtuous women are symbolically rewarded with fine husbands for making good decisions. But it should not be ignored that the virgin heroine was at the centre of this novel: imbued with subjectivity, thinking, feeling, choosing – and, perhaps most importantly, *speaking*.

Joan of Arc at the Purity Ball: Christianity and Virginity

What I have hitherto mentioned, but not substantially addressed, is the role played by religion in shaping narratives of virginity and its loss in Western sexual history – in particular, the role played by Christianity. While religious entanglements with sexual discourses are not intended to be the focus of this thesis – I am interested primarily in the role played by that modern cultural and largely secular phenomenon, romantic love – we cannot progress further without at least some consideration of the ways in which religion has shaped (and continues to shape) cultural scripts for sexual behaviour, especially virginity loss. As Anke Bernau notes, “[r]eligion, not medicine, has been the greatest

⁷⁶ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 109.

authority for the last 800 years [on virginity]. Because religion, culture and learning have been so tightly linked, the influence of the religious view has been pervasive.”⁷⁷

Virginity has been a contested space with contradictory, paradoxical meanings in Christian discourse. Early Christian history reveals the ways in which church authorities grappled with virginity. Scholars such as Joyce Salisbury and Maud Burnett McInerney have discussed in some detail the difficulties that Church Fathers faced: while, as Salisbury notes, their reading of scriptures gave them a strong basis for lauding women living a chaste life, the perpetual virginity of holy women caused them problems, because these women were assuming an independence the Fathers deemed inappropriate (and apparently masculine).⁷⁸ Indeed, while chastity was prescribed for both sexes, women seemed to have more to gain from it, because it freed them from reproductive labour, seemingly allowing them the capacity to participate in intellectual and theological discourse in the way that a man would.⁷⁹ McInerney contends that this question – why should the celibate perpetual virgin *not* participate like a man would in Christian discourse? – was one posed over and over again by the virgin body in Christian history. The Church has attempted to deal with this in a number of ways, some of which – such as conflating virginity and silence and by mobilising a “bride of Christ” discourse – I mentioned earlier. However, by renouncing sexuality and reproduction, these women were rejecting most of the things which constituted womanhood in early Christian history, their virginity thus placing them outside the system in a way that was disquieting and uncomfortable to the institutionalised patriarchy of the Church (and which has been read by later scholars as queer, rejecting as it does women’s position within a heterosexual economy).⁸⁰ To control the virgin body,

⁷⁷ Bernau, *Virgins*, p. 31.

⁷⁸ Salisbury, *Church Virgins, Independent Fathers*, p. 5.

⁷⁹ McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins*, p. 8.

⁸⁰ Lisa Weston, “Queering Virginity,” *Medieval Feminist Forum* 36.1 (2003): pp. 22-24; Kathryn Schwarz, “The Wrong Question: Thinking through Virginity,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13.2 (2002): pp. 15-18.

Church Fathers had to position these perpetual virgins *as women* – and, as Salisbury notes, utilised an ideal of feminine passivity to construct this definition, using it to insist that even virgin women had to be subject to male authority.

This discourse, however, enjoyed only limited success, and religious perpetual virginity continued to be a way in which women (although, obviously, only a very small number) could access a voice and agency. The most famous example of this within a religious context is Joan of Arc, who embodied a kind of martial, Amazonian virginity, rejecting the idea that the virgin woman should be passive and silent and instead mobilising a vision of virginity constructed as active and agentic. This idea of self-determination is one inherent in a number of other hagiographic stories of virgin martyrs, who resist persecution and violation by wicked men and instead insist on the rightness of their own view of the world based on their communion with God.⁸¹ These virgin martyr hagiographies have a relatively similar pattern (so much so that a number of stories were suppressed by the Holy See in 1969 because they were considered too similar and ahistorical):⁸² the deeply religious virgin, who has determined that she wants to remain one, refuses to marry and or to submit to the sexual advances of a man. For this offence, she is punished, tortured, often dismembered, and ultimately killed, but never raped. “The raped virgin is a paradox, an oxymoron that would cause the whole system of stable, fixed signs to collapse,” Kathleen Coyne Kelly notes,⁸³ also writing, perhaps more succinctly, that “*virginity* always outlasts the *virgin*”.⁸⁴ Jocelyn Wogan-Browne discusses this hagiographic narrative as potentially another version of the romance narrative, contending that death and ascension to the arms of a heavenly bridegroom take the place of marriage. In this narrative, the transgressive potential of the virgin is symbolically recontained – it is

⁸¹ McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins*, pp. 210-211.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸³ Kelly, “Useful Virgins,” p. 155.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 137. Emphasis in original.

her commitment to her divine lover, Christ, that causes her to resist the imposition of an earthly man, constructing her virginity as something that exists within a patriarchal economy – but her agentic voice cannot be entirely suppressed. Angela Jane Weisl has argued that the power of the virgin's voice is repeatedly emphasised in medieval hagiographic literature, despite the sense at the time that women “talked too much and badly.”⁸⁵ It is this discourse that Elizabeth I drew on when constructing her own powerful version of virginity (although it was not tethered to ideas of martyrdom and certain death). To speak generally, virginity, in early Christian history through to the medieval period, was imbued with the potential for women who decided on religious perpetual virginity to attain agency in a way that the Church never entirely managed to contain.

However, the shift from Catholicism to Protestantism disrupted this considerably in Britain, which had a substantial impact on visions of virginity in Anglophone cultures, particularly in the time period – post- the revision of ideas of the body in the late eighteenth century – on which I am focusing. Perpetual virginity was not conceived of as a viable option for women in this Protestant world view (making it somewhat ironic that Elizabeth, one of the first Protestant monarchs, drew so heavily on this iconography). While many Protestant writers still lauded perpetual virginity, it was considered so difficult that few could achieve it.⁸⁶ There was a strong shift away from vocational virginity.⁸⁷ With this avenue taken away from women, they became confined, discursively speaking, to the domestic space, contained within a heterosexual economy (something which may have facilitated the rise of the heterosexual romance narrative and the rise, discursively speaking, of companionate marriage and romantic love). While, as Margaret Ferguson has

⁸⁵ Angela Jane Weisl, “The Widow as Virgin: Desexualised Narrative in Christine de Pizan’s *Livre de la Cite des Dames*,” in *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*, ed. Cindy L. Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), p. 52.

⁸⁶ Bernau, *Virgins*, pp. 50-51.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

noted, this idea of an active virginity continued to haunt the Protestant household, containing within it the implicit threat that a woman might reject a husband or a father's ownership, the possibility of using perpetual virginity to gain any sort of agentic voice was largely taken away.⁸⁸ Protestantism emphasised the importance of marriage, rejecting the dictum that privileged perpetual virginity over religiously sanctioned coupledness (a dictum perhaps most succinctly put by St Thomas, whose statement, "marriage replenishes the earth, virginity fills paradise," was often quoted through the Middle Ages).⁸⁹ Thus, as Corrinne Harol notes, the Catholic virgin heroine – the martyr, and/or the virgin Mary – was transformed into the good but eminently marriageable heroine of sentimental fiction, whose virginity is important, but importantly temporary.⁹⁰ (This shift is also articulated in eighteenth and nineteenth century pornography, which regularly featured monks and nuns. These figures – nominally perpetual virgins – were often debauchers and debauchees, participants in orgiastic revelries, demonstrating the cultural shift in attitudes towards religious lifelong virginity.)⁹¹

This is the period in which, as I noted above, narratives of virginity loss and narratives of love begin to be combined together in a particularly noticeable way, embedded as they are in the discourse of companionate marriage. It is not surprising that this discourse emerged under Protestant, rather than Catholic, rule, as the tender, loving, maternal wife replaced the perpetual virgin as the ideal construction of virtuous womanhood. This idea of "virtue" is key here: whereas the path to true virtue had previously been entangled with perpetual virginity, this marks the place where it becomes truly embedded in a heteroromantic paradigm of chaste, continent coupledness. Whereas

⁸⁸ Ferguson, "Foreword" in *Menacing Virgins*, p. 8.

⁸⁹ Louis-Georges Tin, *The Invention of Heterosexual Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), p. 54.

⁹⁰ Harol, *Enlightened Virginity*, p. 12.

⁹¹ Julie Peakman, *Mighty Lewd Books: The Invention of Pornography in Eighteenth-Century England* (Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003) p. 151.

what Louis-Georges Tin calls the “cult of heterosexual love” had been seen as anti-Christian during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, promoting devotion to other humans instead of the divine, love became embedded here in a Christian discourse of marriage.⁹² The importance of this should not be understated, as it forms the basis for many modern ideas about marriage and what it should look like: that is, it should be the site of love as well as conjugal duty. It also brought with it a strong emphasis on continence and self-control. I have already discussed the ways in which the discourse of female passionlessness pathologised the woman who desired and acted outside sociosexual moral norms, positioning her as abnormal. This positioned her also as the guardian of civilisation – as Bernau puts it, the “gatekeeper for man’s carnal nature,” an image on which social purity advocates would draw at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.⁹³ Marriage thus became a space in which the chaste and continent woman contained the destructive potential of male sexual desire, transforming it into a family: the building block of society. Virginity was an important premarital stage for her to pass through before she could take on this gatekeeping role, her preservation of her virginity before marriage symbolically boding well for her ability to contain male desire within it.

(It should be noted here that, as with many other discursive spaces, this discourse applied exclusively to middle-class white women. Black women in particular were cast as hypersexual and as incapable of the kind of self-control necessary for virtue: another way in which racist attitudes were perpetuated in United States culture in particular.)⁹⁴

This emphasis on the link between marriage and continence is one of the major constitutive factors of contemporary conservative Protestantism. This is particularly true in

⁹² Tin, *Invention of Heterosexual Culture*, p. 61.

⁹³ Bernau, *Virgins*, pp. 56-57.

⁹⁴ d’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, p. 46.

the United States, founded as it was on Puritan ideals which firmly rejected maintained religious virginity, emphasised the role of the family, and placed great value on self control.⁹⁵ The Protestant Reformation values of the original migrants from England to America encouraged husbands and wives to love each other and placed some emphasis on sex within marriage, constructing this as part of Christian virtue.⁹⁶ With this equation of love, sex, and marriage, we can see here the clear precursors to the discourse that would eventually become compulsory demisexuality, in which romantic love constitutes the appropriate and legitimate circumstances for sex for women. However, in the United States, which has a much stronger Christian cultural consciousness than other Anglophone countries, the role of marriage in this triptych has not disappeared to quite such an extent. While many Christian cultures around the world still emphasise the importance of premarital virginity, this is far closer to being mainstream discourse in the United States than it is elsewhere, given the far stronger evangelical undertones, which have their roots in this original Puritanical discourse. While by the 1920s, as John d’Emilio and Estelle Freedman note, “female purity lost much of its power as an organising principle for enforcing sexual orthodoxy as young women and men together explored the erotic,” the idea of premarital “purity” has resurfaced in American culture in a way that it has not in other Anglophone societies.⁹⁷ In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a strong conservative backlash against sexual liberalism, which took as its goal restoring sex to its rightful place within marriage – something evident in Ronald Reagan’s repeated refrain that sex, which had been a “sacred expression of love”, had become “casual and cheap.”⁹⁸ A new, largely

⁹⁵ Bernau, *Virgins*, p. 54.

⁹⁶ d’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, pp. 4-5.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 343-345; Carpenter, *Virginity Lost*, p. 3.

religious, pro-premarital chastity movement arose: the movement that Jessica Valenti has termed the “virginity movement”.⁹⁹

What is most remarkable about the American situation is the extent to which this conservative push for premarital virginity has had an effect on legislation and education. One third of American schools teach exclusively abstinence-only education: that is, their sex education includes information on contraception only insofar as it relates to failure rates, and champions abstinence as the only sexual option available to students before marriage.¹⁰⁰ Despite this, a 2006 study showed that 95 per cent of Americans had premarital sex, which would seem to indicate that this kind of education does not work especially well, and also suggests a kind of mass cultural cognitive dissonance.¹⁰¹ Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker note the rise of “technical virginity” as a way that college students deal with this religious imperative: penile/vaginal sex becomes the line past which these religious technical virgins will not go before marriage (that is, “virginity”), but they will engage in other forms of sex, such as oral and anal sex.¹⁰²

In essence, there are two primary levels on which religion and discourses of virginity interact in modern American sexual culture. The first level is the individual level, in which the individual virgin makes the determination that they will not have sex before marriage. They thus become what Judith d’Augelli termed “adamant virgins” – that is, virgins who have made an active decision to maintain their virginity (usually until marriage) – as opposed to “potential non-virgins”, who are not averse to losing their virginity but have not yet found the right situation.¹⁰³ This individual level is most evident in the United States due to their greater level of Christian religiosity, but similar religious

⁹⁹ Valenti, *Purity Myth*.

¹⁰⁰ Doan and Williams, *Politics of Virginity*, p. 1.

¹⁰¹ Regnerus and Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America*, p. 1.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

¹⁰³ Judith D’Augelli et al cited in Susan Sprecher and Kathleen McKinney, *Sexuality* (Newbury Park: SAGE Publications, 1993), pp. 47-48.

adamant virgins may be found in other Anglophone nations. This adamant virginity draws on images of virginity inherent in earlier models of perpetual virginity: the determination of the virgin martyr heroine can be observed here, constructing “virgin” as an identity built on active resistance.

The second level, however – the social level – is far more apparent in American society than elsewhere. The “virginity movement” is visible there in a way that it is not in other cultures. Through the institutionalisation of things like abstinence-only education, the religious influence on discourses of virginity loss is far more apparent in the United States than elsewhere in the Anglosphere, and, as the emergence of the virginity loss confessional genre would seem to indicate, engenders more widespread anxiety about virginity than elsewhere. In short, the emphasis on Christian religiosity means that virginity is visible in American sexual culture in a way that it is not in the United Kingdom, Australia, and other English-speaking countries. We can see this through the regular occurrence in the United States of phenomena like “purity balls”, religious events in which daughters pledge their virginities to their fathers for safekeeping until the event of their marriage. The first purity ball took place in Colorado in 1998, and they now take place across the United States.¹⁰⁴ The ceremony of the purity ball is often (although not always – the two also exist independently of each other) coupled with the giving of a purity ring, which the girl virgin wears in order to symbolise her commitment to maintaining her virginity: as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Miley Cyrus wore a purity ring for many years. While efforts have been made to import these rituals to other nations, including the United Kingdom and Australia, they have been largely unsuccessful, pointing to the peculiar prominence of virginity in American sexual culture. Likewise, organisations like True Love Waits, which promotes the signing of premarital virginity pledges, have not gained

¹⁰⁴ Nancy Gibbs, “The Pursuit of Teen Girl Purity,” *Time Magazine*, July 17, 2008, available from <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1823930,00.html#ixzz1qSP2JCcX>

any substantial foothold outside of the United States, and other Anglophone nations do not have the same legislative debate over the appropriateness of comprehensive versus abstinence-only education. This has the effect of constructing “virgin” as a role to be performed in American society in a way which does not really exist in other nations. These rituals of premarital virginity – purity balls, purity rings, virginity pledges – push young people to publicly identify as, per d’Augelli, an adamant virgin, mobilising an active virginity not dissimilar to that espoused by the virgin martyrs in medieval hagiographies. This has the somewhat counterintuitive effect of making virginity a highly contested space. As Coyne Kelly argues,

“*Verifying* virginity is compromised by the possibility of *performing* virginity; performing virginity both leads to and is caused by interrogating virginity. By grappling with what it means to be a virgin, one must also come to terms with the fact that virginity is, for the most part, beyond proof. The bar, the either/or of virginity, dissolves in the face of such a paradox.”¹⁰⁵

Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that so much anxiety surrounds virginity loss in American culture – which may explain why so many virginity loss confessional narratives arise from that country, as I will discuss in the following two chapters. We can also see this anxiety evident in the cultural treatment of Britney Spears, whose performance of virginity was key to her public identity, and who found it difficult to sustain her public identity once she had been culturally deflowered.

Thus, it is clear that the ways in which young people experience virginity politics across Anglophone nations are substantially different, and the American experience is considerably more influenced by religious politics at the social level than other cultures are. In the American context, emphasis continues to be placed on the role of the girl virgin

¹⁰⁵ Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, p. 122. Emphasis in original.

as sexual gatekeeper who must control male desire – in a way that circumscribes and limits girl desire.¹⁰⁶ As Valenti notes, the idea that girls must remain “pure” is deeply problematic, and often engenders feelings of shame and regret in young women who do not hold to the dictates of this virginity standard. While these feelings clearly do exist in other Anglophone cultures – perhaps both as a result of a previous religious culture and of American influence via popular culture – the American virginity movement and its widespread conservative religious modes of thinking seems to have ensured that this is something that is especially noticeable within the sexual culture of the United States. While I will return now to focus on the role of love in discourses of virginity loss, we should not forget that religion too has had a major part in shaping virginity loss narratives, and that it continues to do so in a noticeable way at the social level in the United States in particular.

Making Love: Desire and the Girl Problem in the Twentieth Century

What is evident in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century is the beginning of the shift that defined twentieth century sexual history. As the virgin begins to speak, she begins to behave less and less like an object. Her virginity is still extremely valuable and necessary for her to be considered virtuous – the fact that her desire is proscribed ensures this. Virginity becomes an intrinsic part of her being: one doubts Mr Darcy would have married a deflowered Elizabeth.¹⁰⁷ Virginity is proof that she is good: not just virtuous, but also not perverse.¹⁰⁸ However, this virginity is a temporary virginity, because sworn lifelong virgins were also considered perverse. The desire for romantic love and marriage

¹⁰⁶ Bernau, *Virgins*, p. 67; Valenti, *Purity Myth*, p. 40.

¹⁰⁷ Interestingly, in 2008 TV drama *Lost in Austen*, Mr Darcy is forced to reject modern time-travelling heroine Amanda Price because she is not a virgin, even though he loves her.

¹⁰⁸ It is also proof of artlessness, signalling she is unaware that her virginity is a treasure: compare here the artless Amelia to the cunning Becky Sharpe in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*.

was figured as natural. All women should want to marry: whereas earlier, the virgin's feelings were (theoretically) functionally irrelevant in questions of marriage, the idea of companionate marriage places specific emphasis upon them. In this system, virginity and the longing for a loving husband are figured as natural for women, particularly considering how religious ideas of virtue had become entangled in ideas of women. Good, normal women are expected to want to participate in the marriage system, choosing where to bestow their own valuable virginities. This is a small shift in the architecture of the patriarchal economy – the virgin is allowed a modicum of agency if she willingly chooses to participate. She gets a voice, but opting into the system is mandatory. (If she is not a virgin, she does not get this choice: only women who adhered to social sexual morality are considered worthy of choosing their own husbands. The rest are excluded from the marriage economy. And even then, this would be much more complex in theory than practice: one imagines the virgin's choice was limited to her own race and class, as well as being constrained by the interests of her family.)

Reviewing this history, we might argue that the discourse of romantic love arose to placate women, to make them content in an unfriendly patriarchy that had symbolically eradicated the possibility of female pleasure and equated virtue with chaste wifehood, to offer them a small amount of movement in a system that remained otherwise rigid. Alternatively, we could argue that the rise of romantic love and companionate marriage represented a modicum of equality within the marital relationship in which the woman could be respected as herself.¹⁰⁹ In theory, even if she was denied sexual desire and pleasure, the (middle-class) woman could choose who she married, and enjoy emotional, if not sexual, fulfilment, as well as more choice and a louder voice than she had hitherto

¹⁰⁹ As Lauren Berlant puts it: "...when romantic love became elevated over economic interest as the normative motivator of long-term couplings, reciprocity emerged as central to what counts as care and carelessness." [Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 15.]

enjoyed in an economy which traditionally regarded her as an object. Early feminists coupled sex with love as part of their activism: Christabel Pankhurst, for example, criticised men for separating sex and emotion, claiming that “sexual intercourse where there exists no bond of love and spiritual sympathy is beneath human dignity.”¹¹⁰ Romantic love encoded a measure of respect for the woman *as an individual*, and not as an object interchangeable with another like it. These two interpretations of history, of romantic love as placatory versus romantic love as subversive, are not incompatible. We can mount similarly divergent but not incompatible readings of the nineteenth century romance novel. In the romance narrative with its moral and intelligent virgin heroine, the social rules of sexual propriety were upheld. The virgin heroine found a man she loved and who loved her. Cynically, we could say that her happy ending consisted in her becoming the possession of a benevolent owner, but it also offered her more subversive possibilities: the potential for selfhood, subjectivity and being treated as an equal.¹¹¹

At the fin-de-siècle, then, ideal virginity loss was entangled with notions of companionate monogamous marriage and romantic love. In the twentieth century, two (linked) things occurred, causing further evolution in this discourse and leading to the emergence of what I have called compulsory demisexuality: that is, the idea that there is an intrinsic link between love and sexual desire for women and that this is the natural female “default”. The first is the rise of reliable contraception. The second is a change in the imagined nature of romantic love.

Hera Cook has persuasively argued that the image of the virtually asexual Victorian woman may have in fact worked to many women’s advantage: she writes that, “[i]n the

¹¹⁰ Christabel Pankhurst quoted in Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880-1930* (North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1997), p. 51.

¹¹¹ Anthony Giddens make a similar argument in *The Transformation of Intimacy*, arguing that romantic love allows the woman to actively engage with the “maleness” of society. [Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), pp. 1-2.]

absence of birth control and economic autonomy, the benefits to women of a libertine or even libertarian sexual culture are extremely questionable”.¹¹² While female pleasure and desire were pathologised, this also probably lessened the number of times husband and wife had sex, potentially lessening the woman’s reproductive labour.¹¹³ However, if sex and reproduction could be decoupled by effective and widely available contraception, it opened a new world of possibility for the woman: a world in which she could reliably control her own reproduction and limit her labour, and one in which she might have the opportunity to enjoy sex. Birth control offered the possibility of a new kind of autonomy for women: one which only perpetual virginity had even begun to offer in the past. It enabled women to at least begin to shape a new view of sex: one decoupled from the major risk of pregnancy.¹¹⁴ It also created a space for a cultural rethinking of virginity: how important was female virginity, if sex no longer carried such disproportionate dangers for women, including not only pregnancy but the immense social stigma (and economic burden) of extramarital single motherhood?¹¹⁵

Linked to this is the rise of a new image of romantic love. In the nineteenth century, as I have discussed, love was largely seen as spiritual. In the twentieth century, it took on a new erotic dimension, as love and desire began to drift closer together, offering more potential for women to enjoy or desire sex. It is probably not coincidental that this occurred at approximately the same time that the availability of birth control began to give women more control over reproduction. Seidman contends that by the 1920s, love and romantic bonding was the most common justification for sex, with the reproductive rationale

¹¹² Cook, *Long Sexual Revolution*, p. 67.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 281-282; Robert Muchembled, *Orgasm and the West: A History of Pleasure from the 16th Century to the Present* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2008), p. 35.

¹¹⁵ Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p. 260; Lynne Segal, *Straight Sex: Rethinking the Politics of Pleasure* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), p. 8.

beginning to diminish in importance.¹¹⁶ The line between erotic desire and romantic longing began to blur.¹¹⁷ As sex started to be decoupled from reproduction, it began to be imagined as something which sustained the romantic relationship, rather than something the man did to the woman. Implicit in this is the notion of reciprocity and participation, endowing the woman with a greater level of sexual subjectivity. Under the influence of twentieth century sexology, sex was reimagined as something women needed to be healthy rather than a male act that had to be endured for the sake of pregnancy, an idea that was popularly disseminated via texts like Marie Stopes' *Married Love*. The discourse around women and desire necessarily had to change as sexual expression became the highest way to demonstrate love.¹¹⁸ The term "making love" was coined in 1586,¹¹⁹ but the growing commonality of its usage in the twentieth century is a linguistic signifier of the ways in which sex and love came to be conflated.¹²⁰ (It is also telling that men are far more likely to say "make love to" while women tend to say "make love with" – the notion of the woman as the passive participant in the sexual relationship certainly has not disappeared.)¹²¹

This notion of sex as expression of love was initially confined to sex that took place within marriage,¹²² where we might read it as a move towards the potential for female pleasure.¹²³ However, given the possibilities offered by reliable and widely available birth control and by the growing economic independence of women, this new discourse of love

¹¹⁶ Seidman, *Romantic Longings*, p. 82.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 4-5.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 84.

¹¹⁹ Stratton, *Virgin Text*, p. 37.

¹²⁰ Seidman, *Romantic Longings*, p. 84; Lynn Jamieson, *Intimacy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p. 106.

¹²¹ Elizabeth Manning, "Kissing and Cuddling: the reciprocity of romantic and sexual activity," in *Language and Desire: Encoding Sex, Romance, and Intimacy*, ed. Keith Harvey and Celia Shalom (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 54.

¹²² Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 6.

¹²³ As Hanne Blank notes: "Erotic desire... was not seen as truly relevant to marriage until the twentieth century." [Hanne Blank, *Straight: The Surprisingly Short History of Heterosexuality* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012), p. 58.]

soon moved beyond the marital boundary.¹²⁴ (Indeed, Claire Langhamer claims that love ultimately undermined marriage altogether, because love could evaporate over time.¹²⁵) We can see a cautious acceptance of premarital sex for women beginning to develop in the early twentieth century, tied to this idea that romantic love justified sex. There were several social changes tied to this. The 1920s marked a period of change in how romantic relationships played out: although this was a gradual progress, it was the period in which courting moved from the private home to the public arena, as young men and women started to go out to places like cinemas and dance halls.¹²⁶ It also marked a period of growing economic independence for women where emotional concerns could begin to take precedence over future financial worries.¹²⁷ While people generally remained sexually conservative in the inter-war period,¹²⁸ this was the beginning of the shift that McLaren has called “front porch to back seat”, observing that the number of sexually active young women clearly rose in the early twentieth century.¹²⁹

As romantic relationships shifted into the public sphere and a cautious acceptance for the potential for female desire and pleasure started to emerge, a new rhetoric around premarital sex began to gain cultural currency. A 1930s study of 1300 college students revealed that 25 per cent of female students were not virgins and a further 37 per cent were willing to lose their virginity, with 49 per cent believing sex before marriage was moral if the couple were in love.¹³⁰ Many women remained virgins until marriage, and many more carefully guarded their reputations, but in both the United Kingdom and the United States, scholars have noted the growing popularity of the idea of love as a justification for

¹²⁴ Giddens, *Transformation of Intimacy*, p. 2.

¹²⁵ Langhamer, *English in Love*, p. 7.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹²⁷ Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, p. 49.

¹²⁸ Cook, *Long Sexual Revolution*, p. 182.

¹²⁹ McLaren, *Twentieth-Century Sexuality*, p. 36.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

premarital sex (and specifically, for this dissertation, virginity loss).¹³¹ By 2006, the idea that men and women should remain virgins before marriage became so outmoded that even in the United States, which has a far stronger fundamentalist Christian influence than other countries in the English-speaking West, a study found that 95 per cent of people had premarital sex.¹³²

Thus, we can see that in the twentieth century, the pattern of love-marriage-sex was disrupted and the “right” time for women to lose their virginity moved away from marriage and was relocated to love.¹³³ This would seem to be a natural progression from the ideal of companionate marriage that arose in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, except in the twentieth century version, marriage is removed. This is a shift in what Norbert Elias calls the “pleasure economy” and Cas Wouters the “lust balance”, an ongoing social process in which men and women ask themselves, “*when and within what kind of relationship(s) are (what kind of) eroticism and sexuality allowed and desired?*”¹³⁴ As Paul Johnson argues, love replaced marriage and became – and still is – the normative force in regulating heterosexual sexual practices.¹³⁵ This marks the full-blown emergence of the discourse that I have termed compulsory demisexuality: the idea that for women, sex and love are and should be tied together, and that romantic love is the only reason for a woman to have sex. This is something that is considered a natural female desire, just as passionlessness was considered natural for the Victorian woman.

The notion that sex was legitimated by love meant that sex sans love took on a significant meaning, much as premarital sex was imbued with a significant meaning for

¹³¹ Langhamer, *English in Love*, pp. 133-134; Seidman, *Romantic Longings*, p. 118.

¹³² Regnerus and Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America*, p. 1.

¹³³ Paul Johnson, *Love, Heterosexuality and Society* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 48.

¹³⁴ Cas Wouters, “Balancing Sex and Love since the 1960s Sexual Revolution,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 15.3 (1998): p. 189, italics in original; Norbert Elias, *The Civilising Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994). See also Jeffrey Weeks, *The World We Have Won: The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 71.

¹³⁵ Johnson, *Love, Heterosexuality and Society*, p. 49.

women in earlier centuries.¹³⁶ In the twentieth century, sex sans love has been constructed as dangerous for women, perhaps because it is imagined to go against their innate nature.¹³⁷ Love thus becomes the new line between the good girl and the bad girl. The discourse of virginity is tied to this. The modern virgin is no longer necessarily looking for a man that will marry her, but she is not seeking simply sexual pleasure. That is the remit of the bad girl. The good girl virgin is looking for someone she loves who will love her back, even if that love will not last forever. Virginity shifts from being a matter of public concern to a private one: she chooses the man on whom she will bestow her virginity, and she must trust that he will not forsake her. It is no longer a social transaction, but an intimate one: she gives him her virginity and hands him her heart, and must trust that he does not break it. The modern virgin is no longer expected to remain with her deflowerer for the rest of her life: she no longer figuratively belongs to him body and soul, like she did in the marriage economy. However, this part of her will always symbolically belong to him in the modern narrative, and so she must choose wisely. She must realise her virginity's worth. A girl who does not value her virginity is regularly imagined as not valuing herself, throwing away her most precious gift on someone unworthy (despite the fact she might be actively pursuing and achieving sexual pleasure). She must see through desire and find love: even if this love ultimately fades, virginity loss can become a milestone she looks back on fondly. She also avoids psychic wounds that must be remedied and bad behaviours that must be unlearned. She can recuperate herself into the demisexual paradigm even if she loses her virginity outside it, but the scars on the woman who lost her virginity in the wrong way remain indelible in the cultural imagination.

There has been one other major shift in the discourse of virginity from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. The growing social acceptance of premarital sex has

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 75.

¹³⁷ Langhamer, *English in Love*, p. 50.

meant that concern has largely been displaced from the sexual behaviour of unmarried women to the behaviour of girls, a shift which occurred in the early 1970s.¹³⁸ As a consequence, virginity has also been relocated from the woman to the girl: girlhood scholar Catherine Driscoll argues that virginity has come to function as the liminal space between girlhood and womanhood.¹³⁹ While the idea of women experiencing sexual desire and pleasure has become far more socially acceptable, for girls, there still exists what is called the “missing discourse of desire”.¹⁴⁰ This is fundamental to the construction of girl sexuality in contemporary society, in which girls are imagined to be objects of desire without desiring themselves: as Deborah Tolman argues, “[g]irls’ *lack* of desire serves as the necessary linchpin in how adolescent sexuality is organised and managed.”¹⁴¹ It is possible to read this as a repurposing of the Victorian ideal of the asexual woman. Girlhood has been romanticised as a period of innocence, a space in which adolescent desire does not belong, in a way which can curtail the self-determination and sexual agency of the girl.¹⁴² While she may dream of a Prince Charming, she has no way to express desire outside of the terms of romantic love: as Tolman suggests, “[w]e have desexualised girls’ sexuality, substituting the desire for relationship and emotional connection for sexual feelings in their bodies.”¹⁴³ Desire outside this paradigm – and, indeed, sometimes even within it – is cast as innately dangerous: the only action a girl is permitted to take is to resist the desire of the boy aggressor. Michelle Fine and Sara I. McLelland contend that, “[d]esire, for young women, materialises into risk the moment it

¹³⁸ Cook, *Long Sexual Revolution*, p. 294.

¹³⁹ Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. 140-141.

¹⁴⁰ Michelle Fine, “Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire,” *Harvard Educational Review* 58.1 (1988): pp. 29-54.

¹⁴¹ Deborah L. Tolman, *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 15.

¹⁴² Dawn Currie, Deirdre M. Kelly, and Shauna Pomerantz. “*Girl power*”: *Girls Reinventing Girlhood* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 28.

¹⁴³ Tolman, *Dilemmas of Desire*, p. 6.

is enacted”.¹⁴⁴ Sex, for the modern girl virgin, is a space on a map marked “here be monsters”. There is a path through – safe sex, at an appropriate age, with a committed monogamous partner in a loving romantic relationship – but this path is narrow. The script for acceptable female virginity loss is limited. Because “boys will be boys”, sex is dangerous for girls.¹⁴⁵ She is the sexual gatekeeper and must discipline her body, to resist sex, to progress slowly through a series of sexual “steps” (kissing, petting, etc) with a trusted partner, and eventually to consent.¹⁴⁶ And yet she should appear sexually unknowing, to trust love, not to plan sex but to “let it happen”, and to please her male romantic partner.¹⁴⁷ Girls who act outside this paradigm of acceptable sexuality run the risk of instigating a moral panic.¹⁴⁸ While the woman has broken free to some extent, Western society has not yet worked out how to deal with the girl virgin who desires outside a romantic relationship.

Hanne Blank contends that virginity loss narratives transmute physical experiences into social narratives.¹⁴⁹ That is certainly obvious in this complex and contested discourse around virginity and the girl body, where acceptable virginity loss becomes a way of reproducing and constructing socially acceptable heterosexual femininity. In Britain in the 1940s, when a teenage girl told “radio doctor” Charles Hill, “[s]exual intercourse before marriage would be wrong if it’s just anyone. If it’s the chap you’re going to marry that’s different. It isn’t quite right but it isn’t exactly wrong,” it was considered shocking.¹⁵⁰ Now, this statement would be considered relatively normal: actually endorsing teen girl

¹⁴⁴ Michelle Fine and Sara I. McLelland, “Rescuing a Theory of Adolescent Sexual Excess – Young Women and Wanting,” in *Next Wave Cultures: Feminism, Subcultures, Activism*, ed. Anita Harris (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 92.

¹⁴⁵ Tolman, *Dilemmas of Desire*, p. 15.

¹⁴⁶ Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Sharpe and Rachel Thomson, “Deconstructing Virginity: Young People’s Accounts of First Sex,” *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* 15.3 (2000): p. 225.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

¹⁴⁸ Tolman, *Dilemmas of Desire*, p. 8.

¹⁴⁹ Blank, *Virgin*, p. 103.

¹⁵⁰ Sheila Rowbotham, *A Century of Women: The History of Women in Britain and the United States in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Penguin, 1999), p. 242.

sexual behaviour would be culturally problematic, but it could be generally agreed that if a girl was to lose her virginity, it would be best to do so within the confines of a romantic relationship. The sexual scripts for virginity loss have changed, with love taking the place of marriage as the legitimating factor. Successfully following the script allows the girl to reproduce herself within Western culture as a “good girl” – as Britney Spears sought to do, both pre- and post- her sexual relationship with Justin Timberlake. While the consequences for not following the script are arguably not as harsh as they have been historically, it cannot be denied that sexual activity outside the script is still culturally policed. There are still penalties for breaking the rules: for not complying with the discourse of compulsory demisexuality.

A Virgin Field? The State of the Scholarship

In her book *Virgin: The Untouched History*, Hanne Blank writes that, information [on virginity] is scattered across numerous fields and disciplines, completely disorganised, and often tricky to find. Virginity’s very nature – socially, religious, physically, and otherwise – means that it has often been a taboo, uncertain, and sometimes deliberately obscured subject.¹⁵¹

Blank is correct in her assessment. While significant writing has been done on the subject of virginity, it is located in a variety of different disciplines, few of which seem to communicate with each other. The study of virginity is not defined so much by a lack of scholarship as by a lack of communication between different scholarly practices.

Loosely, there are three major academic approaches to virginity. The first is a historical approach. The second is a literary approach. These two approaches tend to

¹⁵¹ Blank, *Virgin*, p. x.

overlap, as textual representations of virginity loss are often key to historical understandings.¹⁵² However, the importance of the third approach should not be underestimated – and, indeed, some of the best work on virginity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has been done in this field. This is the sociological approach. The three approaches have different strengths and weaknesses. Speaking in general terms, the historical approach is useful when thinking about the way virginity has evolved and developed as a concept across Western history. The literary approach allows us to highlight the figure of the virgin heroine, particularly examining how the virgin became the central figure in the romantic narrative. And the sociological approach allows us to examine specifically the moment of virginity loss and the contemporary discourse around it: what it signifies, what it has come to mean to individuals, and the stories and scripts that surround it.

Histories of virginity tend to focus on the role of virginity in specific time periods.¹⁵³ I have drawn on several of these histories in my account above of the ongoing

¹⁵² This is also an approach often used in sexual and romantic history more broadly: Seidman and Lystra, for example, rely on marriage advice manuals and love letters respectively to construct their histories of romantic love in America.

¹⁵³ For virginity in antiquity, see Eva Cantarella, “Dangling Virgins: Myth, Ritual and the Place of Women in Ancient Greece,” *Poetics Today* 6.1/2(1985): pp. 91-101; Bonnie MacLachlan and Judith Fletcher, *Virginity Revisited: Configurations of the Unpossessed Body* (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 2007); Ruth Scodel, “‘Aomon Agalma’: Virgin Sacrifice and Aesthetic Object,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-) 126 (1996): pp. 111-128. Sissa, *Greek Virginity*. For virginity in early Christianity, see Peter Robert Lamont Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins*; Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*; Teresa M. Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998). For virginity in the medieval period, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, see Bugge, *Virginitas*; Cindy L. Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl, *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); Ruth Evans, “Virginites,” *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women’s Writing*, edited by Carolyn Dinshaw & David Wallace (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Kelly, *Performing Virginity*; Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Marina Leslie (eds), *Menacing Virgins: Representing Virginity in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1999); Philips, *Medieval Maidens*; Kimberly Guy Reigle, *Defensive Virginity from Spenser to Milton* (PhD dissertation, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2010); Salih, *Versions of Virginity*; Sarah Salih, Anke Bernau and Ruth Evans, *Medieval Virginites* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2003); Wogan-Browne, *Saints’ Lives*. For virginity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see

instability of the concept of virginity and the ways in which it was affected by the rising prominence of romantic love. They are useful for establishing how virginity was perceived and the value placed on it, and, read together, they offer a fascinating picture of the changing discourse. Of particular interest is the way that the virgin is explored as a troublesome figure in a patriarchal economy, both upholding it – “everyone knows that patriarchy has always loved a virgin, for reasons that appear to be transparent... virgins help patriarchy reproduce itself,” Corrinne Harol argues¹⁵⁴ – but also problematising it, due to the fact that they are not yet initiated into it. This question of ownership and the virgin is one that appears regularly in many of these histories as a focal point for cultural anxiety: if the virgin’s body has not yet been penetrated by a man, whose control is she under?¹⁵⁵ Tied to this is the cultural fear not only that the woman might misbehave, but that she might do so without men noticing. This is often discussed in relationship to the idea of menaced virginity – that is, that virginity (and any spiritual virtue it might entail) is most obvious in the moment that it is threatened.¹⁵⁶ Several scholars have also written on virginity testing and the cultural anxiety surrounding faked virginity in different time periods, and the fear that the female body might not be readable.¹⁵⁷

While this tight chronological focus allows a complex and nuanced study of virginity in context, comparatively little work has been done on understanding how these historical views of and anxieties around virginity have affected modern perceptions. An

Lloyd Davis, *Virginal Sexuality and Textuality in Victorian Literature*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993); Tassie Gwilliam, “Female Fraud: Counterfeit Maidenheads in the Eighteenth Century,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6.4 (1996): pp. 518-548; Harol, *Enlightened Virginity*; Stratton, *Virgin Text*.

¹⁵⁴ Harol, *Enlightened Virginity*, p. 2.

¹⁵⁵ Ferguson, “Foreword” in *Menacing Virgins*, p. 8; Theodora A. Jankowski, *Pure Resistance: Queer Virginity in Early Modern English Drama* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), pp. 8-9; Schwarz, “The Wrong Question,” pp. 15-18. See also Valenti’s discussion of purity balls and the performance of patriarchal ownership of the virgin in modern America (*Purity Myth*, pp. 65-69).

¹⁵⁶ See Philips, *Medieval Maidens*; Kelly and Leslie, *Menacing Virgins*.

¹⁵⁷ Bernau, *Virgins*, pp. 5-9; Blank, *Virgin*, p. 76; Jane Cartwright, “Virginity and Chastity Tests in Medieval Welsh Prose,” in *Medieval Virginites*, ed. Sarah Salih, Anke Bernau and Ruth Evans (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 56-79; Gwilliam, “Female Fraud”; Kelly, *Performing Virginity*; Stratton, *Virgin Text*, p. 18.

exception here is Kathleen Coyne Kelly, who includes in her book on virginity in the Middle Ages a chapter on the congruences between the virginity discourses of the Middle Ages and those of the present day. She explores the desire in both periods for the female body to be a readable body, the anxiety that virginity might be performed or faked, and the way that ideal (secular) virginity in both periods is constructed as a period of waiting for the right man at the right time.¹⁵⁸ However, overall, if we wish to gain a fuller appreciation of the changing discourse of virginity across Western history, we must either read multiple histories against each other, or turn to two recent texts which offer an overview of the history of virginity in the Western world: Anke Bernau's *Virgins: A Cultural History* and Hanne Blank's *Virgin: The Untouched History*.

These are relatively recent studies, both published in 2007. Blank in particular explicitly states that her project was to fill this scholarly gap: she writes that, "...it was rapidly becoming obvious to me that if I wanted to read a comprehensive survey of virginity, I was going to have to write it."¹⁵⁹ It is somewhat ironic that these studies emerged almost simultaneously, and thus could not build on each other (although it also highlights a newfound scholarly – and perhaps societal – interest in virginity). Nevertheless, Blank and Bernau draw several matching conclusions and pose important questions which will be foundational for this thesis. They agree that virginity is difficult to define, a far more nebulous concept than it might initially appear (an idea to which I devoted some considerable space above). Similarly, both note that while ideas of what virginity signifies have altered significantly over history, the figure of the virgin has always been culturally potent and imbued with meaning – as Bernau writes, "while virginity can mean many things, those meanings have never been innocent."¹⁶⁰ They argue

¹⁵⁸ Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, p. 137.

¹⁵⁹ Blank, *Virgin*, p. x.

¹⁶⁰ Bernau, *Virgins*, p. 185.

that although ideas around virginity in contemporary culture are continually evolving, virginity does not seem to be becoming less important. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, both Blank and Bernau conclude that virginity, especially its loss, has carried and continues to carry major social and individual significance, due to its cultural importance and the way virginity has become a sexual identity in its own right. Here, we can begin to see the construction of the modern virgin as active: not having sex and waiting coded as active resistance in the sexual identity of “virgin”.

Neither Blank nor Bernau devote much space to the interaction of discourses of virginity and discourses of love. This is indicative of a gap in the broader historical scholarship on virginity. (It is also a gap in the scholarship on love, in which virginity is often touched on but rarely substantively addressed, despite its importance as a focal point of anxiety in debates like the one over the morality of premarital sex.) The discourse of love also subtly changed in the twentieth century. As I discussed above, romantic love became imbued with more erotic dimensions, but, as Langhamer argues, there was also a shift away from understanding love as taking care of the beloved and towards both lovers cultivating the others’ self-development¹⁶¹ (a shift we can perhaps also see articulated in the popularity of the self-help book – as opposed to the conduct book – in the second half of the twentieth century, which, as David Shumway has noted, focused on developing and maintaining intimacy through better understanding of and communication with romantic partners).¹⁶² This is particularly interesting when read alongside Francesca Cancian’s claim that love has been traditionally feminised while self-development has been masculinised, because here, love and self-development are collapsed together: we can see another hint of the way romantic love has been used by women to claim subjectivity and a measure of

¹⁶¹ Langhamer, *English in Love*, p. 38.

¹⁶² David Shumway, *Modern Love: Romance, Intimacy and the Marriage Crisis* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003), pp. 135-136.

equality within a romantic relationship.¹⁶³ This inserts what Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim call the “female biography” into the formulation of love, something they argue becomes prevalent after the 1960s, but which, as I contended above, we can see the roots of in the nineteenth century.¹⁶⁴ Romantic relationships become a kind of postmodern project of the self for both men and, importantly, women, inserting a notion of the woman as a self who can be developed (the female biography) into ideas of love. It has especial implications for the virgin, suggesting that she will continue to develop as a person beyond her defloration, rather than simply being transformed by the act of heterosex from virgin to non-virgin. Virginity becomes the beginning of a story, rather than a rupture in one. Historical studies have been lax at identifying the major effects the evolution of the romantic narrative has on scripts for virginity loss, despite the fact that love has clearly become the cultural arbiter between legitimate and non-legitimate sex for women, and the fact that it offers a possibility for different but still legitimate lovers in the future, troubling the ownership discourse that has traditionally accompanied licit virginity loss.

The relationship between virginity and love is an area that literary approaches to the study of virginity tend to address more fully, due to their examination of the virgin heroine who is so regularly embedded in the romantic narrative. However, despite the relative prominence of the virgin heroine in the novel, there has been no dedicated study of her significance. She appears in literary studies more broadly – Patricia Stubbs’ *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920* and Nancy Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, for example – but has received relatively little attention on her own. Given the tendency of literary studies of virginity to be embedded within historical ones, this means that the relationship between love and virginity on the page as well as off the

¹⁶³ Francesca M. Cancian, *Love in America: Gender and Self-Development* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 5.

¹⁶⁴ Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 61.

page remains considerably understudied. Where the literary approach is divorced from the historical one, it also remains limited, due to its focus on individual texts. *Pamela* has been particularly popular with literary scholars of virginity – and, indeed, the eponymous virgin heroine in that text is an important figure to consider when looking at the romantic virgin heroines who come after her.¹⁶⁵ However, there has been comparatively little dedicated scholarship on these later heroines, particularly in twentieth century literature.¹⁶⁶ Because the twentieth century is the period when sex scenes begin to emerge in mainstream literature (as opposed to pornography), this means that textual representations of the virgin heroine's virginity loss have also been understudied.

This is not to say that modern stories of virginity loss have not been studied at all. While the fictional virgin heroine has been largely neglected, broader cultural and autobiographical narratives around virginity loss in contemporary society have been the subject of several sociological studies. Many of these rely on the notion of sexual scripting, developed in the 1970s by John H Gagnon and William Simon – that is, socially learned narratives that govern the way people approach their sex lives, in addition to or instead of biological imperatives.¹⁶⁷ Gagnon and Simon argue that these scripts exist at three levels.

¹⁶⁵ For discussion of *Pamela* as virgin heroine, see Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*; Rachel M. Brownstein, *Becoming a Heroine: Reading about Women in Novels* (New York: Viking Press, 1982); Dijkstra, "Androgyne", pp. 62-73; Harol, *Enlightened Virginity*, pp. 136-145; Ira Konigsberg, "The Dramatic Background of Richardson's Plots and Characters," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 83.1 (1968): pp. 42-53; Niklas Luhmann, *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986); Mudge, *Women, Pornography and the British Novel*; Stratton, *Virgin Text*; Patricia Stubbs, *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel, 1880-1920* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1979).

¹⁶⁶ While there is more dedicated scholarship on virginity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than there is on virginity in the twentieth century, this is still a surprisingly understudied area. Apart from a few specific studies, such as Harol and Davis's, most scholarship on virginity in these periods is embedded within broader historical studies of sex and/or love.

¹⁶⁷ Gagnon and Simon first outlined this approach in 1973 – see John H. Gagnon and William Simon, *Sexual Conduct* (Chicago: Aldine, 1973). They have since further developed it – selected works include John H. Gagnon, "The Explicit and Implicit Use of the Scripting Perspective in Sex Research," *Annual Review of Sex Research* 1.1 (1990): pp. 1-43; William Simon and John H. Gagnon, "Sexual Scripts: Permanence and Change," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 15.2 (1986): pp. 97-120; William Simon and John H. Gagnon, "Sexual Scripts: Origins, Influences and Changes," *Qualitative Sociology* 26.4 (2003): pp. 491-497; William Simon and John H. Gagnon, "A Sexual Scripts Approach," in *Theories of Human Sexuality*, ed. James H. Geer and William T. O'Donohue (London: Plenum Press, 1987), pp. 363-383.

Cultural scripts are broad social narratives with which people's sex lives are supposed to be congruent. Interpersonal scripts are notions formed through interactions with other people, and intrapsychic scripts are the individual's own fantasies and desires. The three levels are not necessarily discrete – they can overlap, and each level influences the other two. The cultural level is the one in which historical studies of virginity have been the most interested, as it encapsulates the dominant discourse of a period and the sexual narrative with which a society is supposed to comply.¹⁶⁸ This is the level in which compulsory demisexuality is located: the idea that women should only have sex when they are in love is a pervasive cultural narrative in contemporary culture. However, the interpersonal and intrapsychic levels are also interesting, as we can see here the ways in which dominant narratives are problematised and resisted. Gagnon and Simon observe, following Pierre Bourdieu, that cultural scenarios cannot always predict real-world behaviour.¹⁶⁹ This would seem to support Eva Illouz's claim that "[c]ulture operates as a *frame* within which emotional experience is organised, labelled, classified, and interpreted."¹⁷⁰ The interpersonal and intrapsychic levels have not received a great deal of historical attention (not least because they are difficult to study using historical method). What attention they have received is sociological, and has been dominated by one scholar in particular: American sociologist Laura Carpenter.

Carpenter has written several articles discussing the portrayal of virginity loss in various media, including film and magazines, but her most notable contribution to the field

The sexual scripting approach has also been drawn on by several sociological scholars studying virginity – eg. Laura M. Carpenter, "Virginity Loss in Reel/Real Life: Using Popular Movies to Navigate Sexual Initiation," *Sociological Forum* 24.4 (2009): pp. 804-827; Suchi P. Joshi, Jochen Peter, and Patti M. Valkenburg, "Scripts of Sexual Desire and Danger in US and Dutch Teen Girl Magazines: A Cross-National Content Analysis," *Sex Roles* 64.7-8 (2011): pp. 463-474.

¹⁶⁸ It has also dominated studies in which sociological and literary approaches overlap: for example, Stephanie Medley-Rath studies *Seventeen* magazine over twenty years in order to identify changing discourses around virginity, while Jamie Mullaney uses fiction to interrogate what "virgin" has come to mean as an identity.

¹⁶⁹ Simon & Gagnon, "Sexual Scripts," p. 98.

¹⁷⁰ Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, p. 3. Emphasis in original.

is her book *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences*.¹⁷¹ Carpenter interviews over fifty young Americans about their virginity loss experiences, a selection of which are related in the book. She then subjects these stories to academic scrutiny. Following Gagnon and Simon, she identifies three major cultural sexual scripts that surround virginity loss, arguing that virginity is seen as a gift (something to be valued), a stigma (something to rid oneself of at the earliest opportunity), or a step in a process of sexual maturation.¹⁷² These categories do not remain static: Carpenter discusses the ways in which people switch between scripts over their lifetime, often as a result of their own virginity loss, and the ways in which these scripts are complicated by interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts. She identifies major tensions between the different scripted levels and the ways in which this can have a profound effect on the individual. Carpenter is not the only scholar to have identified this tension – for example, other scholars have argued that the “loss” narrative surrounding virginity inculcates feelings of ambivalence in girls¹⁷³ – but she is the only one to have explored this aspect of virginity loss in depth by focusing specifically on individual storytelling practice and biography.

What is missing from Carpenter’s work is any sustained analysis of how perceptions of virginity loss have changed over time. This is indicative of a broader problem in the field of virginity studies: while there is some overlap between historical and literary studies, and between literary and sociological studies, there is little between historical and sociological studies. Historical studies offer an understanding of how the ideology surrounding virginity has changed over time, but have not yet done any major

¹⁷¹ Carpenter, “Virginity Loss in Reel/Real Life”; Laura M. Carpenter, “The First Time/Das Erstes Mal Approaches to Virginity Loss in US and German Teen Magazines,” *Youth & Society* 33.1 (2001): pp. 31-61; Laura M. Carpenter, “From Girls into Women: Scripts for Sexuality and Romance in *Seventeen* Magazine, 1974–1994,” *Journal of Sex Research* 35.2 (1998): pp. 158-168.

¹⁷² Carpenter also identifies a fourth category – maintained virginity as an act of worship. However, as only two people in her study fit into this category, and this is a category focusing on virginity *maintained* rather than *lost*, I will not be discussing it in any depth in this thesis.

¹⁷³ Holland et al, “Deconstructing Virginity,” pp. 221-232.

work on the twentieth and twenty-first century narratives surrounding virginity loss. Historical studies have also focused almost exclusively on the social implications of virginity, with little work having been done on the way in which the focus has shifted to the individual. This is one of the most important shifts in the discourse of virginity in the twentieth century: the relocation of the “value” of virginity from a patriarchal marriage market to the individual. Sociological studies have developed a much better understanding of modern virginity loss narratives, offering a far more specific focus on the contemporary individual and the moment of virginity loss. There are also excellent sociological studies on the cultural implications of the modern practice of telling sexual stories, most notably by Kenneth Plummer, who argues that overarching sexual myths are being supplanted by personal narratives.¹⁷⁴ These texts are important for interpreting explicit textual representations of virginity loss, both in fiction and non-fiction. However, the potential for using the evolution of this practice of sexual storytelling to understand the ways in which ideas surrounding virginity loss have evolved historically has gone largely unrealised.¹⁷⁵

The other major gap in studies of virginity loss is the lack of attention that has been paid to the intersection of narratives of virginity loss and narratives of love. This is despite the fact that these narratives are clearly linked in twentieth century sexual history. As love replaced marriage as the legitimating force for female sexual behaviour, it took on a greater role in the virgin’s choice to lose her virginity than it ever had before. The role of love in female virginity loss has been touched on a little by sociological scholars, but has not been explored in any depth.¹⁷⁶ As virginity loss shifts from being a moment of social

¹⁷⁴ Kenneth Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change, and Social Worlds* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 133-134.

¹⁷⁵ It should be noted that some work has been done here – for example, Stephanie Medley-Rath’s analysis of *Seventeen* magazine over a twenty year period. However, it is not a particularly common practice, and it is an area to which far more scholarly attention needs to be devoted.

¹⁷⁶ While no dedicated studies on this have been done, it has been touched on by several scholars: cf. Giddens, *Transformation of Intimacy*, p. 51; Holland et al, “Deconstructing Virginity,” p. 222, pp. 228-230; McLaren, *Twentieth-Century Sexuality*, p. 39; Lynne Segal, “Feminist Sexual Politics and the Heterosexual

significance to a personal one, the linking of sex and love is the defining feature of the cultural fantasy of the perfect female virginity loss: it is what makes the “right” moment, per McLaren, right. However, it can also imbue it with problems.¹⁷⁷ We are reminded here of Lauren Berlant’s formulation of the female complaint: “women live for love, and love is the gift that keeps on taking.”¹⁷⁸ Stevi Jackson argues that the romance narrative is one upon which people draw to make sense of their emotional world and to narrativise their own lives,¹⁷⁹ while Rosalind Gill contends that “[r]omance is one of the key narratives by which we are interpellated or inscribed as subjects.”¹⁸⁰ In the twentieth century, the narratives of romance and female virginity loss collide. The result? The emergence of compulsory demisexuality, which, in respect to virginity loss, dictates that romantic love is the only legitimate reason for a woman to lose her virginity.

Extra Virgin: Where Do We Go From Here?

In this thesis, I intend to address some of the gaps I have identified above in the scholarship on virginity in order to explore the ways the situation of virginity loss within a romantic narrative has affected women. I am particularly interested in two (related) things. Firstly, the way that discourses of love and virginity interact and the way this has developed historically, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I want to explore the way that compulsory demisexuality has become a dominant sexual narrative for female sexual behaviour, and the way this has evolved. Secondly, I am interested in the

Predicament,” in *New Sexual Agendas*, ed. Lynne Segal (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 87; Stratton, *Virgin Text*, pp. 155-197.

¹⁷⁷ Holland et al, “Deconstructing Virginity,” p. 222, p. 228; Segal, “Feminist Sexual Politics,” p. 87.

¹⁷⁸ Berlant, *Female Complaint*, p. 1.

¹⁷⁹ Stevi Jackson, “Even Sociologists Fall in Love: An Exploration in the Sociology of Emotions,” *Sociology* 27.2 (1993): pp. 213-215.

¹⁸⁰ Rosalind Gill, *Gender and the Media* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2007), p. 218. See also Joanne Hollows, *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 87.

way the virgin heroine has become the subject of the romantic narrative, particularly the way that notions of love and virginity interact on the page and what that might indicate about cultural attitudes now, in the past, and in the future.

I am approaching this project from the field of literary history, which means that texts will necessarily be the focus of my thesis. However, I do not want to limit myself by focusing specifically on close-reading a few texts – while this might be an interesting exercise, it would have limited historical purpose. I have chosen to focus on two major genres in which virginity loss is a primary concern. The first of these is a genre I have termed the “virginity loss confessional genre”. This genre, in which autobiographical (often anonymous) stories of virginity loss are anthologised, appears in the 1990s and seems to be growing in popularity. These books vary from the academic (Carpenter’s sociological study, discussed above, qualifies) to the moralistic to the merely interested. By closely analysing and historicising the stories in these works, I will attempt to paint a clearer picture of the evolution of the different virginity loss narratives that have emerged in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I am especially interested in stories which focus on the role of love. Love, as will become clear in my discussion of these texts, has a palpable effect on young women in relation to virginity loss – before, after, and during the event itself. As I will explore in my two chapters on virginity loss confessionals, these are stories in which the pervasive influence of compulsory demisexuality on women makes itself clear, and the way this is articulated has changed over time.

The emergence of the virginity loss confessional genre, alongside the regular appearance of the virgin heroine in many different popular media, also makes it clear that virginity loss has become the subject of narrative: if it is not necessarily a narrative in its own right, it is certainly figured as a major narrative turning point in an individual’s life. I am particularly interested in the way it functions in the romantic narrative; therefore, I will

devote two chapters to examining the portrayal of female virginity loss in the world's most-read genre: popular romance fiction. To define "popular romance fiction," I am drawing upon Northrop Frye's theorisation of genre: he stated that "the study of genres has to be founded on the study of conventions."¹⁸¹ The convention that unifies and defines popular romance fiction is its insistence on a central love story and a happy ending, where the protagonists find themselves in a long-term committed monogamous relationship. This excludes stories which include romantic elements but end unhappily, and also stories which include romance but do not make it their central focus. This is in line with, as I will discuss in my chapters on popular romance, the definitions put forward by scholar Pamela Regis and the Romance Writers of America, signifying agreement between scholars and the broader reading community. (It should be noted here, although I will explicate on this further in later chapters, that romance fiction is an enormous genre, and my two chapters will necessarily focus on sub-genres: historical romance and contemporary category romance.) This will not only assist with mitigating the scholarly gap on work on twentieth and twenty-first century virgin heroines, but will also contribute to a growing body of scholarship on this understudied genre. Popular genres like romance are not static: to be studied properly, they must be engaged with historically, thinking about not just the texts as historical artefacts but also the position of the reader within history.¹⁸² I will examine the way the narrative of love has evolved within the genre, the way this interacts with the changing discourses of virginity, and the way this has shifted over time. Compulsory demisexuality is the governing paradigm of the romance: the link between sex and love for women is one of the genre's defining features. However, this paradigm has not remained fixed and the way it is articulated has changed substantially. This signals changes in the

¹⁸¹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 96.

¹⁸² Hollows, *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*, p. 2.

historical context in which the books are being written and also changes in reader preferences.

Finally, I will devote a chapter to virginity in the twenty-first century. I will use two of the most popular texts of the last decade featuring virgins and virginity loss as a lens: Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga and E.L. James' *Fifty Shades* trilogy. The texts themselves are of interest, and I will examine the portrayal of the virgin heroine within them; however, I am particularly interested in the reader. By using Amazon reviews, I will look at the way the readers of these texts are constructed as virginal readers, and what this reveals about the discourse surrounding virginity loss both in the present and moving forward in the twenty-first century.

The study of virginity loss and the narratives that surround it is more than an interesting intellectual exercise. Virginity, this strange, nebulous, unstable concept, has historically been loaded with weighty and often contradictory baggage, much of which it still carries today. This is something that has a direct effect on people's lives, especially the lives of women. Virginity *matters*. As Blank concludes:

I feel I can say with certainty that no matter where our changing culture takes us, and no matter how our notions of virginity change, as long as sex is important in the slightest, virginity and virgins will continue to matter profoundly to us.¹⁸³

If anything, I would contend that Blank does not go far enough in this statement. For women, at least, virginity has been entangled with the discourse of love as well as sex, imbuing it with incredible weight in an individual's romantic narrative. Virginity loss may no longer initiate the woman into a patriarchal economy, where the woman is an object exchanged in a homosocial relationship between two men, but in societal terms, there is

¹⁸³ Blank, *Virgin*, p. 257.

still very much a culturally sanctioned “right” and “wrong” way for a woman to lose her virginity. Love has become the legitimating factor. If a woman loses her virginity with a loving partner, she has acted in accordance with the paradigm of compulsory demisexuality. If she does not, she is considered to be somehow psychically wounded: the only cure for which is recuperation into the paradigm. The discourse around virginity has changed substantially as it has become more and more intertwined with the discourse of love, but this has also made its operation murkier. The rules around ideal virginity loss are less clear than they have been in the past. The linkage of love and sex is supposed to be considered natural for girls (we are reminded here of the “missing discourse of desire”), and thus losing one’s virginity sans love is figured unnatural and harmful – but is “love” really so easy to determine? In this thesis, I hope to shed light on the way the relationship between love and virginity operates and how this has evolved: to recognise the way that the paradigm of compulsory demisexuality both confines female sexuality and offers it a safe space, the ways in which it constructs illicit virginity loss as harmful but also offers the possibility of recuperation, the ways in which it is resisted, and the ways in which this discourse might develop in the future – a subject relevant, I suspect, to a wide audience.

Chapter Two – These Are My Confessions: The History, Project, and Pleasures of the

Virginity Loss Confessional Genre

Kenneth Plummer opens his book *Telling Sexual Stories* with a quotation from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 1782 autobiography *Confessions*, one of the first widely read personal sexual stories in the Western world. "It was a bold personal narrative of sex that broke a silence," Plummer argues, before going on to describe the ways in which sexual desire was made to "speak" in the Victorian period, from clinical case studies through sensationalist tabloid narratives and erotic memoirs like Walter's *My Secret Life*.¹ The latter would seem to be the most similar to *Confessions* in form: while it is almost certain that many of Walter's sexual adventures are fabricated and the book is as much pornography as it is autobiography, it adopts this same confessional tone as Rousseau's work.

This word – "confession" – is an important one for this chapter, which focuses on the contemporary practice of telling virginity loss stories. In this opening section, I discuss the theoretical and historical bases behind contemporary sexual storytelling, a practice which has some roots in confessional texts like Rousseau's and Walter's. This will create the foundation for the work I intend to do in this chapter's second section, where I focus specifically on modern virginity loss confessional stories, examining the purposes they serve, both historical and therapeutic, and the functions they perform in shaping sexual narrative. I am particularly interested in the way the positive or ideal virginity loss story is constructed in these modern autobiographical stories, which is the focus of the third section. Overall, I am attempting to illustrate how and why virginity loss stories have been

¹ Kenneth Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change, and Social Worlds* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 3-4.

told in the past, the reasons why the practice of telling virginity loss stories has become so common in recent decades, the effects this has had on sexual discourse, and what this means for the contemporary construction of the cultural script for ideal virginity loss. Tied to this last is the key idea I introduced in the last chapter – compulsory demisexuality, the notion that, in contemporary English-speaking Western culture, love and sex are perceived as inextricably and naturally tied together for women. In this chapter, I aim to provide a better understanding of the historical evolution of discourses like these in sexual storytelling practices, providing a basis for a close reading and analysis of contemporary autobiographical virginity loss stories in the next chapter.

Petit Récits: The Foucauldian Confessional and the Wedding Night Story

The title of Rousseau’s autobiography – *Confessions* – is apt, because this idea of confession is one that has percolated practices of sexual storytelling. Indeed, it has percolated autobiographical practice altogether: the title of Rousseau’s *Confessions* is a clear reference to the *Confessions* of Augustine, written more than a thousand years prior. Their confessional purposes were different – as Linda Anderson notes, Augustine’s confessions were a rhetorical display of a Christian imperative to confess sins, while Rousseau attempted to use his *Confessions* to “make himself as transparent to his readers as he was to himself” – but they are certainly linked, and we can see both these uses of confession inherent in sexual storytelling practice.²

Michel Foucault explores the idea of confession in some detail in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, where he discusses the confessional in Victorian society as a

² Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 17-18, p. 42.

space in which individual desire was transformed into discourse.³ He argues that confession has become one of the primary ways in which truth is produced in Western narrative, writing that:

we have passed from a pleasure to be recounted and heard, centring on the heroic or marvellous narration of ‘trials’ of bravery or sainthood, to a literature ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage.⁴

We might point to Rousseau, with his desire to make himself transparent, as an example of this new kind of literature. Foucault goes on to contend that confessional practice has an especial significance when it comes to sexual narratives. The confessional, he contends, is the place in which truth and sex meet “through the obligatory and exhaustive expression of an individual secret.”⁵

Intrinsic to the idea of the Foucauldian confessional is power: confession takes place within an unbalanced power relationship. For there to be a confession, there must necessarily be someone listening: “a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile.”⁶ We can see this in Augustine’s *Confessions*, which he addresses to God, but this does not have to be a confession in a religious sense, with parishioner and priest – as Foucault notes, the confessional was repurposed and mirrored in a number of different relationships in Western culture, such as those between psychiatrist and patient, teacher and student, parent and child (importantly,

³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol.1* (London: Penguin, 1976), pp. 21-22, pp. 61-62.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 61-2.

all relationships with a hierarchical power dynamic).⁷ The confessor tells their authoritarian interlocutor the truth – in this case, the truth about their sex life. The interlocutor, in turn, passes judgment, measuring the confession against the standards of social acceptability, so that the confessor can be reconciled to these standards of behaviour. This practice, Foucault argues, transforms sex into

a thing to be not simply condemned or tolerated but managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum. Sex was not something one simply judged; it was a thing one administered.⁸

Thus, the confessional, according to Foucault, is a place where individual truths are transmuted into a broader social discourse. The individual's sexual confession is required by the interlocutor, and then measured by them against the yardstick of cultural norms. We are reminded here of Gagnon and Simon's notion of sexual scripting, which I outlined in the last chapter – the individual's intrapsychic desire is measured against the cultural narrative (arguably, in an interpersonal space, mobilising all three levels of the scripting process). We have here an illustration of societal sexual regulation: the Foucauldian confessional functions to measure and micromanage sex, offering guidelines as to what is and is not appropriate.

In his discussion of the confessional, Foucault is talking largely about the Victorian period, connecting the image of the confessional to his argument that sex was not repressed in this time, but rather was relocated to different discursive spaces (a rejection of what he

⁷ It is difficult here not to be reminded here of psychoanalysis, a method which grew in popularity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Featuring a hierarchical power relationship between analyst and patient, this has been characterised as the "talking cure" – the similarities to the notion of the confessional are clear here. [Anthony Paul Kerby, *Narrative and the Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 86.]

⁸ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 24.

calls the repressive hypothesis). How, then, do we apply the idea of the confessional to the present? As Plummer notes, there has been a significant shift in sexual storytelling practices: “a hundred years further on, the modern western world has become cluttered with sexual stories.”⁹ Rousseau’s confession of sadomasochistic desire or Walter’s pseudo-real erotic memoir would not be out of place on modern shelves: in fact, they would be positively ordinary. There is no longer a need to retreat to the cloistered space of the confessional to whisper sexual secrets to an authoritarian interlocutor. Instead, “...a grand message keeps being shouted: *tell about your sex*.”¹⁰

There would seem to be a significant difference between the Foucauldian confessional and the contemporary atmosphere for sexual stories as described by Plummer, but we can see them collide in a fascinating genre that emerges in the 1990s. I have termed this the “virginity loss confessional genre”, a genre in which autobiographical stories of virginity loss are collected, collated, and curated. It is easy to see how this genre fits into the world without sexual secrets as described by Plummer, in which telling all to all has become common practice. Virginity loss is narrativised: unpicked, unpacked, exposed. Yet there is a confessional element to this as well, particularly given the emphasis on anonymity that many anthologies (and particularly virginity loss confessional websites) include. We might argue that this genre offers an opportunity to transform individual stories into discourse. By narrating their virginity loss experience, the storyteller is encouraged to itemise their thoughts, feelings and acts; to view their experience analytically and measure it against the yardstick of social acceptability – essentially to become their own interlocutor. This is particularly obvious in anthologies and online spaces which ask storytellers to provide advice for future virgins. Similarly, the reader is also placed in the position of confessional (and, arguably, primary) interlocutor. The reader

⁹ Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4. Emphasis in original.

can pass judgment by measuring the storyteller's tale against cultural standards, but also against the reader's own notions, desires, and experiences. The virginity loss confessional genre becomes a space where the cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic levels of sexual scripting collide: a space where discourse is formed, measured and problematised.

The major difference between the confessional as described by Foucault and the practices evident in the virginity loss confessional genre is in the position of the interlocutor. The confessor/interlocutor relationship as described by Foucault is very clearly one based in unequal power, and one involving specific individuals. On the other hand, in the virginity loss confessional genre, the often anonymous author tells their story to an anonymous public – not just a reader, but readers. While the reader may certainly pass judgment on the author, they are not in the same conciliatory position as the Foucauldian interlocutor, and they are not in a position of power over the storyteller. Therefore, if we want to understand the practice of storytelling at work in the virginity loss confessional genre more clearly, we must, while realising that this idea of the confessional is important, also seek to understand *why* people are choosing to tell their sexual stories. What purpose do they have?

An examination of autobiography more generally might be useful here. As Anderson notes in her discussion of this genre, autobiography is a contested space, and there is no consensus as to its meanings.¹¹ However, she also raises several potential reasons which may explain the autobiographical impulse. Rousseau, she contends, ceaselessly narrated his own life partially in an effort to demonstrate his own specialness, his distinction from others, but also in what we might think of as a straightforwardly confessional way – to confess his sins – and we can certainly see both these impulses

¹¹ Anderson, *Autobiography*, 15.

demonstrated in the virginity loss confessional genre.¹² Anderson also calls on the work of several eminent theorists to explain this move towards autobiography, the literary shift that Foucault described towards a literature aimed at extracting truth from oneself: using Sigmund Freud, she suggests that autobiography might allow the narrator to assume authorship over their own life;¹³ using Roland Barthes, she imbues this with a performative aspect, suggesting that the autobiographical subject is like an actor performing their own life (and thus having the ability to emphasise or de-emphasise certain aspects, as Zora Neale Hurston did in her autobiographical work *Dust Tracks on the Road*);¹⁴ and using Jacques Derrida, she suggests that autobiography is “the unwitting replication by the text of the process it is trying, rationally, to understand.”¹⁵ These three explanations are not, I would suggest, mutually exclusive: particularly in the case of the virginity loss confessional genre, reading them together may explain the appearance of these stories. Narrating and/or performing one’s own story puts the storyteller in a position of power and control – something which, as my discussion of the genre in the following chapters will show, many storytellers, especially female storytellers, do not feel they had during their virginity loss experiences. The Derridean explanation, which occupies a slightly different space to the Freudian and the Barthesian, is particularly relevant when we consider the fact that virginity loss confessional texts are anthologies, containing repeated tellings of the same moment: an effort, perhaps, to understand this moment’s relevance.

Anderson also raises another point which is especially pertinent given this thesis’ focus on female virginity loss. It would be easy simply to invoke Plummer and argue that the virginity loss confessional genre arises out of a culture of ceaseless sexual narrating. But this would be doing a disservice both to the historical complexity of this storytelling

¹² Ibid., pp. 44-46.

¹³ Ibid., p. 64.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 70. For a discussion of Hurston, see pp. 98-104.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 75.

practice and to Plummer's argument. Anderson suggests that autobiography has an important role in constituting women as subjects instead of objects in discourse. Key to this is imagining the possibility of multiple subjectivities – not just one unitary self, one “woman”, but women.¹⁶ I will explore this idea further when I examine the historical underpinnings of the genre, particularly through feminist consciousness-raising, later in this chapter, but we should note here the importance of the fact that virginity loss confessional texts are anthologies: they contain multifarious – and many female – perspectives on the same moment. If, as Liz Stanley writes, “[t]he differences of women's lives matter, not differences from an assumed exemplary male life, but rather differences from each other,” the virginity loss confessional genre is serving an important purpose for its female storytellers in particular.¹⁷

Despite this, we should be wary of over-theorising the autobiographical impulse of the virginity loss confessional genre, because, as I will discuss further later in this chapter and its successor, the books in the genre are quite different and serve different purposes. The curatorial impulse is of as much interest – perhaps even more – than the autobiographical one: why have these books' curators sought out these virginity loss stories? This brings us back to this focus on story, on narrative, which is, I think, key to understanding this genre. Plummer writes that:

They [sexual stories] do not in fact take us towards the Sexual Truth: towards a full, absolute, real grasping of our essential, inner sexual natures. If I once thought, naively, that all these sexual stories may be seen as signs of the truth, this has long since ceased being my view... For instead of taking all these dazzling stories

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 85.

¹⁷ Liz Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 120.

mentioned above as givens – as providing rays of real truth on sexual lives – *sexual stories can be seen as issues to be investigated in their own right*.¹⁸

Plummer here makes a productive departure from Foucault and this idea of truth, and moves towards a focus on narrative (something in which, I suspect, many curators of virginity loss confessionals are more interested in than truth). There is no way of verifying the truth of the stories in the virginity loss confessional genre, no way of ensuring that they are historically accurate objective retellings of sexual experiences. Using them to highlight essential truths about human sexual nature would be a fraught (and probably ahistorical) project. However, if we examine them as stories, dominant sexual narratives are both made plain and destabilised. The virginity loss confessional genre, with its many iterations of virginity loss stories, can be seen as a clear example of Plummer's claim that, "sexual stories of the Categorically Clear no longer hold, and in their place come *stories of deconstruction*."¹⁹ This is congruent with the postmodern influence on storytelling more broadly: we are reminded here of Jean-François Lyotard's claim that the advent of postmodern sensibility means that notions of the grand narrative have become outmoded, replaced by *petit récits* ("little narratives"). Arguably, the virginity loss confessional genre shares this postmodern project: it is paralogical, creating instabilities in dominant narratives of virginity loss.²⁰

The virginity loss confessional narrative only appears in an observable way in the 1990s: the earliest texts I could find in the genre were the American books *The First Time* by Karen Bouris and *Losing It* by Louis Crosier, both published in 1993. But this is not the first time virginity loss stories have been told publicly, and not the first time they have

¹⁸ Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, p. 5. Emphasis in original.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 134. Emphasis in original.

²⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). See also Dennis K. Mumby, "Introduction," in *Narrative and Social Control: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Dennis K. Mumby (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993), p. 3.

been used to destabilise other narratives, though these stories have not necessarily been confessional stories in the way I have been discussing thus far. Social purity advocates and other sexual modernists at the beginning of the twentieth century used wedding night stories to demonstrate the woman's lack of control over her own body. "I should'nt [sic] mind married life so much if it wasn't for bedtime," Leonora Eyles reports one woman saying in 1922, a loaded statement into which we can read many things about the absence of bodily autonomy for women, the effect that the pathologisation of female desire had on women's lives, the lack of a concept of consent within marriage, and an as-yet unresolved tension between love and sex for women.²¹ Early versions of wedding night stories focused on the man as sexual brute, aggressively inflicting his desires on an innocent and terrified wife – a wife for whom, in the sexual discourse of this period, desire was not really considered possible. Social purity campaigns were tied to images of the woman as pure, moralising, civilising force, and demanded better control over brutal male sexual impulses and a greater recognition of the importance of female consent.

As the potential for female sexual pleasure slowly gained more social traction, the focus shifted somewhat. Wedding night stories were still told, but the emphasis moved to an image of the man as sexual blunderer, rather than sexual brute. Instead of being actively cruel, he became merely ignorant, and wedding night stories were used to campaign for greater male sexual consideration of the woman, so that she would not be so scarred by her virginity loss experience that all possibility of sexual enjoyment was lost forever.²² In her influential 1919 publication *Married Love*, British writer Marie Stopes insisted that, given the climate of ignorance in which young women were brought up, it was "a *rape* for the

²¹ Leonora Eyles, *The Woman in the Little House* (1922), quoted in Lesley A. Hall, "Eyes Tightly Shut, Lying Rigidly Still, and Thinking of England? British Women and Sex from Marie Stopes to Hite 2000," in *Sexual Pedagogies: Sex Education in Britain, Australia, and America, 1879-2000*, ed. Claudia Nelson and Michelle H. Martin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 60.

²² Christina Simmons, "Modern Sexuality and the Myth of Victorian Representation," in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, ed. Kathy Peiss, Christina Simmons and Robert A. Padgug (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), pp. 162-163.

husband to insist on his marital rights at once,” something which might have long term effects on the woman’s life and ability to experience pleasure.²³ American author Margaret Sanger made a similar argument in her 1926 marriage manual *Happiness in Marriage*, where she observed:

Mainly through lack of adequate knowledge of the emotional nature of women many impatient and selfish young husbands have plunged ahead to self gratification with such reckless rapidity that the conjugal relation is forever afterwards associated in the woman’s mind with a positive feeling of repulsion.²⁴

Sanger writes that the husband should “seek knowledge not merely of the sexual function of the generative organs of the male but of the female as well and their relation to the psychic constitution of both sexes” before consummating the marriage so as to spare his bride “an untold amount of unnecessary suffering.”²⁵ She goes on to relate several (unpleasant) wedding night stories, including one of a bride “who had looked forward to marriage with the man she loved as the culmination of happiness”, but became miserable and physically ill post-marriage. Sanger writes that:

A long time afterwards the wife confided to a friend that she had suffered a terrific shock of disappointment on her bridal night. During courtship, her fiancé’s advances had been sufficient to arouse her expectations to the highest point. On the wedding night his approach and embraces had been in the order of a hurried meal over a lunch counter. This duty perfunctorily performed, the young husband, quite oblivious to his bride’s sharp disappointment, had promptly fallen into a deep slumber.

²³ Marie Carmichael Stopes, *Married Love* (London: Pelican Press, 1919), p. 22. Emphasis in original.

²⁴ Margaret Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage* (New York: Blue Ribbon Press, 1926), p. 90.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

Astounded at his lack of idealism and crushed by the total collapse of her romance, this young bride lay awake throughout the long night thinking of all she had expected of the long weeks of preparation, of her wedding garments unnoticed, and her husband's bland indifference to all of her attractive preparations. Tears had finally been her only relief. And so the conviction took root in her mind, a conviction that became ineradicable, that the whole meaning of marriage was to men to be found in the attitude of her husband. That all he wanted was perfunctory sex gratification. For her irretrievably, the beauty, the poetry, the exaltation of romance had been dragged in the dust and had come to an end.²⁶

Stories like this one are clearly intended as cautionary tales. Sanger recommended that a young man approaching marriage seek advice on the best way to "initiate" his wife not from his family physician, but from "some women older and more experienced in life", which perhaps signals a discursive shift in practices of talking about sex.²⁷ Similarly, she argues that brides arm themselves with knowledge pre-consummation: that "modesty and purity do not mean prudishness and false reticence."²⁸ We can see here the way that Sanger uses the wedding night story for a political purpose: to agitate both for a more considerate mode of masculinity, and to resist a model of virginity that fetishises sexual ignorance, arguing instead for sexual education for both sexes and for communication about sex between the bride and groom.²⁹

In the twentieth century, the practice of telling sexual stories has been linked closely with feminism. Sanger was a first wave feminist and a major American advocate for birth control. Jeffrey Weeks notes that the struggle for women's rights raised important

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 93-94.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 94-96.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 96.

²⁹ For further discussion around this, see Lesley Hall, "Sexuality," in *Women in Twentieth Century Britain*, ed. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (Harlow: Longman, 2001).

questions about women and sex, particularly about bodily autonomy.³⁰ As demonstrated above, wedding night stories were often used as a way of signalling that the woman had very little of said autonomy: the way they were told emphasised that the female body functioned as an object for male use, and that this was intrinsically damaging to the woman. (Weeks quotes from one survey participant, who recounts a suffragist discussion on the problem of sex, saying, “And a memory comes of a pallid individual who raised her head from her pillow to whisper that her wedding night had been a dreadful revelation to her...”³¹) Two issues were tied together here in this struggle for bodily autonomy: consent and pleasure.³² Often invoked in both cases were notions of love, something we can see in evidence in the excerpt from Sanger I quoted above. If the husband truly loved his wife, he would respect her bodily autonomy and prioritise her comfort and pleasure over his own sexual needs. Similarly, we can see the way in which sex and love were starting to be linked together for women: the wife in the story related above romanticises sex, and is thus bitterly disappointed when her husband does not seem to treat her the same way. Sex becomes a space where the woman expects to be cherished and respected – to be loved – and it is portrayed as intrinsically scarring when her husband does not live up to her expectations, particularly on their wedding night.

We can see links between the way first wave feminists like Sanger mobilised wedding night stories for political ends and the second wave feminist practice of consciousness-raising, in which small groups of women would gather together and share their personal experiences with each other, especially those that revolved around their

³⁰ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulations of Sexuality since 1800* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1981), p. 163.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

³² *Ibid.*

treatment and mistreatment as women.³³ According to Hester Eisenstein, this was based on a practice from the Chinese revolution called “speaking bitterness”;³⁴ however, it also clearly has roots in earlier Western feminist practices, such as the practice of using wedding night stories. Consciousness-raising was a practice tightly linked to the second wave slogan “the personal is political” – personal experience was highlighted to demonstrate the necessity for political change.³⁵ Dawn Currie, following feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith, notes that consciousness-raising was an expression of a “fault line” between the dominant narrative of what it meant to be a woman and women’s actual experiences.³⁶ We can see a comparable tension in the virginity loss confessional genre, which exposes a similar fault line between dominant narratives of virginity loss and actual virginity loss experiences: the *petit récits* problematising the grand narrative. (We should note here, of course, that the idea of a “grand narrative” is itself problematic, and tensions within competing narratives of virginity loss have permeated Western culture. However, in the rupture-based understanding of sexual history as described by Foucault, we can certainly argue that there is a perception that a unitary grand narrative exists and has existed, and this perception is, in some ways, more important than any kind of discursive reality.) It also, like consciousness-raising, places emphasis on a multitude of voices – something which not destabilises a grand narrative but contains greater possibilities of female subjectivities.³⁷

Stacey Sowards and Valerie Renegar argue that the advent of third-wave feminism has brought it with a new kind of consciousness-raising, one no longer tied to small

³³ Stacey K. Sowards and Valerie R. Renegar, “The Rhetorical Functions of Consciousness-Raising in Third Wave Feminism,” *Communication Studies* 55.4 (2004): pp. 535-536; Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2009), pp. 48-49.

³⁴ Hester Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (Boston: GK Hall, 1983), p. 35.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

³⁶ Dawn Currie, *Girl Talk: Adolescent Magazines and Their Readers* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 13.

³⁷ Anderson, *Autobiography*, p. 85.

groups. They note that while “personal stories continue to play an important role in helping people recognize that their experiences of oppression or discrimination are not isolated,” the venue for these stories have changed: they now tend to appear in much more public formats, such as books, magazines, and anthologies.³⁸ This gives personal stories a much wider audience – and thus, one assumes, offers the opportunity for consciousness to be raised on a broader scale. However, as Sowards and Renegar note, third-wave forms of consciousness-raising appear to be less overtly political. Instead of stories being used in a way intended to incite people to action, a more invitational rhetoric is espoused:

The writers present their ideas and let the audience decide what to do with them, rather than overtly building a platform for social movement... Third wave consciousness-raising rhetoric simultaneously reaches a large, public audience, but also sparks private, internal dialogue and self-persuasion.³⁹

While labelling the virginity loss confessional genre as a project of third-wave consciousness-raising would be simplistic and problematic, this kind of invitational rhetoric is evident. Few of the books have any kind of overt political agenda (though some do have agendas, as I will discuss in the next section). Instead, these stories of virginity loss are being reproduced not necessarily to provoke social change, but to promote individual introspection and consideration. This introspective space reminds us of Foucault’s confessional, but with a different power dynamic: instead of the individual reflecting on the ways they have deviated from the prescribed social standard – one story – they situate themselves in a universe with multiple stories, a universe without an authoritarian interlocutor, something which is important for women in particular, given the way their sexual behaviour has historically been policed in the West. The virginity loss

³⁸ Sowards and Renegar, “Rhetorical Functions,” pp. 541-542, p. 547.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 548-549.

confessional does not provide a revolutionary alternative for a new script for virginity loss, a new yardstick against which experiences should be measured. (Nor do they – overtly, at least – identify the old one.) Instead, these confessional stories, these *petit récits*, these infinite variations on a theme, invite the reader to rethink the idea of a yardstick altogether. How can there be a grand narrative, a social standard against which individual experiences can be measured, when said individual experiences are so diverse? The virginity loss confessional genre becomes an illustration of Plummer’s claim that “sexual stories of the Essence, the Foundation, the Truth are fracturing into *stories of difference*, multiplicity and a plural universe.”⁴⁰

Propriety to Pleasure: The Historical, Therapeutic, and Political Projects of the Virginity Loss Confessional Genre

In the previous section, I attempted to illustrate some of the ways in which sexual stories, particularly virginity loss or “wedding night” stories, have been used in Western culture, in an effort to paint a historical and theoretical backdrop against which we can understand the virginity loss confessional genre. In this section, I intend to focus more specifically on the contemporary virginity loss confessional genre: in particular, its history, its purpose, and its pleasures.

The virginity loss confessional genre first appears in a noticeable way in the early 1990s, with the publication of *The First Time* by Karen Bouris and *Losing It* by Louis Crosier in 1993, both of which anthologise personal stories of virginity loss. Since then, several more books in the same vein have been published. Notable among them are Suzi Landolphi’s *My First Time* (1999), Darcy Luadzers’ *Virgin S-E-X* (2004), Laura

⁴⁰ Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, p. 134. Emphasis in original.

Carpenter's *Virginity Lost* (2005 – the only one of these books which is also an academic study), Kevin Boze and Stasia Kato's *The Virgin Project* (2008) and *The Virgin Project 2* (2010), Kimberley A Johnson and Ann Werner's *The Virgin Diaries* (2010), Shawn Wickens' *How To Lose Your Virginity* (2010), and Kate Monroe's *The First Time* (2011). Several of these books are also tied to virginity loss confessional websites, of which there are a considerable number, and two have been adapted for the stage.⁴¹ From these publication dates, we can see that this is a growing genre: virginity loss is an area in which interest is waxing, not waning. It also seems to be an area that is of specific interest in the culture of the United States: with the exception of Monroe's book, all of these texts are American (although virginity loss confessional websites feature stories from all over the world), something which, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, may result from that country's overtly Christian cultural consciousness and the visibility of its "virginity movement." So why now? Why did this genre arise in the 1990s and why does its popularity continue to grow?

There is no obvious answer to this question. The increasing popularity of virginity loss confessional narratives is in line with other types of sexual stories. Plummer asserts that sexual stories gain unusual prominence at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century.⁴² "Talking about sex has a long history, but, in the main, a disreputable one. The sexual [twentieth] century saw the emergence of sex specialists and the growth of sexpertise," Gail Hawkes notes, and it is possible to read virginity loss

⁴¹ These blogs are: Kate Monroe, "The Virginity Project," available at <http://virginityproject.typepad.com/> (Monroe's book and blog also spawned a stage show); Shawn Wickens, "How to Lose Your Virginity (...And How Not To)," available at <http://www.lossofvirginitybook.com/blog/>. Other virginity loss confessional blogs include: Therese Shechter, "How To Lose Your Virginity," available from <http://www.virginitymovie.com/category/first-person/>; "Lost My V," available from <http://lostmyv.com/>; "My First Time," available from <http://www.myfirsttime.com/> (some stories from which were collated into a book, edited by Suzi Landolphi. This also gave rise to a stage show, the script written by Ken Davenport); Brangien Davis, Jennifer Borges Foster and Kate Lebo, "Some Things Only Happen Once," available from <http://somethingsonlyhappenonce.blogspot.com.au/>.

⁴² Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, p. 5.

confessionals as part of this sexual self-help genre, one which included early marriage manuals like those by Stopes and Sanger.⁴³ We should also consider virginity loss confessionals as an oral tradition, drawing on the interpersonal level of sexual scripting. Sharon Thompson notes that while “[t]alking romance is a female adolescent tradition; talking sex is not.”⁴⁴ She goes on to refer to sociologist August Hollingshead, who noted a “conspiracy of silence” around teenage sex in the 1940s; Alfred Kinsey, who described 1950s “covert culture”; and 1960s survey results which reported that young college women rarely told their friends about sex except in the context of progress in a romantic relationship.⁴⁵ By the 1980s, however, she reports that, while girls had few tools to properly articulate or develop their sexual stories, “my first time” had become part of a girlhood oral tradition.⁴⁶ We can also observe an interesting congruence with Kathleen Sweeney’s contention that cultural portrayals of girls changed significantly in the 1990s, allowing for the growing possibility for and popularity of girl coming-of-age stories.⁴⁷ Considering the significance of virginity loss in this kind of story, this congruence is perhaps not coincidental.

While the figure of the girl is extremely important to the genre (and is a figure I will be focusing on, especially in the next chapter), the majority of virginity loss confessional anthologies include both male and female stories. While understanding why virginity loss stories – and, indeed, sexual stories more broadly – began to be told so

⁴³ Gail Hawkes, *Sex and Pleasure in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996), p. 145.

⁴⁴ Sharon Thompson, *Going All the Way: Teenage Girls’ Tales of Sex, Romance, and Pregnancy* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), pp. 7-8.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Sharon Thompson, “Putting a Big Thing into a Little Hole: Teenage Girls’ Accounts of Sexual Initiation,” *Journal of Sex Research* 27.3 (1990): p. 343.

⁴⁷ Kathleen Sweeney, *Maiden USA: Girl Icons Come of Age* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 1. There was significant development in the discourse around girlhood in the 1990s, of which this is one part. Two competing discourses arise: “girl power”, which is associated with a kind of take-charge dynamism, and “reviving Ophelia”, in which girls are encouraged to privilege the pleasure of others above their own identity. Both these discourses are evident in the virginity loss confessional genre. [Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick and Anita Harris, *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power, and Social Change* (London: Palgrave, 2005), pp. 18-19, pp. 40-42.]

publicly in such large numbers at the turn of the twentieth to the twenty-first century may be an impossible task, returning to the work of Foucault may shed a little light on this area.

In his *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, Foucault outlines a view of sexual history – a view he contends is deeply flawed – which contains two “ruptures”: one which occurs in the seventeenth century which he ties to the rise of capitalism, and one in the twentieth century. Between these two ruptures was a period of repression. In this view of sexual history, Foucault argues that before the first rupture, “[s]exual practices had little need of secrecy; words were said without undue reticence, and things were done without too much concealment.”⁴⁸ However, with the advent of the Victorian period and the rise of prohibitionism, sex was censored from conversation in an attempt to regulate and control it.⁴⁹ One script for sexual behaviour was endorsed (sex between a married couple for the purposes of reproduction), and all others were branded abnormal – “driven out, denied, and reduced to silence.”⁵⁰ “On the subject of sex,” Foucault writes, “silence became the rule.”⁵¹ This vision of sexual history should bring to mind some of the historical changes I discussed in the previous chapter. While the first rupture occurs a little earlier than some of the changes in sexual history I discussed there, it is difficult not to make the link between it and the major revisions that happened in views of the body, sexual desire, and femininity more broadly (which may, indeed, go some way to explaining why this rupture-based vision of sexual history was so appealing). If we focus on virginity more specifically, the pathologisation of female desire meant that virginity came to be associated strongly with ideas of innocence and ignorance, congruent with this notion of sexual silence: ideas rebelled against by figures like Stopes and Sanger.

⁴⁸ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 3.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 17.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 3.

However, Foucault contends that this is an essentially and deeply flawed view of sexual history. He mounts a strong challenge to what he calls the “repressive hypothesis” by arguing that talk about sex was not repressed between the two ruptures, but relocated, becoming an essentially analytical practice, taking place in spaces like medical literature and the increasingly popular spheres of psychoanalysis and sexology. The regulation of sex meant that it was necessarily discussed, possibly more than it ever had been before: “There was installed rather an apparatus for producing an ever greater quantity of discourse about sex.”⁵² Foucault writes that society “spoke verbosely of its own silence” and took “great pains to relate in detail the things it does not say”.⁵³ That is, by removing sex from discourse, a repressed society highlights it, invests it with an almost mystical importance. The question at the heart of his work is not, “Why are we repressed?” but “Why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed?”⁵⁴

But let us return for a moment to this notion of ruptures, which once proved so attractive for understanding sexual history. Whether this repression actually happened or not is essentially beside the point – the narrative of repression has arguably become more important than historical accuracy. (This privileging of narrative over truth is particularly apt in this chapter on virginity loss confessionals, in which one often suspects the truth has given way to a good story.) If the first rupture signified the beginning of repression, then the second signified its end. This rupture, which we can link to the sexual revolution in the modern imagination, signalled the end of prohibitionism. This has important implications for virginity, as it marks the point when sex and marriage become decoupled. This was, as I discussed last chapter, a complex and gradual process with many contributing historical

⁵² Ibid., p. 23.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 8.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

factors, and certainly not attributable to anything as simple as a rupture. Foucault recognises this when he calls the second rupture “really less a rupture and more an inflexion of the curve.”⁵⁵ Nevertheless, in this rupture-based sexual history of the modern imagination, this second rupture signifies the emergence from repression, marking a period of growing acceptance for premarital sex and models of sexuality previously considered abnormal or perverted (such as homosexuality), and of sex reclaiming a place in interpersonal conversation. And this brings us back to the question at the heart of Foucault’s work, because this conversation about sex – the telling of sexual stories – is necessarily a conversation about repression, in that it is a reaction against it.

This idea of repression is one that appears regularly in the virginity loss confessional genre. It is usually articulated not so much as sexual repression (although stories of repression are common), but as suppression of stories. For example, at the beginning of her 1993 virginity loss confessional anthology *The First Time*, Karen Bouris writes:

I found it odd in all that research, all that exploration of female sexuality, nobody ever asked the questions: What was your sexual initiation like? How did you feel about ‘losing your virginity’? Why hadn’t anybody dealt with the subject?⁵⁶

Nearly fifteen years later, Shawn Wickens writes in the opening to his virginity loss confessional anthology *How to Lose Your Virginity*:

Whenever the subject of sex came up among friends, talking about virginity was always taboo.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 115.

⁵⁶ Karen Bouris, *The First Time: What Parents and Teenage Girls Should Know about “Losing Your Virginity”* (Newburyport, MA: Conari Press, 1993), pp. 4-5.

⁵⁷ Shawn Wickens, *How to Lose Your Virginity (...And How Not To): Real Stories about the First Time* (Charleston, SC: BookSurge Publishing, 2010), p. 2.

We can see here a key feature of the virginity loss confessional genre: its claim to be doing something new, to be uncovering previously unspoken history, to be telling stories of the first time for the first time. This is what we might think of as the historical project of the virginity loss confessional genre (although the historical method undertaken is not particularly rigorous and certainly not scholarly). There is a sense within the genre that talking about virginity loss and telling virginity loss stories is something that has never been done before – that these are questions that have never been asked, that these stories have been suppressed: “I felt like I was mining a rich and untapped seam of personal history,” *Monro* writes.⁵⁸ One of the more remarkable features of virginity loss confessional anthologies is that they seem to be largely unaware of the other books in the genre – *Monro* cites *Carpenter*, who likewise lists *Crosier* in her bibliography, but otherwise, authors in the genre seem to be working in almost total isolation from each other. The virginity loss confessional gains a certain poetry here – talking about virginity loss for the first time becomes another symbolic virginity loss. *Jeffrey Weeks* recalls an American historian in the early 1970s claiming that sex in history was a “virgin field”⁵⁹. The truth of this is debatable; however, it seems to be a view of history that the virginity loss confessional genre subscribes to. Anthologising virginity loss stories becomes a historical project – deflowering sexual history, as it were.

There is quite a basic historical notion at play in some (but not all) books in the virginity loss confessional genre: that if we do not recognise our mistakes, we are doomed to repeat them. This occurs primarily in books which have an explicit agenda, often for educational purposes, and ones which are targeted specifically at a virginal reader. *Darcy Luadzers’ Virgin S-E-X* is a good example of this – it includes mostly negative stories of

⁵⁸ *Kate Monro, The First Time: True Tales of Virginity Lost and Found (Including My Own)* (London: Icon Books, 2011), p. 4.

⁵⁹ *Weeks, Sex, Politics and Society*, p. 1.

female virginity loss, with the only positive ones following a specific romantic narrative (a narrative tied closely to the idea of compulsory demisexuality, as I will discuss later).

However, in most, anthologising virginity loss stories seems to be a project of simple historical record – as Kate Monro writes:

On the surface, it was about social history... I hoped that some day in the future this unusual collection of stories might help people to understand something about the intimate nature of our lives as one millennium moved into the next.⁶⁰

But this project of historical record – of archiving, essentially – is only the surface. “I also knew that there was a *gut* motivation for my endeavours,” Monro writes. “On a subconscious level, I needed to know that my hopes and fears were the same as everyone else’s.”⁶¹ This is what we might think of as the therapeutic project of the virginity loss confessional genre. This is a therapeutic process for storyteller and reader alike: the storyteller attains a level of catharsis in sharing the story, and the reader is comforted by learning that they are not alone or abnormal.⁶² Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker put this quite neatly when they write that:

It’s as if reading about what others think and do somehow gives us permission to do what we’ve already done, to consider doing what others are doing, or to simply

⁶⁰ Monro, *First Time*, p. 5.

⁶¹ Ibid. Emphasis in original.

⁶² This therapeutic project may be part of the reason why the virginity loss confessional genre has appeared far more in the United States than in any other culture – Frank Füredi discusses the way a therapeutic vocabulary has become particularly prominent in American society. While it is also emerging in other English-speaking Western nation, there are also other cultural ideas at work: for example, in Britain, ideas of stoicism and a “culture of emotional inhibition” run counter to ideas of a talking cure. [Frank Füredi, *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 1-2, p. 18, p. 49.] (This is in addition to the fact that virginity politics are particularly visible in the United States, given the more widespread evangelical religious influence at play.)

figure out how we're supposed to feel about our own past and present. We want someone to tell us we're *normal*, that we're neither prudish nor promiscuous.⁶³

This desire for a kind of sexual validation highlights some of the problems of postmodernism: the absence of a grand narrative means that people have no idea whether they are doing the right thing the right way – whether they have found the “right moment” that McLaren contends is so important in twentieth century sexual history. As Lynn Jamieson writes:

The phrase ‘narrative of the self’ emphasises the ongoing process of self-construction. It is as if in the Euro-North American world of the late twentieth century people cannot avoid being consciously self-reflexive, frequently considering if they are doing things in the right way as they struggle to maintain an identity.⁶⁴

The virginity loss confessional genre, with its *petit récits*, offers the comforting notion that there is no normal. The differences in these shared experiences thus allow a kind of bonding over commonality. We can see here an echo of the idea of consciousness-raising. The sharing of experiences becomes, if not necessarily a vehicle for political change, a space in which a kind of community can be formed, even if the individuals involved are in no way acquainted with each other.⁶⁵ Plummer agrees that this is a function of telling sexual stories: to establish community through common experience.⁶⁶ This is certainly one of the overt purposes of Monro's book, and arguably of several others in the genre (if

⁶³ Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think about Marrying* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 28.

⁶⁴ Lynn Jamieson, *Intimacy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p. 39.

⁶⁵ Lauren Berlant describes something similar when she talks about women's culture – she writes that, “[t]he works of ‘women's culture’ enact a fantasy that my life is not just mine, but an experience understood by other women, even when it is not shared by many or any.” This process, which has clear echoes of the ideas behind consciousness-raising, demonstrates the ways in which discussions of difference can foster a community based on commonality. [Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), p. x.]

⁶⁶ Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, p. 45.

perhaps not quite so explicitly). Monro calls virginity loss “the *universal* experience that almost all of us will encounter.”⁶⁷ The sexual experiences outlined in the virginity loss confessional genre are diverse both in form and in reaction, ranging from the blissful to the horrific. The repetitive telling of these diverse stories is somehow comforting: there is no *normal* virginity loss experience, no standard against which experiences can be measured. Even though all these experiences are different, they are also somehow shared – by both storytellers and readers. For the virginal reader, the diversity of the stories also offers a kind of mosaic of possibilities, contrary to restrictive, prescriptive dominant narratives⁶⁸ – something particularly important, as Anderson and Stanley contend, for women.⁶⁹ This diversity of narrative thus becomes one of the virginity loss confessional genre’s key pleasurable aspects.

Let us return to Foucault to unpack the question of the historical and the therapeutic a little more, and to highlight other – possibly more political – pleasures of the virginity loss confessional genre. If we (unlike Foucault) accept the repressive hypothesis and the notion that we are only now emerging from a period of intense sexual repression, then talking about sex and telling these previously proscribed virginity loss stories becomes an act of rebellion. Foucault writes that:

If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a

⁶⁷ Monro, *First Time*, p. 2. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁸ This is supported by Richard Delgado, who writes: “Most who write about storytelling focus on its community-building functions: stories build consensus, a common culture of shared understandings, and deeper, more vital ethics. Counterstories, which challenge the received wisdom, do that as well. They can open new windows into reality, showing us that there are possibilities for life other than the ones we live.” [Richard Delgado, “Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative,” *Michigan Law Review* 87.8 (1989): p. 2414.]

⁶⁹ Anderson, *Autobiography*; Stanley, *Auto/biographical I*.

certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom.⁷⁰

This is almost an inversion of the power dynamics of the Foucauldian confessional. That confession takes place in seclusion, in a private space between two individuals in a hierarchical power relationship. Making the audience of the confession public problematises the notion of this powerful interlocutor and transforms the storyteller into a brave truth-seeker, whom the reader reads in their own quest for truth. This is in line with Julia Swindells' contention that autobiography can be a strategy for empowerment, particularly for those from marginalised groups (a group including, importantly for this thesis, women): it allows the storyteller to insert themselves into culture and narrative and to prioritise their voice and subjectivity, upsetting institutionalised power dynamics.⁷¹ In this sense, the virginity loss confessional genre reproduces personal narratives of virginity loss in an effort not to judge them against a social standard, but to problematise that standard. If these stories are repressed, then exposing them becomes a rebellion against that repression, and a step towards truth. (We are reminded here of Kenneth Plummer's description of the current atmosphere for sexual storytelling: "Somehow the truth of our lives lies in better communication: in telling all. There should be no 'sexual secrets'."⁷²) Sex and truth become intertwined.⁷³ The rebellion against repression becomes a promise of freedom from oppressive scripts – as Foucault writes, "[t]omorrow sex will be good again."⁷⁴ By talking about sex and telling sexual stories, by reading other people's brave and truthful tales, we might come to learn the secret that this repression has been hiding: we might come to understand the 'truth' of sex – and thus come to enjoy it more.

⁷⁰ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 6.

⁷¹ Julia Swindells, *The Uses of Autobiography* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1985), pp. 7-11.

⁷² Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, p. 4.

⁷³ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 55, p. 61.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

This notion of rebellion, of somehow deflowering history, is one of the key pleasures of the virginity loss confessional genre, as is the establishment of a kind of sexual community, united by common sexual experiences. It is hard to imagine that there is not also pleasure to be found in titillation – while many of the virginity loss stories in the genre are not in the least erotic, there is always an element of titillation to be found in the hidden and the forbidden. Another pleasure might be found in the transformation of the moment of virginity loss into narrative. The autobiographical nature of the virginity loss confessional genre is key here: the storyteller is not just author and narrator, but protagonist.⁷⁵ Many of the virginity loss stories related in the genre are underwhelming, and are stories of disappointment. The grand narrative of virginity loss incorporates a narrative of transformation – it is the point where a boy is supposed to become a man, and an experience that is supposed to be written on the female body, through blood, pain, and the broken hymen. (It was also, as I discussed in the last chapter, socially transformative, especially for women.) Writing about novels to which female virginity loss is key, Antje Schaum Anderson writes that:

Stories about defloration are stories that feature a climactic *moment*, an about-turn, a radical change triggered by a single event. The momentariness of defloration, the emphasis of an instance rather than a process of change, is crucial to the form of the story of female sexual identity.⁷⁶

Many storytellers in the genre are disappointed when their sexual debut leaves them untransformed, a moment that was supposed to be imbued with so much meaning turning out to be so deeply underwhelming. The narrativisation process of the virginity loss confessional genre, in which the storyteller can situate themselves as the protagonist of a

⁷⁵ Philippe Lejeune, 'The Autobiographical Contract,' in *French Literary Theory*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 193.

⁷⁶ Antje Schaum Anderson, *Sex and the Marriage Plot: Stories of Defloration in the British Novel* (PhD dissertation, Rice University, 1998), p. 14. Emphasis in original.

story, may be a way of investing an experience with importance, as Anderson suggests in her reading of Freudian and Barthesian theorisations of autobiography. If, as Laurel Richardson suggests, “[n]arrative is the primary way through which humans organise their experience into temporally meaningful episodes,”⁷⁷ virginity loss confessional stories may allow the storyteller to reclaim meaning for what is often an otherwise underwhelming experience – to work out what it means not just socially, but individually. According to James Olney, autobiography has the power of “transforming the mere fact of existence into a realised quality and a possible meaning.”⁷⁸ The process of transforming experience into narrative in the autobiographical space of the virginity loss confessional genre allows the storyteller to become a protagonist and cast themselves as the hero of a story. This offers the potential for the non-virginal reader to approach their own experience in this same narrativised way, and may allow the virginal reader the opportunity to muse on the type of story they would like to construct and the best way in which to maximise pleasure in virginity loss. (This active engagement is typically imagined as very important in the virginity loss confessional genre, as I will discuss in more depth in the next chapter.) While the moment of virginity loss itself may have been very disappointing, its promise of transformation unfulfilled, the narrativisation process of the virginity loss confessional genre allows even the most disappointing experience to become a kind of quest, a trial, a journey – a story. It allows people to narrate into existence their sexual identity. This is in line with Adriana Cavarero’s contention that autobiography produces a “narratable self” in a search for unity: that is, a self who makes sense in the unified context of a story.⁷⁹ This is especially interesting when we consider the way that *petit récits* trouble unitary narratives, and suggests something about how stories function: perhaps, we might argue, this

⁷⁷ Laurel Richardson, “Narrative and Sociology,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 19.1 (1990): p. 118.

⁷⁸ James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 44.

⁷⁹ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (London: Routledge, 2000).

narrativisation of virginity loss, this construction of a form, with – as I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, recognisable tropes and archetypes – is a way of dealing with the problems of postmodernism while itself being a kind of postmodern practice. To put it simply, the process of narrativisation in the virginity loss confessional genre allows the storyteller to make their experience make sense. And for women, who have regularly been objectified in the sexual narrative, the opportunity to tell their own story and cast themselves in the role of hero may represent a pleasurable chance to reclaim a kind of sexual subjectivity.

Like “confession”, “pleasure” is another key word to understanding this genre, because it represents a key shift in the confessional politics of the genre. In the Foucauldian confessional, the yardstick used was a measure of propriety: did a sexual story live up to socially acceptable standards? We might argue that wedding night stories mobilised this concept of propriety as well, as they relied on this Victorian idea of the woman as pure, moralising force, sexually imposed upon by a brutish and/or careless man. He, rather than she, is guilty of transgressing standards here, but the question of propriety remains central. In contrast, one question emerges increasingly over the twentieth century, noticeable in wedding night stories but clear in the virginity loss confessional genre: the question of pleasure, particularly female sexual pleasure. This is arguably tied to a sort of gradual sexual deregulation, as sex has shifted from the social to the individual sphere, congruent with the shift of sex as being something legitimated by marriage to something being legitimated by love with the rise of compulsory demisexuality. “Good” stories in the virginity loss confessional genre – that is, stories where the storyteller/protagonist self-describes their virginity loss experience as positive – are tied less to ideas of propriety and more to ideas of pleasure. This is not to say that the idea of propriety is not still important: compliance with the dominant sexual narrative (one linked to notions of compulsory

demisexuality) still seems to be very important for women in particular to tell a positive virginity loss story, as I will discuss in the next section. However, if there is a new yardstick against which stories in the virginity loss confessional genre are measured, it is a yardstick not of social propriety, but of individual pleasure, both physical and emotional. The ideal virginity loss experience is not necessarily one that meets arbitrary social standards, but one that is right for the individual. (We are reminded here of Angus McLaren's claim that the idea of the "right" moment in the sexual narrative arose in the twentieth century.) The construction of pleasure is fundamental to the positive experience in the virginity loss confessional genre, particularly for women – it encompasses not just sexual but emotional pleasure. By examining the positive experience in the genre, we can understand the ways in which pleasure is derived from both upholding and subverting the dominant sexual narrative, which dictates that for women, love and sex are naturally tied together.

Is It Right? The Romantic Narrative in the Virginity Loss Confessional Genre

As I discussed in the last section, one of the key pleasures of the virginity loss confessional genre is the diversity of its stories. On the surface, the overarching message of the genre is that there is no one collective "right" way to lose one's virginity, and that even if you have a bad experience, it will not ruin your life. (In this way, it resists the notion of transformation traditionally inherent in the virginity loss narrative.) However, the experiences collated – the journeys taken, the trials overcome – can serve as lessons for an implied virginal reader in what their "right" path to a satisfying first time might be, and, indeed, this is the explicit purpose of several books in the genre. While, as I noted above, a large section of the virginity loss confessional genre claims to be relatively apolitical and a

matter of simple historical record, if we look at the narratives encoded as positive within the genre, some interesting things begin to emerge. Some books in the genre clearly have an agenda – even though they are reproducing *petit récits*, there is a narrative that they prescribe for a positive virginity loss experience, especially for women. Other books do not, but by looking at the positive stories within them, we can see the pervasive effect that this narrative – which is a romantic one – has on women.

It is important to note that different books in the virginity loss confessional genre have different intended purposes. Carpenter's book is an academic study, interested in what virginity loss stories reveal about sexual scripts, not in offering advice to readers. Monro's is – on the surface, at least – a work of social history. Boze and Kato's are graphic non-fiction, transforming virginity loss stories into visual artwork. Crosier's book is peppered with advice from "sexperts" on abstinence and contraception, and Luadzers and Landolphi explicitly cast themselves as sexperts. Wickens is less interested in offering advice, but still hopes that his book will "compel those on the verge of their sexual lives to put more thought into what they want and need out of their first time – to make an informed decision."⁸⁰ Most books include male and female stories, but Luadzers and Bouris limit themselves to stories of female virginity loss. Potentially, we could situate these books along a spectrum, with "education" at one end and "story" at the other (although exactly where to situate Carpenter's academic study would be difficult). But no matter where a book is situated on the spectrum, one thing seems to be overwhelmingly true: there is a dominant narrative at play for women. In the books which tend more towards the "story" end of the spectrum, this is more implicit, playing out within stories rather than in the commentary around them; but in books with an explicit educational agenda, this narrative is made plain. Bouris writes:

⁸⁰ Wickens, *How to Lose Your Virginity*, p. 5.

Not surprisingly, the women who reported a positive experience almost always needed to feel love in order to enjoy sex; emotional connection seemed to be the gateway to sexual pleasure.⁸¹

Similarly, Luadzers writes:

Take a piece of advice: Sex feels different when you have loving feelings toward your partner than when you feel nothing emotional toward him or her. In fact, sometimes this difference is as big as the difference between joy and pain, and between emotional and physical pain.⁸²

Despite the ostensible influence on individualism in the virginity loss confessional genre, which dictates that the individual is the one in charge of determining when and whether a sexual experience is “right” for them, one clear line that runs through the genre is this: for women, love and sexual pleasure are deeply and intrinsically tied together. There are complicating factors, which I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter when I offer a close reading of the virginity loss confessional genre and attempt to historicise the ways in which this romantic narrative has developed. However, overall, we can see compulsory demisexuality written plain upon the genre. While men can apparently lose their virginity in any number of circumstances and still have it count as a positive experience, overwhelmingly for women across all books in the genre, a link exists between love and sex.

It would be foolish to think that this is a biological truth, as this would imply that both love and sex are ahistorical, unchanging concepts. What this shows us is the influence of sexual scripts and dominant discourse around sex. We can see historical evidence of this

⁸¹ Bouris, *First Time*, p. 10.

⁸² Darcy Luadzers, *Virgin S-E-X: A Girl's No-Regrets Guide to Happy, Healthy Sex – the First Time and Every Time* (Columbia, SC: Palmetto Tree Press, 2004), p. 12.

kind of influence if we look at the discourse of female passionlessness. The pathologisation of female desire had (and, arguably, still has) a very real effect on many women's lives, something which can be seen in evidence in many wedding night stories, where the bride's lack of interest in sex is assumed and the husband's mission is not to cause her pleasure, but to make sex less unpleasant for her. Hera Cook notes that many women came to their marriages virgins in the 1950s not for reasons of contraception but because of difficulties around sexual expression. Sheila Jeffreys argues that "frigidity" was essentially invented in the 1920s to enforce a new narrative in which women enjoyed male sexual attention and women who did not were frigid and thus deviant.⁸³ While this argument seems somewhat hyperbolic, it does highlight that for many women, the ideal of female sexual passionlessness had become a reality. We can observe a similar process at work in the virginity loss confessional genre: the importance of a romantic virginity loss narrative for girls and women has become so socially pervasive that it is difficult for women to have a positive virginity loss experience that takes place outside its parameters. Compulsory demisexuality has been internalised.

It is possible to argue that the virginity loss confessional genre both upholds and subverts this narrative. It differs across texts in the genre. Earlier anthologies, such as Bouris' *The First Time* and Crosier's *Losing It*, place a strong emphasis on the importance of the role of love in positive female virginity loss stories. In Bouris' book, positive virginity loss stories are corralled into a chapter called 'The Romantic Minority'. Virginal readers are advised to:

⁸³ Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880-1930* (North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1997), p. 5.

Focus on what worked for the ‘Romantic Minority.’ Use the information these women shared as a springboard for your own sexual enjoyment...⁸⁴

Bouris helpfully provides a list of the “common ingredients” shared by people in the Romantic Minority, which includes “conscious choice, emotional connection, and physical awareness and readiness.”⁸⁵ She also stresses a lack of pressure and guilt, communication, physically and emotionally sensitive partners, realistic physical expectations, and love.⁸⁶ All the women included in this chapter lost their virginity to long-term partners, and while most did not remain (or expect to remain) with that partner, committed monogamy and a positive virginity loss experience are directly equated. Crosier’s book is less explicit in its agenda, but also directly supports this view. While male virgins in *Losing It* telling positive stories lost their virginity in a variety of different ways, most not congruent with the romantic narrative (for example, in the story ‘Hurricane Helen’, the male protagonist loses his virginity while drunk and high to a stranger⁸⁷), women’s experiences outside the romantic narrative were typically far more negative. In the story ‘Love Boat Surprise’, the female protagonist was pressured into sleeping with her high school boyfriend and ended up sexually dysfunctional for ten years.⁸⁸ In the story ‘The Wrath of God’, the female protagonist slept with a friend while on exchange in Paris, and contracted genital warts as a result.⁸⁹ By way of contrast, in the story ‘Pop’, the male protagonist wanted to follow the romantic narrative, but his obsession with finding the right girl to sleep with ended up scaring women away, so he eventually lost his virginity with a girl he did not know, an experience that is portrayed in the book as positive.⁹⁰ These are extreme examples – there are other stories in Crosier’s book coded as far more ambiguous for both sexes. However,

⁸⁴ Louanne Cole, “What We Can Learn From These Shared Stories” in Bouris, *First Time*, p. 194.

⁸⁵ Bouris, *First Time*, p. 158.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 159.

⁸⁷ Louis Crosier (ed), *Losing It: The Virginity Myth* (Washington, DC: Avocus Publishing, 1993), pp. 181-6.

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 7-12.

⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 19-24.

⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 13-18.

as a whole, both of the virginity loss confessional books published in 1993 stress the importance of a romantic script for virginity loss for girls, while the male script is far more nebulous.

Luadzers' book *Virgin S-E-X*, published about ten years later, continues in this tradition. Luadzers is the most explicit about highlighting the importance of the romantic narrative – she writes:

Girls who are virgins, especially if they are planning to have their first sexual experiences, need to be with someone who is sensitive to their inexperience and emotional vulnerability.⁹¹

However, on the whole, the virginity loss confessional genre books published in the twenty first century seem to be moving away from this relatively simplistic view – and, indeed, away from a focus on education to a focus on narrative. There is far more subversive potential in the later books in the genre, far clearer instances of *petit récits* troubling the dominant narrative. This may signal a gradual shift away from this tight coupling of sex and love – as Carpenter notes in her book, there is more than one script for virginity loss.⁹² However, the link between love and sex is still figured as very strong. This is especially observable in Johnson and Werner's *The Virgin Diaries*, which encodes a clear bias towards a romantic narrative. While it includes hardly any authorial interjection, its stated purpose is to give virgins “the tools to make an informed decision when the time is right”.⁹³ This purpose is not very different to the stated purposes of other books (such as Wickens', mentioned previously), and the romantic bias in the book may not be intentional. However, one of the key questions Werner and Johnson asked of their

⁹¹ Luadzers, *Virgin S-E-X*, p. 13.

⁹² As discussed in the last chapter, Carpenter notes the existence of the “gift”, “stigma” and “process” scripts.

⁹³ Kimberley A. Johnson and Ann Werner (eds), *The Virgin Diaries* (Charleston, SC: Ark Stories in cooperation with CreateSpace, 2010), p. 9.

participants was, “What advice would you give to virgins?”⁹⁴ which seems to signal a desire to uncover a ‘right’ narrative of virginity loss. Some of the advice offered included:

If they listen to you, smile and treat you with love, you will remember this moment as beautiful and will feel bliss.⁹⁵

...be sure you really care for the boy and you don’t want to just experiment with the act.⁹⁶

Intercourse is a huge risk and should not be taken lightly. Curiosity could ruin your life.⁹⁷

When you find the right person to share yourself with it will be a truly wonderful, one of a kind experience.⁹⁸

...do it with someone you care about.⁹⁹

This is by no means the only narrative presented in the 72 stories in Johnson and Werner’s book (one piece of advice offered to male virgins is “to find a kind, experienced, somewhat older woman who is not foolish enough to become emotionally involved”¹⁰⁰), but it is the dominant one. While the stories themselves offer a more nuanced take on the idea of the “right” time (several positive virginity loss stories take place outside a committed relationship, even where the virgin concerned is a woman¹⁰¹), the prescriptive “advice” question asked by Johnson and Werner leads to an overall reinforcement of a romantic narrative as participants reaffirm the dominant cultural sexual script. Indeed, the

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 16.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 20.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 22.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 29.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 101.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁰¹ For example, Stories 30, 56, 62, 66 and 72 in Johnson and Werner’s book feature female virgins who have positive virginity loss experiences outside a committed heterosexual relationship.

exhaustive questions asked by Johnson and Werner (there were 26 in their survey) lead to quite different virginity loss experiences seeming similar due to the structure of the answers.

This focus on advice seems to be what has encoded this bias into Johnson and Werner's book. This is considerably less evident in works like those by Boze and Kato, Wickens, and Monro, which focus less on advice and far more on narrative. This is also true of Carpenter's book. As I discussed in the last chapter, Carpenter identifies three dominant cultural scripts for virginity loss: the gift, the stigma, and the process or rite of passage. The gift script is one regularly gendered female, the stigma script regularly gendered male, but if pressed, one feels that Carpenter would identify the process as the better one. She writes:

In short, men and women who view virginity loss as the most significant event of their sexual careers may be more likely to experience adverse outcomes than people who do not see virginity loss as uniquely important.¹⁰²

The process script, in which virginity loss is seen as one step in a process of attaining sexual maturity, most resembles this assertion. In this script, virginity loss is seen as attaining sexual experience, not as losing or throwing away something which may be inscribed with great value. Monro also seems to support this pro-process line of thinking, writing of her own virginity loss experience:

It wasn't what you might call pleasurable. It wasn't even tender or loving, but for one reason or another it was an encounter that I would always recall with joy.

Why? Because it symbolised something special to me. It was about finding my feet.

It was about shedding my childhood innocence. It was about asserting my right to

¹⁰² Laura Carpenter, *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005), p. 205.

live my life the way I wanted to live it without asking my parents if that was okay.¹⁰³

The idea of virginity loss as not necessarily a romantic experience but as a rite of passage is strong here, a narrative that allows for many more diverse types of virginity loss experiences. Wickens, whose book contains by far the largest number of stories of any virginity loss confessional book, arguably has the strongest focus on individualism in the genre. He writes:

I don't purport to [be] revealing the definite and absolute best way to lose one's virginity. There's no perfect method to ensure a good first time.¹⁰⁴

There is little emphasis on the importance of a romantic narrative in either of these texts, no explicit proselytising on the benefits of a particular narrative. A rite of passage script seems to be favoured by the authors/editors of the anthologies, but is certainly not required. However, as with Johnson and Werner's book, if we analyse the actual stories within, the influence of compulsory demisexuality is still written clearly. In the next chapter, I will discuss the ways in which this dominant narrative manifests itself by offering a closer reading of several of the stories within the genre.

To what extent, then, do the *petit récits* of the virginity loss confessional genre actually trouble the dominant paradigm of compulsory demisexuality? The historical evolution of the virginity loss confessional genre shows that, while change is happening, it happens slowly. However, perhaps the most subversive element of the virginity loss confessional genre is its resistance to the idea that virginity loss is intrinsically transformative. In many individual stories, individuals expect to be transformed by their

¹⁰³ Monro, *First Time*, p. 203.

¹⁰⁴ Wickens, *How to Lose Your Virginity*, p. 5.

sexual debut, and were surprised (and often disappointed) when they were not. As one participant in Bouris' book says:

The term [virginity] implies that you turn into a different person after intercourse, which in most cases is not true.¹⁰⁵

If virginity is something that is lost and yet the individual who has lost it is fundamentally no different afterwards, how, then, can virginity be so intrinsically valuable? The problematisation of this idea of transformation is an important step in the development of a more progressive politics in scripts for virginity loss. But is this idea linked to the romantic script? I would suggest that a move away from the idea of virginity loss as intrinsically transformative is a move away from an older sexual politics, where virginity loss was imagined as a moment that transformed a person's social position (for women, transforming them from virgin to wife if virginity loss was licit, from virgin to whore if illicit). This is a politics in which sex is legitimated by marriage. In a world where sex is legitimated by love, virginity loss necessarily becomes far more focused on questions of the individual than of society. We can see this manifested in the shift from propriety to pleasure evident in the use of virginity loss stories (as well as the shift from understanding virginity loss as physical damage to psychological damage). Love is figured as an intensely personal experience between two individuals. Within the modern romantic relationship, sex is figured as something which should engender and intensify physical and emotional pleasure between the lovers. But how does virginity fit into this schema? What happens – especially to women – when virginity is lost outside this kind of relationship? Is there a more insidious transformation inherent in this cultural discourse: one which suggests that a woman who loses her virginity outside a romantic context is somehow unlovable?

¹⁰⁵ Bouris, *First Time*, p. 181.

Chapter Three – Confessions Part II: Close Readings of Virginity Loss Stories

In the last chapter, I discussed the emergence of the virginity loss confessional genre, in which autobiographical virginity loss stories are told, collected, and anthologised, exploring its historical, therapeutic and political projects, and introducing the romantic narrative for virginity loss which runs through many stories in the genre. In this chapter, I will build on this framework by offering a close reading of stories within the genre and analysing the patterns that emerge. By doing this, I hope to elucidate the pervasiveness of specific narratives, the ways they are gendered, and their evolution over time. I am especially interested in the narrative for a “good” virginity loss that has emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century – a narrative that positions romantic love as a force that makes sex culturally permissible for women. This is not a static narrative – as I have demonstrated in earlier chapters, shifting views of love, sex and romance can lead to noticeable changes in cultural scripts. However, it is a pervasive narrative: the idea that love makes sex appropriate for women is evident across the majority of female virginity loss stories in the genre.

I should note here that I am not particularly interested in questions of historical accuracy, in the sense that I am not particularly interested in the veracity of the stories within the genre. These stories are, for me, second hand, and in many cases, the method of gathering them was not especially scientific, scholarly or rigorous – Wickens, for example, collected most of his stories by talking to people in bars. I am interested in these stories as narrative, not as sociological or scientific data. The fact that the virginity loss confessional genre almost certainly contains fabrications is in fact one of its attractions as source material for a project of literary history, especially considering my interest in what

constitutes a positive virginity loss story. One imagines that fabricated stories would tend to cast the protagonist in a positive light and/or as having a positive experience, which is useful when it comes to using the genre to highlight societal norms and dominant cultural thought. Examining stories instead of statistics will, I think, ultimately be more useful in discerning what cultural scripts for virginity loss look like. In short, I am not interested in virginity loss confessional stories as objectively true retellings of history: rather, my focus is on the ways that virginity loss is represented in autobiographical narrative.

How to Read a Virginity Loss Story: Methodological Questions

In the last chapter, I discussed what the positive virginity loss story looks like. The cultural script for ideal female virginity loss is linked closely to the notion of compulsory demisexuality: if, as I have argued, love and sex are supposed to be linked together for women, thus rendering romantic love and sexual desire virtually identical, then it follows that women are supposed to lose their virginity in a long-term monogamous romantic relationship with a caring, trustworthy (and usually male) partner. Failure to do so promises negative consequences (though whether these consequences are actually experienced is another matter). There are many stories in the virginity loss confessional genre that follow this pattern and both support and subvert the sexual script, but before I embark on my discussion of these, I must touch on a few methodological points.

The first of these revolves around how I determined whether a story was “positive” or “negative”. Essentially, I took the storyteller at their word. Overwhelmingly, storytellers will narrate their feelings about their virginity loss, not just recount the facts, and so this is usually easy to determine. (I will discuss one of these rare stories where the virgin’s feelings are not entirely clear – Monica’s story (2000s) from Wickens’ book – later in this

chapter.) However, this is not as simple as labelling a story as good or bad, positive or negative. Not only is there a clear middle category (which we might call “mediocre” or “ambivalent”), there are also two key points at which positivity can be measured, and often they are not congruent. There is the actual physical virginity loss experience, and then there is the emotional aftermath – or, as we might more simplistically put it, “during” and “after”. These are commonly divergent. There are many stories where virgins have mediocre or negative physical experiences, but positive emotional experiences – stories where sex itself might have been painful or unpleasant, but the storyteller does not regret the experience nor their choice of partner afterwards. Similarly, there are many stories where the storyteller enjoyed sex, but experienced negative consequences afterwards – for example, STIs, pregnancy, abandonment, and (most often) regret. For all the stories I discuss in this chapter, I will note the storyteller’s feelings both about sex itself and its aftermath – that is, during and after.

When determining which stories are positive, we must also consider the question of editorial bias. This is especially true in anthologies where storytellers are not writing their own narratives, but having them relayed through a third party. This typically occurs in books that have an explicit educational agenda – for example, Darcy Luadzers’ book *Virgin S-E-X*. These stories must be taken with a grain of salt, so to speak, but as I noted above, they are still useful in terms of examining dominant cultural narratives, because they often highlight what this narrative is. This is clear in Luadzers’ book, which includes mostly negative stories. The only positive stories represented follow a romantic script.¹ Kayla’s story (1990s) is often returned to by Luadzers as an ideal virginity loss story. This story is also a good example of how virginity loss confessional stories usually assess both

¹ The only exception to this is a story about a same sex virginity loss experience, but although virginity loss took place prior to romantic relationship, a romantic relationship ensued.

the physical experience and emotional aftermath of virginity loss, as can be seen in the excerpt below.

Kayla was almost 17 when she fell in love with Tom the summer before their senior year in high school... They seemed drawn to each other in a magnetic way, and Kayla and Tom dated very seriously for a month... Kissing progressed to touching and loving each other in a special, intimate way. They began to take showers together, play sexually together, and to make love to each other without having sexual intercourse. About mid-summer, Kayla decided Tom was the guy that she wanted to make love to for the first time...

Kayla told Tom that she wanted him to be her first... Tom and Kayla talked about it a lot. Mostly, Tom wanted to make sure that Kayla was *sure* she was ready. Tom was in charge of birth control and the two of them planned out where and when they wanted to have, or could arrange to have, sex.

As it turns out, they first had sex in the back of Tom's car... Kayla said that there was a little bit of uncomfortable pressure with his putting his penis inside of her vagina that first time, and she had a little vaginal bleeding, but not a lot. Kayla had a good time and felt even closer to Tom than she had before...

Kayla has no regrets about her first sexual experience.²

Luadzers goes on to say that, "[t]he important thing is that Kayla was ready for sex, she was in love, and she picked a partner who really respected her."³ This sentence is a concise summation of the script for virginity loss Luadzers urges her virginal readers to follow.

Because Luadzers is telling the story, not Kayla herself, this agenda is made plain – one

² Darcy Luadzers, *Virgin S-E-X: A Girl's No-Regrets Guide to Happy, Healthy Sex – the First Time and Every Time* (Columbia, SC: Palmetto Tree Press, 2004), pp. 7-8. Emphasis in original.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

imagines that if Kayla's words had been used, it might not map so neatly to Luadzers' script. However, books like Luadzers' are helpful in highlighting the acceptable scripts for virginity loss confessionals – and as such, these books are interesting to read against those books in the genre which have a more narrative-oriented social history project, such as Monro's *The First Time*. It provides an example of the way in which narrative is more important than historical veracity when considering this genre: although it is clearly biased, this bias itself is interesting, as it highlights higher-level cultural scripts around virginity loss – that is, the way that curators feel that virginal readers should be thinking about virginity, and the message they should obtain from virginity loss confessionals. This is also evident in many of the stories themselves, in which storytellers attempt to impart wisdom to the presumably virginal reader, and so, one might imagine, tell their stories in a specific way to achieve their desired end, elucidating interesting “approved” narratives for virginity loss. “All biographies like all autobiographies like all narratives tell one story in place of another,” Hélène Cixous writes in *rootprints*.⁴ The virginity loss confessional genre allows us a chance to see both stories: the outward narration of a moment in the storyteller's life, and the story – sometimes a didactic one – they wish to conceal within it.

Other things I took note of when reading the stories in this genre included whether or not the storyteller reported they were in love with their partner (some made a point of saying that they were not, even if they were in a romantic relationship, and vice versa), and an approximate date. While accurately dating virginity loss experiences in this genre is difficult unless a specific year is provided, it was generally possible to make an approximate calculation, based on the protagonist's current age, the age they were when they lost their virginity, and the publication of the anthology. Because of the difficulty of making authoritative calculations, I have grouped the stories loosely by decades, which I

⁴ Hélène Cixous and Mireille Calle-Gruber, *rootprints: memory and life-writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 178.

will use later in this chapter to analyse the ways in which virginity loss scripts have changed over time. There are considerably more stories from the 1990s and 2000s than earlier decades, primarily because the genre did not start being published until this period. The paucity of stories from earlier decades – and the fact that they are being related many years, often decades, after the fact – makes it difficult to make authoritative claims about virginity loss in these decades. It should also be noted that there is a risk that older stories might also be viewed through a nostalgic lens by storytellers. I have attempted to factor these problems into my analysis.

I should also note that, unless stated otherwise, the protagonists I refer to in this genre are female. While there are many stories of male virginity loss, some of which I will touch on here, my focus is on narratives of female virginity loss. Because details of race and/or class were rarely provided by storytellers, I have not factored these into my analysis. Further work needs to be done on the implications of these two factors on virginity loss, but virginity loss confessionals have not proven to be an ideal space in which to do it, as they simply do not contain the data. Likewise, although, as I discussed in the first chapter, religion has played a major part in shaping discourses of virginity loss, particularly in the United States, it is – surprisingly – not often raised as a factor in the confessionals. I have noted it where it is, but this genre has not – at least at this level of analysis – provided sufficient data to analyse the impact religion has had on sexual discourse.

“I made it happen” versus “it just happened”: Active and Passive Stories of Virginity Loss

When reading the virginity loss confessional genre, it becomes clear that although there are a diverse range of stories being told with almost infinite permutations, they can be grouped into two primary categories. I have termed these categories “active” and “passive”. This is not in reference to sexual aggression or passivity, but to decision-making processes and assertion of sexual agency. I am loosely following Heather Albanesi here, who writes:

I define sexual agency as the willingness to exert power within a sexual encounter in an attempt to sway the outcome of events. While all individuals have the *capacity* to exert their will – if an individual desires a specific outcome but she or he makes no attempt to affect that outcome – I do not define the capacity alone, as agentic.⁵

To put it in simplistic terms – in active stories, protagonists assert their agency to some degree, while in passive stories, they do not. In active stories, protagonists actively make a decision to engage in sex for the first time. The experience is often premeditated, and regularly includes pre-sex communication between the virgin and their partner. The virgin takes an active role in deciding what form their virginity loss should take. The decision to have sex is emphasised in these stories (although it should be noted that in some stories this decision is coerced). In passive stories, the protagonist finds themselves in a situation where, although they were not necessarily intending to lose their virginity, the opportunity has suddenly arisen. This type of story often features clichéd rhetoric such as “it just happened” or “one thing led to another”. Also featured in this category are stories of rape, where protagonists are forced into sex. Very occasionally, there is some ambiguity over

⁵ Heather Albanesi, *Gender and Sexual Agency: How Young People Make Choices about Sex* (Lanham, MD and Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), p. 10. Emphasis in original.

which category a story belongs in, such as this one (1980s) from Karen Bouris's book *The First Time*:

I didn't really know the guy. He was in a class I was taking outside of high school and was four or five years older. He asked me to his house for a movie, and I knew that if I said yes, I would have to have sex. That was okay with me. I wanted to get this part of growing up over with, and I didn't see myself as having the choice again. I didn't want to do it the first time awkwardly with someone I really cared about – or so I had convinced myself. The whole experience hurt and bored me. We were on the floor in front of the couch and my head was turned away. The movie *Gremlins* was playing, and I just kept watching the television.⁶

However, even in ambiguous stories, it is usually possible to discern their narrative category. The “circumstances arose” nature of this story is something that is common in passive stories; however, the emphasis on the protagonist's decision to have sex means that this would be classified as an active story. While passive stories often do feature decisions, these are typically impulse decisions made “in the moment”, unlike this one, which features a greater element of premeditation and consideration.

Both active and passive stories include positive and negative experiences (as well as many ambivalent and mediocre ones). These range from romantic experiences with long-term partners to one-time-only encounters with strangers. The best way to illustrate the wide variety of stories in the genre is through example. Kayla's story, as related above, is a positive active story. Sherrie's story (1970s), from Kate Monroe's book *The First Time*, is also a positive active story:

⁶ Karen Bouris, *The First Time: What Parents and Teenage Girls Should Know about “Losing Your Virginity”* (Newburyport, MA: Conari Press, 1993), pp. 86-87.

When my father fell ill, I was packaged off to an aunt's house, and that's where I met the man I lost my virginity to. He was an artist and it was lust. Pure, driven, hormonal lust. I was fifteen years old, he was 23 and my aunt never spoke to me again after that because she thought I had led him on, which is probably true. I was very much the driving force. But I was also sensible. I was mad in many ways, but I was sensible... I got the Pill and I was prepared.

...I was completely fascinated by the whole process of sex and once this guy had made me come, that was it. It was like a door opening to another world that I wanted more of. Losing my virginity wasn't a fumbling, horrible thing like it is for so many...

It was manna from heaven for me on so many levels because sex also equalled freedom, absolutely. And strength.⁷

We can see here how different Sherrie's story is from Kayla's. While Kayla's experience with her boyfriend Tom followed the romantic script closely, Sherrie's departs from it quite dramatically. Kayla's story emphasised the role of love, while Sherrie deliberately lost her virginity to an acquaintance with whom she was in lust, but not love. While she did suffer some negative consequences for her virginity loss (she notes that her mother called her "the biggest 'whore' and 'slapper' under the sun"), the positives seem to have outweighed the negatives for Sherrie. She equates deciding to have sex with establishing her selfhood – for her, sex was a way of breaking free of her family, because "sex also equalled freedom". It is particularly interesting to note that while sex equalled freedom for Sherrie, it did not equal love. Sex for her was imbued with a different meaning. For Sherrie, who lost her virginity in Britain in the 1970s, it might have been tied specifically

⁷ Kate Monro, *The First Time: True Tales of Virginity Lost and Found (Including My Own)* (London: Icon Books, 2011), pp. 74-75.

to the social rhetoric of sexual liberation extant at the time, but this is also a hallmark of many active stories, particularly for women. Where experiences are premeditated, considered, and constructed, it is more likely that they have been invested with a conscious meaning.

Sometimes this meaning is romantic, as in Kayla's story, who decided to have sex with Tom because she wanted him to be "her first" and, afterwards, "felt closer to him". This rhetoric of intimacy is a fairly standard meaning invested in stories that follow a romantic pattern: sex used as a sort of bonding exercise, the "next step" in a relationship. In Sherrie's case, the meaning invested in sex is related to something else: a kind of establishment of self. This is also evident in Monro's own story, which I quoted from in the previous chapter. Her (active) story, in which she lost her virginity as a teenager to a boy she had never met before while on holiday in France, was coded mediocre physically but positive overall, because to her, it was about "finding [her] feet" and "shedding [her] childhood innocence",⁸ rather than being imbued with a romantic meaning. In these positive stories, we can see virginity loss used as a kind of personal fulfilment. Whether it is the claim that sex is about freedom or about emotional closeness or intimacy, it is clear that sex fulfils a previously unmet need. Sex becomes a project of improvement, imbued with meaning.

Protagonists in passive stories, where the circumstances arise for sex instead of sex being premeditated, do not seem to have this opportunity to imbue their experiences with meaning. This may account for the fact that a much greater ratio of these stories are coded as ambivalent. Because these circumstances arise rather than being sought out, storytellers are regularly less clear about what need – if any – is being fulfilled. This seems to be less of a factor in passive stories which take place in a romantic context, perhaps because the

⁸ Ibid., p. 203.

meanings are culturally assumed, tied to the rhetoric of intimacy demonstrated in Kayla's story. Monica's story (2000s) in Wickens' book *How to Lose Your Virginity* is a passive story that follows a romantic script. Curiously, unlike the majority of other stories in the genre, it not only omits a description of how Monica felt "during", but also "after". It does not include any real "what happened next/how I felt next" statement, perhaps because these meanings are culturally implicit:⁹

I had known my boyfriend for like a million years, since high school. We started dating again in my early 20s. We went to the beach on Assateague Island in Maryland one weekend and camped out with a bunch of our friends.

We were both virgins and we were fooling around out on the beach on a blanket. It was three or four in the morning, there was a full moon. There's wild horses out on Assateague Island so the only other living thing on the beach besides us were random ponies walking by.

We didn't plan to do it. It just came to the point where I was like, 'I want it.' It just kind of happened. Maybe the environment helped, the beach, him, the wild ponies...¹⁰

This story is arguably coded positive, although the absence of a "during" or "after" statement makes it more difficult to classify than other stories. This positivity potentially comes from the cultural lens through which it is read – the rhetoric of intimacy is implied. However, it also contains a sort of ambivalence, something that characterises many passive stories. This is especially true of stories where virginity loss takes place outside a romantic relationship, such as in Story #64 (2000s) from Johnson and Werner's book *The Virgin*

⁹ This could have happened either because of the way Monica told the story or because interviewer Wickens stopped asking questions. Either option points to romantic meanings being culturally implicit.

¹⁰ Shawn Wickens, *How to Lose Your Virginity (...And How Not To): Real Stories about the First Time* (Charleston, SC: BookSurge Publishing, 2010), p. 188.

Diaries. The protagonist of this story was an 18 year old college freshman, and lost her virginity to a fellow freshman who lived in her dorm with whom she was friends.

One night he came over. I can't remember why. It could have been after a party. I was asleep or going to sleep and there was a knock at the door. The rest is a blur. I can't remember if we were talking before or what. I know that we started to wrestle. And he tried taking off my shirt and I tried taking off my clothing. Before I knew it, his pants were down and we were silently contemplating having sex. I think I dared him! The scene was not very romantic – it was my dorm room, small and private. We were on the floor in between my refrigerator and my bed.

The actual sex wasn't that romantic either. It hurt but not as much as I expected. It didn't feel that great. He was not compassionate at all – no hugging, kissing, comforting. But he was respectful. I was very different. I didn't try to kiss or hug him. I just looked at him, trying to understand what was going on. Emotionally, I didn't feel anything. There was no intimacy and I didn't care. I didn't know enough to care.

[...]

Afterwards I was numb but not in a bad way. I just didn't know what to feel. I didn't know who to tell. It didn't seem like a big deal. I was the only virgin of my friends. My friends all did it with their boyfriends. I did it with a friend. I was ashamed because I couldn't call him my boyfriend. I was not his girlfriend. But I didn't feel as though I made a mistake. It was very odd.¹¹

¹¹ Kimberley A. Johnson and Ann Werner (eds), *The Virgin Diaries* (Charleston, SC: Ark Stories in cooperation with CreateSpace, 2010), p. 190.

This story is especially interesting because we can see the storyteller explicitly measuring her story against the cultural norm of the romantic script (evoking the Foucauldian confessional process I described in the previous chapter). The rhetoric of intimacy is highlighted in its absence – no hugging, kissing, or comforting. Without this script, the storyteller feels confused and ambivalent, even though, as she states, she does not feel as if she made a mistake. This kind of ambivalence is common in passive stories. Many sit in this middle ground between positive and negative, where the storyteller does not necessarily regret their actions but does not know how to feel about them either. When this ambivalence exists in romantic stories, it is usually related to the partner, with the storyteller unsure whether they were the right person on whom to bestow their virginity. With experiences like the one above, however, the ambivalence seems to result from a lack of a sexual script. How do you know how to feel about an experience when there is no script?

How to Lose Your Virginity: Narrative Patterns

While the romantic narrative may be the only culturally approved script for female virginity loss, it is not the only narrative that exists within the virginity loss confessional genre. Although the romantic narrative, which I will explore in more depth in the next section, is by far the most common, there are other patterns that emerge. Like the romantic narrative, most can be categorised as either active or passive. Many of these narratives can also exist within the romantic relationship.

The lesson narrative

In the lesson narrative, virginity loss essentially becomes a lesson in how to have sex. Storytellers who tell this narrative are almost always male, and their deflowerer is usually either an older woman or a prostitute. (This is not true of every lesson story, nor is every story involving a young man and an older woman a lesson story, but it is a common pattern.) Lesson stories are generally passive. Despite what seems to be questionable ethics and abuses of power from the deflowerers involved, who are frequently teachers, neighbours, babysitters, or mothers of friends, many virginity loss experiences in this category are coded positive. An example of this pattern is Emil's story (1980s) in Wickens' book. Emil was seduced by his best friend's mother at the age of 15, writing that "she was my spiritual teacher, as well as my sexual one."¹² There are few female virgins in this category. Where they exist, their experiences are ambivalent or negative, such as Valerie's story (1970s) in Boze and Kato's book, where she slept with her high school maths teacher, only to find out at her ten year high school reunion that he had also seduced a number of other girls in her class.¹³ While positive lesson experiences for female virgins exist, they tend to be in a same-sex context, such as Sophie's story (1990s) in Monroe's book, where she lost her virginity to her female sports teacher.

The rape narrative

Unsurprisingly, all stories that follow the rape narrative are coded negative, and are also all passive. There are some male virgins in this category, but the majority are female. There are a variety of experiences here, with storytellers raped by partners, friends, acquaintances, strangers, and authority figures in roughly equal numbers. Several books in

¹² Wickens, *How to Lose Your Virginity*, pp. 40-42.

¹³ Kevin Boze and Stasia Kato, *The Virgin Project: Real People Share Real Stories* (Seattle, WA: Fanny Press, 2009), pp. 124-125.

the genre have chapters devoted to rape stories, such as Bouris' 'Violation In All Its Forms' and Wickens' 'No Means No'. Many rape victims choose to redefine virginity, deciding to count their first consensual sexual experience as their virginity loss, as in Laura's story (1990s) in Wickens' book. Laura was brutally raped at 15, but counts a loving, consensual experience at almost 19 as her virginity loss, using a positive experience in part to help deal with the trauma of sexual violence. "I still look back and think that was really strong of me not to consider the horrible experience to be my loss of virginity," Laura writes. "I refuse to allow the bad rape situation as the defining moment."¹⁴

The surrender narrative

There is some overlap between the surrender narrative and the rape narrative, as well as some overlap with the lesson narrative, but the surrender narrative is distinct enough to warrant separation. In this narrative, the usually female virgin is pressured into losing her virginity, generally by a partner. (Occasionally the pressure levelled is from someone else, such as in Therese's story (1980s) in Wickens' book, where peer pressure leads her to sleep with the only other virgin in her social circle, but most often, it is the partner who exerts the pressure.) There is an approximately even split between active and passive stories (noting that in active stories, the decision is coerced), and the experience is nearly always coded negative. Julie's story (1990s) in Carpenter's book is a good example of the surrender narrative. Julie was pressured into sex by her boyfriend at 15. He became convinced Julie was lying about being a virgin, and Julie suffered a period of sexual

¹⁴ Wickens, *How to Lose Your Virginity*, p. 232.

dysfunction for some years afterwards.¹⁵ One storyteller in Bouris' book tells a similar story, writing that, "Maybe my first sexual experience set a precedent of sex with boyfriends – just being content that they're happy, but feeling indifferent and/or confused about my own physical satisfaction."¹⁶ The majority of surrender stories occur within a romantic context, but there are occasional instances where the coercive partner is a friend or an acquaintance, as in Tamika's story (2000s) in Luadzers' book, where she performed oral sex on a friend in return for him looking after her.¹⁷

The conversion narrative

This is a small but significant narrative, in which virgins either use their same-sex virginity loss as a way of confirming their homosexuality, or lose their heterosexual virginity in an attempt to turn themselves straight. The former are usually passive stories coded positive, while the latter (a much smaller percentage of the conversion narrative category) are generally active stories coded negative. (It is worth noting that there are no instances in the virginity loss confessional genre where a homosexual storyteller becomes heterosexual via virginity loss.) Story #41 (1980s) in Johnson and Werner's book covers both types of conversion story. The male protagonist loses his heterosexual virginity to a prostitute his father has hired in order to convince him that he is not gay. The experience is mediocre. Six months later, he stumbles into his first homosexual encounter with a stranger, an experience coded positive, which confirms his identity as a gay man.¹⁸

¹⁵ Laura Carpenter, *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005), pp. 84-86.

¹⁶ Bouris, *First Time*, p. 39.

¹⁷ Luadzers, *Virgin S-E-X*, p. 44.

¹⁸ Johnson and Werner, *Virgin Diaries*, p. 133.

Still a virgin

These stories are relatively rare (although Monro does devote the chapter ‘Invisible Virgins’ in her book to people who are still virgins or maintained their virginity for a very long time), and I will not devote much space to them, as I am primarily interested in stories of virginity loss. However, the reasons these storytellers give for remaining virgins are often revealing. Some are religious and have chosen to wait for marriage, demonstrating the impact of religious discourse, but more are waiting for love. Sarah (1990s) in Crosier’s book is one of these virgins, writing that, “I want to make love the first time I have intercourse. For too many women their first time is just a sexual experience with someone they don’t know.”¹⁹ Karen (2000s) in Wickens’ book has a similar viewpoint, although she is considerably less optimistic: “Nobody really cares about love any more. I always had these optimistic ideals about how sex could be about love and intimacy and it just doesn’t really exist any more. Like, barely.”²⁰

Experiences often overlap. As I have noted, many of these stories occur within a larger romantic script – surrender narratives, for example, most often occur within romantic relationships. They also overlap with each other – there are stories that are both conversion and lesson, for instance. Many permutations are possible, and not all stories fit tidily into one of these categories. However, these are common patterns, and their frequency is worth noting.

Another useful (and related) way to analyse virginity loss stories is to look at the relationship between the virgin and their partner. The virginity loss confessional genre reveals five major partner archetypes.

¹⁹ Louis Crosier (ed), *Losing It: The Virginity Myth* (Washington, DC: Avocus Publishing, 1993), p. 144.

²⁰ Wickens, *How to Lose Your Virginity*, p. 212.

Romantic partner

This is the most common type of partner, featured in about 300 stories in the genre. Stories featuring this type of partner – a partner with whom the protagonist is in a romantic relationship – encompass nearly half of all stories. I have defined “romantic relationship” fairly loosely – it can range from marriage to someone whom the protagonist has been casually dating – but in all instances, some level of romantic commitment is present. All stories which follow the dominant romance narrative include this kind of partner, as do most surrender stories. There is a relatively even split between active and passive stories, with a slightly greater number of active stories. A large number of positive virginity loss experiences exist in this category, but they are outnumbered by mediocre and negative stories (taken together, not separately). Stories where male partners deflower female virgins significantly outnumber stories where female partners deflower male virgins. Part of this may be due to the fact that there are more female stories in the genre than male stories (383 female to 259 male across the texts I am analysing), but this is still quite a noticeable discrepancy. I will expand more on stories featuring partners in the next section.

Friend

This is a fairly self-explanatory archetype: the friend is a person with whom the protagonist is friendly, but with whom they are not in a romantic relationship. There are roughly 100 friend stories (about one friend story for every three partner stories), spread relatively evenly across genders. While a significant number are active stories, the majority are passive. Positive experiences exist, but most seem to be coded mediocre, with a small

number (mostly rape stories) coded negative. Relatively typical examples of stories featuring friends are Stacy's story in Boze and Kato's first book, in which protagonist Stacy sleeps with her friend Steve, and then afterwards thinks, "If you ask me, I fail to see what the big deal is. I have a much more satisfying time on my own,"²¹ and story #64 in Johnson and Werner's book, quoted earlier, where the female protagonist made an impulse decision to sleep with a friend at college. It did not destroy their friendship, but certainly coloured it afterwards.

Acquaintance

This is the second most common type of partner, appearing in about 120 stories. The acquaintance is someone with whom the protagonist is not intimately familiar, but someone they know well enough to recognise. Both active and passive stories feature, but the latter outnumber the former at a rate of about 2:1. There are approximately equal numbers of positive, mediocre, and negative stories. This is, however, gender-blind. Women seem far more likely than men to have a negative experience: about five female virgins had a negative experience with an acquaintance for every one male. A fairly typical story featuring an acquaintance is the one from Bouris' book quoted previously, in which the female protagonist slept with an acquaintance while the movie *Gremlins* was playing and found that the "whole experience hurt and bored" her. Eveline's story (2000s) in Boze and Kato's second book is also reasonably typical: she slept with a school acquaintance, because she "let the curiosity get the better of [her]" and "afterward... realised how stupid and careless [she'd] been."²²

²¹ Boze and Kato, *Virgin Project*, p. 109.

²² Kevin Boze and Stasia Kato, *The Virgin Project: Volume 2* (Ashland, OH: Textstream, 2010), p. 75.

Stranger

There are about 80 stories featuring strangers – that is, someone the protagonist does not know at all, or knows so little that they might as well have never met them. Approximately equal numbers of men and women lose their virginity to strangers. Passive stories outnumber active ones at a rate of about 3:1. As with stories featuring acquaintances, there are approximately equal numbers of positive, mediocre, and negative stories, but while men seemed to enjoy mostly positive experiences, the majority of negative experiences were had by women. A fairly typical story featuring a stranger is story #36 (2000s) from Johnson and Werner's book, where the female protagonist lost her virginity to a stranger (she "knew of" him but did not know him) at a party. Both the experience and the aftermath are coded negative: "It was so gross. I didn't like it at all. He wasn't respectful and he was awkward," she writes.²³ Mercedes' story (2000s) from Luadzers' book is similar: she lost her virginity at fourteen to a stranger while drunk at a party, and regretted it enormously.

Authority figures

This is the least common archetype, with about 40 stories featuring authority figures – often teachers, friends' mothers, relatives, or prostitutes. Unsurprisingly, there are a large percentage of stories featuring this archetype that follow the lesson narrative. Also unsurprisingly, many of these stories involve abuse. Stories featuring male protagonists outnumber those with female protagonists by about 3:1. Passive stories are much more prevalent. (In active stories, the authority figure is almost always a prostitute.) Despite the apparently exploitative nature of most of the relationships, and the statistically significant

²³ Johnson and Werner, *Virgin Diaries*, p. 120.

number of rape stories – where the protagonist is female, this is the most common pattern – there are a large number coded positive. Almost all of these feature male protagonists. These stories are probably the most suspect when it comes to truth, and many are so outrageous that choosing a typical story is difficult. Emil’s story, mentioned above, is a good example, as is Dylan’s story (1980s), also from Wickens’ book. Dylan lost his virginity at the age of twelve to his maths teacher, an experience he talks about in largely positive terms.

A Natural Step: Romance Narratives

These breakdowns of the different narrative patterns and archetypes within the genre reveal the diversity of virginity loss experiences. I have included examples of typical or representative experiences, but even within these narratives, a wide range of stories exist. However, what this breakdown also highlights is that the romance narrative is the most prevalent, with stories involving romantic partners making up about half of all experiences in the genre. The script for the romance narrative seems, on the surface, to be quite simple: the protagonist loses their virginity to someone with whom they are in a romantic relationship. “Romantic relationship” is quite a broad term, and the relationships within which these protagonists lost their virginites were of a varying level of seriousness; however, most felt comfortable describing their partner as their boyfriend or girlfriend (or fiancé/e or husband/wife), which would seem to indicate some level of commitment. There are a wide variety of romance stories, and so isolating a typical one is difficult, as they span from the positive to the negative, and there are a large number of both active and passive stories, which often differ quite significantly. However, Meghan’s story (2000s) in Carpenter’s book is a relatively good example of what we might call an “ideal” virginity

loss. She and her boyfriend Rich “built up” to having sex, much in the same way that Kayla and Tom did in the story from Luadzers’ book mentioned above. Sex became the “‘natural’ next step” in their relationship. Despite a couple of missteps and false starts, they finally did have sex: “And it just happened naturally, so that was nice,” Meghan states. The experience is coded physically mediocre but emotionally positive – Meghan’s only regret is that they did not use protection.²⁴

In stories that follow the romantic narrative, this idea that virginity loss is “natural” is common. “It was all very innocent and natural,” one storyteller (1970s) writes in Bouris’s book.²⁵ “I thought I was in love,” another storyteller in Johnson and Werner’s book writes. “I thought it was a natural progression in what we had already done and I hoped he would choose to only be with me after that. HA! No such luck. Now he got to have sex with BOTH of his girlfriends.”²⁶ Both of these stories are active stories, but the same rhetoric exists in passive ones, as in this story (1940s), also from Johnson and Werner’s book, in which the storyteller lost her virginity at 15 to her boyfriend of three years:

It took place in my home. It wasn’t like today when you watch movies and they say ‘tonight’s the night.’ I mean that’s so calculated. We cared for one another, we were young and that was it...

It was very natural. It was very nice. I wanted to do it again. Afterwards, I felt very nice, we snuggled, you know. I felt very happy, very content, just very close.

[...]

²⁴ Carpenter, *Virginity Lost*, pp. 144-152.

²⁵ Bouris, *First Time*, p. 77.

²⁶ Johnson and Werner, *Virgin Diaries*, p. 136.

We had boyfriends then, we didn't have parties where people switched partners and it was just different. You went steady and eventually you had sex. You loved each other, whether it was real love or not. It was something you did to be close.²⁷

The age of this story makes it susceptible to the “rose-coloured glasses” problem I mentioned in the previous section; however, this also has interesting implications. This storyteller places emphasis on sex as a natural next step in a romantic relationship, and consequently encodes a number of other possibilities as unnatural – from premeditating virginity loss (all active stories would become unnatural in this space), to virginity loss that takes place outside this script. Talking about sex at all with anyone is cast as taboo – the storyteller writes that:

Those were the days when you had to sneak around and you didn't let your girlfriends know and then you found out later that they were doing the same thing with their boyfriends and it was always with a boyfriend. Not just indiscriminately sleeping around the way they do today. The two of us – it just came naturally, we learned together.²⁸

The implication is clear: sex has moved away from this “natural” wordless romantic progression, where everyone did it but no one talked about it, to a world where talking about it has become commonplace (Plummer's world of no sexual secrets?). The act of telling this story at all, decades after the fact, becomes a sign of the changing times for this storyteller.

The notion of sex being the next step in a relationship – that it is “naturally” what happens next in the narrative – is a major contributing factor to the prevalence of the romantic script. Although the idea that communication is also unnatural seems to have

²⁷ Ibid., p. 21.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 21.

gradually faded away, leading to active stories also using this “natural” rhetoric, the idea of sex as the next step in a relationship has remained. This is congruent with the findings of Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, and Rachel Thomson, who found that young women did not approach virginity loss with the notion of “becoming a woman” like young men used virginity loss to “become a man”. They found that “young women do not gain womanhood through sexual intercourse, so much as offer their virginity to men,” and that “[y]oung women are positioned to resist, to slowly cede bodily territory and finally to consent to intercourse,” in a process that they described as a sort of heterosexual “war of attrition”.²⁹ Because of this, they found that sex was often a moment of ambivalence for young women, because sex was constructed as something happening for the benefit of the man, “leaving women to cope with first experiences that did not match their expectations of love, romance, or the earth moving.”³⁰ They write that,

Women had varying strategies of acceptance to, or resistance to, intercourse as his performance, but the main way in which these absences could be accommodated was by situating first intercourse within a social relationship with a boyfriend. They made sense of this accommodation through the acceptance of a careful chronology. There is a clear sense, which is not found so clearly in the young men’s responses, that there is a right moment, a point at which the woman is ready for what comes next, so that intercourse is part of a ‘natural progression’ in a relationship.³¹

We can see McLaren’s idea of the “right moment” evident here, as well as this idea of sex as a natural progression in a romantic relationship. Both of these ideas recur consistently throughout the virginity loss confessional genre. Storytellers regularly regret that they did

²⁹ Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu and Rachel Thomson. “In the Same Boat? The Gendered (in)Experience of First Heterosex,” in *Theorising Heterosexuality: Telling It Straight*, ed. Diane Richardson (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1996), p. 153.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 154.

³¹ Ibid., p. 156.

not wait until the “right moment”, when sex would have been natural – and thus, one assumes, pleasurable. But, as Holland, Ramazanoglu and Thomson note, and as we can see evident in many stories within the genre, many storytellers follow the romantic narrative and do not have this promise fulfilled: their virginity losses are physically mediocre at best and often the protagonist is left with feelings of ambivalence. Why, then, does this narrative persist?

We might argue that the continuing prevalence of the romantic narrative is part of a culture of silence around virginity loss (and sex in general) for women – how does the narrative change if no one is talking about alternatives? As I noted in the last chapter, many virginity loss confessional books position themselves as essentially deflowering history, breaking a silence and talking about the first time for the first time. However, as Sharon Thompson notes, while this covert culture may have existed in the earlier twentieth century, by the 1980s, “my first time” had become part of girls’ oral tradition.³² This was not necessarily an open and carefree culture – Thompson notes that,

girls still had few conventions to draw on to open or develop the subject... most girls said that all their experienced friends told the ‘same story’ about first intercourse. However, the ‘same story’ some girls said they heard reversed the ‘same story’ that other girls said they heard.³³

She also notes that when asked to describe how they lost their virginity, “many girls blink and freeze, dropping predicates and leaving passive sentences dangling as if under a

³² Sharon Thompson, “Putting a Big Thing into a Little Hole: Teenage Girls’ Accounts of Sexual Initiation,” *Journal of Sex Research* 27.3 (1990): p. 343.

³³ Ibid.

posthypnotic suggestion to suppress. ‘It was something that just happened,’ they say finally. They don’t know how it happened.”³⁴

While the emergence of the virginity loss confessional genre in the 1990s seems to suggest a move away from this kind of covert culture, we should also take into account the relative anonymity of the genre, which allows storytellers to tell stories that transgress cultural scripts without fear of reprisal. Talking about sex and sharing sexual stories in a peer group is endowed with difficulties, particularly for girls. Holland, Ramazanoglu and Thomson touch on these when they note that:

‘First sex’ experiences are not only happening in private, they are also performances in a peer group – events that are made meaningful by talking about them. It is in this talk, and its constitution of gendered sexual reputations, that heterosexuality is reproduced and social meanings attributed in ways that are difficult to escape.³⁵

In this sense, talking about sex may in fact help to reproduce the dominant narrative, as girls who step outside it are routinely socially punished. One imagines that within this kind of heavily policed culture, many sexual experiences are tweaked and/or falsified to be brought into line with acceptable scripts for femininity, lest social reprisal ensue.

Problems around girls, sex and identity in English-speaking Western culture are regularly highlighted by girlhood scholars. Dawn Currie, Deirdre M. Kelly and Shauna Pomerantz explore the power of labels among girls, noting that “unarticulated rules police girls’ self-representation,” including the rule that girls “must be attractive to boys but not

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Holland et al, “In the Same Boat?”, p. 148.

seen to be ‘slutty’.”³⁶ They write, “[t]he line separating ‘slut’ from ordinary practices of femininity could be very fine. When this line was crossed, peers could be very harsh in their judgment.”³⁷ Performing femininity correctly thus becomes very important in girl communities because, as Valerie Hey comments, “[i]t is between and amongst girls as friends that identities are variously practised, appropriated, resisted and negotiated,”³⁸ and as Mary Jane Kehily argues, “friendship talk enables certain femininities to emerge and be sustained”, while others are discouraged.³⁹ When it comes to virginity loss, inadequately performing the correct virginity loss narrative may have marked negative social consequences for girls. Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick and Anita Harris describe this neatly when they state that, “[g]irls themselves keep a close eye on each other and create distinctions between those girls who get it ‘right’ and those who are ‘wrong’.”⁴⁰ Deborah Tolman agrees, writing that,

[t]he so-called Madonna-whore split is surprisingly alive and well in the public imagination in the lives of adolescent girls... To act upon one’s own sexual feelings and desire is still, for girls, to invite the risk of being known as a ‘bad’ girl, a girl who deserves any consequences she suffers, a girl who loses her eligibility for social and legal protection against sexual harm.⁴¹

³⁶ Dawn H. Currie, Deirdre M. Kelly, and Shauna Pomerantz, “‘The geeks shall inherit the earth’: Girls’ Agency, Subjectivity and Empowerment,” *Journal of Youth Studies* 9.4 (2006): p. 429.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 427.

³⁸ Valerie Hey, *The Company She Keeps: An Ethnography of Girls’ Friendships* (Buckingham and Bristol, PA: Open University, 1997), p. 30.

³⁹ Mary Jane Kehily, Mairtin Mac An Ghaill, Debbie Epstein, and Peter Redman, “Private Girls and Public Worlds: Producing Femininities in the Primary School,” *Discourse* 23.2 (2002): p. 169.

⁴⁰ Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick and Anita Harris, *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power, and Social Change* (London: Palgrave, 2005), p. 133.

⁴¹ Deborah L. Tolman, *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 11-12.

Kathleen Sweeney also supports this, describing “girl tribes” in American girl culture who work to ostracise “The Slut”,⁴² and writing that,

‘Good Girls’ will masturbate their boyfriends or provide oral sex to ‘help them’ channel their desire with the assumption that they remain intact Virgins in the process. Teenage girls do not have a codified outlet for their desire without risk of being ostracised as weird, dirty, or Sluts.⁴³

We can see here the war of attrition described by Holland, Ramazanoglu and Thomson, with girls being pushed to slowly cede sexual territory to the boy, and then finally to surrender: a natural step, perhaps, but one fraught with consequences if undertaken too soon or with the wrong person. Sex becomes a space in which a very specific form of femininity must be performed, and performed correctly.

Within the romantic script, the “it just happened” narrative correlates more effectively with the idea that sex should be the natural next step in a relationship – without talking about it, the participants should just magically know that now is the right moment for virginity loss, which will lead to a pleasurable experience and a positive aftermath. Tolman notes that, “[i]n a world where ‘good,’ nice, and normal girls do not have sexual feelings of their own”, “it just happened” is one of the few scripts available to adolescent girls for understanding their sexual experiences. She writes that,

‘It just happened,’ then, can also be understood as a cover story. It is a story about the necessity for girls to cover their desire. It is also a story that covers over active choice, agency, and responsibility, which serves to ‘disappear’ desire, in the telling

⁴² Kathleen Sweeney, *Maiden USA: Girl Icons Come of Age* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 25.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

and in the living... It leaves out the ways in which girls are under systematic pressure not to feel, know, or act on their sexual desire.⁴⁴

This echoes what Thompson notes about the practices of girls telling their virginity loss stories and using the “it just happened” narrative in the 1980s. It is an acceptable and common narrative for girls because of its passivity – they surrender and cede territory, but do not initiate, positioning desire as something intrinsically male and coding sex as something girls participate in in exchange for emotional connection.

(This is not to say that a “pure” desire exists for girls – or boys – outside a narrative framework: indeed, narrative is, it would seem, the framework through which desire is made comprehensible. The issue at hand here is that the framework girls are currently given to construct their desire through is limited, and in many instances, denies their desire altogether. Is it any wonder, then, that girls have to develop narrative strategies like “it just happened” in which to recuperate and “translate” their desire?)

However, in the virginity loss confessional genre, active stories that follow the romantic script appear to have a greater chance of being positive, presumably because the protagonist usually has enough trust in their partner to discuss and negotiate the form a sexual encounter will take. This is congruent with Albanesi’s finding that “disappointment is often closely tied with the degree to which each exercises sexual agency. Those expressing the deepest regret about their sexual experiences tend to exercise the least agency in negotiating what they want.”⁴⁵ In virginity loss confessionals which have a specifically educational agenda, such as Bouris’ and Luadzers’, the importance of communication is emphasised. Louanne Cole writes in ‘What We Can Learn From These Shared Stories’, the epilogue of Bouris’ book, that “[o]ur daughters need to feel okay about

⁴⁴ Tolman, *Dilemmas of Desire*, pp. 1-3.

⁴⁵ Albanesi, *Gender and Sexual Agency*, p. 139.

asking their partners for what they want sexually and not censor themselves for fear of coming across as ‘too demanding’ or ‘too experienced’”, and recommends that young women choose a “sensitive, informed partner who is known to you and willing to talk about your feelings.”⁴⁶ Similarly, Luadzers emphasises the fact that communication is intrinsic to an emotional connection, writing that:

If you are with someone you really don't like that much, or if you're just having sexual intercourse to lose your virginity, you will be missing some of the 'specialness' of sex, including the emotional satisfaction, emotional connection, and physical bonding that can make for a wonderful experience. An emotional connection means finding a person with whom you can talk, someone with whom you feel comfortable outside of a sexual situation and who treats you right. Girls who are virgins, especially if they are planning to have their first sexual experiences, need to be with someone who is sensitive to their inexperience and emotional vulnerability. Again, there is a very different feeling when one has a sexual experience that is combined with a loving connection.⁴⁷

This emphasis on communication seems to be a relatively recent development. In older stories in the virginity loss confessional genre, there are distinct echoes of the idea that talking about sex somehow compromises virginity. This is an idea that proliferated in the Victorian period, and one that first wave feminists and social purity advocates agitated against in both Britain and the United States when they fought for greater sexual education for women. (Wedding night stories, as described in the last chapter, were one way in which these groups argued for greater sex education. Stories of sexual ignorance, where the bride attempted to flee her husband when he attempted to have sex with her, were another.) It is

⁴⁶ Louanne Cole, “What We Can Learn From These Shared Stories” in Bouris, *First Time*, pp. 184-185.

⁴⁷ Luadzers, *Virgin S-E-X*, p. 13.

an idea that still appears to have some currency – Jessica, a participant in Maggie Kirkman, Doreen Rosenthal and A.M.A. Smith’s study ‘Adolescent Sex and the Romance Narrative’, states that girls can be deemed “too forward” or “too slutty” if they talk about condoms.⁴⁸ Jessica says that discussing contraception might mean, “that you’re thinking about it, and going to go home and do it... And sometimes you just don’t know what’s going to happen, so you don’t want to say anything in case you’re wrong.”⁴⁹ However, talking about sex with a potential partner once a romantic relationship has been established now seems to be both culturally permissible and encouraged – even if it is to discuss the couple’s ongoing abstinence. This may be due to evolving ideals of intimacy. Lynn Jamieson writes that,

intimacy is at the centre of meaningful personal life in contemporary society...

What is meant by intimacy is often a very specific sort of knowing, loving and ‘being close to’ another person... The emphasis is on mutual disclosure, constantly revealing your inner thoughts and feelings to each other. It is an intimacy of the self rather than an intimacy of the body, although the completeness of intimacy of the self may be enhanced by bodily intimacy.⁵⁰

Talking about sex in this formulation becomes a way of deepening a romantic connection and allowing a girl to become surer about her decision to have sex – that it is the right moment with the right person, that she is appropriately following the romantic script.

Discussing sex with a potential partner becomes part of the romantic narrative instead of

⁴⁸ We can assume that this is a particular problem in American culture, which has a much higher prevalence of abstinence-only sex education than other countries in the English-speaking West. These curricula mention contraception only in terms of failure rates and seem to subscribe to the belief that information about sex will encourage young people to partake in it – an attitude not dissimilar to the one combated by first wave feminists and social purity advocates. However, Kirkman, Rosenthal and Smith’s study is an Australian one, which shows that this policing of girl sexuality is not limited to the USA.

⁴⁹ Maggie Kirkman, Doreen Rosenthal, and A.M.A. Smith, “Adolescent Sex and the Romantic Narrative: Why Some Young Heterosexuals Use Condoms to Prevent Pregnancy but Not Disease,” *Psychology, Health & Medicine* 3.4 (1998): p. 361.

⁵⁰ Lynn Jamieson, *Intimacy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p. 1.

anathema to it – despite the fact that engineering an experience might seem to be unnatural, it has now become a key part of the script.

If sex is the natural next step in a romantic relationship for girls, it stands to reason that there is a link between sex and romance – that sex and love are, if not essentially the same thing, then indelibly linked. This is where we can see compulsory demisexuality in action, a paradigm which polices the sexual behaviour of girls. As discussed in the first chapter, certain religious cultures continue to emphasise marriage as the only acceptable circumstance in which to have sex – for example, Evangelical Christian cultures in the United States have engendered a market in the twenty-first century for “purity rings” to signify a commitment to premarital virginity, among other “purity” rituals, and, in some instances, place emphasis on the importance of “emotional virginity.”⁵¹ However, in English-speaking Western culture more broadly, expressing desire as love for a romantic partner seems to be acceptable. Expressing desire outside of these boundaries, however, is not, and stories of girls who did things the wrong way become cautionary tales. Kirkman, Rosenthal and Smith note this practice in their study, where they interview several teenagers about their attitudes towards sex and love. One of their participants, Sue, recounted the tale of a girl who lost her virginity while drunk:

She was thinking, oh, she wished she hadn't have had sex like that, to lose her virginity; she should have had it being in a relationship, and, ah, had a nice guy.

She didn't really know the guy. She regrets it. Because it's one thing you can't get

⁵¹ This concept seems to have arisen from Joshua Harris' book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, which became a popular guide to romantic relationships in conservative Christian cultures in the late 1990s and 2000s, especially in the United States. In this book, Harris tells the story of a girl walking towards her fiancé at the altar on their wedding day, only to have a string of six other girls – the girls to whom her fiancé had given “pieces of his heart” – join her at the altar. Her fiancé tells her that she can have all that is left of his heart. Harris uses this story to emphasise the importance of emotional, as well as physical, virginity. [Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye: A New Attitude Towards Relationships and Romance* (New York: Multnomah, 1997).]

back again [laugh], is your virginity... She finds it hard to, um, you know, get close to anyone because she feels as though she's acting like a slut.⁵²

Kirkman, Rosenthal and Smith's study reveals how prevalent the paradigm of compulsory demisexuality is when it comes to policing the behaviour of girls. (This study, I should note here, is Australian, which shows that this attitude toward sex, love and female sexuality is not limited to the United States, although the more pronounced "virginity movement" there, per Jessica Valenti, may heighten this attitude in that culture.⁵³) One participant said, "[i]t's [sex] all right when you actually love somebody." Another said, "when girls talk about sex it's more in a loving way, you know; they want the loving component of it." Another described sex as "an expression of their [girls'] love",⁵⁴ mobilising Carpenter's gift script (which is, as Holland, Ramazanoglu and Thomson note, a common way that girls rationalise their sexual behaviour and deal with their ambivalence around feelings of loss).⁵⁵ Kirkman, Rosenthal and Smith recount Sue's description of an appropriate virginity loss, which is very much in line with the notion that for women, love and sex must be tied together:

If you were going out with a guy for two months or something, and, like, you do all that stuff like oral sex, and then you wait a while. You'd do that, like, when you didn't love them as much, but when you love them you'd go into sex... It's... 'I like him a lot and I'll do this with him, but when I love him I'll go all the way with him'.⁵⁶

⁵² Kirkman et al, "Adolescent Sex," pp. 360-361.

⁵³ Jessica Valenti, *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession With Virginity Is Hurting Young Women* (Seal Press, 2010), p. 23.

⁵⁴ Kirkman et al, "Adolescent Sex," p. 360.

⁵⁵ Holland et al, "In the Same Boat?" p. 154.

⁵⁶ Kirkman et al, "Adolescent Sex," p. 360.

We can see here not just the idea that sex is a natural next step in a script that escalates, rounding the “bases” until love is established and sex can occur, but also the implicit promise of the romance narrative: wait for love, and virginity loss will be satisfying, not just physically and/or emotionally, but socially. Love makes sex legitimate. Sharon Thompson notes that the dominant position for teenage boys around sex is “why not?”, but for girls, it is “why?”⁵⁷ “Because we are in love,” seems to be the only appropriate answer for girls. There is no narrative of desire independent from romantic love – and, indeed, Kirkman, Rosenthal and Smith note that female desire is rarely admitted as a criterion in young women’s decision to have sex.⁵⁸ Michelle Fine’s missing discourse of desire is evident here, as well as Tolman’s related claim that Western society has “desexualised girls’ sexuality, substituting the desire for relationship and emotional connection for sexual feelings in their bodies.”⁵⁹ Following the romantic script for virginity loss, where desire, if experienced, is inextricable from love, becomes a way of culturally reproducing acceptable heterosexual femininity.

And yet the romance narrative is not entirely safe for girls, as Kirkman, Rosenthal and Smith’s participant Louise describes. She comments that she and the majority of her friends lost their virginities between the ages of 12 and 15, and most of them regret it. She says:

The most common mistake [is that] they think they’re in love with the guy, and they just... get used... Every single one of my friends would have been used in some way, shape, or form. And it all has to do with sex. I mean, the male mind is

⁵⁷ Sharon Thompson, *Going All the Way: Teenage Girls’ Tales of Sex, Romance, and Pregnancy* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), p. 20.

⁵⁸ Kirkman et al, “Adolescent Sex,” p. 361.

⁵⁹ Tolman, *Dilemmas of Desire*, pp. 5-6.

after sex, and the females want all that love and romance, and they all expect it, too.⁶⁰

The romance narrative, it would seem, is not without its pitfalls. Not only is it a script that must be followed, it is a script that must be followed *correctly*. Some young women seem to place the blame on young men when they lose their virginity according to the romance narrative and it does not deliver. The narrative trope that boys only want sex and girls only want love is apparently prevalent, because there are many stories within the virginity loss confessional genre where the storyteller surrenders her virginity to a partner only for him to never contact her again, something she chalks up to him “getting what he wanted.” However, in other instances, girls will blame themselves for their poor first times (indeed, even in stories where the boy would clearly seem to be at fault, girl storytellers sometimes blame themselves). They thought they were in love with the boy, but they were not. They thought he was in love with her, but he was not, and she should have known better. They were too young. They didn’t wait long enough. They weren’t sure enough. They did not manage to find, per McLaren, “the right moment”.

This is something that appears consistently in the virginity loss confessional genre. While stories that follow a romantic narrative encompass the greatest number of positive stories for women, there is also a high number of ambivalent and mediocre stories (they occur at an approximately 1:1:1 ratio). Despite the cultural endorsement of the romantic narrative and the idea that taking the next step is natural, it appears to contain no guarantee for a positive or pleasurable experience (physically, emotionally, or even socially). Story #4 in Johnson and Werner’s book is a fairly typical example of the failure of the romantic narrative:

⁶⁰ Kirkman et al, “Adolescent Sex,” p. 361.

My expectations were that it would be romantic and sensational...

We did it in a vacant home that his mother owned and that he was remodelling at the time. I knew it would happen. We had talked about it several times and had it planned for this particular evening...

It hurt very badly... I was scared to death. I kept thinking when is this going to feel good? It never did – not even over the course of trying for several months...

He was respectful. He knew I was scared... He was very gentle and tried to make the best of the situation...

There was no best part for me. The blood, emotion and pain were the worst part.

I didn't feel great about myself afterward. I was confused and I feel as though I should have waited – not that he wasn't the right one but I was too young.

I did care for him. He was my first true boyfriend and it was so fantastic to have someone who cared for me...

I chose to lose my virginity with him because it was my first chance to try it.

I was afraid to do it again. I did not want to experience the pain. It was at least two years before I can honestly say I truly enjoyed sex for myself.⁶¹

This story demonstrates something that is common in many ambivalent and negative stories of virginity loss: an excuse for why it was not positive, and why the romance narrative did not deliver on its promise. "I was too young," is the excuse offered here (the protagonist was fifteen). Without doubting the veracity of statements like this, it is interesting to observe this rhetorical move: the romantic narrative did not fail, it was some

⁶¹ Johnson and Werner, *Virgin Diaries*, p. 28.

fault with the protagonists that caused it to fail. We can also see another way in which the script was undermined when the protagonist says that she lost her virginity “because it was [her] first chance to try it,” implying that she did not have sex for the right reason, but because she was curious (the wrong reason). The right reason – the only possible right reason for women – is love. We can see here the influence of the paradigm of compulsory demisexuality, highlighting the parameters of licit virginity loss: not only do women have to follow the right script, they must have the right motivations. The advice offered to virginal readers by this storyteller is to, “[m]ake it [virginity loss] fun, make it with someone who really loves you and you really love. A person who has marriage potential for you.”⁶² The storyteller still endorses the romantic narrative. The thought process here seems to be not that the narrative failed her, but that she failed to live up to the narrative.

When we look at the virginity loss confessional genre in this light, it becomes easier to see why so many female storytellers recount negative or, at best, ambivalent experiences when they lose their virginity outside the romantic narrative. There is no culturally endorsed script outside the romantic narrative. Even where women manage to have a positive physical experience outside this narrative, they often report feeling shame and regret afterwards. Morgan’s story (1990s) in Luadzers’ book is an example of this. Morgan lost her virginity on a beach to a boy she had never met before – she “got caught up in a moment of passion under the stars of a summer night... It was a wonderful moment.” But the next day, she “realised that she had been merely caught up in the moment and perhaps she had made a mistake in going all the way.” Because they did not use protection, she was very worried she was pregnant and “ended up making her first trip to a gynaecologist to get tested for sexually transmitted diseases, which she found

⁶² Ibid., p. 29.

embarrassing.”⁶³ While it is possible to argue that the consequences of potential pregnancy and disease are enough to cloud even the most physically pleasurable experience, Morgan’s guilt that she did not follow the romantic script is also evident: “While it was a fun, passionate moment, Morgan always thought she would have sex for the first time with someone she loved.”⁶⁴ Her failure to do so means that her virginity loss story is imbued with ambivalence and regret.

The paucity of positive virginity loss experiences outside a romantic context within the virginity loss confessional genre is astonishing. They are not only comparatively rare, but rare altogether: positive, passive, non-romantic virginity loss stories for women are the unicorns of the genre. Although positive experiences for men seem to be possible with any kind of partner, for women, the range is much more limited. The majority of positive stories for women take place with a romantic partner – because, perhaps, a woman losing her virginity outside this context is seen not just as transgressive but unnatural. But perhaps the most remarkable finding comes when we analyse these stories along the active/passive axis. It is nearly impossible, it seems, for a female virgin to have a pleasurable and positive virginity loss experience that does not follow the romantic narrative *unless they actively choose to do so* – that is, they engineer and script their own virginity loss. Female virginity loss which is passive – in which circumstances arose and “it just happened” – cannot, it seems, be positive, unless it takes place within a romantic relationship (and thus, one imagines, becomes the “natural next step”).

I found only a few exceptions to this rule. Two were same-sex stories, in which the virgin was deflowered by a female friend.⁶⁵ There were three other stories in which the

⁶³ Luadzers, *Virgin S-E-X*, pp. 29-30.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 30.

⁶⁵ Abby’s story in Carpenter’s book and story #8 in Johnson and Werner’s.

female protagonist was deflowered by a male friend,⁶⁶ and one in which the female protagonist was deflowered by a male stranger.⁶⁷ This is a total of six stories out of 383 total female stories, and even these contain varying degrees of ambivalence. There is no real female analogue to passive virginity loss stories like this one (2000s) with a male protagonist from Johnson and Werner's book:

She was one of my ex-girlfriend's friends...

It was at the house of a friend who I had a crush on. We were all in her room and she was on the bed with her boyfriend making out and me and the other girl were lying on the floor making out. Once things got hot, we went to the spare bedroom. I didn't know what was going to happen. I was taken by surprise... I was like, Oh my god, is this really happening?

I was pretty amazed. It felt pretty good. But I don't think that I could ever have known what would have felt like just thinking about it. I never got sad or scared. Just plain out amazed!

...I felt pretty good. Like I had just stepped into the real man world...

...Honestly I didn't choose it. It was just something that happened. No regrets of course.⁶⁸

Instead, most stories from women that follow a similar sort of "it just happened" virginity loss narrative are much more ambivalent, if not negative, as in Marie's story (2000s) from Wickens' book:

⁶⁶ Michelle's story in Wickens' book, Karen's story in Carpenter's book, Blair's story in Boze and Kato's second book.

⁶⁷ Ann's story in Boze and Kato's first book, but even this has some ambivalence.

⁶⁸ Johnson and Werner, *Virgin Diaries*, p. 107.

There was a party... I got drunk, got completely annihilated and was there after everybody left 'cause I couldn't drive home.

It's just me and the host, this guy I worked with who was in his 30s. He starts giving me more drinks. He does the cheesy backrub thing. Next thing I know we're in his bed having sex. I was watching the clock the whole time. For a whole hour I was watching the clock...

I get home and take a shower and I broke down. I couldn't believe I did such the cliché, have-sex-when-I'm-drunk, idiotic first time. It's so *After School Special*, but everyone does that... Three days later I was still so upset. I'm Catholic so I went to confession.⁶⁹

The circumstances are not identical, and Marie's story has a religious inflection which may have contributed to her feelings of regret, but they are both similar and representative enough to provide an interesting illustration of the difference between male and female reactions to passive virginity loss where the deflowerer was not the virgin's partner. The male protagonist in the story from Johnson and Werner's story had "no regrets" – not about being virtually shanghaied into losing his virginity, not about the circumstances, not about what it meant not to be a virgin any more. His story suggests that he subscribed to Carpenter's idea of virginity as stigma (his first action upon losing his virginity was to gloat to his best friend about what had happened). Virginity loss for him was a thing to be proud of. For Marie, however, it was the inverse – virginity loss was something to be ashamed of, particularly because she lost her virginity in what she thinks of as a clichéd "bad" way (drunk, unplanned, unromantic). She was ashamed of the circumstances, the

⁶⁹ Wickens, *How to Lose Your Virginity*, pp. 168-169.

person, and the way in which she lost her virginity: so ashamed she sought religious absolution.

These are not isolated occurrences in the virginity loss confessional genre. For a second example, one can contrast the story ‘Pump!’ (1980s) in Crosier’s book, where the male protagonist loses his virginity to a girl he barely knew while drunk and yet still codes it as a positive experience, to the experience of the female protagonist Madeleine in the story ‘The Wrath of God’ (1980s), who loses her virginity while on exchange in France to her friend Thierry:

I found myself walking up the steps to Thierry’s sixth floor apartment, wondering what I was doing there...

...as he began to kiss me, the flood of conflicting emotions nearly overcame me. I wanted to be loved, to be caressed, to be acknowledged, but at every moment, my mother’s voice lingered in my ears maligning my sister and all ‘loose’ women. How could I even think about sleeping with him? What would become of me?

I pulled myself away... Thierry listened, nodded soothingly, and began to kiss me again... I had no volition left.

The sexual act itself was painful, but there was only a little blood. Thierry fell asleep afterwards, but I lay awake until dawn... I felt like a stranger to myself.⁷⁰

Madeleine’s story – which, like Marie’s, is certainly religiously inflected, which may have heightened her negative emotions – reads like a morality tale. She refers to her sexual encounter with Thierry as “misbehaviour”, “misconduct”, and “sin”, and writes that, “For a

⁷⁰ Crosier, *Losing It*, pp. 20-21.

long time, I felt a lingering sense of guilt.”⁷¹ This was compounded by the fact that she contracted genital warts, which she believed was divine punishment for her “unforgivable sin.” Even nine years after the incident, when she writes that she is able to think of her virginity loss with “no blame and no shame” and notes that, “losing one’s virginity shouldn’t be a capital crime”, she still refers to it as “sexual misconduct.” The almost complete absence of passive female virginity loss stories outside the romantic paradigm points strongly to the continued existence of the sexual double standard – and may, in an American context, also point to a religious influence on discourse which places specific importance on premarital virginity for girls – especially considering the large number of positive passive male stories in this category that exist in the virginity loss confessional genre. Not all men who “accidentally” lose their virginity in a non-romantic way have a positive experience: there are stories where men lose their virginity in this way and regret it later (for example, Bill’s story (1990s) in Carpenter’s book, where he loses his virginity to a stranger after a party and regrets it). However, it *is* possible for men to have positive non-romantic virginity loss experiences where “it just happened”. For women in the virginity loss confessional genre, it seems, it is very difficult indeed.

Rescripting Virginity Loss: Alternatives to Romance

It seems that for a woman to have a non-romantic positive virginity loss experience, she must deliberately subvert the romantic narrative, consciously shaping her own experience. It must be an active story. Sherrie’s story from Monroe’s book, quoted in an earlier section, is a good example of a protagonist consciously and deliberately doing this. Another good example is Julie’s story (1990s) from Wickens’ book.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 21.

I was absolutely not considered in a sexual way by any male in high school... I was one of those girls who was accidentally forced to wait.

After high school I found out about this job up in Bethel, Alaska... On this fish boat of maybe three females and 86 males there was a baker named Mack.... I accidentally let it slip to this untrustworthy cook Noreen that Mack the Baker should be the man who devirginises me. I thought it was time and I was in Alaska, the land of men. We were on a boat killing fish, it was a very primal setting...

...it took another whole two weeks before Mack the Baker showed up while I was on kitchen duty and blithely requested that I shave his head. I knew this was like my golden hour so I obliged. I shaved him like Curly from The Three Stooges, and then I got fucked in one of the sleeping niches in the boat quarters. It was great and I came. Somehow, somewhere that 19-year-old girl knew that he was the man to do it and it may have been the best sex I have ever had and I never spoke to him again.⁷²

Julie's story is clearly an active one, despite her use of the passive "I got fucked" (a linguistic pattern embedded in ideas of the woman as the passive recipient of sex): while the actual opportunity for virginity loss, her "golden hour", arose somewhat spontaneously, and the experience didn't include any pre-sex communication or negotiation between her and Mack, she made an active decision that a) she wanted to have sex, and b) she wanted to have sex with Mack, although she was not in and did not want to be in a romantic relationship with him. Her virginity loss occurs outside the romantic narrative and yet this story is still coded positive. As in Sherrie's story, it is evident here that women can have positive non-romantic virginity loss experiences if they actively choose them. We might

⁷² Wickens, *How to Lose Your Virginity*, p. 74.

call this a process of “self-scripting” – even if the specific moment is not negotiated or even discussed with a potential partner, the experience has been scripted by the protagonist. What does not seem to be possible is for women to “fall into” positive experiences the way that many men in the genre appear to be able to, unless it is with a romantic partner. For the female protagonist to have a positive experience, she must either follow the dominant romance script or specifically self-script her own narrative (and, it should be noted, neither of these are a guarantee of a good time).

In her book *Virginity Lost*, Laura Carpenter outlines three scripts for virginity loss: gift, stigma, and the process or rite of passage. The first of these is most commonly mobilised in romantic relationships. The third also includes many romantic relationships – Carpenter’s chapter on the process script is called ‘A Natural Step’, which echoes some of the language around ideal female heterosexual virginity loss.⁷³ But the second script, the stigma, is different, with its emphasis on virginity as something to be got rid of at the first possible opportunity. Consequently, it would seem to be the script that offers the most possibility for constructing an alternative virginity loss narrative. While it is not clear, we might argue that there are elements of the stigma script in Julie’s story above, in which she asserts that she was “accidentally forced to wait” due to lack of interest from boys at her high school. The stigma script would seem to be anti-romantic – or, at least, not necessarily romantic. Of the five virginity loss stories Carpenter includes in her chapter on the stigma script, only one follows a romantic narrative: Marty’s story, in which he loses his virginity to his more experienced girlfriend. Carpenter states that those who followed the stigma script in her study positioned virginity as something “abnormal and in need of explanation”.⁷⁴ She observes that considerably more men than women were inclined to

⁷³ Meghan’s story, which I discussed in the previous section as a good example of an ideal romantic virginity loss, features in this chapter.

⁷⁴ Carpenter, *Virginity Lost*, p. 111.

describe their virginity in terms of stigma,⁷⁵ and that where women did follow the stigma script, they “tended to be empowered by the very expectations for gender and sexuality that tended to disenfranchise the men”.⁷⁶ Men who followed this script tended to feel like their virginity was preventing them from adequately performing heterosexual masculinity. Women did not share this feeling – Carpenter notes that they generally “profited from widespread social approval of female virginity” and knew that “[t]heir personal sentiments notwithstanding... surmised that few people would find their virginity appalling.”⁷⁷ The stigma associated with virginity for women came not from a failure to perform heterosexual femininity, but rather a fear that they were somehow behind their peers. In the only story with a female protagonist Carpenter includes in her stigma chapter, storyteller Emma (1990s) states that she “just did *not* want to be a virgin” and that she had an internal timeline for appropriate virginity loss: “in my mind, 15 was a little early, 16 was on time, 17 was late, you know... There wasn’t much leeway as far as that.”⁷⁸ Carpenter notes that this idea of a timeline and that being a virgin after a certain age was stigmatising was common to people who followed this script.

The stigma script would seem to offer more opportunities for girls to script their own virginity loss experiences. The script seems to be embedded with a tacit admission of desire – or, at the very least, sexual curiosity, something regularly proscribed for girls. It seems likely that this script would allow for more active experiences, as girls attempt to engineer their own virginity loss experiences, potentially outside of a romantic context. We can see this in Emma’s story in Carpenter’s book. Emma loses her virginity to her friend Jonathan. Her virginity loss was active and premeditated: she decided she wanted to lose

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 103.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 124.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 129.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 125.

her virginity to Jonathan long before he actually acquiesced. She knew he was not emotionally interested in her – she writes:

I wanted to have sex and he didn't. 'Cause he – he was in love with somebody else, number 1. And like, the other woman was who he had lost his virginity to. So there was that kind of emotional weight going on there... And... there's this whole weird dynamic going on, 'cause he was a really good friend of mine, and so I cared about him. But at the same time, he was not transferring the kind of emotional bond we had as friends into our physical relationship.⁷⁹

Emma eventually wore Jonathan down, and they had sex. However, Emma's script for a non-romantic virginity loss did not go to plan. After they slept together, despite the fact that they were both clear that they were friends and not partners, Emma became "convinced that he would wake up one day, you know, figure out that he was in love with me and all that."⁸⁰ She believes this is because he was the first person she ever slept with:

In times since... there are guys I've slept with, and it's just like, okay, you know, that was fun or whatever, but there's nothing... that kind of bond isn't the same as the first time... [P]eople put more emotional weight on it... just because it is the first time.⁸¹

Emma seems to count her virginity loss as a positive experience, although she does mention some ambivalence after the fact. Reflecting, she wonders whether sleeping with a partner with whom she had a stronger emotional connection might have been preferable:

Not necessarily that it should be the love of your life or anything like that. But... but would be better in a lot of ways if it was someone who you had an emotional

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 126.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 128.

⁸¹ Ibid.

bond with and you had a good communication with as well... [...] It kind of sets the stage for better experiences in the future.⁸²

Although Emma treated her virginity as a stigma and engineered her virginity loss in a context she knew was non-romantic, the persistent influence of the dominant romantic script remains evident. While we should not assume that all women who follow the stigma script and/or script their own non-romantic virginity loss felt like Emma did – and, indeed, storytellers like Sherrie and Julie above do not seem to – it is certainly interesting that even in this seemingly anti-romantic space, the weight of the dominant romantic script is felt. In many instances, the romantic narrative is considered to be, if not necessarily natural, at least the default – something the storyteller is specifically rebelling against in trying to construct their own experience. This is not always true: Carpenter notes that Emma and the three other women she interviewed who followed the stigma script (whose stories are not related in the chapter) did not necessarily seek to challenge established gender norms. However, if Emma's story is any indication, they were aware of these norms, and perhaps returned to them – Carpenter notes that Emma eventually came to favour a process script, and her data indicates that none of the other three women who considered their virginity a stigma at the time of their virginity loss maintained this view long term, but came to favour other scripts. This would seem to demonstrate the pervasiveness of the dominant romantic narrative for virginity loss for women, particularly as Carpenter's male participants who follow the stigma script do not seem to demonstrate these feelings (at least not to the same extent).

The fact that women must specifically design and put into action their own script for virginity loss if they want to have a positive virginity loss experience outside of a romantic context demonstrates the pervasiveness of the romantic narrative. The influence

⁸² Ibid., p. 129.

of compulsory demisexuality is plain here – the idea that love and sex are intrinsically intertwined for women is so omnipresent that it must be consciously rebelled against if female virgins want to have a good first time (and even then, it is not a guarantee). It highlights the ubiquity of the idea that for a woman, losing one's virginity in a romantic context is both acceptable and natural if the magical "right moment" is attained: to have a good experience outside this context, women must seriously consider, plan, and ultimately perform their own script. This would seem to require a great deal of forethought, in which the female virgin must think deeply about their own desires (scripting, per Gagnon and Simon, on an intrapsychic rather than a cultural level). Considering the problematic relationship between girls and desire, we can see here one of the reasons why positive virginity loss experiences for female storytellers in the genre seem to be so difficult to achieve.

Historicising Virginity Loss Stories

In this section, I will use the virginity loss confessional genre to further explore the way narratives have developed over time. The positive self-scripted anti-romantic virginity loss experience for women is, as I noted above, a relatively recent development, possibly tied to discursive developments in the 1990s. Looking at the genre more broadly can paint an intriguing picture of the evolution of virginity loss narratives (particularly in the United States, the country in which most virginity loss confessionals have been published, but also in Western culture more generally).

While we must take into account a) that the majority of the stories in the genre take place from the 1980s onwards, and b) that older stories may fall prey to a "rose-coloured glasses" effect, examining them is still productive, largely because this nostalgia is itself

interesting. In their book *Mundane Heterosexualities*, Jenny Hockey, Angela Meah and Victoria Robinson interview some older British participants about their pre-sexual revolution (that is, pre-1960s) virginity losses and their views on modern relationships. They observe that nostalgia for the “traditional” relationship and family forms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (“Victorian values”) was common.⁸³ One participant said, “We didn’t have sex, we made love, you know, these days it’s all sex, sex, sex, in’t it... but my generation looked at it more as making love, you know.”⁸⁴ A strong link between sex and love is evident here, as well as a disdain for sex (or even wanting sex) in any other context. This attitude is echoed in Edna’s story (1940s, and also British) in Monro’s book, when she says,

I feel sorry for young people now because they’re taking their young days and making the most of them but I think there is going to be a regret later on. I don’t think poor girls setting out for an evening’s boozing and then all finding a one-night stand is a good way to start.

I think it is very likely that if you’re in love with someone and you’re not married, that it can happen in a natural sort of way; that happens. But to go out with the intent, that you’ve got condoms in your bag, I don’t like it.⁸⁵

Hockey, Meah and Robinson noted that some of their participants found what they deemed a modern fascination with sex outside a romantic context “immature”.⁸⁶ All stories with female protagonists from the 1940s and 1950s are passive stories – active stories, which would presumably involve at least some tacit admission of desire on the woman’s part, are totally absent. Indeed, the idea of female desire is presented as vaguely distasteful in many

⁸³ Jenny Hockey, Angela Meah, and Victoria Robinson, *Mundane Heterosexualities: From Theory to Practices* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 67.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 51.

⁸⁵ Monro, *First Time*, pp. 62-63.

⁸⁶ Hockey et al, *Mundane Heterosexualities*, p. 67.

of these older stories. This is true in American as well as British stories – for example, in Jayne’s story (1950s) in Boze and Kato’s first book, in which Jayne lost her virginity to her husband, she describes sex as “a marital duty... I performed with the same care and diligence as my other daily responsibilities.” She goes on to say, “[s]ex is painful at best, humiliating at worst, but I got through it. Some folks claim to enjoy it. Frankly, I don’t see how a sane person can say such a thing.”⁸⁷

Not all storytellers shared these feelings about sex and desire: another American storyteller (1950s) in Bouris’s book describes “[feeling] passionately” about the young men she dated and “get[ting] a lot of sexual mileage out of French kisses and slow dancing. Since many of us drew the line here, these pleasures were exquisite.” Although she and her future husband had “long, red-hot petting sessions”, she was “still technically a virgin” when they got married, and “[their] wedding night was great!”⁸⁸ Another storyteller from the same book (1950s) fell somewhere in the middle: her husband, to whom she lost her virginity, did not satisfy her sexually, and so they sought medical help. While these latter two stories do demonstrate a growing acceptance for female desire and sexual pleasure, they also highlight its limits: virginity loss was to be saved for an intimate loving relationship, something which, in this period, was largely limited to marriage.

Also found in many 1940s and 1950s virginity loss confessional stories is a general anti-communicatory attitude. This fits with Hockey, Meah and Robinson’s research, whose participants also deemed immature the modern “obsession with wanting to know everything that your partner is thinking”.⁸⁹ (It is worth noting that these participants are British, and thus may be more informed by what has been called a “culture of emotional inhibition” than American storytellers; however, this attitude does seem to exist across in

⁸⁷ Boze and Kato, *Virgin Project*, p. 91.

⁸⁸ Bouris, *First Time*, pp. 25-26.

⁸⁹ Hockey et al, *Mundane Heterosexualities*, p. 67.

many virginity loss confessional stories of the period.⁹⁰) This seems to be tied to the shift in intimacy that Lynn Jamieson has described – intimacy within the romantic relationship has apparently evolved and come to involve a deep knowing and understanding of the other, something which these earlier storytellers apparently disdained. Perhaps this is because it would be embarrassing, as this kind of deep knowing would involve exposing sexual secrets, such as desire, with which many of these storytellers appear to be uncomfortable. It might also be considered anti-naturalistic, as in the story from the 1940s from Johnson and Werner’s book that I quoted in an earlier section, where the storyteller claimed that, “[i]t wasn’t like today when you watch movies and they say ‘tonight’s the night.’ I mean that’s so calculated.” Another storyteller (1950s) from Bouris’s book says that,

It was such a different time when I grew up! There were no talk-show hosts casually discussing infidelity, bizarre sex practices or homosexual relationships – it just wasn’t done. Sometimes, I think that the silence was better: that such things should be personal, intimate, and a person’s own business. After all, what is more private than our sexuality?⁹¹

The storyteller from Bouris’ book I quoted above who was “still technically a virgin” on her wedding night shares these views, writing that, “I know my era was repressed yet I believe that now, by seeing so much explicit sex in movies, and TV talk shows geared to every sexual subject imaginable, we’ve taken some of the mystery away.”⁹² What this mystery actually entails is questionable; however, it seems to encode an idea of sex as somehow sacred – mysterious in an almost religious sense. Considering that Western

⁹⁰ Ian Robertson, quoted in Frank Füredi, *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 49.

⁹¹ Bouris, *First Time*, p. 29.

⁹² Ibid., p. 26.

attitudes in this time period still emphasised premarital virginity (according to Kinsey's data, 50% of American brides in the 1950s were virgins, and the British *Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyle* survey states that 38% of female virginity loss occurred within marriage between 1950 and 1965), this is not surprising.⁹³ Sex was supposed to be contained within the private and sacred bond of the marriage: the bedroom door was supposed to remain closed. The discursive shift of the sexual revolution in the 1960s seems to have disrupted this significantly in the modern imagination, and it is not something these earlier storytellers are comfortable with. If sex is to be contained in the marital bedroom, then talking about sex should be similarly private.

Both these storytellers from Bouris' book, although they mourn the "silence" and the "mystery" that surrounded sex in their formative years, also note the benefits of greater cultural discourse around sex. One notes that when it comes to sex, ignorance is not bliss: "I believe sexual ignorance is as dangerous as sexual exploitation."⁹⁴ The other writes that, "in these changing times, it is probably best that people air their dirty laundry so that things can progress. By progress, I mean the elimination of men's violence toward women."⁹⁵ Many early virginity loss stories display the sexual ignorance of the female virgin, such as Edna's story from *Monro's* book, where she loses her virginity on her wedding night to her husband:

I was frightened on my wedding night and when I saw how he looked, I laughed.

I'd never seen anything so funny. In spite of having two brothers I had no idea what

⁹³ Alfred Kinsey, cited in Angus McLaren, *Twentieth-Century Sexuality: A History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 146-147; *Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles* survey, cited in Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception, 1800-1975* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 326.

⁹⁴ Bouris, *First Time*, p. 26.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

a man looked like. My mother had never told me anything. She never said anything about what would happen when I got married, I had to find out by myself.⁹⁶

These stories of ignorance are not dissimilar to the wedding night stories used a few decades earlier, although they are significantly less traumatic. (In contrast to the emphasis put on blood and pain and male cruelty and/or carelessness in those stories, Edna notes that, “[o]n the first night, I might tell you, I thought ‘this is much ado about nothing,’ but then I got to quite like it.”⁹⁷) Other stories of ignorance focused less on the mechanical aspects of sex and more on the emotional side. In *Mundane Heterosexualities*, Meah interviews seventy year old Joan about her virginity loss on her wedding night, and asks her what she had expected. Joan answers, “[d]on’t know, burst of sunlight or heavens open, or, no I don’t suppose it was that, but both of us pretty, fumbling, or, um [...]”⁹⁸

Despite this ignorance, and despite the fact that there were clearly some mediocre first sexual experiences among these early storytellers, many of these stories contain a strong positive bent. The majority of the stories from this period are wedding night stories, and often include an emphasis on how they and their partner were married for decades (even stories like Jayne’s, in which sex is coded negative). Whether it is nostalgia, memories of long-beloved lovers coloured in retrospect, remembrances of genuinely positive experiences, or a mixture of the three informing these stories is not particularly relevant here – what is important is the way in which the romantic narrative is portrayed in respect to virginity loss. It is the only acceptable space for virginity loss to occur, and, for the majority of storytellers, love is not enough: marriage is also required. This romantic script for virginity loss is also a passive script – while some stories do contain admissions of both female desire and pleasure, sex does not seem to be initiated or desired by the

⁹⁶ Monro, *First Time*, p. 62.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Hockey et al, *Mundane Heterosexualities*, p. 75.

majority of female protagonists. Pleasure, where it occurs, is incidental. There is little room for a woman to negotiate or script her own virginity loss experience, even within the romantic space.

In the 1960s, there is a slight but notable shift. The majority of female virginity loss experiences still take place within a romantic context. Few female storytellers make an active decision to lose their virginities. Where they do, there are often extenuating circumstances, such as in Georgia's story in Luadzers' book. Georgia's boyfriend Terry is drafted for the Vietnam War, and Georgia decides to sleep with him "[b]ecause she was afraid she would never see him again."⁹⁹ However, storytellers who lost their virginities in this period are more likely to report ambivalence around having sex, and more strongly voice their dissatisfaction with physical experience of virginity loss, often because they are more open about their own experience of desire. Hera Cook notes that in Britain, the idea of female frigidity and lack of sexual interest in men was generally accepted by younger people as an inadequacy by the 1960s, while Stephen Seidman notes that in the United States, pleasure was becoming an increasingly acceptable reason to engage in sex.¹⁰⁰ This may be why we see more emphasis on desire and disappointment in these stories. One storyteller (1960s) from Bouris' book writes that, "[i]t was quick and not particularly pleasurable for me. After he came, he said, 'Well, that's it,' and I thought, That's it? (I had been masturbating since age eleven or twelve and I knew what it meant to have an orgasm!)"¹⁰¹ Similarly, Sandra (1960s) in Monro's book says that of her virginity loss with her boyfriend Ian,

⁹⁹ Luadzers, *Virgin S-E-X*, p. 31.

¹⁰⁰ Cook, *Long Sexual Revolution*, p. 236; Steven Seidman, *Romantic Longings: Love in America, 1830-1980* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 8.

¹⁰¹ Bouris, *First Time*, p. 92.

It was a pretty disappointing experience but we did manage to get it in and then afterwards we had a total faff about what to do if I got pregnant, which we hadn't thought of before because we hadn't planned on doing it.¹⁰²

Sandra's story is particularly interesting because it also explicitly illustrates another historical shift. While most stories from the 1960s still take place in a romantic relationship, these are increasingly decoupled from marriage. Angus McLaren notes that in America, instances of premarital sex rose in the 1920s, plateaued, then rose again in the 1960s.¹⁰³ Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher observe that in 1920s Britain, there was less acceptance of premarital sex than there was in the USA.¹⁰⁴ However, the move towards decoupling sex and marriage in the 1960s seems to have occurred across English-speaking culture more broadly. This is evident in Sandra's story, which is British, and in Frank Bongiorno's work on Australian sexual history.¹⁰⁵ This rise in premarital sex is observable in the virginity loss confessional genre, although the sample size is small. Sandra's story specifically isolates a historical moment (which editor Monroe uses Philip Larkin's famous poetic claim that "Sexual intercourse began / In nineteen sixty-three" to illustrate).¹⁰⁶ Sandra is coerced into marrying Ian some time later, but it is because she falls pregnant, not because she loses her virginity to him. She notes a change in the (British) culture of talking about sex:

You could have said that a new dawn came with me getting pregnant because it was the sixties and within two or three years of us getting married, everybody was

¹⁰² Monroe, *First Time*, p. 68.

¹⁰³ McLaren, *Twentieth-Century Sexuality*, p. 176.

¹⁰⁴ Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in Britain 1918-1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 113.

¹⁰⁵ Frank Bongiorno, *The Sex Lives of Australians: A History* (Collingwood: Black, Inc, 2012), p. 226, p. 257. Bongiorno uses "Sex and the Single Student" articles on birth control published in 1960s university magazines as proof of the changing Australian sexual culture, although he observes that for many immigrant cultures, premarital virginity remained important.

¹⁰⁶ Monroe, *First Time*, p. 70.

bonking, but more significantly, they were saying that they were bonking. That was when times really began to change. My sister actually lived with her boyfriend before they were married. Now she was only eighteen months younger than me. But that's how quickly times were changing, because there was no way Ian and I would have got away with living together just a couple of years previously.¹⁰⁷

One of the key developments which allowed this shift across sexual cultures of the Anglosphere was the widespread availability of the Pill. Sandra notes that she and Ian had no contraception available to them, despite the fact that he was a medical student (Sandra notes that he was “too shy” to buy condoms),¹⁰⁸ and relied on douching with vinegar and water for birth control – something which was obviously ineffective. Because the Pill enabled women to reliably decouple sex and reproduction, it opened up a new space where sex could focus on pleasure, not on procreation. Tom McGrath, editor of underground 1960s magazine *IT*, described 1960s Western culture as emphasising “the individual’s right to pleasure (orgasm)”.¹⁰⁹ Robert Muchembled describes the “sudden irruption of the female orgasm onto the public and private stage.”¹¹⁰ Similarly, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim note that one of the most major shifts in Western conceptions of love and marriage has been the insertion of what they term the “female biography” – that is, the recognition that the woman is an individual, that she has a public presence and a place in the world independent of a man.¹¹¹ They contend that this has been increasing in impetus since the 1960s, noting that, “[t]he more women come to regard themselves as people with wishes of

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., pp. 69-70.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 69.

¹⁰⁹ Marcus Collins, “Introduction,” in *The Permissive Society and Its Enemies: Sixties British Culture*, ed. Marcus Collins (London: Rivers Oram Press, 2007), p. 3.

¹¹⁰ Robert Muchembled, *Orgasm and the West: A History of Pleasure from the 16th Century to the Present* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2008), p. 5.

¹¹¹ Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 61.

their own, the less they accept the fact that they are not fulfilled.”¹¹² This might account for this new openness of storytellers from the 1960s about their mediocre virginity loss experiences – they had a new opportunity for desire and pleasure, and the promise of a sexually fulfilling relationship, but it was not realised. Cook notes that by 1965, most teenagers in Britain had gained basic sexual knowledge, but only 48% of boys and 30% of girls reported enjoying their first experience of penetrative sex.¹¹³ Storytellers from the 1960s seem much more open to admitting this than those who lost their virginity in earlier decades. This might signal a shift towards pleasure, rather than propriety, being used to measure sexual experiences.

This shift was obviously a contentious one. While the 1960s clearly heralded a major shift in Western sexual narratives, older attitudes did not die easily. We might ascribe some of the ambivalence found in premarital virginity loss stories from the 1960s to guilt for failing older narratives – for example, one 1960s virgin from Johnson and Werner’s book, who lost her virginity in the back seat of a car with her fiancé, writes:

I was scared, I felt ashamed. I felt I was going to hell. What’s he gonna think of me tomorrow???? God, if I get pregnant! It was not a pleasant experience.¹¹⁴

Jamieson contends that during the 1960s and early 1970s, a new narrative began being circulated in modern Western societies in response to a sort of “moral panic”, and perhaps in part to combat this guilt experienced by those who lost their virginity before marriage. In this new public story, the boundaries were reset. Sex in the context of loving relationships was established as natural and healthy, while sex outside it risked negative consequences – pregnancy, disease, and psychological harm. Essentially, love replaced

¹¹² Ibid., p. 62.

¹¹³ Cook, *Long Sexual Revolution*, p. 171.

¹¹⁴ Johnson and Werner, *Virgin Diaries*, p. 86.

marriage as the legitimating force for sex.¹¹⁵ This seems to have been a narrative the storyteller from Johnson and Werner's book above found comforting. She writes that,

Looking back, I don't have that same feeling like it was a shameful thing. I think that it wasn't all that bad that I did what I did. I mean I really felt like I was in love, I really felt like he was the man I was going to marry.

Is that a good enough answer?¹¹⁶

As Jamieson notes, these rules were applied far more rigorously to women than to men.¹¹⁷

We can see this evident in a 1964 Newsweek article about sex on American college campuses entitled "The Morals Revolution on Campus". It claimed that men no longer expected to marry virgins, but offered a stern warning to young women: "Sex with anyone except 'Mr Right' is frowned upon, as is out-and-out promiscuity... The question is, how many 'Mr Rights' make a wrong?"¹¹⁸ Demisexuality, in which emotional connection is required for sexual attraction to be felt, was perhaps already compulsory for women, but in this period, we can see the paradigm being applied on a larger scale. A space was carved out in which it was socially permissible for women to feel desire. Love was the boundary, to the extent where Claire Langhamer has argued that the primacy of love in Britain in the 1960s was such that "the decade could more accurately be described as a golden age of romance, than an age of sexual permissiveness."¹¹⁹ But it was a boundary strictly enforced: there was, it would seem, a limited number of people a woman could claim she was in love with before suspicion would be cast on her reputation.

¹¹⁵ Jamieson, *Intimacy*, p. 26.

¹¹⁶ Johnson and Werner, *Virgin Diaries*, p. 86.

¹¹⁷ Jamieson, *Intimacy*, p. 26.

¹¹⁸ Julia A. Ericksen, *Kiss and Tell: Surveying Sex in the Twentieth Century* (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 76.

¹¹⁹ Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 11.

Cook argues that in Britain, “[t]he revolution in sexual attitudes during the second half of the 1960s was followed by a sexual revolution in behaviour in the 1970s, which accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s.”¹²⁰ This seems to have been echoed throughout the Anglosphere. (In the United States in particular, this revolution also led to the reestablishment of some reactionary conservative – particularly religious – cultures, as I discussed briefly in the first chapter.¹²¹) Indeed, although the rate of change in the 1960s in Western cultures was astonishing, many important elements remained unchanged. Although the boundary for sexual legitimacy had shifted from marriage to love, the idea that women were the sexual gatekeepers, responsible for controlling the desire of men, remained.¹²² In Britain, Langhamer notes that, “[t]he exchange value of virginity remained high across the mid-century,” and discusses a survey undertaken in the early 1960s by sex researcher Michael Schofield, which found that although half of his male respondents approved of premarital sex, 64% wanted to marry a virgin, and 85% of his female respondents wanted to be virgins upon marriage.¹²³ In his 1971 survey, Geoffrey Gorer found that 88% of women reached betrothal, if not marriage, as “technical virgins”.¹²⁴ Similarly, Seidman observes persistent ideas in the 1970s United States of the “good girl,” who controlled and concealed her sexual desires and restricted sexual activity to a serious loving relationship.¹²⁵ This move to using betrothal as a new benchmark for sexual activity seems to signal the beginning of a shift in behaviour, but it should be noted that this shift was a slow one, and virginity remained linked to ideas of innate value. The majority of the 1970s stories with female protagonists in the virginity loss confessional genre follow the

¹²⁰ Cook, *Long Sexual Revolution*, p. 338.

¹²¹ John d’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 343; Jeffrey Weeks, *The World We Have Won: The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 97.

¹²² Seidman, *Romantic Longings*, pp. 153-154; Tolman, *Dilemmas of Desire*, p. 201.

¹²³ Langhamer, *English in Love*, p. 140.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Seidman, *Romantic Longings*, pp. 153-154.

same patterns as the ones from the 1960s. There are some stories, like Sherrie's, which include explicitly scripted active anti-romantic virginity loss, but as with earlier periods, the majority take place with romantic partners, although acquaintances and strangers begin to appear with more frequency. Female protagonists continue to find their virginity loss experiences underwhelming, and many experience moral ambivalence afterwards, as in a story (1970s) from Bouris' book, where the female protagonist lost her virginity at 15 to a boy she was dating. She writes that, "After it was over, I cried. I knew something was irrevocably lost – much more than just my intact hymen."¹²⁶

While 1970s stories seem largely to be an extension of 1960s stories, there is one shift worth noting: the archetypal image of the virgin changed. Cook notes that in Britain, the focus of the moral backlash against society's sexual liberalisation shifted from unmarried women to schoolgirls, and the age at which first sex took place became a subject of anxiety.¹²⁷ Instead of being a woman, the virgin became a girl.¹²⁸ Virginity loss became inserted into a coming-of-age narrative for girls, something which was reflected in young adult literature.¹²⁹ (Judy Blume's influential American young adult novel *Forever* (1975) is a good example of this.) The 1970s marks the first occasion where something resembling Carpenter's stigma script begins to appear for women – Bouris recounts the story of one woman who "literally went on a mission to lose her virginity", and ended up having sex for the first time with a stranger at twenty-one.¹³⁰ (Although this would fit the bill for an active

¹²⁶ Bouris, *First Time*, p. 88.

¹²⁷ Cook, *Long Sexual Revolution*, p. 294.

¹²⁸ It is worth noting that as well as becoming a subject of anxiety, the girl also became overtly eroticised. Mark Jones discusses the developments in British fiction in the 1960s and 1970s depicting intergenerational love stories. He notes the appearance of the nymphet character, who, in this time period, becomes more sexually aggressive, observing that key developments were a liberatory view of permissiveness, the ascription of desire to girls, and the fact that post-pubescent girl characters enjoyed sex. [Mark Jones, "Down the Rabbit Hole: Permissiveness and Paedophilia in the 1960s," in *The Permissive Society and Its Enemies*, ed. Marcus Collins (London: Rivers Oram Press, 2007), pp. 120-121.]

¹²⁹ Amy Bowles-Reyer, "Becoming a Woman in the 1970s: Female Adolescent Sexual Identity and Popular Literature," in *Growing Up Girls: Popular Culture and the Construction of Identity*, ed. Sharon R. Mazzarella and Norma Odom Pecora (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), pp. 21-48.

¹³⁰ Bouris, *First Time*, p. 85.

scripted anti-romantic virginity loss, it is not a positive story – the storyteller did not enjoy sex, writing that it “wasn’t memorable”.¹³¹) This may be because virginity came to be tied to girlhood, rather than with the more adult institution of marriage, leading to the idea of an appropriate “timeline” for virginity loss. However, virginity loss as coming-of-age quest did not seem to be a model adopted by many female storytellers, and even this storyteller notes that she “had a lot of guilt and felt inhibited”, writing that “[u]pon losing it, I may have felt a little proud... But it was by no means a watershed, except that I felt it was wrong and continued to struggle with my mother’s values versus those of the ‘love generation’.”¹³² This association of virginity with girlhood may also have imbued it with some of the fragility and vulnerability that has typically been ascribed to girls, positioning girls as in need of guidance and casting their sexual desire and/or expression as something requiring social concern and policing, serving to reinscribe a dynamic of passivity into virginity.

This association of virginity with the girl, instead of the unmarried woman (who was presumably adult enough to choose her own husband – love, as I discussed in the first chapter, was one key way in which women were enabled to assert some subjectivity), gave rise to shifting ideas of exploitation. Whereas a virgin in an earlier time period who was deflowered and then abandoned might be considered as exploited because she was robbed of something of tangible value that could affect her socially; the exploitation of the 1970s and later virgin was coded as more emotional, something which took place on a more individual level. Virginity loss was figured as a moment of great vulnerability for the girl: it might not render her unmarriedable, but it could break her heart if she was abandoned by a callous partner. This seems to have been true even if the virgin deliberately lost her virginity outside the romantic narrative. For example, in Taylor’s story (1970s) in Boze

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid., p. 86.

and Kato's first book, Taylor lost her virginity as a freshman in college to a stranger in a field, which she described as a "young hippie's dream come true". Afterwards, she discovered that "open meadow boy" was something of an institution at her college, attempting to lure unsuspecting young women into sex, which significantly affected the way she felt about her virginity loss afterwards.¹³³ Even though she was not especially invested in the dominant romantic narrative, virginity loss was still a moment of intense emotional vulnerability for her.

In addition, there was a concern that the new sexual permissiveness of society may have robbed girls of the language in which to resist sex: if sex was acceptable, how could a young woman say no? Sexual surrender became figured as almost inevitable for girls, a necessary step in coming of age. Considering the passivity and vulnerability with which girlhood was endowed, this became a subject of considerable social anxiety. The 1960s and 1970s have been flagged as a period in which sex actually became worse for women for precisely this reason, arguing that girls felt a new pressure to sexually experiment, which many of them were not necessarily comfortable with.¹³⁴ 1970s stories in the virginity loss confessional genre support this to some extent – for example, Patricia (1970s) in Wickens' book, who lost her virginity at 14 to her older boyfriend, "felt moved in that direction; compelled to do it since the clothes had come off and my friend was doing it in the next room." The experience, she reports, was "very unsatisfying", and when she never heard from him again, she was "thoroughly disappointed and shocked by his unpleasant and callous treatment."¹³⁵

The shift as stories move into the 1980s is not large, but it is noticeable. It is not so much a change, but a development, an evolution. There are more diverse partner

¹³³ Boze and Kato, *Virgin Project*, p. 53.

¹³⁴ Albanesi, *Gender and Sexual Agency*, p. 4.

¹³⁵ Wickens, *How to Lose Your Virginity*, p. 110.

archetypes – more women start losing their virginity to friends, acquaintances, and strangers. The partner remains the most popular archetype, but commitment levels seem to be dropping: fiancés and husbands make far fewer appearances, replaced almost entirely by boyfriends. This is linked to another interesting development: while most romantic virginity losses are discussed in mediocre or negative terms physically, female protagonists do not seem to be feeling the same levels of shame after the fact, even though commitment levels are not as high. For protagonists in romantic relationships, marriage and the promise of a long term future relationship seems to have become far less of a concern: loving one's partner at that time seems to have become an acceptable reason for virginity loss. An example of this is the story 'The Same Little Girl From New England' (1980s) in Crosier's book, where the female protagonist Anna makes the decision to sleep with her boyfriend Justin. She does not have a particularly enjoyable virginity loss experience, but writes afterwards:

Justin and I remained a couple for two years during which I became acclimated to the act of love making and found it enjoyable very soon after. I was lucky that my first lover was someone to whom I was very close. Now that I am in my late twenties and this all seems like a series of cartoon images from a past existence, I am embarrassed by the fact that losing my virginity represented such an obstacle... virginity seems like it ought to be as insignificant as taking a driver's test.¹³⁶

This is not to say that guilt abates entirely – in another 1980s story from Crosier's book, 'Sweet Sixteen', the female protagonist Roxanne experiences significant guilt over losing her virginity to her boyfriend because she knew that they wouldn't be together forever – but overall, the 1980s seems to signal a move towards more positive virginity loss aftermaths for women.

¹³⁶ Crosier, *Losing It*, p. 101.

It also signals a general shift towards more active virginity loss stories. The idea of an appropriate timeline for virginity loss appears with more frequency: several scholars note that an increasing number of young women were starting to see virginity as shameful by the 1980s.¹³⁷ This is borne out in the genre. Perhaps as a consequence of this time pressure, more female protagonists make premeditated decisions to lose their virginities than in previous decades. (This, interestingly, is one of the few indications we get in the genre of the effect of the AIDS crisis, despite the suggestion that it led a swing back towards sexual conservatism.¹³⁸ Many of these premeditated experiences explicitly include contraception for the purposes of preventing disease as well as pregnancy.) Phoenix (1980s) in Boze and Kato's second book describes it as "discarding" her virginity when she chose to sleep with her boyfriend. Tammy (1980s) in Luadzers' book decides that "if she had sex in high school, it was too soon for her and she would see herself as a slut", but did not have to wait long after her "'set' time" to lose her virginity, choosing to sleep with her boyfriend on the night she graduated high school. One storyteller in Johnson and Werner's book had sex for the first time at twenty-one with a man she had been dating – she writes that, "I was done with my virginity and it was done with me." She also comments that she did not tell her partner that she was a virgin, because she was afraid he would think she was a "freak if he knew." Afterwards, she was relieved "that the first time was past [her], that [she] wasn't a virgin in her twenties anymore, that [she] didn't have to worry about when or who or where."¹³⁹ This seems to suggest that virginity became even more strongly associated with the girl – when virginity was maintained beyond a certain age, presumably into adult womanhood, it became not so much valuable as somehow monstrous and shameful.

¹³⁷ Laura M. Carpenter, "Like a Virgin... Again?: Secondary Virginity as an Ongoing Gendered Social Construction," *Sexuality & Culture* 15.2 (2011): pp. 119-120. See also Anke Bernau, *Virgins: A Cultural History* (London: Granta, 2007), p. 170; Thompson, *Going All the Way*.

¹³⁸ Albanesi makes this suggestion (Albanesi, *Gender and Sexual Agency*, p. 4).

¹³⁹ Johnson and Werner, *Virgin Diaries*, p. 216.

This notion of the timeline and virginity loss as coming of age can be observed in 1980s stories both inside and outside of romantic relationships – one storyteller in Bouris’ book decided she “didn’t want to go off to college a virgin”, and when the opportunity presented itself on a holiday in Hawaii, she took it. (She wrote to him later and he never wrote back, and she notes having “certain guilt feelings about sex”, showing that older narratives still wielded influence.)¹⁴⁰ Kate Monro’s story, where she decided to lose her virginity to a boy she had never met before while on holiday in France, is also an example of this. (The former is an American story, the latter British, which would seem to suggest a broad Western cultural shift.) This growth in active stories and particularly this notion of the timeline seems to signal a move away from virginity being imagined simply as something which binds two people together, although many storytellers who lost their virginity in romantic relationships do use this kind of language. Virginity loss also becomes a specifically individual milestone, tied more closely to a coming of age rhetoric. This had arguably always been true for men, but for women, this was a significant development in the sexual script. Virginity loss could be imagined as a rite of passage for girls as well as boys – perhaps not used to make a girl a woman in the way that it has been figured as making a boy a man, but an important step in a journey towards adulthood.

Although there was an increased number of virgins choosing to lose their virginities outside a romantic relationship, compulsory demisexuality remained – and still remains – the dominant paradigm in Western culture. Many virgins who lost their virginity outside this paradigm continued to feel regret – one storyteller (1980s) from Bouris’ book writes that, “I thought it was overrated. I had not experienced romance or a good kind of pain. I felt guilty and humiliated.”¹⁴¹ While more virgins were choosing to assert agency both inside and outside romantic relationships than ever before, passive stories continued to be

¹⁴⁰ Bouris, *First Time*, p. 86.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

largely negative if romance was not involved. This trend continues into the 1990s and 2000s. More mediocre experience/positive aftermath stories for women emerge, as well as more non-romantic partners, but it continues to be difficult for women to have a positive virginity loss experience outside the romantic framework unless it has been specifically self-scripted.

This is the period, however, when the majority of these positive self-scripted non-romantic experiences appear. They are a small percentage of stories when looked at in the context of the genre as a whole, but most do appear in the 1990s and 2000s – stories like Sherrie’s, which takes place in the 1970s, are outliers. The 1990s seems to mark a period of increasing opportunity for girls to self-script their virginity losses. Because this is such a small number of stories, using them to make inferences about historical developments is fraught; however, this would seem to be congruent with other movements in sexual history. As Plummer notes, the turn of the millennium marks a period in which sexual stories gain “unusual prominence and power” as dominant cultural narratives give way to personal participant narratives.¹⁴² We can read the rise of the virginity loss confessional genre, a genre defined by its participant narratives, as evidence of this. This would suggest that alternative scripts for virginity loss were at least circulated in the 1990s onwards, if not necessarily culturally endorsed.

When speaking specifically about female virgins, we should also note that the 1990s gave rise to two major cultural discourses on girlhood. The first of these has been called “reviving Ophelia”, in which adolescent girls are culturally coerced into setting

¹⁴² Kenneth Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change, and Social Worlds* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 6.

aside their authentic selves and taught to prioritise the needs of others above their own.¹⁴³ This is a pattern we see regularly reproduced in the virginity loss confessional genre, mostly in passive stories (although it does also occur in stories which follow a surrender narrative, in which the protagonist makes a decision but is coerced into it). We can see this pattern in evidence in Jennifer's story (1990s) in Luadzers' book. Jennifer's boyfriend Peter pressured her into sex: "Jennifer didn't want it, but she felt like she had to say yes or she would lose Peter as a boyfriend."¹⁴⁴ Jennifer prioritises Peter's desires above her own, even though she does not want sex – prioritising his pleasure, at the expense of her own agency, because she does not want to lose the emotional connection. Julie's story (1990s) from Carpenter's book, which I discussed earlier, also displays this rhetoric. Julie is pressured into sex by her boyfriend Scott:

He was like, 'Oh, Jule, you know you really should because.' Uh, what was the reason? Something about... the end result of it was, 'If you don't, then I'm going to leave you.' ...I mean, I think that had a lot to do with it. But I think it was more phrased like, 'Then you'll show me that you really care about me.'¹⁴⁵

We can see here how the idea that girls only want to have sex to establish a relationship is twisted in order to coerce Julie into sex. Julie becomes a living example of the "reviving Ophelia" discourse, choosing to prioritise Scott's sexual needs over her own desire to wait. This is congruent with the findings of many scholars. Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe and Thomson write that, "[t]o be conventionally feminine was to appear sexually unknowing, to aspire always to a relationship, to let sex 'happen', to trust to love, and to make men

¹⁴³ Aapola et al, *Young Femininity*, p. 42. This is a discourse that appeared more in American culture than in the rest of the Western world. Considering that the majority of the stories in the virginity loss confessional genre are American, it is perhaps unsurprising that we see it reflected.

¹⁴⁴ Luadzers, *Virgin S-E-X*, p. 37.

¹⁴⁵ Carpenter, *Virginity Lost*, p. 84.

happy,”¹⁴⁶ and argue that virginity loss is typically imagined as the man’s moment. The woman positioned as object, not as actor. Her desire is essentially disappeared and the man’s pleasure is prioritised, with the woman left to manage feelings of surrender and loss. Alexandra (1990s) in Wickens’ book sums this up succinctly when she refers to her role in her virginity loss as “the catalyst for someone else’s good time.”¹⁴⁷

The alternative discourse to “reviving Ophelia” is “girl power”, associated with a new “take-charge dynamism” in an attempt to rewrite the passivity and silence associated with girlhood and offer new opportunities for girls to assert their voices and agency.¹⁴⁸ This discourse, it would seem, offered new opportunities for girls to craft their own sexual scripts and construct their own experiences. Gail’s story (1990s) in Boze and Kato’s first book demonstrates this kind of “take-charge” dynamism – as a 15 year old at music camp, she and an acquaintance express their mutual desire for each other, but are hampered by a lack of private space to have sex, so Gail picked the lock of a practice room and she and her partner had sex on a timpani, an experience coded positive. Aapola, Gonick and Harris contend that there has been a backlash to girl power rhetoric, “the effect of which is a repositioning of girls within familiar binaries of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ girls and their attendant meanings around sexuality, femininity, power and agency.”¹⁴⁹ Key to this is the enforcement of the romantic narrative – as we saw with Emma’s story from Carpenter’s book, discussed in the previous section, some storytellers who actively scripted a non-romantic virginity loss experience still felt the weight of the romance narrative and experienced some regret about their choices.

¹⁴⁶ Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Sharpe and Rachel Thomson, “Deconstructing Virginity: Young People’s Accounts of First Sex,” *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* 15.3 (2000): p. 222.

¹⁴⁷ Wickens, *How to Lose Your Virginity*, p. 112.

¹⁴⁸ Aapola et al, *Young Femininity*, p. 19.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

While these two discourses may seem to be oppositional, Aapola, Gonick and Harris argue that these discourses are coming from essentially the same place: a shift in modernisation that has led to a kind of surge in individualisation and a simultaneous shift towards “standardising” individual existences. This is linked to the postmodern idea of the self as a kind of project in need of constant improvement, subject to what Anthony Giddens has called “self-monitoring”, the idea that “we are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves”.¹⁵⁰ They write:

Both ‘girl-power’ and ‘reviving Ophelia’ discourses emphasise young female subjectivities as projects that can be shaped by the individual. Both encourage young women to work on themselves, either through the DIY self-invention and ‘girls can do anything’ rhetoric of girl power, or through the self-help books and programmes that are available to transform girls in crisis.¹⁵¹

This has a number of implications for virginity loss. The girl power discourse may offer new opportunities for girls to shape their own sexual scripts and write their own sexual stories, outside of the romantic context. But the “girls in crisis” narrative of the reviving Ophelia discourse may lead these girls to be positioned as aberrant and in need of help and guidance – fragile, vulnerable girls who have been misled. Indeed, it is difficult not to think that some of the books in the virginity loss confessional genre do this work, especially books like Bouris’ and Luadzers’, which include many different stories of female virginity loss but have a prescriptive focus on the romantic narrative as the only appropriate script. Manuela du Bois Reymond contends that many modern young people are living out what she calls “choice biographies”, which contain a kind of paradox: while they have more choices before them than ever before, these come with added pressure to

¹⁵⁰ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), p. 75.

¹⁵¹ Aapola et al, *Young Femininity*, p. 54.

make the right choice. She describes this as a “tension between option/freedom and legitimization/coercion”.¹⁵² This is a tension we can observe in several books in the virginity loss confessional genre, which offer a variety of different virginity loss stories, but tend to only recommend one as appropriate. Virginity loss confessionals may be both part of the solution, offering new alternatives to the romantic narrative for women through their emphasis on participant stories and their inclusion of active stories where women script their own virginity losses, and part of the problem, with their tacit endorsement of the romantic narrative as appropriate and “natural” for girls.

Romanticising Virginity Loss

In summary, the stories of female virginity loss in the virginity loss confessional genre reveal a distinct evolution in discourse, moving from the marriage-only anti-communicatory attitude displayed in the earlier stories to a more open space in later stories. In this space, virginity loss is decoupled from marriage, and is positioned on a timeline. Opportunities exist for girls to script their own virginity losses, but this is generally discouraged. The ideal partner is one with whom the protagonist is in a long term committed monogamous relationship, and with whom they can openly discuss and plan their sexual experience(s). Across all time periods discussed in this chapter, it has been very difficult for girls to have a passive virginity loss experience outside a heterosexual romantic context.

By contrast, it is very difficult to discern any patterns at all when looking at stories of male virginity loss. As with women, the majority of stories from the 1940s-1960s follow the romance narrative, and as with women, there are more stories that take place with a

¹⁵² Manuela Du Bois-Reymond, “‘I don't want to commit myself yet’: Young People's Life Concepts,” *Journal of Youth Studies* 1.1 (1998): p. 65.

partner than with any other archetype, but overall, there is no real evolution to chart. Men lose their virginites with acquaintances, friends, strangers, authority figures. Experiences can be active or passive. Experiences are far more likely to be positive than they are for women, and there does not seem to be any particular narrative or archetype more likely to yield a positive result. Some male virgins experience performance anxiety, and others experience regret after the fact, but there is no real sense of the shame and guilt that pervade so many female stories. An illustrative example of this is the story ‘Pop!’ (1980s) from Crosier’s book, where the male protagonist Roger desperately wanted to lose his virginity to the “perfect” girl, but discovered this put too much pressure on him, so lost his virginity to a girl he had never met before and experienced a positive experience overall:

When I woke up the next morning, I was surprised to find that I didn’t hate myself.

The most overwhelming sensation was that I felt more ‘normal.’ I was suddenly more confident and felt little regret.¹⁵³

Where men do experience concern or regret after their virginity loss experience, it is usually because of fear of sexually transmitted diseases (this is particularly pronounced in stories from the 1980s and 1990s, where protagonists – like Roger above – are afraid of contracting AIDS). The cultural imperative to have a romantic first time with a loving partner in a committed relationship is not entirely absent, but it seems to hold little sway over men. For women, on the other hand, it is a constant spectre.

It is clear that compulsory demisexuality is applied to women in a way it is not to men. Men generally do not experience the same pressure to find the “right moment” to lose their virginity, and they are rarely, if ever, socially punished for losing their virginity outside of the romantic narrative. Men do not need to follow a script for their sexual

¹⁵³ Crosier, *Losing It*, p. 17.

experiences to be positive, whether it is a romantic narrative or a script of their own making. In short, men are not expected to be demisexual: romantic love and sexual desire are considered two discrete things. For women, the boundary is far more blurred. Many female virgins in the genre do describe experiencing sexual desire – Tolman borrows from Audre Lorde when she describes this as the teenage girl’s “erotic voice”, in which they describe feeling sexual desire and incorporate it into their narratives of sexual experiences.¹⁵⁴ The virginity loss confessional genre demonstrates that the majority of women are not demisexual themselves: the genre is peppered with female virgins who are sexually curious and experience desire. There are few tales of sexual awakening in the genre – that is, stories where the female protagonist had not experienced any form of sexual desire until they were coaxed into it by a partner. (Where these stories exist, they are mostly same-sex.) However, the genre also highlights the way that girl desire is disappeared at a cultural level, and the way this can affect young women – perhaps most pointedly, causing them to almost fall into “it just happened” experiences.

There is obviously a limitation on the sexual space allowed to girls and women here (especially the former). However, within the boundaries of love, there would seem to be a growing safe space for girls to sexually experiment, particularly with this relatively recent emphasis on trust and communication as intrinsic to real intimacy. In the following chapters, I will explore the ways this space is displayed in female-dominated popular culture: specifically, popular romance novels, in which female virginity loss is a regularly repeated trope. While the romance novel would seem to wholeheartedly endorse compulsory demisexuality, the safety of the space created by its emphasis on love also allows this paradigm to be subverted in increasingly interesting ways.

¹⁵⁴ Tolman, *Dilemmas of Desire*, p. 41.

Chapter Four – This Modern Love: The Virgin Heroine in Historical Romance

Fiction

Popular romance fiction is one of the largest, most widely read genres extant today. Figures published by the Romance Writers of America (RWA) show that the genre generates over a billion dollars per year in sales (\$1.438 billion in 2012, \$1.350 billion in 2013), which places it many millions of dollars ahead of its nearest competitors. Describing it as “popular” romance fiction is apt: according to the RWA figures, it was the top performing category on bestseller lists in 2012, and in 2008, it was estimated that approximately 74.8 million people read a romance novel.¹ Considering these are American figures, we can safely assume the global figure is significantly larger. Romance fiction is a major industry, and popular romance novels are widely read.

Significantly, the majority of these people are women. Although the influence of male publishers, editors and booksellers should not be understated, and male readers of the genre certainly exist, overwhelmingly, popular romance is a genre for women, by women, about women. It is thus unsurprising that we see mirrored in it a paradigm that, as I explored in the previous chapters, is gendered feminine. Popular romance fiction, defined by Pamela Regis as “a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines”² and by RWA as comprising “two basic elements... a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending,”³ is governed by compulsory demisexuality: the notion that for women, love and sex are naturally and

¹ “Romance Industry Statistics,” Romance Writers of America, available from <http://www.rwa.org/p/cm/ld/fid=580>

² Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), p. 19.

³ “About the Romance Genre,” Romance Writers of America, available from <http://www.rwa.org/p/cm/ld/fid=578>

should be intrinsically tied together. (This may seem an obvious point to make, but, as will be highlighted particularly in my discussion of early Mills & Boon in the next chapter, the role of sex in particular in the romance narrative is contested and complicated, and its entanglement with love not necessary a given.) It is also a genre in which there is a long tradition of virgin heroines and, more recently, representations of virginity loss. It is the natural genre to turn to next in this examination of the ways in which the romantic narrative dominates and affects female virginity loss experience.

Romance fiction is not a static genre, and the ways in which the link between love and sex manifests has altered over time. Jayashree Kamble has accounted for this in her description of the romance novel as a double helix, made up of the intertwined strands of “romance” and “novel”. Her definition of “romance” is of particular interest here: she argues that “the word ‘romance’ in the mass-market romance novel is actually the adjective ‘romantic’ used to describe an element that is ‘conducive to feelings of romance’ (i.e., supportive of a love affair).”⁴ What is considered “romantic” is historically specific and changes over time – as Kamble describes it, further drawing on this genetic metaphor, various alleles (which we might think of as traits or tropes) are dominant or recessive depending on the historical and cultural context.⁵ The alleles which express the relationship between love and sex in the novel are no exception – and a reading of the modern romance shows that compulsory demisexuality is certainly currently a dominant allele. Likewise, the alleles which govern the portrayal of virginity loss have not been static, and the genre’s relationship to virginity has undergone considerable shifts. The size of the genre means that contained within it are a multitude of sub-genres, and the tropes of these sub-genres also affect the ways in which love, sex and virginity are textually realised.

⁴ Jayashree Kamble, *Making Meaning in Popular Romance Fiction: An Epistemology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 14-15.

⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

In this chapter, after a brief overview of the history of the scholarship on romance, I examine historical romance fiction – that is, romance fiction written by contemporary authors set in the past, often in nineteenth century England. In the next chapter, I examine the contemporary category romances published by Harlequin Mills & Boon. I will focus specifically on representations of virgin heroines, but it should be noted that romance is a large genre and contains sub-genres outside the two I will be exploring here. In addition, while I believe compulsory demisexuality is inherent in the genre as a whole, the way it manifests in novels with non-virgin heroines can (though does not necessarily) follow different patterns.

What is a Romance Novel?

Many definitions of the romance novel are extant, and I mentioned some of the most well regarded and commonly cited above. Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan offer a more irreverent definition in their book *Beyond Heaving Bosoms*:

Boy meets girl.

Holy crap, shit happens!

Eventually, the boy gets the girl back.

They live happily ever after.⁶

Wendell and Tan's definition encompasses both the RWA's and Regis' – it includes the courtship/central love story, and the optimistic ending. There is one minor semantic element, however, I feel it gets wrong. The romance novel is rarely the story of the boy

⁶ Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance Novels* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), p. 10.

meeting the girl, but rather the girl meeting the boy. Although romance novels typically feature two protagonists, one male and one female,⁷ and increasingly have come to be told from the perspective of both characters, it is usually the heroine's experiences that are placed at the centre of the narrative. This is one of the reasons I have chosen the romance genre to study alongside the autobiographical stories of female virginity loss in the virginity loss confessional genre – in romance, emphasis is placed very firmly on female experience and female narratives.

Pamela Regis expands on her concise definition to outline eight essential elements of the romance novel:

- Society defined (that is, the society in which the hero and heroine will conduct their courtship is outlined)
- The meeting between hero and heroine
- The attraction between hero and heroine
- The barrier between hero and heroine
- The declaration of love
- The point of ritual death or dark moment (where it seems that hero and heroine can never be together)
- The recognition of the means by which the barrier can be overcome
- The betrothal.⁸

These are structural elements – elements which must occur in the plot. They can occur in any order. Some may occur more than once, some may occur off stage, and some may be emphasised, depending on the individual text.⁹ Regis also identifies three more optional

⁷ Although same-sex romance, particularly romance with two men, is becoming increasingly popular.

⁸ Regis, *Natural History*, p. 30.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

elements – the wedding or fete, where the happy couple’s union is celebrated; the scapegoat exiled, where a character opposed to the union is removed from the new society formed around the couple; and the bad character converted to good, where a character previously opposed is transformed to supporting the romantic couple.¹⁰

At the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance conference in 2014, Catherine Roach, following Regis, identified a further nine thematic elements of the romance novel:

- It’s hard to be alone
- Women are in a man’s world
- Love is a religion (that is, you must have or come to have faith in love)
- Love is hard work
- Love is a risk
- Love heals
- Love brings the promise of great sex
- Love brings happiness
- Love levels the playing field for women (that is, women win, and gain power).¹¹

These two sets of elements highlight the centrality of love to the romance novel. The plot, as we see in Regis’ elements, is structured via the development of the romantic relationship between hero and heroine; and romantic love, as we see in Roach’s elements, is imagined in a specific way within the romance novel. Love can function as a weapon wielded by the romance heroine – it is the tool she has that enables her to win, and allows her and the hero to construct a new egalitarian world. This is congruent with the equation Lynne Pearce

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 38-39.

¹¹ Catherine Roach, “(Another) Eight Essential Elements of the Romance Novel,” delivered at 5th International Conference on Popular Romance Studies: *Rethinking Love, Rereading the Romance*. Held at Makedonia Palace Hotel, Thessaloniki, Greece, 19-21 June 2014.

uses to express the way we think about modern love. Her formula is $x + y \rightarrow x' + y'$ – that is, when Partner X and Partner Y are added together and fall in love, they are transfigured and remade.¹² In the romance novel, X and Y are better, happier people in love than they were out of it. Romantic love allows hero and heroine to become utopian versions of themselves, and to construct a utopia – a small one, perhaps, but a utopia nonetheless – within the society defined at the beginning of the novel.

Roach's elements also highlight another feature of the romance novel which I believe is crucial, especially for the purposes of this dissertation: in the romance novel, love and sex are intrinsically tied together. Even in novels where sex is not represented within the boundaries of the narrative, love brings the promise of great sex. Compulsory demisexuality is a dominant paradigm within the romance novel. I find it curious that in her list of optional elements of the romance, Regis does not mention the sex scene. Although sex scenes do not appear in all romance novels, nor are they necessary to the form (as the popularity of inspirational and Amish romance would suggest),¹³ where they do appear, they generally function as a key narrative turning point and are crucial to the text. These scenes are often instances where the politics of love and sex within the novel are exposed. This is especially true of virginity loss scenes, as the narrative weight placed on the heroine's virginity makes its loss important, especially when read against the mandatory happy ending of the romance, where the couple are united in a long-term monogamous romantic relationship. This can be articulated in a number of different ways, and varies across sub-genres, as I will explore in the following chapters. The politics of love within the romance novel have also subjected the form to considerable scholarly criticism. I will explore this criticism and the questions scholars have raised about the

¹² Lynne Pearce, *Romance Writing* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), p. 1.

¹³ For more on these subgenres, see Valerie Weaver-Zercher, *The Thrill of the Chaste: The Allure of Amish Romance Novels* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 2013), and Lynn S. Neal, *Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

cultural narratives for women endorsed by the romance in the next section, before turning my focus specifically to the historical romance.

Is Romantic Love Feminist? Romance Scholarship

Romance scholarship, which has a history of some forty years, has been haunted by one question, neatly encapsulated in the title of the 2007 volume on popular romance edited by Sally Goade, *Empowerment versus Oppression*:¹⁴ do romance novels empower or oppress their readers? The question of whether books have a positive or negative effect on their readers is a question which, as Sarah Frantz and Eric Selinger note in their introduction to *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction*, has a long history, dating back at least to Plato's *Republic*, but it has been a peculiar preoccupation of scholarship on popular romance fiction.¹⁵ It is telling that the question is often phrased as "are romance novels feminist?", when we consider that they are, at their core, stories about romantic love. This is usually (but not always) heterosexual romantic love with a happy ending, where heroine and hero are united in blissful long-term committed monogamy. The pervasiveness of this question of romance fiction's feminist credentials is largely focused on the role played by romantic love within the romance novel. In the 1970s, when feminist literary critics were attempting to uncover a lost female canon,¹⁶ little attention was paid to the romance. It was apparently easier to sweep romance under the rug when looking for Elaine Showalter's *Atlantis*, the lost tradition of women's literature, even though romance

¹⁴ Sally Goade (ed), *Empowerment versus Oppression: Twenty First Century Views of Popular Romance Novels* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007).

¹⁵ Sarah S.G. Frantz and Eric Murphy Selinger, "Introduction," in *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction: Critical Essays*, ed. Sarah S.G. Frantz and Eric Murphy Selinger (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2012), p. 5.

¹⁶ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 10; Mary Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 4-5.

is almost exclusively written and read by women and focuses on female protagonists and experiences. If the romance was not openly derided by feminist critics, it was seemingly ignored, with its enthusiastic endorsement of love, romance, and blissful heterosexuality perhaps seen as too embarrassing to include in a female (or feminist) canon.

Much of the early scholarly criticism of romance, as I will outline below, arose in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and was heavily informed by second-wave feminism, as well as by a Frankfurt School-influenced attitude to mass culture that positioned romance readers as passive dupes of patriarchal capitalism. Essentially, the genre was accused of romanticising the subordinate position of women. Germaine Greer openly loathed the romance novel, proclaiming that romance authors were “women cherishing the chains of their bondage”.¹⁷ Ann Barr Snitow derisively called Harlequin romances pornography for women, “in which sex is bathed in romance, diffused, always implied rather than enacted at all”,¹⁸ and contending that it is the heroine’s task to “convert rape into love-making”.¹⁹ Tania Modleski, also writing about Harlequin romances, argued that “the reader is encouraged to participate in and actively desire feminine self-betrayal” because “the heroine of the novels can achieve happiness only by undergoing a complex process of self-subversion”.²⁰ Kay Mussell called romance novels “adolescent dramas that mirror the infantilism of women in a patriarchal culture”.²¹ Janice Radway, in her well known 1984 study of the “Smithton” romance readers, *Reading the Romance*, was a little more optimistic, noting that the Smithton readers read romance novels as a story of female triumph, with an understanding that “female independence and marriage are compatible

¹⁷ Cited in Regis, *Natural History*, p. 4.

¹⁸ Ann Barr Snitow, “Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different,” *Radical History Review* 20 (1979): p. 154.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

²⁰ Tania Modleski, *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women* (London: Routledge, 1982), p. 37.

²¹ Kay Mussell, *Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women's Romance Fiction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. 184.

rather than mutually exclusive”.²² However, her ultimate conclusion was that romances “give the reader a strategy for making her present situation more comfortable... rather than a comprehensive program for reorganizing her life in such a way that all needs might be met”.²³ According to these scholars, romance was, as Hsu-Ming Teo has put it, the “opiate of the missus”²⁴ – an inherently conservative form, its portrayal of romantic love serving to reconcile women to patriarchy.

In this figuration, the ultimately utopian portrayal of romantic love within the novels becomes a panacea for all other ills: the heroine gains love, and so does not require autonomy, which passes on a deleterious message to the duped readers. It also enables her to change and symbolically defang the hero without changing the world around them, allowing him to function as a sort of benevolent patriarch, his love for her ensuring he will not treat her badly – a dangerous principle, critics reasoned, if applied in the real world. There is a dichotomy set up within many of these articles between the readers of romance and the feminist critic. This is particularly evident in Radway’s book, where she writes:

The Smithton women are, in sum, significantly more inclined than their feminist critics to recognise the inevitability and reality of male power and the force of social convention to circumscribe a woman’s ability to act in her own interests. It must also be said that they are comfortable with the belief that a woman should be willing to sacrifice extreme self-interest for a long-term relationship where mutually agreed upon goals take precedence over selfish desire...

²² Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p. 54.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 215

²⁴ Hsu-Ming Teo, “The Opiate of the Missus? Modernity and the Romance Novel,” delivered at Women and Modernity Conference: *Flappers, Trappers and Modish Maids*, held at the University of Melbourne, December 2000, quoted in Juliet Flesch, *From Australia With Love: A History of Modern Australian Romance Novels* (Perth: Curtin University Press, 2004), p. 108.

While the romantic heroine may appear foolish, dependent, and even pathetic to a woman who has already accepted as given the equality of male and female abilities, she appears courageous, and even valiant, to another still unsure that such equality is a fact or that she herself might want to assent to it.²⁵

The feminist critic thus becomes enlightened and able to penetrate the ideology of the romance in a way that the reader (portrayed here as inherently conservative, if not actually anti-feminist) cannot. However, in Radway's grudging admission that the heroine of the romance is perhaps not as passive as she is made out to be, we can see the foreshadowing of the bolder claim made by Alison Light in her essay 'Returning to Manderley'. Romance novels, Light notes, "have on the whole, been condemned by the critics on the Left... seen as coercive and stereotyping narratives which invite the reader to identify with a passive heroine who only finds true happiness in submitting to a masterful male."²⁶ She condemns this kind of analysis, writing that it,

slides into a puritanical Left-wing moralism which denigrates readers. It also treats women yet again as the victims of, and irrational slaves to, their sensibilities.

Feminists must baulk at any such conclusions which implies that the vast audience of romance readers (with the exception of a few upfront intellectuals) are either masochistic or inherently stupid. Both text and reader are more complicated than that. It is conceivable, say, that reading Barbara Cartland could turn you into a feminist.²⁷

²⁵ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, p. 78.

²⁶ Alison Light, "Returning to Manderley: Romance Fiction, Female Sexuality, and Class," in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Mary Eagleton (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 140-141.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

Light acknowledges that romances are polysemic texts, and that reading is a more complex process than these earlier critics of the romance had allowed.²⁸ She concludes that the romance offers a kind of fantasy heterosexuality to women who are unable to achieve it in their own lives, one where all their needs (including the needs for respect and relative autonomy) are being met. She reads the romance as symptomatic of discontent with the real (patriarchal) world rather than as reconciling the reader to it – a small, quiet rebellion, but a rebellion nonetheless. Her ultimate conclusion that the romance novel might not be progressive, but it could be transgressive, is arguably the first scholarly recognition that the feminist romance reader and a feminist reading of the romance novel might be possible.

This point was taken up with vigour by romance authors in 1992 with the publication of *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*. This anthology was edited by prolific romance author Jayne Ann Krentz, and contained essays by romance authors in defence of the genre. Several explicitly defended the genre's feminist credentials, including Krentz, who wrote in her introduction that, "[m]ost [authors in the volume] consider themselves feminists, although they recognise that their definition of feminism may not coincide with that of all feminists."²⁹ In the brand of feminism expressed here, there were no critiques of romantic love. There was, however, an implicit critique of heterosexuality, recognising that the power relationship between the hero and heroine was skewed, particularly given the emphasis on the hero's virility and aggressive "alpha" masculinity. This runs through several essays in the book – Robyn Donald writes that,

²⁸ Light is supported here by Nickianne Moody, who writes that, "Popular texts are always polysemic, porous, and marked by significant interstices. They are open to contradictory readings and capable of articulating ambiguity or negotiating tensions in cultural values." [Nickianne Moody, "Feminism and Popular Culture," in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, ed. Ellen Rooney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 174-175.]

²⁹ Jayne Ann Krentz, "Introduction," in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*, ed. Jayne Ann Krentz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), p. 3.

“[h]is strength is a measure of her power. For it is she who must conquer him.”³⁰ Daphne Clair contends that romance novels are “the subversive literature of sexual politics”³¹ and that,

Romantic heroes are arrogant autocrats and macho males, not because women are masochists but for the same reason that 007’s enemies possess all that unlikely technology. Victory over a weak and ineffectual adversary is not worth much. But when a woman has a big, tough, powerful male on his knees and begging her to marry him, that’s a trophy worth having.

A smoking .45 and six corpses at his feet is a male fantasy. A woman will settle for one live hero at hers. And if she places a dainty foot upon his neck, it is only to invite him to kiss it.³²

Similarly, Susan Elizabeth Phillips argues that,

By the end of the book, the heroine has brought him under her control in a way women can seldom control men in the real world. The heroine has managed to change him from an emotionally frigid Neanderthal into a sensitive, caring, nurturing human being... his almost superhuman physical strength is now *hers to command*.³³

In the figuration expressed by the authors in this volume, romantic love becomes not a panacea to reconcile women to patriarchy, but a weapon that enables women to fight against it. Heroines symbolically defeat the hero when he is on his knees, begging her to

³⁰ Robyn Donald, “Mean, Moody and Magnificent: The Hero in Romance Literature,” in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, ed. Krentz, p. 81.

³¹ Daphne Clair, “Sweet Subversions,” in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, ed. Krentz, p. 61.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 71.

³³ Susan Elizabeth Phillips, “The Romance and the Empowerment of Women,” in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, ed. Krentz. p. 58. Emphasis in original.

marry him. Romantic love becomes radical, allowing women the opportunity for a voice and choice.³⁴ This mirrors some of the ideas surrounding romantic love I discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation: it does not change the world, but it can carve out a safe space for women within it.

As second-wave feminism gradually gave way to third-wave feminism, readings more like the ones those championed in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* began to emerge in scholarship. Readings similar to those espoused by early critics have remained: one year after the publication of *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, Jeanne Dubino argued that romances “condition women for subservience”,³⁵ and views like this have persistently been aired – for example, in 2011, psychologist Susan Quilliam, concerned about romance fiction as “value transmitter” and “permission giver”, contended that, “[s]ometimes the kindest and wisest thing we can do for our clients is to encourage them to put down the books – and pick up reality.”³⁶ However, broadly, more feminist readings of romance have emerged. In her seminal 2003 text *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, Regis defends the genre, seeking to debunk the claims that romance fiction reinforces marriage, a dangerous institution for women, and that it is powerful enough to reconcile women to patriarchy and subservience, extinguishing the heroine’s agency.³⁷ She contends that, “[t]he genre is not about women’s bondage as the literary critics would have it. The

³⁴ As Kamble notes, this is also symptomatic of romance’s complex and troubled relationship to capitalism. The romance hero very often takes on the form of the capitalist captain of industry, and his wealth and (especially) industrious spirit are a key textual pleasure, as he pursues the heroine as he might pursue a new enterprise. However, through his ultimate submission to the heroine via his declaration of love for her, the genre “undercuts its own veneration of him through the heroine’s (and others’) concern of the traits he exhibits as a romantic partner – and as an alarming economic figure.” In this way, the romance novel expresses concerns about unequal power along an economic axis, as well as a gendered sexual one. (Kamble, *Making Meaning*, p. 60.)

³⁵ Jeanne Dubino, “The Cinderella Complex: Romance Fiction, Patriarchy and Capitalism,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 27.3 (1993): p. 116.

³⁶ Susan Quilliam, “‘He seized her in his manly arms and bent his lips to hers...’. The surprising impact that romantic novels have on our work,” *Journal of Family Planning and Reproductive Health Care* 37.3 (2011): p. 181.

³⁷ Regis, *Natural History*, pp. 10-13.

romance novel is, to the contrary, about women's freedom."³⁸ Crucial to this is romantic love: it is the love story within the novel that *creates* the possibility for this freedom. Catherine Roach supports this argument – in her article 'Getting a Good Man to Love', she contends that love is viewed as an idealising force, and the romance narrative has a "healing end"³⁹ – she writes that:

The reader fantasy here is that patriarchy ends, yet patriarchy continues, and *you get a good man to love*; that is, you now have the alpha-king for your own, as you have fought and vanquished him on the battlefield of love.⁴⁰

We can see here how views of love have changed in scholarly views of the romance novel. Regis's claim is a direct response and rebuttal to Greer's assertion that romance writers cherish the chains of their bondage. Romantic love, we can assume, was the chain that kept these women yoked for Greer, drawing on Shulamith Firestone's notion that love was a "cultural tool of male power to keep women from knowing their condition".⁴¹ (Lynne Segal neatly describes this second-wave feminism approach to love and romance as, "it starts when you sink into his arms and ends with your arms in his sink".⁴²) Firestone also described love as "the pivot of women's oppression today".⁴³ Fellow second-wave feminist Kate Millett was likewise critical, believing love obscured problems of women's status and economic dependency.⁴⁴ By contrast, third-wave feminism has been far less interested in addressing love as an oppressor of women, making way for readings like Roach's, in

³⁸ Ibid., p. xiii.

³⁹ Catherine Roach, "Getting a Good Man to Love: Popular Romance Fiction and the Problem of Patriarchy," *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 1.1 (2010): p. 5.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 11. Emphasis in original.

⁴¹ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Bantam, 1970), p. 147.

⁴² Lynne Segal, *Straight Sex: Rethinking the Politics of Pleasure* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), p. 242.

⁴³ Firestone, *Dialectic of Sex*, p. 126.

⁴⁴ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1970), p. 37.

which love is both a battlefield on which heroine vanquishes hero and something which heals them both, with the form functioning as “a fantasy antidote to patriarchy”.⁴⁵

Crucial to this shift in views of the romance novel, are, I contend, changes in views of love – in particular, the ways in which love interacts with sex. In my discussion of the virginity loss confessional genre, I argued that compulsory demisexuality functions to place boundaries on the space in which women are able to desire and seek pleasure. This is obviously limiting, but within these boundaries, a sort of safe space is created, in which pleasure and desire can be explored. The romance novel functions as this kind of space. Early critics of the genre focused on the boundaries and how they limited women, while more recent critics have focused on the freedom within. Writing about the distinction between second- and third-wave feminism, Rosemarie Tong argues that,

Third-wave feminists are shaping a new kind of feminism that is not so much interested in getting women to want what they *should want*, as in responding to what women say they want and not second-guessing or judging whether their wants are authentic or inauthentic.⁴⁶

This is another way of reading these boundaries. More recent approaches to the romance novel have accepted that the fantasy of romantic love appears to be important to the predominantly female readers of the form. Instead of railing against this, new approaches to the romance novel have focused on the potential radicalism of this portrayal of romantic love and the opportunities it affords. (And, indeed, new forms of the romance novel have developed in which the discourse of romantic love is mobilised in new and radical ways: for example, Kamble discusses the work of paranormal romance author Nalini Singh,

⁴⁵ Roach, “Getting a Good Man to Love,” p. 9.

⁴⁶ Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2009), p. 288.

whose books have a multi-racial and culturally hybrid cast which disrupts a narrative of romantic love which centres on the reproduction of the white race.)⁴⁷ Romance fiction provides a safe space in which female characters can desire and achieve pleasure within socially permissible boundaries, something which has become increasingly obvious as sex scenes have begun to appear on the page in the romance novel. The guaranteed romantic happy ending of the romance novel also means that these socially permissible boundaries can be pushed somewhat, leading more transgressive fantasies to be expressed in sex scenes. I am particularly interested in a specific subset of these: virginity loss scenes. While the virgin heroine has appeared regularly in romance fiction since the inception of the form, representations of virginity loss are a more recent phenomenon. I have already explored the ways in which the romantic narrative influences autobiographical stories of virginity loss – in this chapter and the one following, I want to explore the ways in which virginity loss is represented in romantic narratives.

Fairy Tale Romance: The Fantasy of the Historical Romance

In 1972, Avon Books published *The Flame and the Flower*, the book widely recognised as the first erotic historical romance.⁴⁸ These “sweet savage” romances,⁴⁹ sometimes pejoratively referred to as “bodice rippers”, were a new kind of romance novel: set in the past, they featured more graphic sexual content than other romance novels of the period.⁵⁰ Although other sexually explicit texts by women certainly existed – Grace

⁴⁷ Kamble, *Making Meaning*, pp.131-156.

⁴⁸ Whether or not *The Flame and the Flower* actually was the first erotic historical romance is a question I do not have the space to explore here. However, it was certainly treated as a new type of book by the publishing industry, and in that sense, it was groundbreaking.

⁴⁹ This name comes from Rosemary Rogers’ 1974 erotic historical novel *Sweet Savage Love*.

⁵⁰ Other sexually explicit texts certainly existed – *Peyton Place* (1956) and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (pub. 1960), for example – but sweet savage romances are among the first genre romance novels to have such a high degree of sexual explicitness.

Metalious' 1956 novel *Peyton Place*, for example – these erotic historical romances were one of the first large bodies of sexual writing by women which focused on the female experience.⁵¹ The terms “sweet” and “savage” provide an insight into the typical plot of these early erotic historical romances: heroes were regularly dominant, brutal and sexually aggressive. Many, including Brandon, hero of *The Flame and the Flower*, raped their respective heroines. But these heroes were also ultimately transformed, the savage man becoming sweet as the heroine's love changed him from dangerous brute to ideal husband.

This plot is not a new one. We can see its ancestor clearly in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, published 232 years earlier than *The Flame and the Flower*. But while Pamela saved and transformed the rapacious Mr B by preserving her virginity at all costs, the fate that befalls the virgin heroines of the erotic historical often more closely resemble that of Richardson's other famous heroine, Clarissa. In *The Flame and the Flower*, the heroine, winsome English virgin Heather, is raped by hero Brandon, who mistakes her for a prostitute, in the first chapter. But Heather is not Clarissa, doomed to die once she is deflowered. Instead, Heather gets Pamela's happy ending. It is not virginity that transforms Heather's aggressive hero from rapist to lover – rather, it is love. Hsu-Ming Teo writes of this new virgin heroine that,

Her attitude toward sexuality is one of the defining characteristics of the new heroine. She is no longer willing to refrain from sex until she is married, and if her virginity is forcibly taken from her, the experience is traumatic but it does not signify the end of the world for her.⁵²

⁵¹ Carol Thurston, *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 10.

⁵² Hsu-Ming Teo, *Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2012), p. 155.

Teo is writing specifically about orientalist historical romances here, but this can be expanded to apply to the historical romance more broadly. For heroines of the post-*The Flame and the Flower* erotic historical romance, loss of virginity outside a socially acceptable framework is no longer a death sentence. As the historical romance evolves, we see heroines increasingly bend and break the rules of the societies in which they live. This is something for which they are ultimately not punished, but rewarded: at the novel's denouement, they achieve a romantic happy ending with their hero. His love for her ensures that she will be respected and not oppressed. The governing law of female sexual behaviour within the historical romance is a modern one: compulsory demisexuality. Sex – and, in particular, virginity loss – becomes permissible if the heroine's partner is the man with whom she will ultimately achieve this happy ending. When reading virginity loss scenes in the historical romance, we must be cognisant of this fact: while the society defined, per Regis, within the novel is historical, the governing paradigm is modern.⁵³ This is arguably one of the key pleasures of the historical romance, and before we can move on to examining virginity loss scenes more closely, we must consider the implications of the historical setting.

While *The Flame and the Flower* is very important in the history of the historical romance novel, it is important to note that not all (or even most) of the historical romances that come after it follow its form. The historical romance novel has not remained static – as Carol Thurston notes, authors were disavowing rape plots as early as 1981 (although rape in romance continued to occur much later than this, and still occasionally, although rarely,

⁵³ This is not true solely with reference to romantic love: Kamble has noted the way in which evolving attitudes towards race has been portrayed in the romance genre. She reads portrayals of slavery in Lisa Kleypas's 1992 romance *Only in Your Arms* against its revised reprint in 2002, *When Strangers Marry*. The latter is far more condemnatory towards slavery as an institution, reflecting social concerns about racism in the context in which the book was written, rather than when it was set. (Kamble, *Making Meaning*, pp. 15-21.)

appears, as in Anna Campbell's controversial 2007 novel *Claiming the Courtesan*).⁵⁴

While the basic form of the romance – that is, a central love story with a happy ending – has remained the same, the tropes of the historical romance have evolved significantly. Some things, though, are relatively consistent. Firstly, historical romances consistently feature, as Thurston puts it, “high-spirited women who ultimately [win] not only love but more respect and independence than the times in which they lived commonly allowed their sex.”⁵⁵ In the historical novel, patriarchy is almost always institutionalised, the rules curtailing female freedom made plain and clear. The heroine often breaks these rules or achieves romantic success in spite of them, something which is one of the key pleasures of the form. Secondly, in the erotic historical, love, marriage, and sex are typically distinct textual milestones. In the historical romances of authors like Georgette Heyer, love, sex, and marriage are generally bundled together in the conclusion: hero and heroine declare their love, get married, and presumably have sex in the nebulous world that exists beyond the happily-ever-after.⁵⁶ In the erotic historical, these three elements are regularly separated. Love – by which I do not mean simply a declaration of love, but a narrative assurance of the long-term endurance of the protagonists' companionate and passionate romantic relationship – is the stable endpoint of the romance novel, but marriage and sex are no longer automatically included in this endpoint. Instead, they often become separate textual milestones which serve to drive the plot forward. For example, in *The Flame and the Flower*, sex occurs first, with Brandon's rape of Heather occurring in the first chapter. Marriage occurs next, as rich family friends of Heather's compel Brandon to marry her when it is discovered that she is pregnant. Love comes much later, with the declaration of

⁵⁴ Thurston, *Romance Revolution*, p. 22.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁵⁶ It should be noted that by “historical” I am referring to books written specifically about the past from a remove. Georgette Heyer's books are historical because she wrote them long after the time period in which they are set – for example, *These Old Shades* was published in 1926 but set in the Georgian period. Jane Austen, on the other hand, would not be considered historical by this reasoning, because while her books continue to be read now, they were set in a period contemporary with their writing.

love coming towards the end of the book. I will discuss these textual functions in more detail in the next section.

There are several factors that need to be taken into account when thinking through the potency of the historical setting in romance. Laura Vivanco quotes (not necessarily approvingly) from author Philippa Gregory, who contends that the historical romance, unlike the historical novel, “uses historical settings because it depends on the imaginary glamour of the past.”⁵⁷ While it would be foolish to disregard the appeal of the glamour of the historical setting (it is worth noting here that the vast majority of historical romances take place against a backdrop of wealth, particularly on the part of the hero, and great relish is often taken in describing ball gowns and stately homes), to write off the appeal of the historical wholly on this glamour is reductive. Juliet Flesch draws on the work of Deborah Kaye Chappell, who argued that the erotic historical appeared at the moment in which women were being challenged and empowered by the feminist movement and was both part of a conservative backlash and allowed for a construction of a new female identity. She contended that “[d]epictions of violence with erotic intent may appear more acceptable when safely removed from the reader by time,” and that early erotic historicals “provided women of the 1970s with a fantasy that was psychologically useful”.⁵⁸ However, this does not really account for the ongoing popularity of the historical setting, against which an increasingly more permissive sexual politics is being portrayed.

Chappell’s argument does, however, contain the interesting potential for the idea that the veneer of historical accuracy allows readers to indulge in fantasies that might be considered transgressive if located in a modern setting. By setting a book in the past, the reader is automatically placed at a cultural remove. The historical romance takes place in a

⁵⁷ Philippa Gregory, quoted in Laura Vivanco, *For Love and Money: The Literary Art of the Harlequin Mills & Boon Romance* (Penrith: Humanities-Ebooks, 2011), p. 42.

⁵⁸ Deborah Kaye Chappell, quoted in Flesch, *From Australia With Love*, p. 182.

recognisable but fantastical world, with different rules and mores than the contemporary world of the reader, which allows boundaries to be pushed. This is particularly obvious in older erotic historicals, with the prevalence of scenes where the usually virginal heroine is raped. (Another subgenre in which scenes like this also occur occasionally in various manifestations is the paranormal romance, which is obviously a fantastical space.⁵⁹) The brutality of the hero is sometimes excused, rationalised as historical accuracy, allowing the fantasy of the romance to continue (and perhaps the fantasy of his brutality to be entertained), without the reader being forced to acknowledge that it is a (perhaps specifically sexual) fantasy. The three quotes below are all from Amazon reviews of *The Flame and the Flower*:

I read through the reviews and completely understand why someone would feel that a few of the initial sexual scenes (and yes the term 'rape' is accurate) are hard to read through and they were offended. But as many of the reviewers stated, you need to put it into perspective. This is, in every sense of the term, a 'period piece.' This was normal and quietly accepted.⁶⁰

He [Brandon] didn't repeatedly rape her all along. It was only two times. This was 200 hundred [sic] years ago when women and children were still considered to be property unlike today. Do I excuse his early behavior? No, but I could see how things were back then. To be fair, he never forced himself again on her, and they

⁵⁹ In the paranormal romance, the unwilling act in which the heroine is forced to take place is sometimes transformation into a supernatural creature rather than sex. It is an interesting question to consider in the light of virginity loss narratives, because these transformation scenes are often imbued with the same sense of inevitability, though they are not always operating under the paradigm of compulsory demisexuality.

⁶⁰ Amazon Customer, "Your Body Will Tingle with All the Tension and Passion!" Amazon, September 6, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R2XHXWCD5AP7UO/>

took their time to warm up to each other and love each other before they really made ‘love’ for the first time.⁶¹

I feel the way she [Woodiwiss] brings them together is actually quite believable [sic] if one will consider the time period the book represents. Men could and did pretty much what they wanted to and with woman in that era. And that was in real life, not just romance novels.⁶²

For many readers, the historical setting of *The Flame and the Flower*, as well as the guarantee of the happy ending that comes from the romance genre, creates a safe space in which rape fantasies can be depicted. As one reviewer puts it, “Yes, there is forced seduction, but many like to read that.”⁶³

Rape scenes are a relatively simple example of this phenomenon. As contemporary sexual mores have become more permissive and rape scenes have consequently disappeared from historical romance, there are no longer such clear examples of the ways in which the historical setting enables more transgressive fantasy. However, we should not assume that this function of the historical has disappeared, and the only appeal left is a sort of anaemic glamour. The historical setting encodes both the real and the fantastical in interesting, productive ways. Imelda Whelehan notes that the nineteenth century (by far the most popular period for historical romance) is recent enough to be accessible, and appeals to the collective psyche stressed by the pressures of modernity.⁶⁴ However, it is also far

⁶¹ Bookwormsince75, “Different Opinion,” Amazon, 19 June, 2010, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/RILP8M72RC80Y/>

⁶² KellyL, “Best by Far,” Amazon, 27 February, 2009, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R36E6YCRZI3VSJ/>

⁶³ Pandapaws, “Good down time book,” Amazon, 26 January, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R2CYDGPDLIOU8/>

⁶⁴ Imelda Whelehan, “The Contemporary Dilemmas,” in *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*, ed. Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 12.

away enough to function as fantastical, and the idea of both being restricted by and breaking its stringent rules is potent.

Pearce, writing about the literary obsession with romantic love, suggests another key appeal that the historical romance might have. She writes that,

Western civilisation... has been apparently hell-bent on discovering a universal explanation for this most lawless of emotions; and this, in turn, has resulted in the widely held belief that romantic love is the same everywhere: transhistorical, transcultural and terrifyingly omnipotent.⁶⁵

This idea that romantic love is transhistorical (or, perhaps more correctly, ahistorical) is intriguing when applied to the historical romance, in which women use love to ultimately triumph over an overtly patriarchal society. Lisa Fletcher explicates this argument more fully in her book *Historical Romance Fiction*, writing that,

Broadly speaking, the performative *force* of the romantic speech act [“I love you”] (and of romance) depends on both a denial of its historicity, of the fact that it has always been said before, at the same time as it relies on this fact for its familiarity and sense. In these terms ‘I love you’ invokes a kind of continuous present. More particularly, there are two somewhat contradictory but mutually reinforcing aspects to this claim which are brought to the fore by my focus on heterosexual love stories set in the *past*: ‘I love you’ is always said anew, but over and over again these texts insist that whenever and wherever it is said it means the same thing. The utterance ‘I love you’ is not only the key to the plotting of historical romance novels, as it is

⁶⁵ Pearce, *Romance Writing*, p. 1.

to romances generally, but is also crucial to the link which they strive to draw between the present and the past.⁶⁶

Fletcher argues that this captures heterosexuality's "claim to universality, timelessness and *truth*",⁶⁷ but I would replace "heterosexuality" with "romantic love". Despite the fact that romance authors and readers often pride themselves for being sticklers for historical accuracy, the portrayal of love is always modern: that is, in line with how love is imagined in the historical moment in which the book was *written*, not in the moment the book was *set*. This is particularly true in erotic historicals, where love is necessarily tied with the erotic. Many of these texts are set in the nineteenth century and feature a highly eroticised version of romantic love, despite the fact that, as I discussed in the first chapter, romantic love in the nineteenth century was rarely endowed with an erotic dimension, but was figured more as a spiritual bond.⁶⁸ Pleasure, then, we might argue, is generated by seeing modern love against a historical backdrop, symbolically endowing our own modern version of love (and its relationship with sex and the erotic) with universality. (As Kamble has argued, this is also true in regards to other paradigms within the genre: she notes, for example, the change in attitudes towards race in novels which represent slavery, reinforcing a modern, anti-racist, anti-slavery view as the correct one, although this would have been unlikely to have been the view of wealthy plantation owners at the time in which the books are set.)⁶⁹

Teo makes a related point, writing that,

⁶⁶ Lisa Fletcher, *Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), p. 15.

⁶⁷ Ibid. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁸ Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); Steven Seidman, *Romantic Longings: Love in America, 1830-1980* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1991); Teo, *Desert Passions*.

⁶⁹ Kamble, *Making Meaning*, pp. 15-21.

Women's historical novels may often play fast and loose with the known facts of history... However, they present an unsettling view of the past which forces the reader to think about past gender and social orders which limited women's lives and condemned them to silence, preventing their stories from appearing in the historical record. According to Diana Wallace, the very excesses of historical fancy – the highlighting of sentiment and the concerns of the domestic sphere with its different rhythms and cycles that contrast with the received chronology of political history – “all work to disturb accepted accounts of ‘history’ and suggest that what it offers as ‘truth’ is in fact equally fictional, and damaging to women.”⁷⁰

The picture of love portrayed in the historical romance may be technically inaccurate, but, it would seem, it also allows for the creation of an alternate history, one more friendly to women. In historical romance, the heroine triumphs over a patriarchal society distinctly unfriendly to her needs, often one that treats her cruelly, and, as Roach puts it, “[gets] a good man to love”.⁷¹ This is clearly a potent fantasy. Diane Elam discusses this as part of a postmodernist feminist project, arguing that the anachronistic representation of love and desire works to revalue female discourse.⁷² Similarly, Angela Toscano contends that historical romance functions to “delight” and “enchant” rather than educate readers, arguing that the society defined (per Regis's first element) in the historical romance is porous and permeable, “that the world itself is transformable and in order to transform the world we must first make our selves vulnerable to it, to transform ourselves.”⁷³ The agent of this transformation, it would seem, is this very modern version of romantic love. Within

⁷⁰ Hsu-Ming Teo, “‘Bertrice teaches you history and you don't even mind!’: History and Revisionist Historiography in Bertrice Small's *The Kadin*,” in *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction: Critical Essays*, ed. Sarah S.G. Frantz and Eric Murphy Selinger (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2012), p. 25.

⁷¹ Roach, “Getting a Good Man to Love,” pp. 10-11.

⁷² Diane Elam, *Romancing the Postmodern* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 2-3.

⁷³ Angela Toscano, “Permeable Histories,” delivered at annual meeting of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association. Held at Woodside Marriott, Washington, DC, March 2013.

the historical romance, with its rigidly defined patriarchal society, it allows characters – heroines in particular – to transform the world and make it better: an intensely pleasurable process for the female reader.

Roach draws on the work of Sarah Frantz and refers to this world as a, mythic fantasy world in which Woman: the Virgin, the Maiden, the Princess Warrior, Everywoman, tames and controls the monster, Man: the patriarchal alpha hero, who has the power to easily harm her, but who will not, because she has cracked open his frozen patriarch's heart and taught him to love."⁷⁴

This idea that the world of the romance is a mythic one is raised regularly in scholarship, and the form is regularly linked to fairy tales.⁷⁵ Radway attempted to use Vladimir Propp's classic text *Morphology of the Folk Tale* to understand the romance's structure. Romance authors Jayne Ann Krentz and Linda Barlow described the romantic union of hero and heroine as, "a union that is both mythological and real, a union that celebrates the power of the female to heal and civilise the male".⁷⁶ Bridget Fowler argues that the romance novel is descended from the fairy tale, in which women functioned largely as dependent chattels or trophies.⁷⁷ Linda J Lee expands on Fowler's contention, noting a large number of similarities between the romance and the fairy tale. She writes that both forms are essentially formulaic, focus on the creation and/or reconciliation of a romantic pair, and invoke a fantasy realm,⁷⁸ ultimately arguing that romance novels serve the same function

⁷⁴ Roach, "Getting a Good Man to Love," p. 9.

⁷⁵ Explicitly attempting to rewrite fairy tales as historical romance is a fairly common practice – for example, see Eloisa James' Fairy Tales series. *A Kiss at Midnight* (2010), *When Beauty Tamed The Beast* (2011), *The Duke Is Mine* (2012), *The Ugly Duchess* (2012) and *Once Upon A Tower* (2013) are retellings of Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, the Princess and the Pea, the Ugly Duckling, and Rapunzel respectively.

⁷⁶ Linda Barlow and Jayne Ann Krentz, "Beneath the Surface: The Hidden Codes of Romance," in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, ed. Krentz. p. 27.

⁷⁷ Bridget Fowler, *The Alienated Reader: Women and Romantic Literature in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 12.

⁷⁸ Linda J. Lee, "Guilty Pleasures: Reading Romance Novels as Reworked Fairy Tales," *Marvels & Tales* 22.1 (2008): p. 52.

fairy tales once did, “encapsulating collective fantasies and providing a way for women to subvert and resist patriarchal norms”.⁷⁹ We can argue that the pseudo-fantastical setting of the historical romance also evokes this mythic function. It is portrayed in many ways not just as a more “glamorous” world; but a simpler one. The society defined at the beginning of the historical romance has clear rules. Many of these rules function to curtail female autonomy, much in the way women in fairy tales have their autonomy curtailed – Rapunzel isolated in a tower, Cinderella forced into domestic drudgery, Sleeping Beauty unconscious.⁸⁰ But just as these fairy tale heroines manage to achieve both true love and a measure of freedom, so too do heroines of the historical romance manage to defy their society. Most pointedly in historical romance, the patriarchal society is not one interested in love, but in marriage and in managing and policing female sexual behaviour so as to reproduce itself. The historical heroine carves out her own subversive, radical space within this society, a space created by an anachronistically modern brand of romantic love. And while she does not destroy and remake the patriarchy, she does destroy and remake a lone patriarch – the romance hero.

Several of the romance authors in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* argue that the romance heroine’s seemingly ubiquitous virginity is part of this mythic resonance of the romance. Krentz contends that virginity is not linked to sexual morality in romance, but that,

It has everything to do with creating a metaphor for the qualities of female power, honour, generosity, and courage with which the heroine is imbued. Virginity has been the stuff of legends, of stories of kings and queens, bloody wars and patched-

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 62.

⁸⁰ It is interesting to note that many of these fairy tale heroines are oppressed by other women – Cinderella by her stepmother, for example. This also plays out often in romance fiction – in *The Flame and the Flower*, for instance, Heather is oppressed by her wicked aunt – and seems to be a way in which the heroine’s position as heroine, as exceptional, exemplar woman, is reinforced (although there seems to be a slow move away from this kind of practice in more recent romance to a model based on female friendship).

up alliances, territorial feuds and historical consequences since the dawn of time.

There is an heroic quality about a woman's virginity that is truly powerful when used to its fullest potential in fiction.⁸¹

Doreen Owens Malek supports this claim, writing about virginity as “an attribute of female heroism” and arguing that virgins in romance have a sort of ethereal, magical quality, because “they have not participated in that essential earthbound activity which transforms a girl into a woman”.⁸² These claims are, I suspect, taking matters rather too far – while virginity is certainly imbued with mythic and magical resonance, we would be foolish to neglect the perhaps more mundane sexual politics that underlies portrayals of virginity in the romance novel. If the romance is a fairy tale, it is a modern fairy tale, even if it has a historical setting. In the next section, I will turn more specifically to an examination of the ways in which virginity loss is represented in the historical romance, its resonances with contemporary sexual politics, and the ways in which this has evolved over the history of both the historical romance novel and society.

Virginity Loss in the Historical Romance: Modern Love in the Past

It is perhaps telling that erotic historical romances emerged in a social context where love and marriage were becoming increasingly decoupled. Approval for premarital sex had begun to appear; however, this approval was cautious, and this is something we see reflected in these early texts. The societies within these historical romances have rigid social rules, and premarital virginity loss for women is explicitly proscribed. These strict

⁸¹ Krentz, “Introduction,” p. 111.

⁸² Doreen Owens Malek, “Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know: The Hero as Challenge,” in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, ed. Krentz. p. 117.

rules around female sexual behaviour and virginity loss are something that historical heroines have to negotiate. In *The Flame and the Flower*, Heather violates the rules around premarital virginity loss, but through no fault of her own – she is raped. Thurston calls scenes like this “a sneaky way to get permission to do something society might not approve... to either indulge in sex before marriage or simply enjoy it.”⁸³ It sometimes also functions simply as a way to drive the plot forward and to force the two characters into proximity: Heather and Brandon’s eventually romantic happily-ever-after could not have occurred without the initial rape scene and the pregnancy that ensued. Similarly, in Catherine Coulter’s 1982 historical romance *Devil’s Embrace*, we see hero Anthony consciously and coldly use sex in an attempt to bring about his happy ending with heroine Cassie, for whom he declares his love quite early in the text: he rapes her so she will have no choice but to marry him. Cassie is therefore absolved of responsibility for the multiple orgasms she has in the frequent rape scenes that ensue. These two novels are representative of a common pattern in 1970s and 1980s historical romance fiction: Heather and Cassie have to exhibit at least the appearance of following the rules of the societies in which they live for them to continue being coded as “good” girls – and thus worthy of being heroines – within the texts.

However, as the sexual politics of contemporary society have evolved, so too have the sexual politics of the romance novel – as Kamble might put it, different alleles are becoming dominant. The texts are clearly responsive to modern sexual mores (and perhaps to feminist criticisms of the genre, as well as other evolving social mores, such as those around issues of race), which has increasingly allowed romance heroines degrees of agency, particularly sexual agency. This is despite the fact that these texts are set in a society in which this sociosexual shift has not occurred: as Merja Makinen puts it, “the

⁸³ Thurston, *Romance Revolution*, p. 22.

romance genre by its very focus comments on the changing cultural construction of femininity and the more fluid this becomes, the more the traditional format has to rewrite itself.”⁸⁴ Coercion plotlines remain popular – that is, plotlines where circumstances force the heroine to marry the hero long before the declaration of love, just as Heather and Brandon are compelled to marry in *The Flame and the Flower* and Anthony attempts to compel Cassie to marry him in *Devil’s Embrace*. However, there has been a movement towards relatively more innocent social compromises, which result in the hero and heroine forced to be in proximity to each other, often because they are obliged to marry. We can see this in the novels discussed below, which I have chosen for their popularity with readers as well as for the high profile their authors have in the romance genre. In Loretta Chase’s much-beloved 1995 romance *Lord of Scoundrels*, heroine Jessica is compelled to marry hero Dain after they are seen kissing at a party. In 2003 title *One Night of Scandal* by Teresa Medeiros, heroine Lottie convinces hero Hayden to marry her after she is seen alone with him in his house, which has compromised her reputation. It is strongly suggested that Daphne, heroine of 1995 title *The Duke and I* by Julia Quinn, engineers her own compromise in an effort to speed up the progress of her relationship with hero Simon; and similarly, Annabelle, heroine of 2004 title *Secrets of a Summer Night* by Lisa Kleypas, plans to be seen alone with one man, Lord Kendall, so as to force him into marrying her, but ultimately cannot go through with it and is compromised almost immediately afterwards by the hero, also named Simon. In an even more innocent incident, Honoria, heroine of Stephanie Laurens’ 1998 title *Devil’s Bride*, spends a night under the same roof as hero Devil as they nurse a dying man together, and this is enough to force them to become engaged. Marriage, for most of these heroines (Honoria is an exception, as I will discuss momentarily), is the first textual milestone reached. Sex comes second, with strong

⁸⁴ Merja Makinen, *Feminist Popular Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2001), p. 55.

emphasis placed not only on the heroine's participation but her enthusiastic consent. Finally, a declaration of love comes towards the end of the novel, and it is this that enables hero and heroine to live happily ever after. The major shift that can be observed here is tied to the portrayal of sex, particularly virginity loss. In older erotic historicals, heroines generally play a passive role in their own virginity losses, even if they are not raped like Heather or Cassie. Instead, as the genre has developed, historical heroines have become more and more comfortable both expressing and acting on their sexual desire. This growth in sexual agency has distinctly affected the way in which virginity loss is portrayed.

This is perhaps clearer nowhere than in the growing amount of historical heroines who willingly engage in premarital sex. Despite the fact that virginity loss outside wedlock is prohibited by the society in which the novels are set, these heroines are not textually punished for making a transgressive decision. Honoria of *Devil's Bride* is such a heroine, choosing to sleep with Devil before they are married (although they are engaged). Hyacinth of Julia Quinn's 2005 title *It's In His Kiss*, and Lilian and Daisy Bowman, heroines of Lisa Kleypas' 2005 title *It Happened One Autumn* and 2006 title *Scandal in Spring* respectively, make similar decisions, electing to lose their virginites to their heroes before marriage – and, in some cases, before becoming formally betrothed. Although, given my focus on virginity loss scenes, I will not discussing the following heroines much in this thesis, there is also a growing number of heroines who have been deflowered by men other than the hero before the narrative starts, such as Jessica, the heroine of Courtney Milan's 2011 romance *Unclaimed*, a book which deftly inverts the tropes of historical romance by pairing its courtesan heroine with devoutly virginal hero Mark, author of a volume entitled *A Gentleman's Practical Guide to Chastity*. Although all these texts are set in roughly similar time periods to texts like *The Flame and the Flower* (that is, the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), we can observe a marked shift in regards to women

and sexual permissiveness. While the social rules that govern the societies within the texts remain essentially the same, the evolution of contemporary sexual politics are mirrored, allowing even the most virginal of heroines to become desiring agents.

Despite the growth in the number of non-virginal heroines, as well as the existence of a small subset of widowed heroines, the majority of heroines in historical romances are virgins, largely because of reasons of social propriety. This is one of the key differences between the way virginity is portrayed in the historical romance and the contemporary romance. In contemporary romances written post-sexual revolution, the heroine's virginity is not assumed: in the society defined within the novel, female virginity is not presented as the social norm, and so if the heroine is a virgin, her virginity is usually justified in the text (as I will discuss in more depth in the next chapter). In the historical romance, by contrast, the heroine's virginity is assumed by the society around her. (It should be noted here that this is also a function of the fact that the majority of historical heroines are white and middle-class, and thus correspond with stereotypical semiotic signs for virginity: the white middle-class heroine is assumed to be a virgin by her society in a way that a non-white and/or working-class heroine probably would not be, due to problematic assumptions linking whiteness and class background with virtue and virginity, symbolically excluding those not of that background.) More often than not, this assumption is correct and the historical heroine has remained a virgin, generally because she has had no compelling reason to lose her virginity and risk the social consequences. While she may have rejected suitors and chosen not to marry, specifically choosing to remain a virgin is not encoded as so key a textual decision in the historical romance as it is in the contemporary. This affects the way virginity is portrayed, as it rarely has an especial individual or moral meaning to the historical heroine. While "awakening" plots – that is, plots where the virginal heroine experiences sexual desire for the first time – are relatively common in historical romance,

they are not imbued with the same anxiety that they often are in contemporary romance. Despite the apparent restrictions of her society, virginity in the historical romance is not endowed with the same moral angst that it is in the contemporary romance, and the historical heroine is generally more comfortable with her experience of sexual desire than her contemporary counterpart.

This is true even though the historical heroine often lacks the language to describe or even identify her desire. Many historical heroines lack basic sexual education. Sometimes this can have deleterious effects – for example, in Courtney Milan’s 2012 novella *A Kiss For Midwinter*, heroine Lydia is sexually exploited by an unscrupulous man before she meets the hero, after which she becomes pregnant. (“...you do everything except that one thing, that one thing that risks pregnancy, that one thing that you’re saving for your wedding night. He tells you that he can’t wait to do that one last thing... He tells you how much more there is to do over and over as he rogers you senseless,” Lydia says, describing her exploitation to hero Jonas.⁸⁵) In Johanna Lindsey’s 1991 medieval romance *Prisoner of My Desire*, a book which is in many ways a throwback to earlier erotic historical romances, heroine Rowena is forced by her stepbrother to rape captive hero Warrick (in an interesting inversion of the usual trope of the raped virgin, the virgin here is the rapist), but because she lacks basic knowledge of what sex constitutes, she is forced to seek advice from her maid before she can successfully do so. In other instances, the heroine’s sexual ignorance can be treated more lightheartedly – for example, in *The Duke and I* (1995) by Julia Quinn, Violet Bridgerton attempts to explain sex to her daughter, heroine Daphne, on the night before her wedding:

‘Ohhhhhh,’ Daphne breathed, her heart racing with anticipation. She’d been waiting for this. All her friends had told her that the night before one’s wedding,

⁸⁵ Courtney Milan, *A Kiss for Midwinter* (Self-published, 2012), p. 33.

one's mother delivered all the secrets of marriage. At the last possible moment, one was admitted into the company of womanhood, and told all those wicked and delicious facts that were kept so scrupulously from the ears of unmarried girls. Some of the young ladies of her set had, of course, already married, and Daphne and her friends had tried to get them to reveal what no one else would, but the young matrons had just giggled and smiled, saying, 'You'll find out soon.'

'Soon' had become 'now', and Daphne couldn't wait.⁸⁶

Milan, an explicitly feminist author, is obviously concerned about the politics of sexual education in her portrayal of her heroine Lydia, and texts in this mode are increasingly emerging. However, heroines like Daphne are more typical of the genre overall. In these portrayals, the heroine's ignorance is generally used to erotic effect. The more experienced hero is constructed as sexual teacher, initiating the hitherto unawakened heroine into a world of desire, sexual pleasure and multiple orgasms.⁸⁷ This is often in contrast to the (blurry) picture of sexual pleasure the heroine has been afforded, where sex is portrayed as something women have to endure rather than enjoy. This is another function of the historical setting – the society portrayed regularly adheres to a sort of "lie back and think of England" figuration of female sexuality, uninterested in and sometimes even disapproving of the possibility of female sexual pleasure. This makes the heroine's experience of sexual pleasure somewhat transgressive. It also signals that her partner, the hero, is a good man, even if he otherwise seems outwardly cold or cruel, because he ensures that her sexual experience is a pleasant one. This becomes a harbinger of the

⁸⁶ Julia Quinn, *The Duke and I* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 229.

⁸⁷ This occurs even in *Prisoner of My Desire*, where Rowena loses her virginity when she rapes Warrick – the text manages some truly spectacular contortions to ensure that he is still relatively active in this scene (it is his increasing arousal that ultimately breaks her hymen, something she was not strong enough to do on her own). When he escapes, he kidnaps her in revenge and proceeds to rape her several times, before making her his mistress. She experiences considerable pleasure in these post-virginal episodes, but significantly not in the episodes where she is the rapist.

ultimate happy ending: he cares about her pleasure, and so he will come – irrevocably, passionately, and monogamously – to care about her.

Let me now discuss this with more historical specificity. While, as I have noted, the fact that virginity is socially mandated rather than individually chosen in the historical romance generally means that heroines experience significantly less angst about their experience of desire, this is something that has evolved pronouncedly as the genre has grown. In early erotic historicals, female sexual desire is far more overtly problematised. In *The Flame and the Flower*, Heather does not experience sexual desire for most of the narrative. While some readers might derive pleasure from her defloration and rape (one Amazon reviewer refers to it as “the darkest and most delicious of female fantasies”⁸⁸), Heather herself takes no pleasure from it: her immediate reaction is to turn to the wall and sob. She does not experience desire until long after she has married Brandon and given birth to their son. Even when they do recommence a sexual relationship, he has to threaten her with rape again in order for her to be able to “[give] herself wholly to his passion, becoming so enmeshed in its intensity that she found herself returning it with a wild and free abandon that amazed herself as well as him.”⁸⁹ To say that Heather has a problem expressing her sexual desire is an understatement. In *Devil’s Embrace*, published ten years later, the sexual desire of heroine Cassie is also problematised, but in an almost inverse way. Before she is kidnapped and raped by hero Anthony, Cassie is engaged to another man, Edward, for whom she experienced sexual desire. She imagined that this desire was evidence of their true love, and so, when she experiences sexual pleasure in later encounters with Anthony (not the virginity loss scene – like Heather’s, Cassie’s defloration is presented as traumatic), she feels guilty. She wonders:

⁸⁸ A Customer, “The Classic That Started It All,” Amazon, 13 April, 2002, available from <http://www.amazon.com/review/R1WA3J86CMFT8D/>

⁸⁹ Kathleen Woodiwiss, *The Flame and the Flower* (New York: Avon, 1972), p. 393.

Could any man touch her and set her body on fire? Was she a willing, loose little slut who would part her thighs at a man's touch, at a man's mouth closing over hers?⁹⁰

Cassie is petrified that now she is no longer a virgin, she must be a whore – less because of her physical defloration, and more because of her experience of desire and/or pleasure with more than one man. Later in the text, Cassie has consensual sex with Edward, which is devoid of pleasure. Actually having sex with Edward is less problematic than desiring him. By sleeping with Edward, Cassie actually resolves, rather than creates, a textual problem – it becomes clear that her desire is not multiple, and that Anthony is the sole focus of her sexual longing. Cassie's initial desire for Edward must be recuperated: it is reimagined simply as curiosity. Her experience of desire for and pleasure with Anthony marks him as her one true love. Something similar occurs in 1991 medieval romance *Prisoner of My Desire* (an apt title, given the subject of this discussion), where Rowena's experience of desire for and pleasure with hero Warrick signifies that he is her destined romantic partner, even though they are figured as enemies for most of the text. When he kisses her, she cannot help but compare him to the only other person who has ever kissed her, her wicked stepbrother Gilbert:

'Twas true that no lover's lips had ever shown her the way of kissing. What Gilbert had done just before he left her to Warrick's mercy was naught like this. That kiss had been brief, hard, and repugnant to her. This one was soft, unending, and she wished she were not being made to know the difference. There should have been no

⁹⁰ Catherine Coulter, *Devil's Embrace* (New York: Signet, 1982), p. 80.

difference. But she could not deny this was another thing about her enemy that she did not mind.⁹¹

We can see here a clear example of how compulsory demisexuality governs this older style of romance, and how this intersects with a kind of compulsory monogamy to create a One True Love narrative. Desire is problematic if it is not linked to love, and so it is used to signal love. Heather does not experience it until almost a year into her marriage to Brandon, during which time she has become romantically attached to him. Rowena's desire for Warrick signals that he is her true love, despite the various horrors they visit on each other. Cassie must be reassured that her desire is only for one man, and that it is tied to love, before she can be certain that she is a good person. While all these heroines transgress the rules of their historical societies (albeit through no fault of their own), the contemporary morality governed by compulsory demisexuality is ultimately upheld.

It is also worth noting that for many heroines in older erotic historicals, desire is awakened in direct response to male sexual aggression. This aggression is portrayed as more inevitable in older texts than in more recent ones – for example, when Brandon first rapes Heather, he stops when he realises that she is a virgin and not the prostitute he expected, but almost immediately continues, “no longer able to contain himself”.⁹² Although he remains celibate for much of their marriage, it is ultimately his threat to rape her again that restarts their sexual relationship. In *Devil's Embrace*, Anthony is calculated in his sexual possession of Cassie, reasoning that if he takes Cassie's virginity, she will not be able to marry anyone else. (““To allow you to continue in your virgin state would be the height of foolishness, for it would encourage you to nourish unfounded hopes and keep

⁹¹ Johanna Lindsey, *Prisoner of My Desire* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 212.

⁹² Woodiwiss, *Flame and the Flower*, p. 29.

you all the longer away from me,”⁹³ he says to her.) This kind of aggression is regularly paired with consideration for the heroine’s pleasure, but it is often this aggression which enables her pleasure to begin with. This is expressed neatly in *Prisoner of My Desire*, in which heroine Rowena says to hero Warrick, after one of many sexual encounters with questionable consent, ““You are cruel in all your demands, vengeful in all your motives, yet when you touch me, you are naught but gentle.””⁹⁴ In a text where both characters rape the other at various points, it is notable that Rowena never experiences sexual pleasure when she is the aggressor, but only when Warrick is.

As the genre develops, historical heroes seem to become more capable of restraint, and this extreme aggression is presented less and less as a heroic quality. We can perhaps read this as indicative of the period in which the books were written (although it should be noted that this is not a firm line – *Prisoner of My Desire* was published in 1991 but has many of the trademarks of earlier novels. We should not negate the significance of other factors, especially authorship). As the politics of sexual consent have received more and more cultural attention, so too has the romance hero come to adhere to them, and this has become increasingly encoded as a desirable trait. Male sexual aggression is no longer treated as something inevitable that must be managed (or ultimately enjoyed) by the heroine. Instead, more influence has been placed on the heroine’s role as sexual and desiring agent, even if she is ignorant of what “sex” actually is.

We can identify here two major shifts between the older style of historical romance and the newer: a shift in the portrayal of the hero, and a shift in the portrayal of the heroine. While heroes certainly largely remain “alpha” – that is, dominant, autocratic,

⁹³ Coulter, *Devil’s Embrace*, p. 38.

⁹⁴ Lindsey, *Prisoner of My Desire*, p. 280.

powerful, and usually wealthy and of high social status⁹⁵ – the edge of overt sexual aggression has been blunted. He remains dangerous, but he is no longer sexually dangerous to the heroine: while he might, as Kamble have noted, pursue her in the same way that he, as a capitalist, might pursue a new venture, he will not demolish (or, perhaps, in economic terms, liquidate) her as he might have previously – she is allowed a greater voice in their contractual dealings.⁹⁶ The heroine, meanwhile, has become considerably more active. She is far more comfortable with her desire – both experiencing and expressing it. For example, in *Lord of Scoundrels*, Jessica’s desire is evident throughout the text. In the episode that constitutes her compromise, when she and Dain are spotted kissing at a party, she tells him he, ““shouldn’t use masculine wiles””. She knows he will let her go if she flees (“[h]e had too much pride to force her into his embrace or chase her if she fled,”) but she finds herself unable to:

Now she found that she’d never wanted anything so desperately in all her life as she wanted his low voice sending shivers up and down her back and the lashing strength of his arms about her and his hard, depraved mouth crushing hers.⁹⁷

Dain is technically the aggressor in this scene; however, the balance of power soon shifts. He initially refuses to marry her, an episode that leads to Jessica shooting him in the shoulder. When they do get married, Jessica initiates several of their sexual encounters, including the virginity loss scene (that is, the scene where they have penetrative sex for the first time). “She’d wanted to touch and kiss and hold him from the day she’d met him,” she thinks during this scene, and, in a neat inversion of the archetypical “bodice ripper”

⁹⁵ Although this is not always the case – see Elizabeth Hoyt’s 2007 title *The Leopard Prince*, where wealthy titled virgin heroine Georgina is paired with hero Harry, her steward.

⁹⁶ Kamble, *Making Meaning*, pp. 31-60.

⁹⁷ Loretta Chase, *Lord of Scoundrels* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 114.

moment, tears his shirt off.⁹⁸ Her desire is presented as active and as strong as Dain's is – early in their marriage, Dain realises that, “heated and maddened as he was... he wasn't powerless. He could make her beg, too.”⁹⁹ This kind of response is consistent with many of the virgin heroines in more recent romance – in *The Duke and I*, for example, Daphne's desire for hero Simon leads her to effectively engineer her compromise, and she also takes the lead in the virginity loss scene. In *Devil's Bride*, Honoria has no choice in her compromise (and neither does hero Devil), but her decision to sleep with Devil (premaritally) is clearly her own. On the night of her defloration, she waits for Devil in his bedchamber, and makes the following declaration:

‘Would you agree that, at present, I'm free of your seductive influence? Free of coercion or manipulation?’

He was watching her closely; he hesitated, then nodded.

‘In that case... I have a declaration to make! [...] I *want* to marry you. I want to be your wife, your duchess, to face the world at your side. I *want* to bear your children. [...] Most importantly of all... I want *you*. Now... Tonight.’

[...] ‘Are you sure? ...I mean about tonight?’

[...] ‘*Yes!*’ she said – and kissed him.¹⁰⁰

We can see both the shifts in hero and heroine evident in this passage. Honoria is clear about her desire for Devil, and unafraid to express it. Devil, by contrast, is anxious about securing Honoria's consent and not exploiting her in any way. While *Lord of Scoundrels* and *Devil's Bride* are set in similar time periods to *The Flame and the Flower* and *Devil's*

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 232.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 211.

¹⁰⁰ Stephanie Laurens, *Devil's Bride* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), Kindle edition, location 3533. Emphasis in original.

Embrace (the late eighteenth to nineteenth century), the politics of desire within the books have changed dramatically. Heroines no longer require overt male sexual aggression to forcibly awaken their desire. This is playfully highlighted in the second sex scene in *One Night of Scandal* (following immediately after the first, a virginity loss scene initiated by the heroine). Hero Hayden and heroine Lottie engage in role play, pretending that he is a dangerous sexual aggressor and she is powerless to resist. Power play is thus firmly located in the realms of sexual fantasy, establishing Hayden and Lottie as equal, trusting sexual partners. Lottie, like her counterparts in more recent historical romance novels, can experience and act on desire and still be encoded within the text as a good person, worthy of being a heroine. Increasingly, the historical heroine is allowed to become an active agent in her sexual and emotional relationships. Her ultimately loving relationship with the hero is the safe space that enables this to occur in a social framework distinctly unfriendly to this kind of female sexual expression.

We can also observe changes in the portrayal of virginity loss if we look at the specifics of the virginity loss scenes themselves. I want to focus here on two key tropes: pain and blood. In *The Flame and the Flower*, Heather's virginity loss is not only traumatic, but painful: "[a] half gasp, half shriek escaped her and a burning pain seemed to spread through her loins."¹⁰¹ Cassie's defloration in *Devil's Embrace* is similarly painful – "[s]he cried out at once at a sharp pain" – despite Anthony's use of some sort of "cool and soothing" cream.¹⁰² In *Prisoner of My Desire*, Rowena experiences so much pain she almost cannot continue – "[t]ears streaked her smooth cheeks. Her sapphire eyes, glassy with wetness, reflected that pain."¹⁰³ In all three texts, reference is made to the virgin bleeding – a maid cleans Rowena's blood off the restrained Warrick, Brandon stares at

¹⁰¹ Woodiwiss, *Flame and the Flower*, p. 29.

¹⁰² Coulter, *Devil's Embrace*, p. 63.

¹⁰³ Lindsey, *Prisoner of My Desire*, p. 73.

Heather's blood on his bedsheets, and Anthony threatens to fly the bloody post-coital sheets from the mast of his ship so that everyone will know he has deflowered Cassie. Breaking the virgin's hymen is not only a textually significant event but an event that can be read on and via the woman's body. Much has been made of the fact that virgin heroines in historical romance often have curiously imperforate hymens (usually located anatomically incorrectly), which enable the hero to determine that she is a virgin and which are painful to break. These scenes are so ubiquitous that Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan parody them in their book *Beyond Heaving Bosoms*:

Suddenly he felt the tip of his eager manhood brush against her maidenhead... 'It will only hurt but a moment, and then it will be gone,' he said. Then he reared back as if he and his man-staff were jumping hedges at full gallop, and thrust himself deep within her.

Eleanora screamed as if she'd been impaled upon a pikestaff, beating his shoulders with her fists and crying out from the pain.¹⁰⁴

This is a pornographic trope (Fanny Hill's bloody defloration, where the pain caused by the breaking of her hymen is so intense it causes her to pass out, is an archetypal example), and we should not deny this aspect of its literary history. However, we must also consider the impact of this type of scene in texts authored by women, for women. It is significant that, as the genre has developed, considerably less emphasis has been placed on blood and pain, although it has not disappeared. In *Lord of Scoundrels*, Jessica feels pain ("[h]er mind went black and *Please, God, don't let me faint*, was all she could think"¹⁰⁵), but, unlike Heather, Cassie and Rowena, it swiftly turns into pleasure. Dain, presumably familiar with the pornographic trope of gory defloration, is surprised to find she does not bleed much:

¹⁰⁴ Wendell and Tan, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms*, p. 39.

¹⁰⁵ Chase, *Lord of Scoundrels*, p. 233.

He'd found a spot of blood on one of the coverlet's gold dragons and there had been a bit on him, but it was nothing like the carnage his overwrought imagination had pictured these last three days.¹⁰⁶

In *Devil's Bride*, Honoria similarly experiences pain ("the sharp agony that had speared her was so intense she could still feel it"¹⁰⁷), but Devil ultimately keeps his promise that, "'There'll be no more pain – from now on, you'll only scream with pleasure,'"¹⁰⁸ and no mention is made of blood at all. In *One Night of Scandal*, Lottie's defloration follows essentially the same pattern: a moment of pain which turns swiftly to pleasure, with only "a few rusty stains" remaining.¹⁰⁹ The pain and blood associated with the broken hymen continue to function to keep the female body readable within the text: it is clear when the virgin heroine has been deflowered and is no longer a virgin. (This is in contrast to many stories in the virginity loss confessional genre, where a considerable amount of storytellers admit to being unsure as to when and whether they lost their virginity, and many redefine virginity loss around an act other than penetrative heterosexual.) The major shift that can be observed here is in the portrayal of pleasure. For Heather, Cassie and Rowena, virginity loss is distinctly devoid of pleasure. Although some of this is because neither of these three heroines consent in these sex scenes (even Rowena, who rapes Warrick, is doing so under duress), there are later rape scenes in both *Devil's Embrace* and *Prisoner of My Desire* where the heroines do experience sexual pleasure. In the more modern mode of historical romance with its focus on the heroine's enthusiastic consent and participation, virginity loss may initially be painful, but this swiftly gives way to pleasure.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 235.

¹⁰⁷ Laurens, *Devil's Bride*, location 3662.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., location 3661.

¹⁰⁹ Teresa Medeiros, *One Night of Scandal* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 288.

If we read virginity loss scenes in historical romance against those in the virginity loss confessional genre, we might argue that they are becoming less realistic. While some female storytellers in the genre do have positive experiences both physically and emotionally, they are rarely as spectacular and multi-orgasmic as those enjoyed by historical heroines like Jessica, Honoria and Lottie. If we take the stories in the virginity loss confessional as a measure of realism, it is clear that painful or at least non-pleasurable experiences are distinctly more common. The virginity loss experiences of historical heroines are becoming, in many ways, as fantastical as their settings: these heroines are experiencing increasingly orgasmic virginity losses despite the fact that they live in societies in which female sexual pleasure is certainly not *de rigueur*. What does this evolution tell us?

Reading historical romance against the notions inherent in compulsory demisexuality is useful here. As I have already discussed, this contemporary morality – that sex is better when you are in love, and for women, the link between desire and love is a natural one – is the one upheld in historical romance, despite the fact that the historical society itself has different rules and priorities. Although hero and heroine have usually not declared their love when they have sex, the heroine's experience of desire and sexual pleasure generally functions to denote the hero as her True Love: *Devil's Embrace* is a good example of this, where Cassie's desire for Edward is reimagined as curiosity so her desire for Anthony can be established as signifying her love for him. This function remains intact even as the genre develops and the heroine becomes more comfortable with her desire: while she is far more eager to express it, the heroine rarely experiences desire for a man other than the hero. This is usually true even if the heroine is not a virgin – if she had feelings for or desired another man before the hero, this is often downplayed or retrospectively reimagined, serving to establish her as in some ways virginal, if not

actually a virgin. Wendell and Tan make this their first commandment in their Ten Commandments of Heroine Conduct in *Beyond Heaving Bosoms*:

1. Thou shalt not lust in thy panties for any male's mighty wang due to normal sexual horny pants. Thou shalt lust in thy panties only for the mighty wang of the hero. There is no 'ho' in heroine.¹¹⁰

It is not as simple as saying that the romance heroine is demisexual, because the relationship between love and desire is more complicated and has changed. Heather of *The Flame and the Flower* is, it would seem, straightforwardly demisexual: her desire for Brandon arises after they have been married for some time and have formed an emotional bond. However, this generally occurs the other way around in more recent texts, with the heroine's desire for the hero predating her romantic love for him (although the line between desire and love is often murky and hard to ascertain). Where this happens, her desire is ultimately prophetic of her love. Even if the heroine is not technically demisexual, she generally adheres to the dictates of compulsory demisexuality: that for women, sex and love are and should be tied together.

If we look specifically at the virginity loss scenes in the texts I have described here, we can note a marked increase in the adherence to the principle of enthusiastic consent. In the more recent texts, heroines enthusiastically consent to and in many cases initiate their own virginity loss experiences. These experiences usually turn out to be extraordinarily pleasurable. This is not the case in older texts, where many heroines are forced into penetrative heterosex, take on a much more passive sexual role, and find the experience of virginity loss far more traumatic. The higher level of comfort with female desire in more recent romance novels is key to the ability of the heroines to enthusiastically consent: they

¹¹⁰ Wendell and Tan, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms*, p. 36.

speaking a language that earlier heroines simply do not possess. However, we should also examine the location of these virginity loss experiences within the text. It is important to note that the historical romance genre is enormous and this will not hold true for every single text; but in the texts I have discussed in this chapter, virginity loss scenes tend to occur considerably later. Heroines like Jessica, Daphne and Lottie have had the time to establish an emotional bond with their respective heroes *before* sleeping with them. Their virginity losses take place within the socially endorsed framework of compulsory demisexuality: all of these heroines have strong emotional bonds with their heroes before they sleep with them. These three heroines are also all married to their heroes, but this principle is also true for a heroine like Honoria, who loses her virginity to Devil premaritally. This is a function peculiar to the historical romance, with its socially mandated virginity. As heroes have developed and male sexual aggression has been encoded as a less desirable trait, virginity loss scenes have necessarily been contingent on the heroine's enthusiastic consent, something she is far less likely to give early in the narrative than a contemporary heroine. These virginity loss scenes function very much as a consummation, consummating not only (in many cases) a marriage, but also primarily a romantic relationship. This romantic relationship may – and always does, unless the virginity loss scene occurs right at the end of the novel – get thrown into turmoil later on, but its consummation ensures its ultimate happy ending. This is not necessarily true of virginity loss scenes in books which follow the older pattern, such as *The Flame and the Flower*, *Devil's Embrace* and *Prisoner of My Desire*. In these books, the virginity loss scene often functions as a sacrifice: a textual sacrifice that must be made to ensure the characters' ongoing proximity.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ This function is often one taken over by compromise episodes in later books, but is not necessarily vital to the narrative.

Essentially, in later books, the strict rules of the historical society enable heroines to model ideal female sexual behaviour per the dictates of compulsory demisexuality: while they do not necessarily have to wait until marriage, they do wait to sleep with their heroes until they have established a strong emotional bond. They are also assured that their heroes will not leave them – Honoria, when she sleeps with Devil premaritally in *Devil's Bride*, does so in full knowledge of the fact that they are to be married in a few weeks and confident that Devil will not abandon her in the interim. They model the promise that compulsory demisexuality makes in respect to virginity loss almost perfectly: wait until you are in love and in a committed relationship, and your experience will be pleasurable. As the virginity loss confessional genre shows, this promise is one that is not always (or even often) lived up to in reality. In historical romance, however, no matter what travails the romantic relationship goes through both pre- and post-virginity loss, there is a guarantee that everything will work out all right in the end.

It is vital to read romance against this happy ending. The fantasy operating in historicals which follow the older model is, we might contend, a different one, in which heroines succeed romantically despite whatever horrors are visited upon them, including by the hero. The fantasy of defanging and taming the dangerous man is much more intense in these novels: in later novels, while the hero remains dangerous, he is rarely dangerous to the heroine.¹¹² Both types of novels contain the promise that no matter what happens, everything will turn out all right in the end. This is key to reading the rape scenes in books like *The Flame and the Flower*, which, in books without this promise, one imagines many more readers might find quite horrifying. The romance also offers a safe space in which

¹¹² We can see this displayed quite neatly in two books by Lisa Kleypas. At the end of *It Happened One Autumn* (2005), heroine Lilian is kidnapped by villain Sebastian, who takes her to Gretna Green with the intention of forcibly marrying her. She is rescued in time by hero Marcus, but we can see clearly here how Sebastian poses a danger to Lilian. In the next book in the series, *The Devil in Winter* (2006), heroine Evangeline proposes marriage to Sebastian (now the hero) out of desperation. While he still remains a dangerous character, he is never cast as dangerous to Evangeline as he was towards Lilian.

desire and love are inextricably linked and women are not going to be abandoned, as Lydia, heroine of Courtney Milan's novella *A Kiss for Midwinter*, found herself abandoned after being seduced by an unscrupulous man. The society within the novels may have the appeal of a sort of historical glamour, but it is also distinctly unfriendly to women, and the heroines within the novels understand just how severely their choices are curtailed by propriety. But all historical heroines succeed in spite of this, carving out a space within this society where they can attain not just pleasure, but a kind of equality. As Alison Light puts it:

Romance offers us relations impossibly harmonised; it uses unequal heterosexuality as a dream of equality and gives women uncomplicated access to a subjectivity which is unified and coherent *and* still operating within the field of pleasure.¹¹³

Key to this is the notion that love and sex should be tied together, a notion coded – as I have discussed at length in earlier chapters – explicitly feminine. While heroines may technically not be demisexual, they are certainly closer to it than heroes, who are almost explicitly anti-demisexual. Many historical romance heroes are rakes, who have had a great deal of (presumably pleasurable) sex before.¹¹⁴ When they encounter the heroine, they essentially become demisexual, unable to experience pleasure with anyone else but her. This phenomenon is referred to as the “magic hoo hoo” by Wendell and Tan and as the “glittery hoo ha” by romance author Jennifer Crusie.¹¹⁵ Despite the fact that he has had sex with many other women, once he has sex with the heroine, the romance hero is tied to her for life. Her vagina is magical: it initiates him into her world of compulsory demisexuality and monogamy. He becomes the unicorn only she can pet.

¹¹³ Light, “Returning to Manderley,” p. 142.

¹¹⁴ As I mentioned earlier, Courtney Milan's *Unclaimed* is an interesting inversion of this, with its courtesan heroine and devoutly virginal hero.

¹¹⁵ Wendell and Tan, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms*, p. 38; Jennifer Crusie, “Modern Literary Terms: The Glittery Hoo Ha,” Jennifer Crusie's Blog: Argh Ink, 9 April, 2007, available from <http://www.arghink.com/2007/04/09/the-glittery-hoo-ha-an-analysis/>

This is one of the key pleasures of the romance: the heroine will not be abandoned by the hero to exist alone in a society unfriendly to her needs. Instead, their love will enable her to create a space where all her needs – both needs for pleasure and respect as an individual – will be met. The glamour of the historical setting undoubtedly has its appeal, but it also functions as a strong signifier of patriarchy: the heroine who breaks its rules, particularly its rules about female sexual behaviour, will be harshly punished. The historical heroine often does break these rules. In older books, this is usually through no fault of her own, perhaps because in the context in which the books were written, collusion in things like premarital virginity loss might be enough to encode the heroine as a “bad” girl and thus not worthy of being a heroine.¹¹⁶ As the genre has developed alongside contemporary society, however, the heroine has often become far more of an active participant in this rule-breaking. This is clear in novels with a compromise plotline, such as *Lord of Scoundels* and others I have noted above. But she does not break the rules of compulsory demisexuality. As Catherine Belsey puts it:

The story popular romance recounts is most commonly one of triumph, not only over outward impediments but also over mere sensual desire. The heroine finds her identity confirmed, her self-control rewarded or her values realised, as she recognises the hero’s passion and at the same time responds to his attention and care.¹¹⁷

That is: in popular romance, the heroine’s worldview (this very modern idea that sex and love should be tied together, often contrasted to the more typical “historical” idea that marriage is about money) triumphs. Love is proved superior to lust, and the hero – who has regularly been guilty of the latter – comes to realise this. This is particularly evident where

¹¹⁶ It should be noted that heroines in older books often do break other, non-sexual social dictates, as the popularity of “hoyden” heroines demonstrates.

¹¹⁷ Catherine Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 22.

virginity loss is concerned, something which is abetted by the historical setting. In historical romance, virginity loss has increasingly come to function as a consummation of a romantic relationship. We can arguably see this even in novels like *The Flame and the Flower*, where Heather is raped and the virginity loss scene functions more like a sacrifice: the second major sex scene, where Heather consents to sex, functions as a consummation scene, and can be read as a sort of second virginity loss. Even if the heroine breaks the rules of her society, she ultimately adheres to contemporary morality: the idea that love and sex should be tied together.

I touched briefly on the appeal of the idea that modern notions of love are transhistorical (or ahistorical) – that love has always been the same. We can see this enacted in the historical romance, with this contemporary notion that love and sex should be tied together ultimately enabling the heroine to create a space in an unfriendly society where her pleasure is prioritised and where she can be cherished and respected. Part of the pleasure of the historical romance is the idea that the narrative of compulsory demisexuality is universal and unchanging. As the books have become more and more comfortable with heroines expressing desire, so too has this become equated with pleasure. While in earlier books, heroines had to be essentially forced into sexual pleasure and took a passive role both sexually and within the narrative, increasingly, the heroines manage to pull off that feat that, in cultural terms, promises a good virginity loss experience: they lose their virginity with the right man in the right way at the right time. This is abetted by their society – the value placed on virginity giving the heroines incentive to wait until an emotional bond has been established and the virginity loss episode takes the form of a consummation.

But what happens when the heroine is not aided by her society in this way – when, indeed, society is textually constructed as anti-demisexual? I will examine this question in

the next chapter, when I explore the portrayal of virginity loss in contemporary category romance.

Chapter Five – Middle Class Morality: The Virgin Heroine in Contemporary

Category Romance Fiction

In the previous chapter, I discussed the role virginity loss plays in the historical romance. I argued that this type of romance, despite being set in the past, presents an image of love that is essentially modern. Compulsory demisexuality is imposed on the historical setting, and is thus figured as universal and transhistorical – as the way romantic love was, is, and always will be. This has a considerable effect on the approach the books take to virginity loss. The rules of the texts' historical world, which applies social penalties to women who lose their virginity outside of wedlock, collide with modern notions of romantic love. Heroines are forced to place a specific social value on their virginity, which means that when they choose to lose it, they generally lose it in a committed relationship – whether they are married, engaged, or have a similar level of trust with their partner – even if there has been no formal declaration of love.¹ Even if they break their historical society's rules and choose to have premarital sex, historical heroines in more recent texts generally follow the modern narrative for an ideal virginity loss: they lose it with the right man in the right place at the right time. Their virginity loss thus functions as a consummation of a romantic relationship.

This is not necessarily true in the contemporary romance novel. While consummation narratives do appear, different narratives have also emerged, particularly in contemporary romances written in more recent decades, including a variation on the sacrifice narrative we can observe in older historical novels, where the heroine's virginity becomes a sort of textual sacrifice to the happy ending. The society in the historical

¹ Some heroines, as I discussed at length in the previous chapter, do not choose to lose their virginities, although this rape narrative has mostly fallen out of fashion.

romance puts an explicit social value on virginity, which means that the risks to the heroine for losing her virginity outside a relationship with a certain level of commitment and trust are great. The society in the contemporary romance, however, places a different level of value on virginity, adhering to what Laura Carpenter would call a stigma script. In more recent novels, the heroine's virginity is often presented as unusual: instead of being the default, it is something she has chosen, and it marks her as an anomaly. Generally speaking, this means that (somewhat counterintuitively) virginity is more of a textual preoccupation in contemporary romances that feature virgin heroines than it is in historical romances.

This is, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, a broad statement, and not necessarily true – or true to the same degree – in all time periods. The world invoked by the contemporary romance is the world in which it is written, which means that, to situate and contextualise its portrayal of virginity, we must also consider the discourse around virginity, love, sex, and marriage that was circulating at the time of writing. In this chapter, I am specifically going to consider the form of the contemporary romance made popular by Harlequin Mills & Boon. This is a firm with some one hundred years of history. As Jay Dixon notes in her excellent book on Mills & Boon, these romances are regularly treated ahistorically by scholars.² This is something I want to mitigate here by reading these contemporary romances against the time periods in which they were written, in order to highlight the ways the texts upheld, supported, subverted, and resisted the dominant discourses surrounding virginity loss of the day.

² Jay Dixon, *The Romance Fiction of Mills & Boon, 1909-1990s* (London & Philadelphia: UCL Press, 1999), p. 5. Also see Juliet Fleisch, *From Australia With Love: A History of Modern Australian Romance Novels* (Perth: Curtin University Press, 2004), p. 11.

The Contemporary Category Romance: A Brief History

Mills & Boon started operation in 1909. While they did not initially publish solely romance (indeed, much of their profit in their early years was made through reprints of Jack London's work) in the ensuing century, their name has become synonymous with romance fiction. For many years, they published exclusively in hardback, until they formed a relationship with Canadian company Harlequin in the late 1950s, who began to reprint some of their work in paperback in North America. In 1971, Harlequin acquired Mills & Boon. Soon afterwards, a division in the romance fiction published by the firm that had been emerging over the past two decades was formalised when Harlequin split their romance list into two lines. 'Harlequin Romance' featured gentler romances, while 'Harlequin Presents' had a greater emphasis on erotic content. (Presents books were colloquially known as "Heisey's Heavy Breathers" after Harlequin CEO W. Lawrence Heisey.)³ This was the real emergence of what we now think of today as the category or series romance. These books are distinct from single-title romances, such as the historical romances I discussed in the last chapter. Category romances are usually significantly shorter than single-title romances, and are issued under a common imprint or series name. They are released at regular intervals, usually monthly. Currently in Australia, eleven different lines are published – some, like 'Sweet', 'Sexy', and 'Blaze', are differentiated largely by the amount of erotic content; while others, such as paranormal line 'Nocturne' and romantic suspense line 'Intrigue', are differentiated by sub-genre. While there was fierce competition in the category romance market in the 1980s, particularly from

³ Paul Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus: Inside Harlequin & the Empire of Romance* (Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 1997), p. 93.

American publishing house Silhouette (later acquired by Harlequin), Harlequin is currently the sole dominant force in the category romance market.⁴

Of all the forms and sub-genres of romance, category romance is the most derided. Laura Vivanco notes that it was referred to in 2004 as a “degenerate form” of romance;⁵ while Ann Curthoys and John Docker have observed the way “Mills & Boon” has become a cultural signifier of “embarrassingly ‘bad’ writing, sentimental, over-explicit, slushy, sloppy, the lush, the unforgiveable”.⁶ In this way, the category romance has become a sort of cultural icon of trash fiction and bad taste. As such, it is often treated as a stand-in for the romance genre more broadly – as Lynne Pearce argues, “what is most degenerate is also most *defining*... it is the template originating in these mass-produced romances that has become the twenty-first-century’s base-line definition of romance.”⁷ (This ubiquity also makes the category romance a fruitful area of study.) This practice of using the category romance to signify all romance is something that occurs not only in popular discourse, but was also perpetuated by early scholars of the genre. For example, the Smithton readers studied by Janice Radway in *Reading the Romance* clearly preferred historical romance to category romance, but these distinctions are ultimately collapsed together by Radway when she talks about the romance more generally.⁸ This collapse is rarely corrected by scholars unfamiliar with the romance genre when they refer to her work, despite the fact that historical and category romance are discrete genres with distinctly different publishing histories. Similarly, although scholars like Ann Barr Snitow

⁴ Smaller publishing houses, such as Entangled, also publish what we might think of as category romance, but Harlequin romance and category romance have virtually become synonymous.

⁵ Laura Vivanco, *For Love and Money: The Literary Art of the Harlequin Mills & Boon Romance* (Penrith: Humanities-Ebooks, 2011), p. 11.

⁶ Ann Curthoys and John Docker, “Popular Romance in the Postmodern Age. And an Unknown Australian Author,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 4.1 (1990): p. 24.

⁷ Lynne Pearce, “Popular Romance and its Readers,” in *A Companion to Romance: From Classical to Contemporary*, ed. Corinne Saunders (Maldon, MA: Blackwell, 2004), p. 521. Emphasis in original.

⁸ Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p. 56.

and Tania Modleski write specifically about the Harlequin romance, their work is often applied to the romance genre as a whole.⁹ Even where their work is used specifically with regard to the category romance, it is not adequately historically contextualised. There has been a tendency in scholarship to flatten the history of the category romance and treat it as a static phenomenon. One frequently referenced claim about the category romance comes from Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance*, where she writes that,

Each book averages approximately 187 pages, and the formula rarely varies: a young, inexperienced, poor to moderately well-to-do woman encounters and becomes involved with a handsome, strong, experienced, wealthy man, older than herself by ten to fifteen years. The heroine is confused by the hero's behaviour since, though he is obviously interested in her, he is mocking, cynical, contemptuous, often hostile, and even somewhat brutal. By the end, however, all misunderstandings are cleared away, and the hero reveals his love for the heroine, who reciprocates.¹⁰

Modleski was not necessarily wrong when speaking about the Harlequin romances of the period in which she was writing (1982), although I would contend that she is too general. However, this claim has been regularly repeated by other scholars – most recently, in a wave of criticism about Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series – without recognition of the fact that category romance is distinct from other forms of romance, and that is a form that has evolved considerably over its history.¹¹ As I will demonstrate in this chapter, the books reflect the changing climates in which they were written.

⁹ Carol Thurston, *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 9.

¹⁰ Tania Modleski, *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women* (London: Routledge, 1982), p. 28.

¹¹ For example, see: Fleur Diamond, "Beauty and the Beautiful Beast: Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* Saga and the Quest for a Transgressive Female Desire," *Australian Feminist Studies* 26.67 (2011): p. 47; John Milton,

We can see the ahistoricism of much of the scholarly work (particularly the early work) on category romance when we look at treatments of the virgin heroine. It is regularly assumed that the heroine of the contemporary category romance is and always has been a virgin. For example, Snitow claims that,

The heroine is not involved in any overt adventure beyond trying to respond appropriately to male energy without losing her virginity. Virginity is a given here; sex means marriage and marriage, promised at the end, means, finally, there can be sex.¹²

Similarly, Radway claims (speaking, I suspect, of the genre more broadly here) that the romance sets up an unstable initial situation with multiple potential endings, which are, “then kept consistently before the reader by the seemingly endless repetition of threats to the heroine’s virginity or life.”¹³ Modleski contended that the Harlequin Mills & Boon novel “repeatedly insisted on the importance of the heroine’s virginity”.¹⁴ Juliette Woodruff wrote in 1985 that in Harlequin romances, “there must be no explicit sex: the heroine must remain chaste”, and quoted from a columnist who called Harlequin “virginity merchants”.¹⁵ Largely, these scholars seem to be suggesting that virginity in category romance is mandatory, and that the romance narrative is a narrative of menaced virginity – which, as Kathleen Coyne Kelly has noted, throws virginity into sharper relief, because it

“‘Have you ever really been afraid?... of a man?... of a house?... of yourself?’: Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, and Modern Gothics,” in *Secrets Beyond the Door: The Story of Bluebeard and His Wives*, ed. Maria Tatar (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 86; Hila Shachar, “A Post-Feminist Romance,” in *Theorizing Twilight: Essays on What’s at Stake in a Post-Vampire World*, ed. Maggie Parke and Natalie Wilson (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), p. 156; Jessica Taylor, “Romance and the Female Gaze Obscuring Gendered Violence in the *Twilight* Saga,” *Feminist Media Studies* 14.3 (2012): p. 7.

¹² Ann Barr Snitow, “Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different,” *Radical History Review* 20 (1979): p. 144.

¹³ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, p. 205.

¹⁴ Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, pp. 16-17.

¹⁵ Juliette Woodruff, “A Spate of Words, Full of Sound and Fury, Signifying Nothing: Or, How to Read in Harlequin,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 19.2 (1985): p. 28.

is never more evident than when it is threatened.¹⁶ However, if we look at category romance from a historical standpoint, we can see that this is not necessarily accurate. While this narrative of menaced virginity does exist, particularly in the 1970s, the texts' treatment of virginity evolves and changes significantly. Dixon argues that Mills & Boon romances "reflect an aspect of the society from which they come".¹⁷ This is, I contend, vital to understanding the contemporary category romance, especially when attempting to understand the politics of love, sex and desire operating in the texts. We must read the contemporary category romance against the society in which it was written to understand the ways in which the texts upheld and subverted sociosexual discourse. I am particularly interested in the politics of virginity and the scripts offered for virginity loss here, but this approach also offers the potential for a glimpse of the development of sexual politics in the twentieth century.

Innocence and Escape: 1909-1930s

In their excellent book on sex before the sexual revolution in Britain, Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher argue that innocence was a highly prized attribute in unmarried young women in the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁸ This, they contend, contributed to the structuring of British society and popular culture, particularly during the first decades of the twentieth century, so as to exclude all explicit references to sex (although, as I will discuss, we should certainly not assume that sex was absent from the popular fiction of the time).¹⁹ This led to a culture of sexual ignorance among women, and positioned young

¹⁶ Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 137.

¹⁷ Dixon, *Romance Fiction*, p. 8.

¹⁸ Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in Britain 1918-1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 82-83.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

husbands as sexual teachers (despite the fact that they too had had little recourse to sexual education).²⁰ This was particularly true before the First World War, where, as Hera Cook has noted, sexual ignorance was common among all classes,²¹ but, as both Cook and Szreter and Fisher have noted, in the interwar years, attitudes to sex shifted along classed lines. For the working classes, there was an emphasis on preserving innocence by maintaining ignorance (although this might not have worked especially well in practice).²² However, there was a growing acceptance among the middle classes – presumably the dominant audience for Mills & Boon romances²³ – for a modicum of sexual knowledge, provided premarital virginity was maintained.²⁴ This was undoubtedly due to the influence of sexologists like Havelock Ellis, feminist campaigners, and, in particular, Marie Stopes’ 1918 marriage manual *Married Love*. Stopes, unsatisfied in her first marriage, had begun to research sex, and discovered that she had been so sexually ignorant that she had not realised she was still a virgin and that her husband was impotent. She emphasised the importance of sexual education for women, the existence of the female sex drive, and encouraged women (and their husbands) to strive for sexual pleasure.

We should not neglect to emphasise the “married” in the title of *Married Love* – despite the fact that she received a large number of letters from single people, Stopes was

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 63-64, p. 88.

²¹ Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception, 1800-1975* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 169.

²² The existence of “khaki fever” in the 1910s, in which girls became so excited by soldiers that they behaved in what were considered sexually inappropriate ways, as well as the women’s police, who patrolled the streets near military encampments largely for the purposes of monitoring female behaviour, are proof of the fact that working class girls were perhaps not so ignorant as they were supposed to be. [See Angela Woollacott, “‘Khaki Fever’ and Its Control: Gender, Class, Age and Sexual Morality on the British Homefront in the First World War,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 29 (1994): pp. 325-347; Philippa Levine, “‘Walking the streets in a way no decent woman should’: Women Police in World War I,” *Journal of Modern History* 66.1 (1994): pp. 34-78.]

²³ The research of Szreter and Fisher, which highlights the growing proclivity of the middle classes to discuss sex, would seem to position the books as a middle-class pleasure. Nicola Beauman, who argues that the interwar women’s novel was written “by middle-class women for middle-class women”, would seem to agree. We should read the books, therefore, specifically against British middle-class history in this period. [Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman’s Novel 1914-39* (London: Virago, 1983), p. 3.]

²⁴ Szreter and Fisher, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution*, p. 94, p. 111.

clear that, while the female sex drive was natural, sex belonged in marriage. Szreter and Fisher note that, although courting in public places (that is, dating) increasingly became the relationship model in both Britain and the USA during the 1920s, there was considerably less acceptance of premarital virginity loss in British than in American society,²⁵ although circumstances did emerge where premarital sex might be cautiously deemed acceptable (dependent largely on the point in the relationship and whether sex might be read as expressing love).²⁶ Following Stopes, there was a growing recognition among the middle classes of an autonomous female sexuality;²⁷ however, social discourse seems to have been clear on the fact that the only appropriate place for it to be expressed was within (companionate) marriage, something to which all women were encouraged to aspire. We can see this through the social pathologisation of the spinster. Alison Oram has noted that, while spinsters were also held in contempt in the nineteenth century, the form of this contempt changed. Then, it was because they had failed to fulfil their purpose in the marriage market. In the interwar years, post- the influence of a sexology which positioned heterosexual fulfilment as crucial to women's happiness, spinsters were positioned as dangerously repressed and frustrated – or, if marriage and motherhood were something they had specifically rejected, as frigid and abnormal.²⁸

Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that the contemporary romantic novel was popular in this time period. Maintained virginity was pathologised: women were encouraged to aspire to marriage for their own health, if not for their pleasure, which makes the romantic happy ending of the romance socially, as well as individually, satisfying. Susan Kingsley Kent has extended upon this, arguing that the sexual disorder of

²⁵ Ibid., p. 113.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 115-116.

²⁷ Cook, *Long Sexual Revolution*, p. 192.

²⁸ Alison Oram, 'Repressed and Thwarted, or Bearer of the New World? The Spinster in Inter-War Feminist Discourses,' *Women's History Review* 1.3 (1992): pp. 414-415.

war needed to be replaced by peace, and that marriage and marital sex were the way this was symbolically achieved: “sexual peace through sexual pleasure”.²⁹ Specifically, this marriage on which peace was to be built was a companionate one, because, as Stopes’ book makes clear, sexual pleasure in marriage could only be achieved with male care and cooperation. It is also worth noting that there was a considerable amount of social anxiety following the First World War about the “surplus” of women – by some accounts, there were as many as two million excess women in the population.³⁰ As Katherine Holden has noted, these women were considered to be a socially disruptive force and many were encouraged to move to the colonies to seek husbands.³¹ Combining this “man shortage” with the unfulfilled, frustrated, lonely fate prophesied for the spinster, a cultural anxiety for women was created that the romance novel could, in some measure, assuage: the end of the romance, where the heroine achieves her companionate marriage, became a social as well as personal victory.

Dixon notes that the dominant heroine archetype at any one time in a Mills & Boon novel is not necessarily the dominant social archetype.³² The slippage between the two is a fruitful ground for examination. For example, despite the popular image of the young single woman as “flapper” in the 1920s, the heroine of the Mills & Boon romance was rarely one.³³ Billie Melman has noted that two nineteenth century meanings of the word “flapper” fused in the 1920s – one referring to innocent young girls, the other child prostitutes, leading to the word denoting young women under voting age with a sense of “loose” sexuality.³⁴ The absence of the flapper from the Mills & Boon novel might seem to

²⁹ Susan Kingsley Kent, *Gender and Power in Britain, 1640-1990* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 296.

³⁰ Katherine Holden, “‘Nature takes no notice of morality’: Singleness and Married Love in Interwar Britain,” *Women’s History Review* 11.3 (2002): p. 484.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Dixon, *Romance Fiction*, p. 82.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 27-29.

suggest a level of disapprobation at her sexual proclivities. And, indeed, this might be true, but we would be mistaken to think that sex does not haunt the Mills & Boon romances of this period. Alan Boon, longtime editor at the firm, notes that his father and predecessor Charles, who was in charge during this in this period, “was not very hesitant of sex. In a curious way, the books were more permissive in a sense than today.”³⁵ We rarely see heroines actively pursuing men in Mills & Boon romances of this period or admitting to feeling sexual desire. Stopes’ autonomous female sex drive is mostly absent. However, we do see heroines making sexual “mistakes” – that is, having sex outside marriage, often with inappropriate men. The texts also interact with marriage in an interesting way: we see numerous examples of bad marriages with unpleasant sex that the heroines must escape before they achieve their happy ending – something which is often equated with an escape from Britain altogether.

The Mills & Boon romance did not spring fully formed from the pen of Sophie Cole, author of the firm’s first published romance (and, indeed, first book). Nicola Beauman has argued persuasively that authors of women’s fiction in the early twentieth century had inherited the mantle from nineteenth century sensationalists like M. E. Braddon. Two of the most influential of these authors were Elinor Glyn and Ethel M. Dell, who paved the way for later authors like E. M. Hull. These authors received little critical attention and so could be more daring in their portrayal of female desire and sexuality. In addition, they imbued their vocabularies with moral overtones.³⁶ Glyn’s grandson notes that, despite her books’ preoccupation with desire, Glyn “was not much interested in sex; she thought it unromantic, animal, earthy. She was interested in love, in the romantic

³⁵ Joseph McAleer, *Passion’s Fortune: The Story of Mills & Boon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 150.

³⁶ Beauman, *Very Great Profession*, p. 124.

disguise which enveloped more material thoughts, and feelings.”³⁷ While retribution generally befell heroines who acted outside social boundaries – for example, Glyn’s heroine in *Three Weeks*, her most popular novel, dies – it is worth noting that it is this love which acted as an attempt at legitimization of their sexually transgressive actions.³⁸ Likewise, heroines also attempt to mobilise romantic love as a sort of excuse for sexual activity in early Mills & Boon romances. In Sophie Cole’s *Arrows from the Dark* (1909), Mills & Boon’s first ever book, heroine Eugenie plans to go away to Paris for the weekend with her lover Herr Stehmann, although circumstances prevent them from getting further than Dover. (This is a plot device used often by Cole – Alan Boon notes that her books usually featured “the heroine, a pie-eyed little girl, going down to Brighton and being seduced”.³⁹) Similarly, in Denise Robins’ *Desire is Blind* (1928), heroine Thea is seduced early in the book by the villainous Bevil, who manipulates her into sleeping with him by accusing her of being “frigid” (thus invoking the spectre of the sexually anomalous spinster) and of having “plebeian morals”, as well as “not really caring for him”.⁴⁰

For both Thea and Eugenie, romantic love functions as a way of legitimating their sexual activity. However, both are still conscious of the social value of virginity. Thea struggles to “get it out of her foolish, narrow little mind that she had committed a terrible crime and was blighted”, feeling particularly guilty for transgressing the lessons taught to her by her religious aunt.⁴¹ Eugenie is conscious enough of the social ramifications of her weekend with Herr Stehmann (even though they did not end up having sex) that she is blackmailed with it by Stehmann’s widow Elsa. Ultimately, it is revealed that this premarital sexual activity (or intention thereof) was a mistake: Thea discovers Bevil with

³⁷ Ibid., p. 185.

³⁸ The much more conservative Barbara Cartland, attempting to abridge these books in the 1960s, found much more to excise than just overt references to sex. [Nickianne Moody, “Elinor Glyn and the Invention of ‘It’,” *Critical Survey* 15.3 (2003): p. 94.]

³⁹ McAleer, *Passion’s Fortune*, p. 17.

⁴⁰ Denise Robins, *Desire is Blind* (London: Mills & Boon, 1928), pp. 13-14.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 15.

another woman, while Eugenie is worried that learning about her planned weekend with Stehmann will damage her relationship with her fiancé Tom. In this sense, the social status quo is upheld and sex before marriage is condemned; however, we should not neglect the importance of the fact that Thea and Eugenie are still allowed to occupy the position of heroine – and, by extension, sympathetic character. Both are still, as Rachel Brownstein puts it, “an integral, aesthetically and morally coherent unique individual, a signifying self.”⁴² Unlike Glyn’s transgressive heroines, Thea and Eugenie both live happily ever after. Eugenie is able to convince Tom that “she was guilty of nothing more than indiscretion”,⁴³ while Thea’s happy ending takes place with Charles Fettermore, who she marries for convenience when he rescues her after her discovery that Bevil has betrayed her. Virginity loss outside the accepted paradigm is not ruinous for these heroines – they achieve romantic fulfilment in spite of it.

It should be noted that seduced heroines are shown as relatively blameless – they are manipulated into sex by wicked men, who abuse the rhetoric of romantic love in order to bend these virgins to their will. Heroines like Thea believe their virginity loss is a consummation of a romantic relationship; however, they are sadly mistaken. This specifically sexualised love is imagined as a rhetoric to which women are susceptible, not one that they mobilise. This idea is supported by feminist writer and activist Lucy Re-Bartlett, who wrote in 1911,

That there are many sensual women in the world is all too true, but we maintain that there is an infinitely larger number of whom the chief factor working in sex

⁴² Rachel M. Brownstein, *Becoming a Heroine: Reading about Women in Novels* (New York: Viking Press, 1982), p. xvi.

⁴³ *The Advertiser*. “Epistolary Indiscretion (review of *Arrows from the Dark*),” Adelaide, 3 July, 1909, p. 16, available from Trove database, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/5731692>.

relationships is the heart. And their hearts lead women astray and make them weak and wicked, just as the senses do with men.⁴⁴

We see no heroines actively desiring and pursuing men in Mills & Boon novels of this period. This is arguably in contrast to what was actually happening in society at the time: Angela Woollacott discusses “khaki fever” at the beginning of World War I, where girls “were so attracted to men in military uniform that they behaved in immodest and even dangerous ways”.⁴⁵ Similarly, Karen Chow discusses the way the film adaptation of *The Sheik* turned Rudolph Valentino into a sex symbol and allowed female readers and viewers to vicariously experience the sexual excitement of heroine Diana⁴⁶ – something which, as Melman has suggested, was found threatening by many male cultural commentators of the time.⁴⁷ We see no such overt expressions of autonomous sexual attraction in Mills & Boon novels: instead, heroines are portrayed as women whose instincts are essentially compliant with the dominant morality of the day, who are fooled by wicked men. We can see here the innocence that was key to the construction of virginity during this period: the “good girl” was expected to want to marry, and so if, like Thea, she slept with a man who told her he loved her, perhaps she could be forgiven. The girl who pursued sex, however, might not meet with such approbation. (This is a group which might include flappers, which perhaps explains why they did not appear in Mills & Boon novels.) Even if a girl lost her virginity, the books ensure that she remains culturally encoded as “good”: she maintains a sort of innocent, virginal mindset, a victim who was duped in her pursuit of that female ideal – companionate marriage and heterosexual fulfilment.

⁴⁴ Lucy Re-Bartlett, *The Coming Order* (1911) excerpted in *Outspoken Women: An Anthology of Women's Writing on Sex, 1870–1969*, ed. Lesley A. Hall (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 45.

⁴⁵ Woollacott, “Khaki Fever,” p. 325.

⁴⁶ Karen Chow, “Popular Sexual Knowledges and Women’s Agency in 1920s England: Marie Stopes’s *Married Love* and EM Hull’s *The Sheik*,” *Feminist Review* 63.1 (1999): p. 73.

⁴⁷ Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination*, p. 92.

Neither Thea nor Eugenie marry their seducers (attempted or actual). Instead, they marry other, non-threatening men, with whom they can build a stable domestic future, a figure linked with the 1920s-1930s image of a new domestic, neurasthenic masculinity: the gardener, rather than the soldier.⁴⁸ As Jayashree Kamble notes, many of these heroes are not particularly wealthy: the emphasis on the hero as a capitalist captain of industry did not yet exist in any sustained way in the books of these time. Instead, heroes and heroines were generally both petit bourgeois (probably mirroring the status of the readership) with the emphasis placed on their building and cultivating a life together.⁴⁹ The love between hero and heroine is not particularly sexualised – there is, for example, no eroticisation across class boundaries, even when, as in the case of Thea and Charles, they do exist – especially when compared to the relationship between heroine and seducer. Dixon writes that these early Mills & Boon novels,

acknowledge sexual attraction as an element of marriage, [but] emphasise that the essential basis for marriage is love which includes elements of friendship, shared interests and companionship.⁵⁰

This is interesting, given the growing social emphasis on the role of sexual pleasure in the marital relationship in the post-Stopes world. Dixon notes that, in these novels, “[i]t is as if the sexual passion of acknowledged lovers is literally indescribable”.⁵¹ We might assume that the love and respect borne by the hero for the heroine will lead him to treat her well sexually, but we rarely see these relationships consummated: the dominant sexual element in the books comes from this other man. Jane Lewis has argued that many women in the

⁴⁸ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 8.

⁴⁹ Jayashree Kamble, *Making Meaning in Popular Romance Fiction: An Epistemology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 34.

⁵⁰ Dixon, *Romance Fiction*, pp. 49-50.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

1910s probably found sex distasteful,⁵² something which would seem to be supported by Re-Bartlett, who wrote in 1914 that,

woman's way of preserving her identity has often lain in abstracting herself partially, that is to say with her mind and heart, from all that part of the sexual relation which she found unlovely.⁵³

Dixon adds that this sex-negativity is reflected in Mills & Boon novels of the period.⁵⁴ Indeed, where sex appears in the narrative, it is usually negative: we see few of the ecstatic consummations of romantic relationships that can be observed in the historical romance. Often, the heroine is deflowered by the "wrong" man, but even when she sleeps with the hero, her experience is often miserable: in Louise Gerard's *Life's Shadow Show* (1916), for instance, the heroine's wedding night with the hero is full of "fear and shame", the only sounds that of "a man's voice, soothing and tender, and the sound of a girl's shamed weeping."⁵⁵

We see an example of the "wrong man" virginity loss narrative in Denise Robins' *Shatter the Sky* (1933), where heroine Karey is regularly troubled by the sexual impositions of her husband Ralph. This is true on their wedding night (her virginity loss), where she struggles to allow "no revulsion of feeling to spoil his happiness"⁵⁶, but is particularly exacerbated after she encounters the book's hero, Dickon. She thinks,

He [Ralph] could never be her lover in every sense of the word, because even when their bodies were one, their minds were segregated. Between them there could never be that complete fusion of spirit as well as body which woman finds a

⁵² Jane Lewis cited in Dixon, *Romance Fiction*, pp. 48-9.

⁵³ Lucy Re-Bartlett, *Sex and Sanctity* (1914) excerpted in *Outspoken Women*, ed. Hall, p. 42.

⁵⁴ Dixon, *Romance Fiction*, pp. 48-9.

⁵⁵ Louise Gerard, *Life's Shadow Show* (London: Mills & Boon, 1916), pp. 195-196.

⁵⁶ Denise Robins, *Shatter the Sky* (London: Mills & Boon, 1933), p. 44.

necessity, although a man can do without it. That was the missing link, and the longer Karey lived with Ralph, the more acutely she was aware of it.⁵⁷

Ralph does not appear to be a particularly sensitive lover (despite being a doctor, he does not seem to have been a reader of Stopes), but what is coded as important by the text is the lack of emotional bond between them. Thea is textually forgiven for having sex because she believed she was in love; Karey, on the other hand, cannot enjoy sex, because she is not. A strong line between sex and love is drawn. This is reflective of Stopes' work, which positions "spiritual and romantic intercourse" (pun apparently not intended) as "the highest side of marriage".⁵⁸ Similarly, socialist and feminist campaigner for reproductive rights F.W. Stella Browne wrote in 1917 that, "[d]iffusion of the sexual emotions in women is not merely physiological: it extends throughout the imaginative and emotional life,"⁵⁹ and, more bluntly, safe sex activist Ettie Rout wrote in 1925 that, "[w]omen experience sexual pleasure only when having intercourse with a man who is beloved by them."⁶⁰ This "complete fusion of spirit", as Karey puts it, is necessary to female sexual pleasure – pleasure, for women, is not just physiological, but emotional. This is true too of desire: these heroines are, in effect, demisexual. Dixon argues that all Mills & Boon novels, including those of this period, adhere to a "middle-class morality, which condemns sex without love".⁶¹ This is what we see in evidence in these books: love allows heroines like Thea and Eugenie to be forgiven for what might otherwise be considered a transgression, and the lack of it makes Karey's sex life miserable, especially once she realises she does have this spiritual bond with another man.

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 48-49.

⁵⁸ Marie Carmichael Stopes, *Married Love* (London: Pelican Press, 1919), p. 59.

⁵⁹ F.W. Stella Browne, *Sexual Variety and Variability Among Women* (1917) excerpted in *Outspoken Women*, ed. Hall, p. 48.

⁶⁰ Ettie Rout, *The Morality of Birth Control* (1925) excerpted in *Outspoken Women*, ed. Hall, p. 113.

⁶¹ Dixon, *Romance Fiction*, pp. 48-49.

This is a proto-version of the narrative that later evolves into compulsory demisexuality. Love is not yet coded as making sex legitimate – it is very clear that Thea’s sexual activity with Bevil is wrong, for example – but it is recognised that for women, romantic love and sex are inextricably entwined. Stopes’ book *Married Love* is predicated on the notion that there is indeed love in the marriage: husband must love wife enough to care about her sexual pleasure, and the role that emotions play for women in sex are acknowledged. Being trapped in a marriage where sexual imposition exists without love is presented by the texts as being horrible for women: in Denise Robins’ 1934 novel *Slave Woman*, heroine Janet explicitly figures her relationship with aggressive husband Guy as slavery, and dreams of the hero, the more sensitive, respectful Dacre. This is, perhaps, one of the reasons why the non-threatening model of masculinity is generally preferred over the sexually aggressive model: Tom over Herr Stehmann, Charles over Bevil, Dickon over Ralph, Dacre over Guy. These are heroes who will not only love but, presumably, listen to their heroines, taking their pleasure into account.

However, these non-aggressive heroes are not the sole model of hero available – and, indeed, the most popular hero in women’s fiction of this period is Ahmed ben Hassan of E.M. Hull’s 1919 novel *The Sheik*. Ahmed is an extremely aggressive hero: he kidnaps heroine Diana and rapes her many times over a long period before eventually falling in love with her.⁶² There are many Ahmed-esque heroes in Mills & Boon novels – Dixon notes that the hero of the 1920s in particular is “more likely to be an expressively passionate Latin lover than an English gentleman.”⁶³ This kind of hero appears regularly in the novels of Louise Gerard. Gerard was arguably drawing on the longer tradition of the

⁶² *The Sheik* is, in many ways, an ur-text, because this pattern, where the heroine experiences desire for the seemingly villainous hero before/while falling in love with him, is one repeated frequently in much later romance fiction, from about the 1960s onwards. Its narrative pattern is not dissimilar to *The Flame and the Flower*, which I discussed in the previous chapter.

⁶³ Dixon, *Romance Fiction*, p. 6.

dangerous lover⁶⁴ – it is difficult not to read her 1916 novel *Life's Shadow Show*, in which the heroine is tricked into a bigamous marriage by the hero, against *Jane Eyre*. (Like Jane, heroine flees hero, and the happy ending does not take place until his wife dies and she has become financially independent, giving their relationship a more equal power dynamic.) Gerard's 1922 novel *A Son of the Sahara* bears more obvious resemblance to *The Sheik*: dangerous hero Raoul, the Sultan Casim Ammeh, pursues and eventually kidnaps English heroine Pansy, keeping her in his harem. Unlike Ahmed, he does not rape Pansy, but we see the same struggle within him between the "civilised" white man and the barbarous Other, essentially creating a dual personality. The Other is sexually aggressive, and, as Chow has noted, might have been attractive to the contemporary reader "as an escapist fantasy that represented a departure not only from the ordinariness of England but from the ordinariness of English men, who... perhaps needed books like *Married Love* to please their wives."⁶⁵

However, in both *The Sheik* and *A Son of the Sahara*, this dangerous hero is eventually revealed to be white and not racially othered after all, reinscribing romance as the domain of the white race at the same time as sexualising the Other. Coupled with his love for the heroine, this functions within the text to civilise him and transform him into the non-threatening caring husband necessary for the romance's happy ending. Ahmed in *The Sheik* maintains an edge of dangerous eroticism – "You will have a devil for a husband," he warns Diana at the book's conclusion – but Raoul embraces his white identity more wholeheartedly, falling at Pansy's feet and begging her to help him "grope back to [her] white ways".⁶⁶ We can see here a practice common in many post-Hull novels of constructing dangerous sexuality as other and foreign, reinforcing Western sociosexual

⁶⁴ For more on this, see Deborah Lutz, *The Dangerous Lover: Gothic Villains, Byronism, and the Nineteenth-Century Seduction Narrative* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006).

⁶⁵ Chow, "Popular Sexual Knowledges," p. 75.

⁶⁶ Louise Gerard, *A Son of the Sahara* (London: Mills & Boon, 1922), Kindle edition, location 4985.

norms as civilised and correct. This, as Woollacott has argued, constructs white man as capable of self-control and restraint, while “uncontrolled lustful and barbaric behaviour” is ascribed to the non-white man.⁶⁷ In texts like *The Sheik* and *A Son of the Sahara*, the racially othered and eroticised hero thus becomes capable of forcefully awakening desire in the virginal heroine largely because of the guaranteed happy ending of the romance – as Chow notes, “[t]he consequences are erased, the fantasy made safe.”⁶⁸ As Hsu-Ming Teo has argued with respect to Anglo-Indian Raj novels, it is revealed that romance is a Western sensibility;⁶⁹ therefore the hero must embrace his whiteness in order for the love story to come to its successful conclusion.

This said, it is not coincidental that the most eroticised heroes – and the heroes most capable of awakening sexual desire in the heroines – are racially othered. While “romance” might be coded British by the books, we see very little sexual desire, pleasure, or satisfaction expressed from the heroines with respect to British men: instead, it is targeted towards these exciting foreign strangers. Szreter and Fisher have noted that, in the culture of innocence that surrounded sex, there was pressure put on young men to somehow “acquire a degree of knowledge without being morally tainted by it”,⁷⁰ and that society “reflected an ideal of men as sexual educators.”⁷¹ However, considering the amount of dissatisfaction and dysfunction we see expressed from both men and women in letters to Marie Stopes, we can assume that this ideal was one British men found hard to live up to. We can perhaps also see this in the portrayal of sexually aggressive husbands like Ralph in *Shatter the Sky*, who are either too selfish or unaware of how to sexually satisfy their wives. The othered and eroticised man has somehow obtained the skills necessary to

⁶⁷ Angela Woollacott, *Gender and Empire* (Houndsmill and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 52.

⁶⁸ Chow, “Popular Sexual Knowledges,” p. 76.

⁶⁹ Hsu-Ming Teo, “Romancing the Raj: Interracial Relations in Anglo-Indian Romance Novels,” *History of Intellectual Culture* 4.1 (2004): p. 8.

⁷⁰ Szreter and Fisher, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution*, pp. 63-64.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

awaken desire and pleasure in the heroine – he, unlike the British man, might offer her the potential of good sex (including virginity loss), even if he must be made “white” to embrace romance. This might also account for why so many romantic happy endings, even those with British heroes, take place outside Britain – the society that fostered women’s unhappiness is rejected for one more friendly to their needs.

Mills & Boon novels of this period seem to express a distinct dissatisfaction with British men. Where sex is represented on the page, it is generally negative – whether because of an insufficiently sensitive partner (as with Karey and Ralph), or because the heroine’s partner has manipulated her into transgressing social boundaries (as with Thea and Bevil), perhaps reflecting a broader culture of female sexual dissatisfaction. Virginity loss in particular is regularly traumatic, and it is perhaps not coincidental that heroines are not always – or even usually – deflowered by the hero. We see an explicit rejection of the idea that virginity loss dooms a woman to remaining with the man who takes her virginity: heroines are not stuck in bad marriages, nor are they ruined by wicked men who deflower them. Whether the hero is a gentler alternative to the sexually aggressive man or the sexually aggressive man transformed, the romantic happy ending takes place with a man willing to fulfil the heroine’s emotional needs: and it is these needs for love, rather than for sexual pleasure, that take textual precedence. The books suggest that escape is possible: from bad men, bad marriages, and in some cases, from Britain. But most importantly, we can see the growth of an ideology that positions romantic love as the legitimating force for sex – that, as social worker and activist Margaret Kornitzer wrote in 1932, “slow recognition that love and not marriage is the true sanctification – the humanising – of sex”⁷² – as well as the development of the idea that romantic love is necessary for women to enjoy sex. These are the seeds that would later grow into compulsory demisexuality, the

⁷² Margaret Kornitzer, *The Modern Woman and Herself* (1932) in *Outspoken Women*, ed. Hall, p. 172.

paradigm that would later come to define not just the romance novel, but sociocultural scripts for appropriate female virginity loss and sexual activity.

Rejecting Pleasure and Rebuilding the Nation: 1940s-1960s

The mid- to late 1930s were an important period in the history of Mills & Boon. This was the period when the firm became a specialised romance fiction publisher, and it marks the period when, as Joseph McAleer notes, “we can begin to speak confidently of the modern Mills & Boon imprint.”⁷³ Certain characteristics of the heroine began to emerge as the dominant archetype – she was a young, clever virgin, often an orphan, who, as Dixon puts it, “exemplifie[d] a certain type of English womanhood.”⁷⁴ (It goes without saying that this was a white womanhood – as I discussed in the last section, romance was constructed very much as a white domain.) However, the guidelines for the narratives and restrictions placed on the books were still quite loose.⁷⁵ It was not until the Second World War that we can begin to speak of a formal Mills & Boon editorial policy.⁷⁶ This was partially because of wartime restrictions – for example, paper rationing meant that the books were forced to become shorter (interestingly, Mills & Boon maintained its paper ration by arguing that the books were good for working women’s morale).⁷⁷ However, several developing market forces over the 1940s and 1950s also pushed Mills & Boon in a more conservative direction. This had significant impact on the politics of virginity loss within the novels. Sex – whether positive or negative – effectively disappeared from the novels. Heroines who strayed from the “traditional” wedding night script of virginity loss disappeared. The racially Othered (although still ultimately white), sexually potent heroes

⁷³ McAleer, *Passion’s Fortune*, p. 59.

⁷⁴ Dixon, *Romance Fiction*, p. 6, pp. 85-86; McAleer, *Passion’s Fortune*, pp. 150-151.

⁷⁵ McAleer, *Passion’s Fortune*, p. 163.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 171.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 171-172; Grescoe, *Merchants of Venus*, p. 47.

disappeared, to be placed exclusively with white British or colonial men. Instead, virginity loss was usually located in the nebulous world post- the happy ending, to function as the consummation of the romantic relationship (and marriage) established by hero and heroine over the course of the novel, or, if hero and heroine were married during the narrative, took place off the page and did not really affect the progress of the story. Sex was largely rejected in favour of love.

There are three key market forces (outside of a broader cultural conservative turn) that we must note when discussing the development of the Mills & Boon editorial policy in the 1940s and 1950s. The first is the influence of the religious and conservative but lucrative Irish market. This was a market not averse to banning books it found offensive: it objected to “divorce, bedroom scenes or attempted seduction appearing in novels, even if in the context the comment is unfavourable to such”.⁷⁸ While this was presumably a source of anxiety for all publishers, it was particularly so for Mills & Boon, whose books were accepted without being pre-read by buyers in Ireland, a state of affairs which they were anxious to maintain.⁷⁹ The second was the beginning of the relationship between Mills & Boon and the Canadian firm Harlequin, who began reprinting Mills & Boon novels in paperback (primarily, to begin with, “doctor/nurse” romances) in 1957. This process was overseen by Mary Bonnycastle of Harlequin, who had a conservative outlook on what a romance novel should look like, feeling “they shouldn’t bring a blush to the cheek”.⁸⁰ The

⁷⁸ Alan Boon to Anne Vinton, 17 November, 1958, archives, University of Reading Special Collections.

⁷⁹ For example, Alan Boon wrote to author Joyce Dingwell in 1961 and asked her to rethink a scenario in which a divorced hero married the heroine while his first wife was still alive, conscious of alienating the Irish Catholic market. He wrote, “At the present time all our novels go into Southern Ireland, for example, and are accepted without hesitation, but if one of them ran into trouble, this situation might be altered.” [Alan Boon to Joyce Dingwell, 29 March 1961, archives, University of Reading Special Collections.] Similarly, he wrote to author Constance Evans asking her to remove a description of suicide, writing, “At present any Constance Evans story enters that market ordered without being read by the buyers, in the confidence built up over years that it will be quite all right from their point of view. Once this confidence was broken, the future would not be so easy.” [Alan Boon to Constance Evans, 30 December 1954, archives, University of Reading Special Collections.]

⁸⁰ Grescoe, *Merchants of Venus*, p. 56.

third was the lucrative serialisation deals with women's magazines that Mills & Boon developed during the 1950s and which continued into the 1960s. The editors of these magazines had considerable sway over editorial policy, as even the most cursory readings of Alan Boon's letters to authors in this period can reveal. The most prominent of these editors was Winifred 'Biddy' Johnson of *Women's Weekly*. Alan Boon recalls that,

She had a good idea of what appealed to the public, which was always a strong romance, with never any suggestion of sex. Her idea was to have everything very cosy indeed, without any jarring.⁸¹

Here, we can see Boon highlight what is perhaps the most important fact about the influence of editors like Biddy Johnson: their preferences were not simply idiosyncratic, but dictated by their readership. We should not make the mistake of thinking that the conservative turn in Mills & Boon editorial policy was dictated by the preferences of individuals: rather, these individuals – editors like Johnson in particular – can be read as emblematic of cultural shifts.

Unlike the books of the 1920s and 1930s, which often featured travelling heroines or happy endings that took place outside of Britain or its colonies, Mills & Boon novels of the 1940s were resolutely domestic. This is unsurprising, given the cult of domesticity that flowered during and after the Second World War.⁸² There was still an escape fantasy active in the texts – many of the books, especially those written during the war, did not mention it, providing an escape to a more comfortable, less uncertain world. In addition, some of these domestic narratives were set in other colonial countries: for example, popular authors Joyce Dingwell and Essie Summers were from Australia and New Zealand respectively,

⁸¹ McAleer, *Passion's Fortune*, p. 232.

⁸² Marlene LeGates, *In Their Time: A History of Feminism in Western Society* (New York & London: Routledge, 2001), p. 290.

and often set their books in those countries, which might have functioned as an escape for the British reader. Likewise, Lilian Warren's narratives often took place against an exotic colonial background, although the protagonists were always British: fellow author Charlotte Lamb described a typical Warren heroine and hero as a "hesitant, frightfully sensitive, not to say neurotic English girl and a hero who is an Empire building Englishman".⁸³ However, despite the persistence of the escape fantasy, the relationships between men and women in the books began to change. Heroines rarely sought to escape men in the way we could observe in earlier novels: instead, they sought to rebuild and restructure their relationships. We can see this in Fay Chandos' 1944 novel *Away From Each Other*, where married heroine Maive is seduced by an army officer billeted in her home. Her happy ending is not with her seducer, but with her husband, with whom she rekindles her love. We can see here the way the books generally sought to reinforce and strengthen the domestic unit. Increasingly, as the books moved into the 1950s, deviations from traditional narratives were removed from the texts altogether: *Away From Each Other* probably would not have been published if Chandos had written it in 1954 instead of 1944. It certainly would not have been deemed acceptable by either women's magazine editors or by Harlequin – in 1966, Alan Boon said of Harlequin that, "They do not like heroines to be in love with married men, or married heroines in love with other men, or unhappy married situations, and no touching on differences of colour."⁸⁴ If heroines were virgins, it was made very clear that the only appropriate place to lose their virginity was within marriage, and these were not rules that authors had literary licence to break.

We can read this move towards reinforcing marriage – and thus, the wedding night script for virginity loss – in the texts two ways. The first, as I have already mentioned, is as a result of the conservative shift that occurred in society in this period. Several scholars,

⁸³ McAleer, *Passion's Fortune*, pp. 99-100.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

including George Mosse, Ann Laura Stoler, and Sonya O. Rose, have argued that controlling sexual desire is often a nationalistic project, and that sexual morality can become crucial to delineating national boundaries:⁸⁵ in a post war society, following traditional sexual scripts could be read as part of a rebuilding project. Jeffrey Weeks has noted the population panic that existed in Britain in the 1940s: the Beveridge Report of 1942 declared that “with its present rate of reproduction the British race cannot continue”, an example of a growing concern that without stable marriages and women entering motherhood, Britain would cease to exist as a nation.⁸⁶ By following the traditional sexual script for virginity loss and establishing an enduring marriage within Britain or one of the colonies (and presumably having children), we might read the romance heroine as doing her part to ensure British society endured. We might also read the fact that heroines in this period almost always worked (until their marriage) as indicative of this: she is determined to contribute. Instead of fleeing society, heroines functioned to stabilise and remake it. Dixon argues that “[i]n this period it was women who were explicitly charged with their traditional role of creating and keeping a sense of community”,⁸⁷ and this is something we can certainly see evident in the novels – for example, Linda, the heroine of Denise Robins’ 1949 novel *The Uncertain Heart*,⁸⁸ works hard at her career as a typist (the book opens with her returning from a six month stint working in post-war Germany), but ultimately leaves to marry hero Grant. Grant is a somewhat pathetic character – as well as being penniless, he spends a significant portion of the book in hospital with appendicitis. His reasons for not marrying Linda immediately are financial (Linda rejects a richer suitor in

⁸⁵ George Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995); Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 7; Sonya O. Rose, “Sex, Citizenship and the Nation in World War II Britain,” *American Historical Review* 103.4 (1998): pp. 1162-1163.

⁸⁶ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulations of Sexuality since 1800* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1981), p. 297.

⁸⁷ Dixon, *Romance Fiction*, p. 88.

⁸⁸ Robins was no longer writing for Mills & Boon at this time – however, she was arguably the most popular romantic novelist of the mid-twentieth century, and her books are often indicative of broader trends.

Grant's favour), and his pecuniary woes are never resolved by the text: rather, it is assumed that Linda's superior domestic skills will help them cope. She provides the strength needed to transform their romance into a strong, stable domestic unit. She is exemplary of the ideal woman of the period as described by Rose: a "class-neutral, normative female moral subject who would exhibit both sexual restraint and social responsibility."⁸⁹

However, there is another way of reading this emphasis on strengthening marriage, and this is to do with evolving attitudes towards love. Claire Langhamer has argued that the 1950s saw an "emotional revolution" in Britain, and that by the 1960s, the cultural primacy of love was striking – she writes that the decade could more accurately be described as a golden age of romance than an age of sexual permissiveness.⁹⁰ She notes that in the years following 1945, there was a belief "that love could lay the foundations for a better social order".⁹¹ This is congruent with a change in the way marriage was perceived – as Langhamer writes, "love became the primary basis for lifelong partnership."⁹² Penny Summerfield observes that sociologists in the 1950s and 1960s argued that marriage was in flux: it was moving from being considered an institution defined by duties to "a relationship in which the partners negotiated their roles in accordance with personal preferences rather than externally imposed expectations."⁹³ This new marriage was a companionate one – defined by what Marcus Collins has called mutuality, "the notion that an intimate equality should be established between men and women through mixing,

⁸⁹ Rose, "Sex, Citizenship and the Nation," pp. 1166-1167.

⁹⁰ Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 11.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁹³ Penny Summerfield, "Women in Britain since 1945: Companionate Marriage and the Double Burden," in *Understanding Post-War British Society*, ed. Peter Catterall and James Obelkevich (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 58.

companionate marriage and shared sexual pleasure”.⁹⁴ This was commented on by the 1949 Royal Commission on Population, which remarked on the growing emphasis on “the wife’s role as companion to her husband as well as producer of children”.⁹⁵ Essentially, it seems that romantic love was becoming more and more important to the marriage, especially to wives: in 1949, Laura Hutton wrote that, “for a woman love cannot be localised. Just as her whole body responds in physical love, so her whole life is involved in the love of her heart, if it really is love.”⁹⁶ This emphasis on love in marriage is something which, as both Summerfield and Langhamer note, also functioned to destabilise it.⁹⁷ The Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce in 1956 included concerns about the “greater demands” placed on men by this new style of marriage, contending that wives did not fully appreciate their marital obligations, while husbands found “the changed position of women” hard to accept.⁹⁸ In this climate, the appeal of the romance novel, which has a companionate romantic relationship guaranteed to endure at its heart, is easy to understand. Marriage was reinforced as the site of love, and heroines found men who would not object to the emotional work of the companionate marriage, because they were in love. The books were an essentially an assertion of what Langhamer describes when she says, “[i]f real love should lead to marriage, then a real marriage was founded on love.”⁹⁹

The 1950s saw a distinct shift in the portrayal of the romance hero. While we can read this as emblematic of the “renewed confidence in masculinity” and the reassertion of “heterosexual male dominance of sexual activity” that Cook argued emerges in this

⁹⁴ Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: An Intimate History of Men and Women in Twentieth Century Britain* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003), pp. 4-5.

⁹⁵ Royal Commission on Population (1949), paragraph 103, quoted in Summerfield, “Women in Britain since 1945”, p. 59.

⁹⁶ Laura Hutton, *The Unmarried* (1949), excerpted in *Outspoken Women*, ed. Hall, p. 172.

⁹⁷ Langhamer, *English in Love*, p. 7; Summerfield, “Women in Britain since 1945”, p. 67.

⁹⁸ Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce (1956), paragraph 45, quoted in Summerfield, “Women in Britain since 1945”, p. 67.

⁹⁹ Langhamer, *English in Love*, p. 42.

period,¹⁰⁰ as well as being emblematic of capitalism and industry, I contend that this is also linked to these ideas about companionate marriage and marriage as a site of romance between equals. This is the era in which Mills & Boon introduced their “Alphaman” policy, which dictated that heroes be “strong, brave, mentally and physically tough, intelligent, tall, and dark”.¹⁰¹ While sex itself was removed from the texts, sexual tension was important, and these heroes were eroticised in a way that they had not been since the racially othered heroes that became popular in the wake of Hull’s *The Sheik* (heroes that, it should be noted, re-emerged into the form in the 1960s, with less emphasis on the need to recuperate them explicitly into whiteness). This was achieved by emphasising the power differential between hero and heroine. His inscrutability was highlighted – Biddy Johnson, a champion of the alpha hero, believed he should be imbued with “glamorous unapproachability”. Alan Boon explicated on this in a letter to author Joyce Dingwell:

I remember years ago Miss Johnson once laid down her serial formula to one of our authors whose work was not quite on the beam for a serial. Miss Johnson said that the hero should have a certain glamorous unapproachability about him. In this particular story the heroine was working in a hotel and the hero was the proprietor, so Miss Johnson suggested that the heroine should drop some crockery and the hero would then rebuke her; but the heroine would subsequently cut her finger, and the hero would then be kind to her. The effect of the tender scene after the tough scene is enhanced by the contrast.¹⁰²

These heroes, then, were often cold and cruel, though capable of great tenderness. They usually explicitly rejected romance. One of the most popular tropes in this period (again, a Johnsonian favourite) was the “marriage in name only”, where hero and heroine would be

¹⁰⁰ Cook, *Long Sexual Revolution*, pp. 184-186.

¹⁰¹ Grescoe, *Merchants of Venus*, p. 50.

¹⁰² Alan Boon to Joyce Dingwell, 24 November 1961, archives, University of Reading Special Collections.

married for reasons of convenience or propriety, but without genuine affection existing between them.¹⁰³ The story of the romance, then, was not just the story of how hero and heroine came to marry, but the story of how their marriage became the site of love and romance. The alpha hero – the embodiment of masculine power – was remade by the heroine into an ideal husband, his tender side defeating his cruel side. We can see an example of this in Kathryn Blair's *The Man at Mulera* (1959).¹⁰⁴ Early in the novel, the power difference between hero Ross and heroine Lou is established, his coldness made plain:

as he looked her way there was that experienced, worldly expression in his lean, handsome face, the lord-of-the-universe look which put her back where she belonged, among the young and innocent and negligible.¹⁰⁵

However, by the end of the book, romantic love has transformed Ross. He has not lost his dangerous edge altogether, but the tender side of his personality has triumphed because of his love for Lou:

She smiled and kissed the palm which covered her mouth, and by the small adoring action Ross was vanquished. He was cruel and tender, laughing and passionately intent.

‘My dearest, lovely darling,’ he said, in various ways.¹⁰⁶

This is not a man concerned with the demands placed on him by companionate marriage: rather, he relishes the fact that his future marriage with Lou will be the site of love and romance. Not only are heroes like Ross symbolically remade by the heroine (a textual

¹⁰³ McAleer, *Passion's Fortune*, p. 237.

¹⁰⁴ Blair was a pseudonym of Lilian Warren, who also wrote under the names Rosalind Brett and Celine Conway. She was a particular innovator in the 1950s and her alpha heroes were very popular.

¹⁰⁵ Kathryn Blair, *The Man at Mulera* (London: Mills & Boon, 1959), pp. 56-57.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

representation of the cultural idea of the woman and marriage rebuilding society), they are strong enough to bear what other men might think of as added emotional work in companionate marriage.

The power assigned to the alpha hero, and, as the 1950s moved into the 1960s, the explicitly sexual allure he held for the heroine, changed the way that virginity was enacted within the texts. While virginity in earlier texts often functioned as a default position, something the heroine might surrender in marriage (even if to the wrong man) or might be lured into surrendering, we see few indications of her desire. Texts in this period, however, often show the virgin heroine being tempted, although she does not surrender. The works of Denise Robins, arguably the most popular romance author of the mid-twentieth century, are useful to look at here. She authored heroines Thea and Karey, whom I discussed in the last section, as well as pragmatic Linda of *The Uncertain Heart* (1949), who is never sexually tempted by Grant (who is not an alpha hero). In some of her 1950s books, however, alpha heroes appear, and the consequent sexual attraction for the heroine is evident. However, these heroines are invariably able to resist. In *The Seagull's Cry* (1957), heroine Tansy has to pull back from a passionate clinch with hero Martin because “in another moment she was fully aware that she would have surrendered to that mad moment and that long hot kiss”.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, hero Christophe thinks, “What admirable control and what capacity she seemed to have for doing the right thing no matter how desperately her senses were assailed!” of heroine Annabel in *Heart of Paris* (1951).¹⁰⁸ In response to the temptation posed by the hero, the romance heroine becomes what Judith d’Augelli has called an “adamant virgin” – one who is determined to keep their virginity (as opposed to a

¹⁰⁷ Denise Robins, *The Seagull's Cry* (London: Hutchinson, 1957), p. 85.

¹⁰⁸ Denise Robins, *Heart of Paris* (London: Hutchinson, 1951), pp. 167-168.

“potential non-virgin”, who is willing to lose it but has not had the opportunity).¹⁰⁹ As I noted earlier, controlling sexual desire can be read as a sort of civilising, nationalistic project, but we can also look at this more specifically as an expression of anxiety over pleasure. While there was a growing acceptance of the notion that women had a right to sexual pleasure inside marriage, seeking pleasure outside of it was treated with suspicion. As Rose notes, there was considerable social anxiety over “moral laxity”, and women who strayed from sociosexual conventions were derisively branded “good timers” or “good time girls”¹¹⁰ – a name with a double meaning that suggested not only that they provided a good time for men, but that they were seeking pleasure themselves. The romance heroine, by contrast, is not morally lax: her adamant virginity shows that she can resist the promise of pleasure, and this is something for which she is symbolically rewarded when she achieves the companionate romantic happy ending.

One way this is regularly symbolised is through the character of the “other woman”, who emerges as an archetype in the 1950s.¹¹¹ This other woman is usually glamorous and sexualised in a way the virginal heroine is not: she does not resist pleasure, and, in many cases, actively pursues it. We can see an example of such a figure in Violet Winspear’s 1961 novel *Lucifer’s Angel*, where heroine Fay is contrasted with alpha hero Lew’s now dead ex-girlfriend Inez. Inez cheated on Lew, which leads him to swear that “never again would any woman be more to him than a means of pleasure”.¹¹² (He marries Fay at the beginning of the novel largely because he wants a housekeeper.) Fay must make him realise – through, eventually, leaving him – that she is not like Inez, in pursuit of pleasure, but that she loves (and wants) only Lew. She thinks:

¹⁰⁹ Judith D’Augelli et al cited in Susan Sprecher and Kathleen McKinney, *Sexuality* (Newbury Park: SAGE Publications, 1993), pp. 47-48.

¹¹⁰ Rose, “Sex, Citizenship and the Nation,” p. 1164.

¹¹¹ Dixon, *Romance Fiction*, pp. 6-8.

¹¹² Violet Winspear, *Lucifer’s Angel* (London: Mills & Boon, 1961), p. 152.

Didn't Lew know her yet? Didn't he know that she could never, and would never, suffer any man's kisses but his? Another man's sympathy was one thing, but another man's lovemaking was something she never even thought about, let alone wanted.¹¹³

Dixon makes the compelling argument that the other woman functions within texts at these periods not just as a rival to the heroine (that is, a reiteration of the virgin/whore dichotomy), but as a foil: she represents an element of the heroine's nature that the heroine must embrace – that is, her sexual nature, the side of her capable of pleasure.¹¹⁴ The alpha hero is, after all, a man of sexual appetites, and this is a side of him the virgin heroine must embrace, even if she does not (as Fay, who marries Lew, does) lose her virginity within the text. The romantic companionate marriage of the happy ending is one coloured by sexual pleasure. However, the other woman is unable to perform the inverse of this: she cannot embrace the part of her that is like the heroine. Her premarital pursuit of pleasure and inability to resist temptation has left her incapable of the romantic love that transforms the hero from dangerous aggressor to ideal husband. It is, I contend, the heroine's ability to resist pleasure, rather than her virginity per se, that constitutes her as a representative of moral, heroic femininity within the texts of this time. The situation of love and romance within marriage (and, arguably, the consequent destabilisation of marriage) represents the emergence of compulsory demisexuality as a governing paradigm for women's sexual behaviour. While heroines might not technically be demisexual – some experience desire before forming an emotional connection with their heroes – they certainly adhere to the idea that for women, sex and love should be linked together, and that pursuing pleasure outside this paradigm is inappropriate.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 87.

¹¹⁴ Dixon, *Romance Fiction*, pp. 92-93.

Surrendering to Temptation: Late 1960s-1990s

In terms of sexual history, the 1960s was a decade of considerable change. While some historians have argued that sexual behaviour remained relatively conservative in this period, we cannot disregard the fact that this is the decade in which premarital sex became increasingly more usual. While historians like Jeffrey Weeks and Jane Lewis dismiss this as a continuation of a trend, as virgins who had sex before marriage generally did it with their prospective spouse, there is an important nuance here we must note: it is love, not marriage, that makes this sexual activity legitimate.¹¹⁵ Just as marriage firmly became the location of love, so love expanded and began to supplant marriage in the sexual narrative: romantic love, rather than a wedding vow, became what was most important in the committed relationship. (We can see this shift illustrated neatly in advice columns in women's magazines – in 1955, a woman was advised to take a chaperone when staying overnight in her fiancé's home if there were no other women in the household, but by 1975, women were encouraged to holiday alone with their boyfriends as long as they took precautions.¹¹⁶) This new narrative is what I have called compulsory demisexuality, which positions love – not marriage – as the force that makes sex legitimate, particularly for women. It is still firmly linked to commitment and a future marriage in this period – something that gradually erodes over the following decades, although it does not disappear altogether – but we should not dismiss the importance of this nuance, which essentially makes romantic love more important than marriage.

¹¹⁵ Cited in Cook, *Long Sexual Revolution*, pp. 271-272.

¹¹⁶ Martin P.M. Richards and B. Jane Elliott, "Sex and Marriage in the 1960s and 1970s," in *Marriage, Domestic Life and Social Change. Writings for Jacqueline Burgoyne (1944-88)*, ed. David Clark (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 34-35.

We also should not underestimate the importance of the widespread availability of the Pill. As Cook notes, this brought about a relatively swift transformation of sexual mores, because for the first time, contraception was available that not only allowed women to have sex without fear of pregnancy, but did not limit female pleasure in a way that previous methods, such as withdrawal, might.¹¹⁷ This positioned sex firmly as a space in which women might seek or even expect sexual pleasure. Combined with the emerging narrative which made love the legitimating force for sexual activity, this created a clear connection between sex, love, and pleasure.

This said, we should not fail to note the radicalism of these narratives.¹¹⁸ Sex became politicised: while many more people began losing their virginity before marriage,¹¹⁹ changes in social attitudes did not come quickly. New narratives, which, as Hanne Blank argues, positioned virginity as “the difference between being liberated or hung up” began to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s, but to suggest that a widespread change in social attitude happened would be too simplistic. Virginity retained at least some measure of social currency, and a definite double standard was reproduced: according to Geoffrey Gorer’s research, in 1969 in Britain, 27 per cent of men and 49 per cent of women disapproved of premarital sex for men, while 43 per cent of men and 68 per cent of women disapproved of it for women.¹²⁰ It was this more cautious, “traditional” worldview that continued to inform Mills & Boon novels as they moved into the 1970s: heroines remained virgins, and despite the temptations presented by the alpha hero, they maintained their virginity until they were married.

¹¹⁷ Cook, *Long Sexual Revolution*, p. 295.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 271-272.

¹¹⁹ According to the authors of the *Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles* survey, 38% of female virginity loss occurred within marriage between 1950 and 1965, compared to just 15% between 1965 and 1975. [*Ibid.*, p. 326.]

¹²⁰ Geoffrey Gorer, *Sex and Marriage in England Today* (London: Nelson, 1971).

However, this is not to say that Mills & Boon romances did not become sexier. Sexually aggressive, racially othered heroes (who this time did not have to be quite so overtly recuperated into whiteness) began to reappear, bringing with them a new and exotic potential for pleasure. Some of the more overt conservative influences on the books faded away: serialisation deals with women's magazines, for example, became less important, although they continued into the 1970s. While Harlequin still refused to reprint some of Mills & Boon's racier authors, such as Violet Winspear and Roberta Leigh, until the late 1960s,¹²¹ they gradually realised that they were out of step with readers and began to embrace the more permissive books.¹²² The first sex scene we see in a category romance (though "see" is perhaps the wrong word – it is indicated by the text through a "fade to black", not explicitly described) is in Nan Asquith's *The Garden of Persephone* (1967). This is a premarital sex scene, although we should note here that the heroine is a widow, not a virgin. Over the 1960s, a divide begins to emerge between gentler romances, which continue to largely omit sex, and more erotic ones, in which sex and desire play a larger narrative role. By the time Harlequin acquired Mills & Boon in 1971, this divide was quite pronounced, which led to its eventual formalisation in 1973, with the creation of the 'Harlequin Romance' ("the less sexual line portraying a more gentle relationship between the sexes") and 'Harlequin Presents' ("the more sexual line of books often depicting a violent battle of the sexes acted out between the hero and heroine") lines.¹²³

Cook contends that cultural anxiety around premarital sexual activity shifted in the 1970s away from unmarried women and towards the schoolgirl. Less emphasis was placed on marriage as the only acceptable space for virginity loss, and more on the age at which

¹²¹ McAleer, *Passion's Fortune*, p. 123.

¹²² Grescoe, *Merchants of Venus*, p. 95.

¹²³ Dixon, *Romance Fiction*, p. 7.

virginity loss took place.¹²⁴ She notes that the steepest decline in age at virginity loss took place between 1956 and 1960 (from 21 to 19),¹²⁵ but, as Langhamer mentions, the majority of people in this period were marrying young, observing that marriage marked “the end of teenage life”.¹²⁶ However, when young women began to have sex outside marriage, a problem was created, even if society would accept women of this age having sex within marriage. The virgin thus becomes culturally constituted as a girl, not a woman. Cook notes that by the 1960s, the psychoanalytic idea that the woman who was not sexually interested in men was frigid and abnormal was widely accepted by young people.¹²⁷ However, by constituting the virgin as a girl, not as a woman, the virgin continued to be associated with a kind of asexuality: she was immature, unripe, unawakened.

Whether or not Mills & Boon embraced this idea of the virgin-as-girl is contentious, and not consistent between authors. Heroines were generally younger in the 1970s than they are in the majority of modern category romance novels – 18-23 seems to be roughly the age bracket for most. Reading the letters of Mills & Boon authors, we can see heroine and hero described as “girl” and “man” repeatedly: for example, Violet Winspear writes to Alan Boon in 1970 that, “the element of danger [in the romance novel]... must arise from a worldly man meeting up with a virginal girl. If the girl isn’t innocent then down the drain with any sense of romantic danger.”¹²⁸ The romance narrative is often a narrative of sexual awakening, which, in the context of the period, would seem to position the heroine as girl, not as woman. However, as the novels developed, particularly as they moved into the 1980s, more emphasis began to be placed on the heroine’s maintained virginity as a choice – her “adamant virginity” rather than an

¹²⁴ Cook, *Long Sexual Revolution*, pp. 294-295.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 320-321.

¹²⁶ Langhamer, *English in Love*, p. 151.

¹²⁷ Cook, *Long Sexual Revolution*, p. 236.

¹²⁸ Violet Winspear to Alan Boon, August 1970, archives, University of Reading Special Collections.

idea of her (somewhat childlike) innocence. This assertion of choice and agency would seem to position her more firmly as an adult. We see this in evidence in Charlotte Lamb's 1978 Harlequin Romance *Desert Barbarian*, where heroine Marie tells hero Stonor, "'I'm not going to bed with you as casually as I would choose a hat... When I fall in love it's going to be for keeps.'" ¹²⁹ Marie's apparent lack of sexual desire is something that Stonor finds frustrating:

'I want to hurt you,' he said fiercely. 'I want to sting you to life. You're like an android, an artificial creation shaped like a woman, with all a woman's beauty and desirability, but lacking the vital spark which lights it up. I told myself it was folly to come here. It isn't in you to respond to any man.' ¹³⁰

He is thus positioning Marie as an abnormal adult woman, as per the psychoanalytic script which argues for the normality of the female sex drive. To an extent, this is a position that the romance embraces, figuring the heroine as one of these anomalous women, until she meets the hero and achieves heterosexual fulfilment. While we can certainly argue that she is imbued with many of the signifiers of girlhood, she is not necessarily positioned as adolescent or immature by the texts: rather, as unawakened, needing the right (alpha) hero to initiate her and transform her into a desiring subject as well as object of desire.

As the texts move into the 1980s, the hero's role increasingly begins to include initiating the heroine into sexual pleasure as well as desire. Whereas heroines in more conservative earlier decades always managed to resist the advances of the hero (at least before marriage, if it was a marriage-in-name-only novel), the late 1970s and early 1980s saw heroines beginning to surrender to the temptation to have premarital sex. (This was to the disgust of many Mills & Boon authors, several of whom, including Violet Winspear

¹²⁹ Charlotte Lamb, *Desert Barbarian*, (London and Toronto: Harlequin, 1978), p. 371.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

and Ethel Connell/Katrina Britt, abandoned the firm because they believed sex was taking the place of love in the novels – Winspear wrote to Alan Boon that, “I just can’t debase the romance by making it too sexy,”¹³¹ while another author, Betty Neels, who had long eschewed the erotic turn in romance and continued writing “sweet” romances for many decades, referred derisively to modern romances as “gynaecological training manuals”.¹³²) “Interrupting” became a popular practice in the 1970s – that is, the hero and heroine being interrupted on the point of having sex – but by the 1980s, these interruptions started to disappear. Considering the competition category romance faced not only from television and other erotic novels but from the historical romances I discussed in the previous chapter, this is not surprising. It might also have been a result of increasing competition in the category romance market, particularly with the introduction of American category romance imprint Silhouette.¹³³ (This period of competition in the 1980s is sometimes referred to as the “Romance Wars”.) Silhouette heroes were generally less cruel and heroines more sexually assertive than their Harlequin equivalents, but in terms of sexual content, the early Silhouettes were “the same as the more pure Harlequins [i.e. Harlequin Romance], with sex play forever suffering from premature interruption”.¹³⁴ This changed as more publishing houses entered the market and the competition for readers became fiercer. In 1980, publishing house Dell released their Candlelight Ecstasy line, the first romance line in which on-the-page sexual consummation was guaranteed.¹³⁵ This line was very popular among readers,¹³⁶ and other publishing houses soon followed suit. Silhouette

¹³¹ Violet Winspear to Alan Boon, 1976?, archives, University of Reading Special Collections.

¹³² McAleer, *Passion's Fortune*, pp. 288-289.

¹³³ Silhouette was eventually acquired by Harlequin in 1984, although slight differences persist between the two imprints.

¹³⁴ Grescoe, *Merchants of Venus*, p. 160.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹³⁶ Mariam Darce Frenier, *Good-bye Heathcliff: Changing Heroes, Heroines, Roles, and Values in Women's Category Romances* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988), p. 7.

launched their Desire line in 1982, which featured a warning label about their level of sensuality.¹³⁷ The guidelines for this line required that:

The writing should be extremely sensuous, providing vivid, evocative descriptions of lovemaking and concentrating on the characters' reactions to each other and the sexual tension between them.¹³⁸

Harlequin launched a similar line, Temptation, in 1984.¹³⁹ This indicates the level of demand among the mostly female audience of the romance for these more erotic stories, which included sex scenes (and thus, in most cases premarital virginity loss). We can read this against broader cultural shifts, perhaps especially the growing acceptability of premarital sex. As heroines began surrendering to their desires, so too did female readers begin expressing their demand for erotic content in the books.

This is not to say, however, that heroines cast off their sexual inhibitions lightly. Virginity loss became a locus of great anxiety within the texts, because, just as many storytellers from the 1980s in the virginity loss confessional genre began losing their virginities outside the romantic paradigm, so too did heroines.¹⁴⁰ This was traumatic for many heroines, considering their dearly held beliefs that sex and love, if not sex and commitment, should go together. We can see an example of this in Anne Weale's 1983 Presents title *Wedding of the Year*, where heroine Savanna is horrified by her experience of desire for hero Jago at their first meeting:

¹³⁷ Grescoe, *Merchants of Venus*, p. 163.

¹³⁸ "Silhouette Desire Guidelines circa 1982," RomanceWiki, available at http://www.romancewiki.com/Silhouette_Desire_Guidelines_Circa_1982

¹³⁹ Grescoe, *Merchants of Venus*, p. 163.

¹⁴⁰ We can also see this anxiety around virginity and narratives around non-romantic virginity loss arising in films in the 1980s: we see girls making socially transgressive decisions about virginity loss in films like *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) and *Little Darlings* (1980). One virginity loss story in Wickens' book features a storyteller who loses her virginity after making a *Little Darlings*-style pact with a friend, which would seem to demonstrate the growth of the idea of virginity as coming-of-age. [See Lisa Dresner, "Love's Labor's Lost? Early 1980s Representations of Girls' Sexual Decision Making in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and *Little Darlings*," in *Virgin Territory: Representing Sexual Inexperience on Film*, ed. Tamar Jeffers McDonald (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), pp. 174-200.]

To have been aroused by a stranger made her feel disgusted with herself. It offended the idealist in her, the romantic, the dreamer.

It wasn't that she was a prude. She had always liked poetry, and the erotic verses of the Golden Age of the English love lyric made her long to experience the raptures so graphically described by Cavalier poets such as Thomas Carew and Richard Lovelace. But it seemed a far cry from their descriptions of lovemaking to the short-lived sexual adventures which she saw going on all around her.¹⁴¹

Savanna is able to resist her desires until her marriage, which occurs relatively early in the text. However, many heroines do not manage this feat. Weeks has noted that by the 1980s, the most striking feature of sexual culture was the absence of an agreed moral framework.¹⁴² This, while not necessarily untrue, is something of an overstatement, although a confusion as to what the "rules" are is sometimes invoked in virginity loss confessional stories in this period. However, this idea that there is no consensus on societal sexual morality is often true of the societies portrayed within category romance novels, which, as in the extract above, are often portrayed as spaces in which both men and women pursue sex for pleasure with no care for romantic love. The heroine, in contrast to her society, has adopted a strong moral position: that she will not have sex before she is in love (or, in some cases, married, though the number of heroines who take this position declines). Losing her virginity before the establishment of a relationship and a declaration of love – usually in an "it just happened" experience like those I describe in my chapters on virginity loss confessionals, where she is overwhelmed by desire and circumstances – is thus distressing for the romance heroine. Incidences of these non-romantic virginity losses

¹⁴¹ Anne Weale, *Wedding of the Year* (London & Toronto: Harlequin, 1983), p. 16.

¹⁴² Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p. 288.

appear in category romances during the 1980s, but become more prevalent in the 1990s and especially the 2000s.

Because the heroine begins to surrender to the sexual temptation of the hero more frequently, there is a growing recognition within the texts of the strength of the heroine's desire (which, as Mariam Darce Frenier notes, seems to grow exponentially more active in the late 1970s and early 1980s).¹⁴³ This results in a sort of Cartesian mind/body split.

Catherine Belsey has argued that "true love" promises to unite mind and body: "the overwhelming intensity of erotic desire... brought into harmony with rational and moral commitment, a shared life of sympathy and support, freely and confidently chosen."¹⁴⁴

When the heroine surrenders to her sexual desire, her body triumphs over her mind. Part of the work of the romance is to restore this balance: to bring her mind into harmony with her body. Often, she must perform the same work for the hero, who has existed in this split state for some time: seeking only to gratify his body but not believing that romantic love is necessary for him to live an emotionally satisfactory life. His love for the heroine brings this into alignment, just as he awakens the sexual female body that had, for so many heroines, remained hitherto dormant.

In the 1980s, we also begin to see the growing popularity of the non-virgin heroine. Some romance lines began to require that the heroine had previous sexual experience – for example, Berkley's *Second Chance At Love* line focused on heroines who were not virgins. However, there was still an emphasis on a specific sexual morality. The guidelines for this line stated:

Her first relationship must have been serious enough for her to have felt she was in love and committed, and it must have ended before the start of the novel. The

¹⁴³ Frenier, *Good-bye Heathcliff*, p. 26.

¹⁴⁴ Catherine Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 23.

heroine can be a divorcee, a widow, or perhaps jilted for a reason that does not reflect badly on her.¹⁴⁵

Although my focus here is on narratives with virgin heroines, there are two points I should make here about the importance of the non-virgin narrative. Firstly, the Second Chance At Love guidelines indicate the way that compulsory demisexuality had emerged by this period to be the dominant script for female sexual behaviour. While the heroine was not a virgin, her previous sexual encounters were legitimated by love. We can see here the way that love has become disentangled with marriage and become tied more to notions of monogamy, including serial monogamy.¹⁴⁶ The idea that women could have multiple partners, and that this could be acceptable because love was involved, was beginning to emerge. This seemingly takes the emphasis off virginity: as Cook notes, “[w]hen having sexual intercourse with a person of the opposite sex was tantamount to choosing them as a lifetime partner the act had immense emotional, economic, and symbolic weight attached to it.”¹⁴⁷ However, this brings me to my second point: the non-virgin heroine is regularly coded by the texts as virginal. Despite her loving sexual relationship with her previous partner(s), she remains, to an extent, innocent and unawakened – as Frenier writes, “[a]uthors became adept... at turning experience into a new mode of innocence”.¹⁴⁸ We can see an example of this in 1986 Silhouette Intimate Encounters title *Bachelor Mother* by Elda Minger, in which hero Bubba thinks the following about heroine Mel:

...there was something reserved, untouched, about Mel. It was in the way she carried herself, the expression he sometimes caught in her eyes.

¹⁴⁵ “Second Chance at Love Guidelines,” quoted in Frenier, *Good-bye Heathcliff*, p. 77.

¹⁴⁶ Cook, *Long Sexual Revolution*, pp. 325-6.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 339.

¹⁴⁸ Frenier, *Good-bye Heathcliff*, p. 78.

*She hasn't been touched by passion yet.*¹⁴⁹

Much of the same imagery is invoked around the non-virginal heroine as it is around the virgin. While this becomes less obvious as texts move into the 1990s and 2000s, this idea of sexual awakening remains potent in category romance. With a virgin heroine, it marks the hero as her first, only, and true love. With a non-virgin heroine, it casts her hero as superior to her previous lovers, for only he has the capacity to wake this level of sexual desire in her. Desire and love are explicitly linked: the greater the love, the greater the desire.

This is the period when the Harlequin romance first began to be heavily criticised by feminist critics. This includes, as I mentioned earlier, critics like Ann Barr Snitow and Tania Modleski, as well as Ann Douglas, who argued that “[t]he timing of the Harlequins’ prodigious success [in the 1970s] has coincided exactly with the appearance and spread of the women’s movement.”¹⁵⁰ These critics argued that the books – and, specifically, their sexual politics – were anti-feminist: Snitow argued that Harlequins allowed women to indulge an “impossible fantasy life”,¹⁵¹ Modleski believed the denial of men’s hostility to women within the books pointed to major ideological conflicts,¹⁵² while Douglas argued that the world of the Harlequin is “totally anti-feminist”, that the heroine “is fighting for the status of an exception; she neither wins nor wants the vindication of her sex: clearly a lost cause,” and that “it is difficult to see the Harlequins as picking up on any feminine struggle – even the ancient battle to be loved as well as desired – ignored by the women’s movement.”¹⁵³ As I discussed earlier in this chapter, the role of the heroine’s virginity and what critics perceive to be a narrative of menaced virginity is particularly criticised.

¹⁴⁹ Elda Minger, *Bachelor Mother* (Toronto and New York: Harlequin, 1986), p. 73. Emphasis in original.

¹⁵⁰ Ann Douglas, “Soft-Porn Culture,” *New Republic* 30 (1980): p. 26.

¹⁵¹ Snitow, “Mass-Market Romance”, p. 160.

¹⁵² Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, p. 111.

¹⁵³ Douglas, “Soft-Porn Culture,” pp. 26-27.

However, I am more inclined to agree with Dixon's perspective on this, when she argues that,

Just as the Doris Day films of the early 1960s can be interpreted as pictures of an adult career-woman protecting her space, instead of being labelled as a virgin protecting her virginity, so can the 1970s' and 1980s' heroine be interpreted as, and admired for, fighting for what *she* wants – even if it is not what feminists think she should want.¹⁵⁴

Dixon uses the antagonism between hero and heroine – a major part of many category narratives in this period – to support her argument. The virgin heroine is not passive, while she may fall victim to her desires on some occasions. What the heroine wants is a committed romantic relationship, and this is what she succeeds in attaining, ultimately reconciling her mind and body by recuperating desire into romantic love. This romantic love is, importantly, a companionate one, where the heroine and hero are on equal footing: the heroine “fight[s] the hero at every turn until he recognises [her] as an autonomous individual”.¹⁵⁵ As Dixon argues, at least part of the appeal of the alpha hero in romance fiction is due to second-wave feminism's characterisation of the man as dangerous to women: he is Other, and the heroine must bring him into her world, one characterised by the narrative of compulsory demisexuality, a feminine space in which they can live happily ever after.¹⁵⁶ This is similar to the (mythic) function I argue historical romance performs: the heroine does not destroy and remake the patriarchy, but she does destroy and remake a lone patriarch, transforming him from a man who is often overtly misogynistic to one who is respectful of and embraces feminine needs.

¹⁵⁴ Dixon, *Romance Fiction*, p. 90. Emphasis in original.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 76.

Borrowing from Ann Ferguson, Rosemarie Tong has neatly explicated the differences between two schools of feminism in the 1980s: “radical-libertarian” and “radical-cultural” feminism (loosely, the two sides of the “pornography wars” that took place in the 1980s, the former pro-sex, the latter anti-porn). While the romantic relationship formed in the category romance might be problematic for radical-cultural feminists, whose ideal sexual relationship did not rely on polarised gender roles (although they generally approved of romantic love), it is not dissimilar to the one aspired to by radical-libertarian feminists, who believed it should take place between two equal, consenting partners with a focus on mutual pleasure.¹⁵⁷ The work of the romance in this period is largely about equalising the power differential between the two protagonists, defusing and defanging the dangerous man and drawing him into a feminine space. (This also mitigates some of the problems of polarised gender roles noted by radical-cultural feminists.) This is the most dominant paradigm in the romance as it moves from the 1980s into the 1990s and 2000s: while the hero (sometimes quite forcefully) initiates the heroine into the world of desire and pleasure, she initiates him into an emotional, feminine world, where he takes the needs and wants of women seriously, because they have become his needs and wants too. Her tool for this is romantic love. Numerous second-wave feminists had major problems with the idea of romantic love: Shulamith Firestone called it “the pivot of women’s oppression today”,¹⁵⁸ while some radical-libertarian feminists, such as Pat Califia, found love oppressive because of its links to heterosexual monogamy and procreative sex, which constrained women and curtailed their sexual freedom.¹⁵⁹ However, there is no major anti-love school of thought in third-wave feminism, which may account for the fact that, while romance novels are often still criticised by feminist critics, more

¹⁵⁷ Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2009), p. 66.

¹⁵⁸ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Bantam, 1970), p. 126.

¹⁵⁹ Pat Califia, “Feminism and Sadoomasochism,” *Heresies* 12.3 (1998): p. 33.

feminist readings of the genre (such as the one I have offered in this thesis) have become available.

So what is the impact of this on the virginity loss politics in the texts? There is certainly a growing awareness in the genre of the impact of feminism – in the mid-1970s, Violet Winspear wrote to Alan Boon that, “[t]here is too much womens’ [sic] lib around in the Seventies for romantic authors to be able to get away for very much longer with stories in which the hero pushes the girl around and makes her afraid for her virginity.”¹⁶⁰ In the early 1990s, the romance authors in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* defended the portrayal of virginity in romance, arguing that virginity is emblematic of heroic femininity and that it signals the heroine’s intelligence and agency in being able to wait for the right man.¹⁶¹ Certainly, we do see growing emphasis on the heroine’s agency in this period: her virginity is clearly cast as a choice, not as a default. I discussed earlier in this section how the 1970s heroine was often signified both as girl and as abnormal woman. By the 1990s, the texts have moved firmly away from the idea of heroine-as-girl. Her lack of desire continues to mark her as anomalous – heroine Kate of Amanda Browning’s *A Promise to Repay* (1992) says that “as a woman, she had something vital lacking”¹⁶² – but specific emphasis is often placed on the heroine’s agency: she is figured as an adult woman, who has thought about her personal sexual politics and decided upon virginity. Leila in Madeleine Ker’s *Tiger’s Eye* (1991) is one such heroine:

¹⁶⁰ Violet Winspear to Alan Boon, 1976?, archives, University of Reading Special Collections.

¹⁶¹ Jayne Ann Krentz, “Trying to Tame the Romance: Critics and Correctness,” in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, ed. Jayne Ann Krentz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), pp. 111-112; Doreen Owens Malek, “Loved I Not Honor More: The Virginal Heroine in Romance,” in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, ed. Krentz, pp. 117-118; Brittany Young, “Making a Choice: Virginity in the Romance,” in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, ed. Krentz, p. 122.

¹⁶² Amanda Browning, *A Promise to Repay* (London & Toronto: Harlequin, 1992), p. 38.

Her virginity was a precious thing to her. Not something she would bestow on any man, just for the sake of losing it. She wanted to give it to a man she loved, someone who would mean everything to her.¹⁶³

We also see a movement away from the “menaced virginity” plotlines like the one Winspear describes and which were so strongly criticised by the feminist critics of the 1980s. While narratives do exist where the heroine is afraid the hero will rape her, there is a movement towards narratives where she is more afraid he will seduce her – that the temptation he represents will lure her to betray her firmly held principles (something which, as I have discussed, regularly, although not always, occurs).

This might be part of the shift towards a more emotional style of romance Dixon describes between the 1980s and the 1990s: the heroine’s fear of the hero is relocated from a physical to a mental arena. In some ways, the heroine is more afraid of her own desire than of the hero – for example, virgin heroine Ria of Helen Brooks’ 1994 title *Deceitful Lover* thinks, after being kissed by hero Dimitrios, “Those few minutes in his arms had brought alive to her for the first time man’s age-old dominance over woman. Her skin was still crawling with a strange thrill.”¹⁶⁴ Ria is afraid of Dimitrios, but she is perhaps more afraid of the sensations he awakens within her. While the hero is often still figured as dangerous in other ways to the heroine – for instance, in Rebecca King’s 1995 title *Passion’s Slave*, hero Ramon kidnaps heroine Georgia – he is distinctly less inscrutable than he had been in previous decades. The increasingly regular inclusion of the hero’s perspective within the texts ensures that he is more relatable and his motivations are clear to the reader: he is not as aggressively othered as he had been in the 1950s and 1960s. More emphasis is placed on his journey as well as the heroine’s: he brings her into his

¹⁶³ Madeleine Ker, *Tiger’s Eye* (London & Toronto: Harlequin, 1991), p. 83.

¹⁶⁴ Helen Brooks, *Deceitful Lover* (London & Toronto: Harlequin, 1994), p. 21.

world of desire and pleasure, while the reader can vicariously witness the hero's emotional walls crumble as he becomes part of a feminine space where sex and love are tied together, governed by compulsory demisexuality.

The idea that the romance is a narrative in which women exert power over men is repeated consistently in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*.¹⁶⁵ Other scholars, such as Frenier, Modleski and Regis, have also agreed that the text is one that the woman symbolically wins (although with varying degrees of optimism: Modleski's reading is far more pessimistic than Regis', for instance).¹⁶⁶ If the romance is, indeed, a power struggle which the woman wins – which I am inclined to think that it is, given the emphasis on the dominance of the alpha hero – then the sex scene often functions as a microcosm of these politics. This is particularly true when the heroine is a virgin. The hero's power to awaken her desire is perhaps most evident in her seduction, especially if he is seducing her away from her explicitly held principles. However, this is also the point where the power balance within the narrative begins to shift. His discovery that she is a virgin almost always provokes strong feelings in him: whether it is rage that she has neglected to tell him (which he often reads as her attempting to manipulate him into a romantic relationship) or wonderment that she has chosen him to be the man to deflower her. It becomes clear to him that, having enjoyed sexual pleasure with her – usually a degree of sexual pleasure which even he, generally the possessor of a storied and presumably pleasurable sexual history, has never before experienced – he can no longer enjoy pleasure with anyone else. She has exerted control over his sexuality: he is now in her thrall.

¹⁶⁵ See Krentz, "Introduction," p. 5; Linda Barlow and Jayne Ann Krentz, "Beneath the Surface: The Hidden Codes of Romance," pp. 17-19; Susan Elizabeth Phillips, "The Romance and the Empowerment of Women," pp. 56-58; Daphne Clair, "Sweet Subversions," pp. 63-71; Doreen Owens Malek, "Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know: The Hero as Challenge," pp. 74-76; Robyn Donald, "Mean, Moody and Magnificent: The Hero in Romance Literature," p. 81; Krentz, "Trying to Tame the Romance," pp. 111-112; Penelope Williamson, "By Honor Bound: The Heroine as Hero," p. 131, all in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, ed. Krentz.

¹⁶⁶ Frenier, *Good-bye Heathcliff*, pp. 101-106; Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, p. 40; Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), pp. 10-16.

Sometimes, these scenes function as consummations – Leila’s virginity loss in *Tiger’s Eye* is such a scene, taking place at the end of the book after she and hero Blaize have declared their love for each other. However, as sex scenes increasingly begin to occur earlier in narratives, particularly as the books move into the 2000s, these scenes perform a different function. The heroine loses her virginity outside the ideal script for virginity loss, despite her adherence to the principles of compulsory demisexuality. A romantic relationship has not been established – the hero, instead of being her partner, fits more neatly into the archetypes of “stranger” or “acquaintance”. Unlike the historical heroine, who often actively chooses her virginity loss, this heroine’s virginity loss is often passive: “it just happened”, as she was overwhelmed by her desire. This is, as the virginity loss confessional genre shows us, a relatively common virginity loss story for this period. (It is not coincidental that the emergence of the virginity loss confessional genre in the early 1990s is chronologically not far removed from this shift towards virginity as a subject of great anxiety in the romance – both, it would seem, indicate virginity as an area of growing cultural concern.) It is also an experience likely to be negative, but this is not necessarily the heroine’s experience. While the aftermath of virginity loss may be difficult for the heroine, the experience itself is always physically pleasant, and ultimately, it is recuperated into the romantic script dictated by compulsory demisexuality. The virginity loss scene ties the hero and heroine together – it really does bring them closer in a way that many storytellers lament their own virginity loss experiences did not bring them closer to their partners.

Instead of a “consummation”, I have termed this kind of virginity loss experience a “sacrifice”, because the heroine is in many ways a virgin sacrifice to the happy ending. In this way, it performs a similar function to that played by virginity loss in earlier historical romances, where the heroine’s forcible defloration serves to tie her to the hero and

eventually bring about the happy ending, though its articulation is clearly different. She sacrifices her virginity, along with, in many cases, her firmly held belief that she will only have sex inside a romantic relationship, which would seem like an instance where she loses power: but without her doing this, the happy ending might not occur, because the balance of power within the text might not shift. She gains, instead of loses, power by losing her virginity – something which might be a potent reparative fantasy, given what we see in virginity loss confessional stories from this period. She limits the space in which the hero can experience sexual pleasure, neutering any desire he might have to sleep with other women. If she is demisexual, he becomes demisexual, and it is in her world – the demisexual world, where sex and love are linked – they live happily ever after, even if she loses her virginity outside the culturally acceptable romantic script. To put it in simple, irreverent terms: the sacrificial function performed by the virginity loss scene becomes crucial to the narrative, because this is where the heroine gives the hero love as a sexually transmitted disease.

Virgin Sacrifice: The Twenty-First Century

In 1992, Penelope Williamson wrote that, “[i]n romance novels, there is no sex for the heroine without her first falling in love.”¹⁶⁷ However, this is largely untrue of category romances in the 2000s, particularly those published in lines which have an emphasis on erotic content. The sacrifice dynamic I described above becomes heightened in this decade as sex increasingly starts to occur earlier in the text. For instance, in Lynne Graham’s 2009 title *Desert Prince, Bride of Innocence*, virgin heroine Elinor sleeps with hero Jasim hours

¹⁶⁷ Williamson, “By Honor Bound,” in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, ed. Krentz, p. 129.

after meeting him, despite having “standards” that, for her, link sex to love.¹⁶⁸ The primary journey of the book revolves around recuperating their relationship into the paradigm of compulsory demisexuality: she must convince him that her desire was prophetic and that she is essentially demisexual herself, which in turn softens his hard heart and allows him to love.¹⁶⁹ Generally speaking, the virgin narrative becomes more extreme in the 2000s, the patterns – especially the sacrifice pattern – more pronounced.

We can contend that this extends so far as to make the virgin heroine narrative a kind of unofficial sub-genre of category romance in the 2000s. This is particularly emphasised by the use of “keyword titles”, which Harlequin adopted in the early 2000s.¹⁷⁰ These titles focused on easily identifiable keywords, and one of the things most often highlighted was the heroine’s virginity, using the word “virgin” as well as more euphemistic words like “innocent”, “inexperienced”, “untouched” and “unworldly”.¹⁷¹ This would seem not only to functionally separate virgin heroine narratives from others, but to signal the presence of a market interested specifically in virgin heroines. Looking at online reader communities, we can see that this market exists – for example, on romance reader website I Heart Presents (referring to Harlequin Presents), we can see commenters

¹⁶⁸ Lynne Graham, *Desert Prince, Bride of Innocence* (London & Toronto: Harlequin, 2009), p. 106.

¹⁶⁹ For further analysis of this book, see Jodi McAlister, “‘That complete fusion of spirit as well as body’: Heroines, Heroes, Desire, and Compulsory Demisexuality in the Harlequin Mills & Boon Romance,” *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture* 3.3 (2014): pp. 299-310.

¹⁷⁰ Interestingly, Harlequin have recently stopped using such titles, reverting to more euphemistic titles like those used in earlier decades.

¹⁷¹ For example, see titles like *The Italian Millionaire’s Virgin Wife*, *His Virgin Secretary*, *The Tycoon’s Virgin Bride*, *One Night With His Virgin Mistress*, *The Sheriff and the Innocent Housekeeper*, *Innocent Secretary... Accidentally Pregnant!*, *The Billionaire Boss’s Innocent Bride*, *The Sicilian’s Innocent Mistress*, *The Ruthless Italian’s Inexperienced Wife*, *The Italian’s Inexperienced Mistress*, *Untouched Until Marriage*, and *Unworldly Secretary*, *Untamed Greek*.

mentioning that they prefer to read virgin heroines exclusively,¹⁷² and suggesting that books carry a V-mark, “not for Vegetarian but for Virgin!!”.¹⁷³

This is the culmination of decades of angst that begins in approximately the late 1960s, when sex started to be signalled in the narrative. Contemporary romance has always included virgin heroines, but never is it more anxious about its heroine’s virginity than in the category romances of the last decade. While the contemporary societies represented within the books are coded as caring less and less about virginity – and, indeed, positioning virginity as stigmatising – so category romance seems to have imbued it with more and more textual significance. Virginity loss scenes become, as I discussed in the last section, focal points of power within the texts: in effect, much more important than in earlier texts or in historical romances where, we might assume, the societies represented actually cared a great deal more about virginity. The sacrifice narrative positions virginity loss as arguably the text’s most important incident, the spectacular orgasms experienced by both hero and heroine mirroring its significance as a major textual romantic and erotic climax.

So what does this tell us about the discourses of virginity in the twenty-first century? Reading the romance against the virginity loss confessional genre is productive here, because we can highlight the anxieties the romance speaks to. As I mentioned when discussing virginity in the 1990s category romance, the fact that the heroine ultimately gains, rather than loses, power through virginity loss is a potent reparative fantasy when we look at the virginity loss confessional genre, which features many female storytellers who feel used and disempowered by their first experiences of heterosex. Their experiences often destroy a romantic fantasy, but here the fantasy is realised. Even if the immediate

¹⁷² Iathe, comment on “Recap: Virgin Heroines in Harlequin Presents Books,” I Heart Presents, August 18 2010, available at <http://www.iheartpresents.com/2007/06/recap-virgin-heroines-in-harlequin-presents-books/comment-page-1/#comment-58548>

¹⁷³ Julia-James, comment on “Harlequin Presents Code 5: Virgin,” I Heart Presents, May 28 2007, available at <http://www.iheartpresents.com/2007/05/harlequin-presents-code-5-virgin/comment-page-1/#comment-1007>

aftermath of virginity loss is bad for the virgin – as in *Desert Prince, Bride of Innocence*, where Jasim accuses Elinor of being a gold-digger and they do not see each other for eighteen months – in the long run, the heroine gets, as Catherine Roach has put it, “a good man to love” (the same man, importantly, who deflowered her).¹⁷⁴ The heroine achieves multiple orgasms and the guarantee that this will continue into the future – and she is so desirable and so powerful in bed that she can figuratively destroy the hero, despite (or perhaps because of) her sexual inexperience. (“It was her first time. And, in some way he couldn’t understand, it was his first time, too,” hero Jake thinks when he first has sex with virgin heroine Catarina in 2005 title *The Disobedient Virgin*, which speaks to the way the virgin heroine can undermine the experienced hero’s power in bed.¹⁷⁵) Her virginity loss ensures that, in the long run, she will not be abandoned: she is reassured that her choice was the right choice, a reassurance that many storytellers in the virginity loss confessional genre never get. Even the most cursory reading of the virginity loss confessional genre signals that one of the major anxieties experienced by female storytellers is around their symbolic disempowerment in sex, particularly if they lose their virginity outside of the romantic script. Surprisingly few virgin heroines in the contemporary category romance of the 2000s lose their virginity within this script: however, they are not exploited, abandoned, shamed, or mocked. Virginity loss is still, for them, ultimately an empowering experience, with a partner who ensures that they feel pleasure – and who will, in the end, care more about them than anyone in the world. Simply put: they lose their virginity, and *something good happens*.

In this sexual climate, the fantastical appeal of the virgin heroine narrative in 2000s contemporary category romance is hard to ignore. Whether this fantasy is reparative and

¹⁷⁴ Catherine Roach, “Getting a Good Man to Love: Popular Romance Fiction and the Problem of Patriarchy,” *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 1.1 (2010).

¹⁷⁵ Sandra Marton, *The Disobedient Virgin* (London & Toronto: Harlequin, 2005), p. 142.

pleasurable to women, or whether the romantic fantasy reinforces the idea that love is the only legitimating force for sex for women and thus creates “unrealistic” expectations about first time sex in readers is a debate that has been going on for some time. Certainly, both readings are possible; however, to assume that the majority of romance readers are virgins and are taking the latter message would seem to be rather reductive, and is part of a long tradition of sexist discourse that worries about the effect of popular fiction on presumably frail-minded female readers. In any case, the virgin heroine narrative seems to be hitting a particular cultural sore spot. The 2000s do not see its demise – rather, they see it becoming almost a sub-genre of the contemporary category romance, with its politics heightened. The slippage between the heroine’s desire and ensuing virginity loss and the romantic happy ending is more obvious, with the books increasingly becoming a project of recuperation into the demisexual paradigm. The link between sex and love is upheld, and yet the two also seem to be drifting farther apart. The idea that you can lose your virginity in completely the “wrong” way and still achieve a happy ending speaks clearly to an anxiety regularly expressed in virginity loss confessionals: the heroine is still worthy of love, and things can still turn out all right in the end. We should also not ignore the fact that these “wrong” virginity loss experiences are deeply eroticised, which would seem to be a tacit acknowledgement of the fact that many female sexual fantasies take place outside the acceptable romantic script: the dangerous, othered stranger that is the hero is eroticised over the stable romantic partner (and, indeed, the narrative ends when the former is turned into the latter). This is a relatively new development in the erotics of virginity loss, because it admits that all women are not, in fact, demisexual – and that perhaps the most erotic fantasies take place outside the romantic paradigm, even if they are ultimately recuperated into it by the happy ending.

This last point is, I think, key to understanding the evolution of virginity loss politics in the twenty-first century. It points towards the autonomous female sex drive – which, as I have discussed, appeared in the cultural imagination of the Anglosphere in the early twentieth century with sexology and the publication of *Married Love*, but has hitherto been linked closely with romantic love. The idea that love and desire are virtually inextricable and that sex should take place only with the one you love is an idea regularly internalised by girls, as the virginity loss confessional genre shows. However, the eroticisation of sex – and, importantly, virginity loss – outside this paradigm is an interesting social script. Because the romance is ultimately defined by compulsory demisexuality, it becomes a safe space to explore this (we are reminded here of Alison Light’s claim that while the romance might not be progressive, it can be transgressive¹⁷⁶). This is an issue I will explore in more detail in the final chapter of this dissertation, in which I will examine virginity loss and the reactions to it in popular culture phenomena *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*. By doing so, I hope to gain a firmer understanding of what virginity loss signifies in the twenty first century, why it remains such a potent subject of cultural anxiety, what conflicting narratives exist around it, and the ways in which virginity discourse might evolve in the future.

¹⁷⁶ Alison Light, “Returning to Manderley: Romance Fiction, Female Sexuality, and Class,” in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Mary Eagleton (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 143.

**Chapter Six – The Virginal Reader: Virginity Loss in the Twenty-First Century and
Reactions to *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey***

As my discussions of the virginity loss confessional genre and popular romance fiction have shown, virginity – in particular, female virginity – remains a locus of considerable cultural concern in the twenty-first century. Rather than virginity ceasing to be an issue once the ties between sexual legitimacy and marriage weakened, it has instead become imbued with an intense anxiety. Perhaps this is because, in the absence of a concrete milestone like marriage, the “right moment” for virginity loss has become troublingly ambiguous. Love has been repeatedly invoked as the force which makes sex legitimate, especially for women, but trying to define the moment when love is enough to justify sex is much more problematic than knowing when and whether one is married. While new sexual scripts have emerged, virginity in the twenty-first century exists in a space of uncertainty. It remains entangled with nostalgic ideas of innocence and morality, particularly in the Christian culture of the United States, but has also become established as a sexual identity in its own right and something that is explicitly and actively chosen. For girls in particular, it has been figured as a milestone in a relationship – a sort of romantic rite of passage and/or coming of age – but as sexual scripts have moved away from one-partner-for-life and towards serial monogamy, the relevance of virginity has become more ambiguous. In short: there seems to be a sort of cultural consensus that virginity is important, but saying why it is important has become much more difficult. In addition, as I will discuss in this chapter, there is considerable cultural concern about the messages – especially the messages about love and sex – that the virgin receives. Society is anxious about what I have termed “the virginal reader”, worried that she will imbibe the wrong message about sex and thus, presumably, follow the wrong sexual script.

As I discussed briefly in the first chapter, what actually constitutes virginity is surprisingly nebulous. While modern popular culture generally privileges the first instance of penetrative heterosexual as virginity loss¹ – something which is certainly true of the romance novels I examined in the last two chapters – this has been complicated by changing styles of sexual behaviour. According to Hugues Lagrange, it is possible that many women before the twentieth century had sex for the first time without having kissed their partners² (although, as Ellen Rothman notes, petting might have been part of courting practices in America as early as the 1830s).³ In the twentieth century, however, kissing and petting became a more usual premarital practice, especially as dating supplanted courting and romantic relationships between unmarried people moved into the public sphere.⁴ This meant that some non-coital sexual activity before marriage became more acceptable,⁵ and thus positioned penetrative heterosexual as the culmination of a process of sexual activity: as a kind of pinnacle, but also as something separate and special. Juliet Richters and Chris Rissel outline a 1960s “bases” script of sexual activity, which progressed through kissing, touching above the waist, and touching below the waist to intercourse, noting that oral sex often fulfils the “third base” position in more modern sexual scripts.⁶ This has given rise to the modern phenomenon of “technical” virginity, wherein the virgin has participated in a variety of sexual activities (including oral, and, sometimes, anal sex), but not vaginal sex,

¹ Laura Carpenter, *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005), p. 44; Laura M. Carpenter, “Virginity Loss in Reel/Real Life: Using Popular Movies to Navigate Sexual Initiation,” *Sociological Forum* 24.4 (2009): p. 805.

² Hugues Lagrange cited in Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *The Single Woman and the Fairytale Prince* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), p. 50.

³ Ellen Rothman, “Sex and Self-Control: Middle-Class Courtship in America, 1770-1870,” *Journal of Social History* 15.3 (1982): p. 415.

⁴ Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), p. 31; Lynn Jamieson, *Intimacy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pp. 24-25; Lagrange cited in Kaufmann, p. 50.

⁵ Laura Carpenter, “The Ambiguity of ‘Having Sex’: The Subjective Experience of Virginity Loss in the United States,” *Journal of Sex Research* 38.2 (2001): p. 129.

⁶ Juliet Richters and Chris Rissel, *Doing It Down Under: The Sexual Lives of Australians* (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2005), p. 4.

allowing them to retain the title “virgin”.⁷ (This phenomenon may also arise out of religious culture, allowing virgins to participate in sexual activity without “technically” losing their virginity.) This has the effect of both constituting virginity as something specifically physical (often associated, for women, with the idea of the intact hymen), and casting doubt on it: if virginity is only “technical” when a woman has participated in a variety of sexual activities, then, it would seem, a truer virginity is also mental, invoking ideas of innocence and purity that have historically been part of virginal imagery, and implying that they should be maintained.

The growth of awareness and acceptance of LGBTQ sexual identities has also proved problematic for ideas of virginity.⁸ If, as Catherine Driscoll has written, “virginity [is] a fated pause before heterosexuality”, how can it be conceived of when the virgin is either already engaging in heterosexual activities, or does not identify as heterosexual at all?⁹ In addition, recent decades have given rise to the idea of “secondary” or “born again” virginity, particular in religious contexts. This not only problematises the idea of virginity as physical and places emphasis on it as mental, but constructs virginity as something valuable enough to want to reclaim.¹⁰ In short: in the twenty-first century, the idea of virginity is in flux.

In some cases, this confusion has caused a kind of doubling down on the importance of virginity. I discussed in the last chapter the emphasis placed on the virginity loss narrative and the textual significance of virginity in the contemporary category

⁷ Stephanie R. Medley-Rath, “‘Am I Still A Virgin?’: What Counts as Sex in 20 Years of *Seventeen*,” *Sexuality and Culture* 11.2 (2007): p. 26.

⁸ Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 140; Carpenter, *Virginity Lost*, pp. 6-8; Medley-Rath, “Am I Still a Virgin?” p. 34.

⁹ Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 31.

¹⁰ Laura M. Carpenter, “Like a Virgin... Again?: Secondary Virginity as an Ongoing Gendered Social Construction,” *Sexuality & Culture* 15.2 (2011): pp. 115-140; Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, pp. 120-121.

romance novels of the 2000s, but this is hardly an isolated phenomenon. The emergence of the virginity loss confessional genre, which grows exponentially more visible in the 2000s, also signals the way in which virginity has become a flashpoint for cultural anxiety just as it seems like it should be moving towards cultural irrelevance. In the United States (the culture of which is influenced more by Christian perspectives of virginity and sexual activity than other more secular English-speaking Western nations), virginity pledges – in which teens promise to maintain the virginity until marriage – have become increasingly more popular, championed by organisations like True Love Waits. (The name of this organisation is an almost perfect encapsulation of the way love is positioned as the legitimating force for virginity loss, although love is also equated with marriage here.)¹¹ Jessica Valenti has called this a “virginity movement”, one which she argues persuasively is bad for the girls it affects, because it is teaching them that “their ability to be moral actors is absolutely dependent on their sexuality”.¹²

The goal of the virginity movement, Valenti contends, is perpetual girlhood.¹³ This girlhood involves a curious combination of the two discourses of girlhood which arose in the 1990s – “girl power” and “reviving Ophelia”. The latter positions girls as vulnerable, damaged, and in crisis.¹⁴ The virginity-as-gift script that informs the virginity movement (girls are encouraged to save their virginites to give to their husbands on their wedding nights, for example) perpetuates this, positioning virginity as precious and something which intrinsically and irrevocably damages the girl when it is lost. The former discourse, however, encourages girls to assert their voices and agency. The virginity movement

¹¹ Heather Albanesi, *Gender and Sexual Agency: How Young People Make Choices about Sex* (Lanham, MD and Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), p. 5.

¹² Jessica Valenti, *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession With Virginity Is Hurting Young Women* (Seal Press, 2010), p. 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁴ “Reviving Ophelia” rhetoric appears more in the United States than in other Western nations. This may be connected to the more pronounced virginity rhetoric that also exists there. [Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick and Anita Harris, *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power, and Social Change* (London: Palgrave, 2005), p. 40.]

appeals to young women as agents who can “choose” virginity, deciding to maintain it as a form of self-respect. This perpetuates the idea of the virgin as sexual gatekeeper, who resists desire, rather than desiring herself.¹⁵ It also positions the female body as an object that is used during sex, rather than allowing the girl to be an active participant: in this formulation, the girl who “respects” herself enough to maintain her virginity is refusing to let her body be used by men.

These ideas are exacerbated by the widespread popularity of abstinence-only education in the United States, in which abstinence is taught as the only premarital sexual option. (Contraception is generally only referred to in terms of failure rates: in many ways, this movement aspires to the ideal of virginal ignorance that existed in the early twentieth century.) This form of education, heavily informed by evangelical Christian discourse, implies that premarital virginity loss will result in dire consequences, especially for girls – one popular curriculum, *Sex Respect*, claims that, “[i]f you have sex outside of marriage, there are consequences for you, your partner, and society,”¹⁶ going on to say,

You ARE worth waiting for, so you can learn about real love. For the price of keeping your clothes on and keeping cool now, you could have a priceless treasure – years of reaping the benefits of premarital virginity in your marriage.¹⁷

While there are, as Doan and Williams note, distinct limitations to teaching this and withholding information about contraception in a “post-virginal society” which is saturated with sexual imagery, abstinence-only education functions to problematise girls’ sexuality,

¹⁵ Valenti, *Purity Myth*, pp. 37-40. It should be noted that while boys are also appealed to maintain their virginites, the rhetoric employed is gendered – they are implored not to “damage” another man’s future wife. We can see this exemplified in the difference between “purity balls” and “integrity balls”. In the former, girls swear to remain virgins (entrusting their virginites to their fathers for safekeeping). In the latter (which are less common phenomena), boys swear not to deflower female virgins.

¹⁶ *Sex Respect*, student workbook, p. 11, cited in Valenti, *Purity Myth*, p. 105.

¹⁷ *Sex Respect*, student workbook, p. 74, cited in Alesha E. Doan and Jean Calterone Williams, *The Politics of Virginity: Abstinence in Sex Education* (Westport: Praeger, 2008), p. 113.

seeking to position them as objects of desire who must resist male aggression and usage, rather than desiring subjects, as well as perpetuating and fetishising ideas of innocence.¹⁸ It invokes older ideas of the virgin as asexual by casting them as anomalous in a hypersexual society, but not as abnormal: rather, by disappearing the desire of girls, it casts female sexuality itself as abnormal.¹⁹ (There is also a racial dimension to this: this asexual virginity can be read against the stereotype of the black girl as hypersexual, constituting virginity as white.²⁰) It is, I contend, an overreaction to the evolution of more permissive social norms. This moral panic over virginity is largely an American phenomenon, probably due to its more predominant Christian cultural consciousness; however, similar ideas about the problem of girl sexuality exist to lesser extents in the rest of the Anglosphere. This discourse positions controlling female sexuality as a crucial civilising process, fearing a kind of sexual anarchy in which girls pursue sex for pleasure, rather than progeny, and thus seeking to remove girls' pleasure from the equation.

As Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick and Anita Harris have discussed, these ideas of virginity place the girl in a tricky position in sexual discourse, in which she must choose either sex or love. If she chooses sex and pursues pleasure, she is cast as a “bad” girl. If she chooses love, she can functionally limit her access to sexual pleasure.²¹ The only way around this seems to be the discourse of compulsory demisexuality, in which love legitimates sex, but knowing when and whether love is enough is difficult for girls when so much emphasis is placed on virginity as valuable and important, and on the consequences if she fails to wait for the “right” moment. Several scholars have noted that girls often fail to adequately resolve this puzzle and do not seem to demonstrate a great amount of

¹⁸ Doan and Williams, *Politics of Virginity*, p. 1.

¹⁹ For further explication on this subject, see Michelle Fine, “Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire,” *Harvard Educational Review* 58.1 (1988): pp. 29-54; Deborah L. Tolman, *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005),

²⁰ Doan and Williams, *Politics of Virginity*, p. 65; Tolman, *Dilemmas of Desire*, p. 171; Valenti, *Purity Myth*, p. 30.

²¹ Aapola et al, *Young Femininity*, p. 151.

forethought about their sexual decisions: Albanesi writes that in her study, many girls “exhibit[ed] little conscious thinking about sexual decisions prior to, or during, a sexual encounter,” and that “they seem to be abdicating their agency to a vague script of sexual permissiveness”.²² This leads, as Deborah Tolman and Sharon Thompson have both argued, to many girls having a virginity loss experience that “just happened”. “Asked to describe the circumstances of first coitus, many girls blink and freeze, dropping predicates and leaving passive sentences dangling as if under a posthypnotic suggestion to suppress,” Thompson writes,²³ while Tolman argues that “it just happened” is a cover story – one which girls use to cover their desire.²⁴

Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Sharpe and Rachel Thomson have noted that girls’ pleasure is often strikingly absent in stories of and scripts for virginity loss,²⁵ while Anastasia Powell has wondered “whether the extent to which these young women talk about sexual pleasure in emotional terms, primarily represents their experience, or the ‘acceptable terms’ with women *can* speak about their sexual pleasure.”²⁶ What we can see here is Michelle Fine’s “missing discourse of desire” for girls – one which has been extended, I contend, to pleasure. Girls are regularly cast as being interested in love, with sex becoming a kind of price of admission to a romantic relationship, rather than something girls might want to pursue for their own pleasure. The romantic relationship has become the only way in which girls might have a kind of covert access to pleasure, but, as Laura Carpenter notes, “[m]any women reported feeling disappointed when their own

²² Albanesi, *Gender and Sexual Agency*, p. 144.

²³ Sharon Thompson, “Putting a Big Thing into a Little Hole: Teenage Girls’ Accounts of Sexual Initiation,” *Journal of Sex Research* 27.3 (1990): p. 343.

²⁴ Tolman, *Dilemmas of Desire*, pp. 1-3.

²⁵ Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Sharpe and Rachel Thomson, “Deconstructing Virginity: Young People’s Accounts of First Sex,” *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* 15.3 (2000): p. 227.

²⁶ Anastasia Powell, *Sex, Power and Consent: Youth Culture and the Unwritten Rules* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 34.

experiences failed to fulfil the ‘romantic fantasy’ of the ‘first time’.”²⁷ This is something we see repeatedly demonstrated in the virginity loss confessional genre: many female storytellers do not seem to have the tools to say either yes or no to sex, leading to a large number of “it just happened” experiences (many which take place with romantic partners) that leave girls disappointed and often ashamed. “[W]e do not simply live inside our cultures. In many ways our cultures live inside of us,” Tolman writes – and here, we can see the ways in which the missing discourse of female desire has negatively impacted the sex of lives of girl virgins.

This is one of the reasons why I have chosen to focus in this final chapter on the portrayal of virginity loss in Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* saga and its erotic descendant, E.L. James’ *Fifty Shades* trilogy. Both speak directly to a desiring female subject: something which has arguably contributed considerably to the amount of cultural derision directed towards the texts. The former text, which speaks explicitly to a girl subject, is especially interesting, but the ways in which James remade and rewrote *Twilight* to become the erotic *Fifty Shades* are also informative here, not least because it removes some of *Twilight*’s more radical elements and reshapes them into a more normative sexual narrative. This focus on the desiring female subject is something which these two texts have in common with the popular romance genre, including the texts I discussed in the last two chapters. However, the immense popularity of *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades* makes them especially interesting to study, because, while the romance genre is the world’s most-read genre, these two particular texts have a reach and a cultural iconicity that extends beyond the texts I have already discussed. In this chapter, I will closely examine the portrayals of virginity loss in both texts and read them against twenty-first century scripts. In addition, I will also examine Amazon reviews of the texts, focusing on the ways in which they

²⁷ Laura Carpenter, “Gender and the Meaning and Experience of Virginity Loss in the Contemporary United States,” *Gender and Society* 16.3 (2002): p. 346.

uphold, subvert, endorse and resist the way virginity loss is imagined in the books and in the world more broadly, and their peculiar anxiety about the virginal reader.

The Desiring Girl: Virginity Loss in the Twilight Saga

Twilight, the first book in Stephenie Meyer's popular young adult saga, was published in 2005, with sequels *New Moon*, *Eclipse* and *Breaking Dawn* following soon after. The series has sold over one hundred million copies worldwide,²⁸ and was adapted into a sequence of five blockbuster films. It follows seventeen year old heroine Isabella "Bella" Swan, who relocates from Arizona to Washington State, where she meets the hero, broody vampire Edward Cullen. Their relationship is established in the first book, and, after a series of trials and tribulations, they are married at the beginning of the fourth book, *Breaking Dawn*, and lose their virginites together on their honeymoon. The saga has been described as "abstinence porn" in popular cultural criticism. More commentary has been made on the religious influences on author Meyer, who is a Mormon, but largely, this "abstinence porn" criticism has arisen because a large portion of the plot revolves around episodes of what we might call "erotic resistance".²⁹ Despite being tempted continually to have sex, Bella and Edward wait until after they are married (something for which they are symbolically textually rewarded by the birth of their miracle baby Renesmee). While religion is not specifically invoked by name in the text (although ideas of virtue do arise), there is a clearly religious framework of morality operating, probably arising from author Meyer's own convictions.

²⁸ Kristine Moruzi, "Postfeminist Fantasies: Sexuality and Femininity in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* Series," in *Genre, Reception and Adaptation in the Twilight Series*, ed. Anne Morey (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), p. 47.

²⁹ Christine Seifert, "Bite Me! (Or Don't)," *Bitch Magazine* 8 (2008), available at <http://bitchmagazine.org/article/bite-me-or-dont>

It is not Bella, but Edward who is the driving force behind the couple's premarital chastity: Bella wants to have sex, and Edward continually refuses. "Do you get the feeling that everything is backward? ... Traditionally, shouldn't you be arguing my side, and I yours?" he asks her at one point.³⁰ They have distinctly different views of virginity. Edward is what Judith d'Augelli and her collaborators would call an "adamant virgin" and insists on premarital virginity as moral and virtuous. ("... this is the one area in which I'm as spotless as you are... You know that I've stolen, I've lied, I've coveted... my virtue is all I have left," he tells Bella, after insisting on protecting her virtue as well as his: a position clearly arising out of a religious pro-abstinence American sexual politics.³¹) In contrast, Bella is a "potential non-virgin": willing to lose her virginity, but without access to the appropriate circumstances.³² For her, sex is the next logical step in her romantic relationship with Edward; to him, sex (and desire) is much more problematic. Chiho Nakagawa argues that Edward is part of a wave of new, more emotionally aware heroes that emerged in the 1990s: a breed who "express their feelings often enough to avoid major misunderstandings".³³ Bonnie Mann expands on this by writing that "Edward gets it", in contrast with, potentially, real life teenage boys.³⁴ Bella can be very sure that Edward is interested in her emotionally: he is not interested in her body as an object of use, but in her as a person. We regularly see him controlling his bloodlust for her, symbolically curbing the aggressive male sex drive that girls are regularly taught they must resist. He loves her, not the possibility of having sex with her, to the extent where he is prepared never to have sex with her.

³⁰ Stephenie Meyer, *Eclipse* (New York: Little, Brown, 2007), p. 451.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 454.

³² Judith D'Augelli et al cited in Susan Sprecher and Kathleen McKinney, *Sexuality* (Newbury Park: SAGE Publications, 1993), pp. 47-48.

³³ Chiho Nakagawa, "Safe Sex with Defanged Vampires: New Vampire Heroes in *Twilight* and the *Southern Vampire Mysteries*," *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 2.1 (2011), p. 5.

³⁴ Bonnie Mann, "Vampire Love: The Second Sex Negotiates the Twenty-First century," in *Bitten by Twilight: Youth, Culture, Media and the Vampire Franchise*, ed. Melissa A. Click, Jennifer Stevens Aubrey and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 140.

But does Edward really “get it”? Bella is not especially happy about the lack of sex in their relationship, and her desire for pleasure intrudes on the emotionally ideal but asexual romance Edward is providing her with. Edward’s sexual refusal is not a relief, freeing her from a potential “it just happened” experience, but a source of frustration. Bella is a girl who desires, and much of the narrative is consumed by her negotiating access to sexual pleasure with Edward (something which eventually results in their post-marital mutual virginity loss in *Breaking Dawn*). When we read this against a twenty-first century discourse that often attempts to disappear and/or pathologise girl sexuality, it is easy to see how Bella’s frank admissions of desire and pursuit of pleasure (albeit within the safe space of the romantic relationship) might be both reassuring and pleasurable for the girl reader.

Bella is often criticised as a passive heroine.³⁵ This is not necessarily an argument without merit – despite the fact that she regularly asserts her agency in her sexual negotiations with Edward, she often requires rescuing, is sometimes forced to capitulate to his will (usually to her displeasure), and is rendered almost catatonic when he leaves her in *New Moon*. However, simply to write Bella off as “passive” is to miss one of the key textual pleasures of the *Twilight* saga, one that is key to its popularity. Bella is a desiring subject: she is open, explicit, and unashamed about her desire for Edward, and is the sexual aggressor for most of their relationship. In this sense, she is active, not passive. The work of sexual resistance so often ascribed to girls is taken off her shoulders by Edward, who takes on the role of gatekeeper. There is an innate conservatism to the girl’s desires being placed so firmly in male hands, and it can be read, like so much other cultural discourse, as casting girl sexuality as a problem that needs to be controlled and restricted. However, the

³⁵ For example: Anna Silver, “*Twilight* is Not Good for Maidens: Gender, Sexuality, and the Family in Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series,” *Studies in the Novel* 42.1 (2010): p. 125; Reni Eddo-Lodge, “The Anti-Feminist Character of Bella Swan, or Why the *Twilight* Saga is Regressive,” *Kritikos* 10 (2013), available from <http://intertheory.org/eddo-lodge.htm>; Fleur Diamond, “Beauty and the Beautiful Beast: Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* Saga and the Quest for a Transgressive Female Desire,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 26.67 (2011): p. 47.

radical removal of this burden of culturally required resistance also allows Bella to be open in her expressions of desire and her pursuit of pleasure with Edward. ““You make me feel like a villain in a melodrama – twirling my moustache while I try to steal some poor girl’s virtue,”” Bella grumbles after another failed attempt at seducing Edward, signalling her desire for a sexual relationship and her frustration that he will not provide her with one.³⁶ Their relationship is a safe space in which she can vocalise her sexual curiosity. It is also a frustrating space, because her pursuit of pleasure is regularly thwarted by Edward. However, it is one in which she need not fear being used merely as a sexual object, and so can become a desiring subject.

Criticism of Bella as passive heroine mirrors criticism often levelled at the romance genre, which, as Pamela Regis has argued, also positions the reader as passive, existing in a state of “childlike helplessness”.³⁷ This exclusively female reader is a blank slate on which the text writes. Unlike the critic, who positions themselves as separate to the reader and as able to penetrate the text in a way the reader cannot, this reader apparently has no other sources of cultural input. She is shaped by the text, her worldview transformed by it. She is, in essence, a virginal reader. In the case of *Twilight*, this is made more literal, because the typical reader of the text is often assumed to be not just female, but a girl virgin.

This virginal reader is a locus of intense anxiety. In the case of *Twilight*, considerable concern has been expressed in popular criticism about what messages virginal readers might take from the text. One blogger worried that Edward and Bella’s first time might lead to virginal readers forming unrealistic expectations of their own sexual debuts, writing that, “[y]oung women, in particular, may expect harps playing, rose petals in the

³⁶ Meyer, *Eclipse*, pp. 452-3.

³⁷ Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), p. 5.

bed, falling head over heels in love, marriage, and living happily ever after with their first sexual partner.”³⁸ Another article on feminist website xoJane is tellingly entitled ‘*Breaking Dawn* Sends the Wrong Message to Virgins’. Focusing on the screen adaptation of the first half of *Breaking Dawn*, it calls the portrayal of virginity loss “insanely irresponsible”. This is due in part to the fact that Bella is left with bruises post-sex (she doesn’t mind or remember receiving them, but Edward is horrified), but also because their virginity loss is orgasmically pleasurable:

maybe I'm just suffering from PTSD when it comes to first times. I won't go into detail but it wasn't stare-y, starry or glowy. It was icky, painful and brief. And I've just assumed that most first times are like that, although movies had me dreaming of soft-lighting, white sheets and giggling.

None of this is to say that if I knew what I was in for that I wouldn't have done it but still. I wouldn't have minded a heads up.³⁹

Despite the fact that many feminist popular critics lamented the series’ conservative sexual politics (another critic called it “a bible for the new virginity”⁴⁰), it also drew criticism from conservative sources. One blogger argues that the couple are not adequately virginal because their abstinence is based on fear – that is, Edward’s fear that he will hurt Bella – rather than virtue, and writes that, “[a]nyone who claims that the books promote chastity has to explain how a young girl can read detailed first-person descriptions of ‘making out’ as a tool to preserving her innocence.”⁴¹ Both arguments cast the virginal reader as

³⁸ YadiraE, “*Twilight*, *Glee* and JFK: Romanticising Virginity Loss,” May 17, 2012, available at <http://yadirae.hubpages.com/hub/What-do-Twilight-Glee-and-John-F-Kennedy-have-in-common>

³⁹ Helena, “*Breaking Dawn* Sends the Wrong Message to Virgins,” xoJane, November 23, 2011, available at <http://www.xojane.com/entertainment/breaking-dawn-sends-wrong-message-virgins>

⁴⁰ Erich Kuersten, “Someone to Fight Over Me: Feminism, S&M, and the Daemonic in *Twilight*,” *Bright Lights Film Journal* 68 (2010), available at <http://brightlightsfilm.com/68/68twilight.php#.VB0GMBbEaRM>

⁴¹ “WELCOME! What is *Twilight* saying to young women?” Spes Unica, 2008, available at <http://spesunica.wordpress.com/>

ignorant, and worry about the impression the text will have on her – the former seeks to give her a more “realistic” sexual education, while the latter wants to keep her in a state of virginal ignorance.⁴²

This anxiety over the virginal reader is something we see repeatedly reinforced when we examine reviews of the saga. I have chosen here to focus on reviews of *Breaking Dawn*, the book in which Bella and Edward finally lose their respective virginities. Following Hsu-Ming Teo, who has used this approach to examine Bertrice Small’s *The Kadin*, I am using reviews from the website Amazon as they offer the largest cross-section of opinions on the books: from “superfans” to dedicated anti-fans, as well as those that are ambivalent.⁴³ What is particularly interesting when we look at these reviews is that few of them come from the girl readers that are the locus of all this concern. Instead, the impetus behind many of these reviews is to invoke this concern, positioning the reviewer in an educated space above the ignorant virginal reader. Even where reviews are by girl readers, many seek to set themselves apart, worrying about whether or not these books are appropriate for their age bracket.

One word that is repeatedly invoked in these reviews is “innocence”. While it is difficult to tell where reviewers come from, this is something which may arise out of a religiously informed American sexual culture. Many reviewers speak approvingly of the innocence of the first three books in the saga, which took place before Bella and Edward got married and which were characterised by episodes of eroticised resistance. Once the couple sleep together, this innocence is, for many reviewers, destroyed. “The virtuous

⁴² This liberal vs. conservative argument over why *Twilight* is bad is so ubiquitous it was satirised in the episode ‘Time Capsule’ of popular US comedy series *Parks and Recreation*. Both conservative and liberal community members seek to have *Twilight* excluded from a time capsule based on their wildly divergent and contradictory views of its message.

⁴³ Hsu-Ming Teo, “‘Bertrice teaches you history and you don’t even mind!’: History and Revisionist Historiography in Bertrice Small’s *The Kadin*,” in *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction: Critical Essays*, ed. Sarah S.G. Frantz and Eric Murphy Selinger (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2012), pp. 21-32.

innocence of Bella and Edward were completely eradicated just a few chapters in, and then it just got worse. When did our little virgins become sex-crazed masochists?” one reviewer laments.⁴⁴ Another wrote that the primary attraction of *Twilight* was “the innocent, and almost beautiful, love between Edward and Bella,” and that as such, in *Breaking Dawn*, “[i]t was completely wrong how all Bella could think about was sex.”⁴⁵ One reviewer, who identified herself as a fifteen year old girl, was extremely disappointed with the book, writing that, “[f]illed with sex, and gore *Breaking Dawn* was my biggest disappointment... All innocence is shattered as your view of Edward becomes tainted in a gruesome love making session.”⁴⁶ Another, identifying himself as a father of teenage girls, writes that his daughters felt “disgusted” and “completely betrayed” by *Breaking Dawn* and described it as “porno”, full of “flat out teen sex, gross nastiness”.⁴⁷ Innocence, it would seem, is incompatible with sexual activity, no matter how functionally legitimated by marriage and romantic love. The following review essentially sums up this viewpoint:

This is horrific [sic]. It's almost surreal, it's so awful. The entire novel's basically about sex and childbirth. I thought we were going to have a decent romance novel free from details like that? She [Meyer] completely avoided subjects like that before, including the topic of Bella's – y'know – only to haul them right out into the open. 'PMS'? 'Stud service'? 'Lingere' [sic]? I never thought I would be subjected to those terms, or all that accompany them, in this relatively innocuous series. This is not what I signed up for. Everything was just TOO MUCH. I understand teenagers are hormonal, but the details were just too – graphic. The

⁴⁴ dan dan, “Seriously?” Amazon, August 3, 2008, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R22S10EG8M4M3L/>

⁴⁵ Aruba, “Stephenie Meyer has failed us,” Amazon, August 6, 2008, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R2V6562PT96OOH/>

⁴⁶ Glory Rae “HARRY POTTER LOVER”, “Why why why! WHAT HAPPENED! KEEP FROM CHILDREN! BEWARE ALL!” Amazon, August 2, 2008, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R2XPOMS1MUGQ8J/>

⁴⁷ Amazon Customer “the father”, “Can I have my money back?” Amazon, August 2, 2008, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R1WUIGMIHR5I2P/>

wrong ones. I literally got queasy about an eighth of the way in. How could she do this, knowing all those small girls would be reading?⁴⁸

The last line in particular points to the crux of the issue when it comes to the loss of innocence in *Breaking Dawn*: but what about the girl reader? The innocence lost, according to these reviewers, is not only the innocence of the characters but of the virginal readers: those “small girls” who are reading. We are reminded here of the 1730 letter to the editor in the *Universal Spectator* that I quoted from in the first chapter, which claimed that “*Romances... ruin more Virgins than Masquerades or Brothels.*”⁴⁹ This concern that representations of love – and, in particular, sex – will destroy virginal innocence is not new, but is in fact situated in a long literary tradition.

Reading these reviews, one would be forgiven for thinking that *Breaking Dawn* featured explicit erotic encounters between its protagonists, including a depiction of their first time. In fact, there are no explicit sex scenes in *Breaking Dawn*. Apart from a cursory reference to “the way [their] bodies were connected” in a scene that is more conversational than carnal, the major sexual episode is the virginity loss sequence, which is a fade to black (from Bella’s perspective):

‘Don’t be afraid,’ I murmured. ‘We belong together.’

I was abruptly overwhelmed by the truth of my own words. This moment was so perfect, so right, there was no way to doubt it.

His arms wrapped around me, holding me against him, summer and winter. It felt like every nerve ending in my body was a live wire.

⁴⁸ Amarillo by Morning, “Possibly the Single Greatest Mainstream Literary Disappointment, Ever,” Amazon, August 2, 2008, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R39VBXVA9HMEMM/>

⁴⁹ Anon., Letter to the editor, *The Universal Spectator*, 4 July 1730, quoted in Bradford K. Mudge, *Women, Pornography and the British Novel, 1684-1830* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 75.

‘Forever,’ he agreed, then pulled us gently into deeper water.⁵⁰

This scene segues into another that features the couple in bed the next morning. The fact that no explicit sex scene was included was a source of disappointment to some reviewers: “That was something I was most looking forward to: a short intimate scene about their first time,” one reviewer laments.⁵¹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, several versions of the “missing” sex scene from *Breaking Dawn* have been published on fan fiction websites.⁵² However, for a large percentage of reviewers, this oblique sex scene – and, indeed, the very fact that Bella and Edward consummated their marriage – was still too much. One reviewer writes,

we all wanted to believe that it was possible for two individuals to be completely head over heels in love without ever being able to express it with more than a peck. This is classic old world romance in a modern day form. And gosh, what a fantastic example for youth today! Did we all know that Bella and Edward would eventually find a way to consummate their relationship? Well, yeah, but the story before that was so much more interesting and fulfilling, especially in a world that already revolves so much around sex. So I felt cheated when it finally did happen, regardless that marriage was involved.⁵³

The invocation of “youth today” speaks once again to this image of the virginal reader, on whom, it would seem, sex should not be inflicted, no matter how obliquely and no matter

⁵⁰ Stephenie Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008), p. 85.

⁵¹ N. Flanary, “Steph threw us a curve ball here (spoiler warning),” Amazon, August 3, 2008, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R3CU2KYCG4RU22/>

⁵² For example: Leasie-Lee, “Seducing Mr Cullen,” February 17, 2009, available at <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/4867732/1/Seducing-Mr-Cullen>; MyOwnCrystalHeart, “The Honeymoon,” <http://www.destinysgateway.com/viewstory.php?sid=4139&warning=4>; Sadonis, “Deeper Water,” August 8, 2008, available at <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/4455982/>; Tenkic, “What happens on Isle Esme after Edward say ‘Forever...’,” available at <http://www.fanpop.com/clubs/twilight-series/articles/41051/title/what-happens-on-isle-esme-after-edward-forever>; ThexInvisibleGirl, “Belong Together,” December 28, 2008, available at <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/4746892/>; twilightmamaof3, “Breaking dawn sex scene,” February 21, 2010, available at <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/5762544/1/Breaking-dawn-sex-scene>; Yoda, “Forever Then,” December 12, 2009, available at http://www.booksie.com/romance/short_story/yoda/forever-then

⁵³ Karla S, “WARNING: Book 4 contains MATURE themes (sex and violence),” Amazon, August 3, 2008, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R2875GCIR34WNP/>

how “legitimate” the circumstance. Bella and Edward are cast as role models and examples, heroes of the abstinence-only movement, one that it is assumed the virginal reader will emulate: and thus, in a world where teen sexuality, particularly girl sexuality, is problematised, their sexual activity becomes a locus of concern.

Due to this positioning of the central couple as exemplars of good behaviour, several reviewers sought to assuage what they saw as unnecessary hysteria about Bella and Edward’s sexual activity, often appealing to “morality” (which appears to be specifically religiously inflected) to justify their reading. “For those people saying that there were morality problems in the book; I think they have their morals backwards. See, getting married, and then having sex, and then having a baby is the RIGHT way of doing things,” one reviewer writes.⁵⁴ “If Stephenie was sending a bad message, they would have ran away, gotten married in Twilight, or had sex before marriage, or had a baby before marriage. FYI, Bella did it in order! Is that so bad?” another asks.⁵⁵ A third writes, “[a]nd for those complaining about morals, SM did write about a relationship where there was no sex before marriage. In a world where everyone expects sex before marriage, I think the book had an excellent moral. How is it not okay to marry young if you’ve met your soul mate? Better to live in sin?”⁵⁶ Finally, another reviewer writes that, “The beginning chapters were intensely beautiful and, in this day and age of instant gratification, sex within marriage is displayed with precious sanctity...If anyone ever demanded a reason to abstain until marriage, I would immediately direct them to page 83 of this book.”⁵⁷ These reviewers seek to justify Bella and Edward’s sex life by insisting on its legitimacy, arguing

⁵⁴ Rashella Dunn “shelladawn”, “I loved every page!” Amazon, August 6, 2008, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/RVVHWBLY1QXX5/>

⁵⁵ K. Provence, “An enjoyable book!” Amazon, August 4, 2008, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R2R5IQ65I9J64C/>

⁵⁶ Karen Altomose “Karelots”, “Amazing! If it had to end, I’m glad it ended this way!” Amazon, August 4, 2008, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R1ZP849ZGPXUBR/>

⁵⁷ Meghan N. Sours, “Ms. Meyer did some things so right, but the over-the-top twists lead to a dead end,” Amazon, August 2, 2008, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R1ETOQ9ZGAGMVH/>

that it sends a good message to the virginal reader – that is, wait until after marriage for sex – rather than that the presence of sex destroys the books’ “innocence”, and, by extension, the innocence of the reader. There is a strong sense that the book must have a moral, and must set an example for the virginal reader – something which, even if it does not insist on her ignorance to the same extent, still positions her as a passive, blank slate, and casts the text as an educational, rather than a pleasurable experience: “I’m eighteen and I don’t think it [Bella and Edward’s marriage and subsequent sex life] set a good example. Not for the eleven year olds reading this series,” one reviewer (one of the few girl reviewers) writes.⁵⁸ The pleasure of the girl reader is disappeared from most of these conversations: it does not exist in the discourse.

Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that the biggest problem many Amazon reviewers found with *Breaking Dawn* was Bella’s overt expressions of desire for Edward, even after he becomes her husband. Post-virginity loss, she remains the sexual aggressor in their relationship – after he accidentally bruises her during their first sexual encounter, he is reticent to sleep with her again, but she pursues him until he succumbs. Bella is neither ashamed nor afraid to express her sexual desires – something which, as I argued above, might be very pleasurable for many girl readers who do not have access to such a safe space in their own lives – but the fact that she does this draws ire from many reviewers:

She’s gone from been a smart, perceptive girl who stands up for herself, to nothing more than a sex crazed housewife!⁵⁹

...the author manages to change the beloved Isbella [sic] Swan, to a stupid girl who enjoys sex more then [sic] her own existence.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Rose, “A major disappointment.. [sic] the FAIL BOAT has arrived,” Amazon, August 2, 2008, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/RAUEUAZCX1BK8/>

⁵⁹ S. AL-ZOBAIYDI “Phoenix”, “A Big Dissapointment [sic],” Amazon, August 3, 2008, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R2TVDWWSSSDBHR/>

It was completely irrational for her to be so sex crazed after just one time. totally unrealistic.⁶¹

And all the sex...

I mean Bella, get a hold of yourself.

Yeah okay, the hormones sure...but we all thought you were different than that...⁶²

She set feminism back a hundred years when she began begging Edward for sex.

Not to mention the author portrays her as a sex-crazed eighteen year old boy. She constantly wants to sex-it-up with Edward, and not just in this book.⁶³

The fact that Bella begged for sex still gets me. Sure she made the deal to marry Edward to get sex in the first place, but it was ridiculous how much she begged for it.⁶⁴

...the none stop [sic] inuendo [sic] lust/sex maniac that Bella becomes after turning into a vampire seems unnecessary.⁶⁵

It was completely wrong how all Bella could think about was sex.⁶⁶

Bella was some sex-crazed lunatic.⁶⁷

Bella is a sex maniac.⁶⁸

⁶⁰ Ramon Dreher, "Disappointment," Amazon, August 3, 2008, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R2R3AGF0GDCDI3/>

⁶¹ Amazon Customer, "Is this even the same series?" Amazon, August 3, 2009, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R1D621S38PFBN/>

⁶² musicandbookjunkie "book lover13", "WHYYYYY! WHYYYY!" Amazon, August 3, 2008, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R1A9ID1IS6762T/>

⁶³ Katya Lawson "It is not what we are that defines us, it is the decisions that we make in our lives that truly give insight to our inner beings", "This is one of the orst [sic] pieces of literature I have ever read," Amazon, August 3, 2008, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R1M8GCKC03RZ8X/>

⁶⁴ Sue Z. Q, "A Great Disappointment, Could Have Been Great," Amazon, August 3, 2008, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/RDTV4RLNMYMW9/>

⁶⁵ A. Fredericksen, "Dissappointed [sic]," Amazon, August 4, 2008, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R9ODEX4IY3OE/>

⁶⁶ Aruba, "Stephenie Meyer has failed us."

⁶⁷ L. Ruthen, "Vastly disappointed, words can't describe," Amazon, August 4, 2008, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/RIFV95O957LF1/>

As I noted earlier, Bella has been very open about her desire for Edward across all the books in the series: something which, as we can see above, some readers found problematic. However, once she is finally able to act on her desires and her desire evolves into pleasure, her sexuality became a major locus of concern for reviewers. Although Bella seemingly does everything right – she is in a committed romantic relationship and she has married her lover before sleeping with him – her experience of pleasurable heterosex causes a rupture for many readers. The “innocence” of the text is lost: “Why couldn't Meyer go along with the original story line, hmm? I mean, it was about people being in love, making sacrifices [sic], pure clean love. NOT SEX AND A MUTANT BABY,” one reviewer writes.⁶⁹ Bella's post-virginity loss sex drive is a particular source of anxiety: having had sex, she wants to have it again, something which caused some readers to cast her as a “complete nymphomaniac”, despite the fact that this would seem to be consistent with her expressions of sexual desire throughout the first three books of the series.⁷⁰ Bella's desire is, it would seem, only acceptable when she is forced to sublimate it.

As a girl heroine, Bella is figured as an example to the girl reader – and so, no matter how seemingly ideal and socially acceptable the circumstances of her virginity loss might be, once she has sex, she becomes a bad example. There are some counterpoints to this view: “Of course she wants to have sex all the time! She is a newlywed! ... Those of you who can't understand that probably have never been with someone they are madly, truly in love with or have never been married (or had sex for that matter),” one reviewer writes.⁷¹ However, we can still see the reader positioned as virginal here – as someone too immature to understand the text, in this case. While the eroticisation of sexual resistance in

⁶⁸ E. Edwards, “This vampire saga sucked (pun intended),” Amazon, August 5, 2008, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R1K30GRWSGQW91/>

⁶⁹ musicandbookjunkie, “WHYYYYYY! WHYYYY!”

⁷⁰ New Moon Lover, “A Realistic View of Breaking Dawn,” Amazon, August 4, 2008, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R1U2I2UO38FEPR/>

⁷¹ Jennifer J. Brantley “livingintherealworld”, “LOVED IT!” Amazon, August 4, 2008, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R10R6864WKF7LH/>

the *Twilight* saga is revealing when it comes to the cultural fixation on virginity in the United States today, reactions to the saga and the way it positions the reader as virginal are perhaps more interesting. When Bella loses her virginity, it also symbolically deflowers the virginal reader – and watching a girl heroine realise her desires and experience pleasure is, for many reviewers, something of major concern. The innocence of girlhood is fetishised as something that must be maintained. The text is positioned as didactic, something from which the virginal reader derives a moral: a moral which many seem to think is bad. The suggestion that the text might be pleasurable for a girl reader positioned in a discourse that largely proscribes her desire is not an idea that appears in reviews. This is unsurprising, since girls' pleasure itself seems to engender so much anxiety.

Pleasure Isn't Realistic: Virginity Loss in the Fifty Shades Trilogy

E.L. James' blockbuster *Fifty Shades* trilogy, which includes *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Fifty Shades Darker*, and *Fifty Shades Freed*, was published in 2012, and the first book is the fastest selling paperback of all time.⁷² However, the series began life some years earlier as *Twilight* fanfiction *Master of the Universe*, which James published online under the name Snowqueens Icedragon. When it was pulled from the internet to be published as an original novel, James' alternate universe Bella Swan and Edward Cullen became Anastasia "Ana" Steele and Christian Grey. In James' work, vampirism was transformed into wealth, power, and a predilection for BDSM, as billionaire hero Christian courts and seeks to sexually dominate twenty-two year old virgin heroine Ana. Despite its roots in *Twilight*, *Fifty Shades* is quite a different sort of text. The religious overtones have basically

⁷² Bianca London, "Is This Fifty Shades Too Far? New Book-Themed Collection of Sex Toys Aimed at the Frustrated Housewives of Middle England," *Mail Online*, 2 October, 2012, available at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2211596/50-Shades-Of-Grey-sex-toys-The-collection-E-L-James-hopes-spice-Middle-England.html#axzz2KGgH1DQP>

disappeared and episodes of erotic resistance in the *Twilight* saga are transformed into sex scenes: once Christian takes Ana's virginity in the first book in the series, their sexual relationship becomes the book's primary focus. ("Remember all the sex that we didn't see in twilight? Well it was all here," one reviewer writes.⁷³) While abstinence is key to the developing "innocent" romance of Bella and Edward, Ana and Christian take a different path: sex essentially constructs their romance, and is one of the key ways in which they communicate with and relate to each other.

As well as the religious elements, many of *Twilight*'s more radical elements were removed in the process of erotic revision, wherein Bella becomes Ana and Edward becomes Christian. Unlike the virginal, emotionally aware, romantically driven Edward, Christian has had multiple sexual partners and is explicitly anti-romantic. He is more closely aligned with some of the alpha heroes we can observe in contemporary category romance: he does not tie sex to either love or morality, and eschews romance. Similarly, Ana does not take on the role of sexual aggressor that Bella does, although she is still a desiring subject within the text. She is much less comfortable with her experience of desire: not least because, unlike Edward, Christian does not provide her with a safe space to express it. If we accept that compulsory demisexuality is the current dominant script for "appropriate" female desire, Edward's insistence on love and marriage means that Bella's desire is always culturally condoned. Ana, on the other hand, does not have this guarantee from Christian. Much of the plot of the trilogy revolves around the tension between their differing views of relationships: Ana wants a "vanilla" monogamous romantic relationship, while Christian insists on a negotiated, aromantic BDSM contract, which sets out their roles as sexual Dominant and submissive.

⁷³ L.Boulad, "i wish i could unread it!!!" Amazon, December 23, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R1LR8BKB0X91XE/>

This contract is, in many ways, the literalisation of the negotiations that take place between Edward and Bella in the *Twilight* saga, where they finally agree on a compromise in which she can access sexual pleasure. For Ana, accessing sexual pleasure is not necessarily difficult – it is, essentially, all that Christian is offering her. She wants to access love and romance: something which is not allowed for by the contract. It is important to note that, while the contract is a key plot point in the first book in the trilogy, Ana never actually signs it. This refusal to take on Christian’s aromantic worldview allows him to be recuperated into hers, one which is defined by a link between sex and love.⁷⁴ I have already discussed the emergence of “sacrifice” narratives in contemporary category romance featuring virgin heroines, where the heroine’s virginity becomes a sacrifice to bring about the happy ending, because it is an episode in which she essentially infects the hero with a disposition towards romantic monogamy. *Fifty Shades of Grey* includes this sacrifice narrative (unlike the *Twilight* saga, which follows a consummation narrative). When Christian broaches the subject of the contract with Ana, she admits to him that she is a virgin. This is a situation which he seeks to rectify so that she is able to meaningfully consent to the contract: “you really need to have some idea of what you’re getting yourself into,” he tells her.⁷⁵ His proposed solution is to have sex with her immediately, before she signs the contract. “This doesn’t mean I’ve come over all hearts and flowers,” he says, but by taking Ana’s virginity outside of the D/s context, their relationship is automatically established as different to the ones he shared with his previous submissives. He “make[s] love” to Ana as well as “fucking [her]... hard.”⁷⁶ Because this takes place in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the first book in the trilogy, I will be focusing on this book and its reviews.

⁷⁴ This is something that is literalised in the trilogy’s conclusion, in which Christian and Ana physically relocate from his luxurious apartment in a phallic inner city skyscraper to a large country house which she helps decorate.

⁷⁵ E.L. James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (London: Arrow Books, 2012), p. 110.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

I argued briefly in the last chapter that this sacrifice narrative can offer the opportunity for more transgressive female sexual fantasies outside the accepted “ideal” romantic fantasy for virginity loss. Unlike Bella, Ana does not lose her virginity with a trusted partner, but with an inscrutable man who is almost a stranger to her, after she is overwhelmed by a new desire that she does not completely understand. (In this sense, Ana is more like the heroine of the contemporary romance than Bella, who follows patterns more common to the historical heroine – one reviewer writes that, “[t]he ‘Fifty’ series are actually ‘Harlequin Romances on Steroids with Red Rooms and Non-Disclosure Agreements’”,⁷⁷ and another calls the books, “[p]ornographic Mills and Boon.”⁷⁸) The actual sexual experience is, for Ana, multi-orgasmic; however, we do see her experiencing a certain amount of shame the next day. She thinks to herself:

So you’ve just slept with him, given him your virginity, a man who doesn’t love you.

In fact he has very odd ideas about you, wants to make you some sort of kinky sex slave.

*ARE YOU CRAZY?*⁷⁹

The reference to Christian as “a man who doesn’t love you” is very telling here. Although Ana is not necessarily an adamant virgin – she seems to have maintained her virginity more because of a lack of desire than because of any explicitly held convictions – she certainly seems to have internalised the narrative that love is the only acceptable space in which women are allowed to have sex. One of the more commonly derided features of the books are Ana’s conversations with her “inner goddess” and her “subconscious”. While the characterisations of these two elements of her psyche are not especially consistent, the

⁷⁷ Michelle Courtney Berry, “The Amazon Reviews Outshine Trilogy!” Amazon, May 27, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R1080QXKTX7N9Y/>

⁷⁸ Juno, “50 Shades of Grey,” Amazon, July 19, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R1WP6DN60FOVOC/>

⁷⁹ James, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, p. 126. Italics in original.

former is largely an expression of her sexual desire, while the latter seeks to police her behaviour for social and cultural acceptability. Ana must find a balance between the two by recuperating her sex life with Christian back into the paradigm of compulsory demisexuality, where their sex life can be both pleasurable for her and socially mandated. Once her virginity has been lost – sacrificed to the happy ending – she must find a way to structure her relationship with Christian to her satisfaction. Unlike Bella, who is transformed into a vampire and thus becomes like Edward, Ana must transform Christian and make him, like her, demisexual.

We should note here another key difference between Bella and Ana is in the construction of their virginity. Seventeen year old Bella is clearly positioned as a girl heroine, and is thus subject to discourses of girlhood. Twenty-two year old Ana, by contrast, is coded as a woman. Girl sexuality is problematised in a way that the sexuality of the woman is not (at least not to the same extent), and Ana's ongoing virginity is portrayed as unusual, whereas Bella's virginity, as a girl heroine, is not. "How have you avoided sex? Tell me, please," Christian asks, to which Ana replies, "No one's really, you know..."⁸⁰ The "you know" Ana is referring to here is the fact that no one has ever been able to awaken desire in her: her virginity is, in fact, the virtually asexual virginity that girls are supposed to have. Ana really does have no desire before encountering Christian, but having passed through the space of girlhood and entered into womanhood, this now positions her as somewhat anomalous. This is something regularly highlighted in Amazon reviews. One reviewer writes that the idea of "[a] twenty-two year old English Lit major

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 109.

that doesn't own a computer and whose virginity is intact" is "ridiculous".⁸¹ Another contends that "Ana's naivety is over-the-top in today's society,"⁸² while a third writes that,

How unrealistically naive that a senior in college is 1) a virgin, and 2) eager to jump into that kind of relationship as one. I'm sorry, but a 22 year old smart, 'sexy', witty girl who has a likeable personality and in the midst of graduating college would NOT be a virgin 'because no one has noticed her' because of her awkwardness or clumsiness or whatever... There's something wrong with her.⁸³

There were some counterpoints to this – for example, one reviewer contends that "there were and are 21 year olds out there who are virgins and have never masturbated. Not many for sure but a few,"⁸⁴ while another reviewer writes that,

Also, while I agree that Ana was definitely sexually naive for a young woman of college age... I was struck by the number of reviews I read here where people thought it was unrealistic or implausible that a twenty-two year old would in fact still be a virgin. Especially a pretty twenty-two year old. I realize that in 2013 we are living in hyper-sexualized times where younger and younger kids are being exposed to far more sex and eroticism than they need to be. But am I that far behind the times or that old-fashioned where there are no twenty-something virgins left in this world unless they were terribly sheltered or are abstaining for religious reasoning?⁸⁵

⁸¹ RunMommyRun, "The only handful of phrases you need to know about this book," Amazon, July 16, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R1H6XJZUIYQ8J/>

⁸² Englishmajor97, "Abusive teenage love-gasp!" Amazon, July 9, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R1GLWGHUUAZN9L/>

⁸³ Kaitlyn, "Read it to get rid of your curiosity, no other reason," Amazon, April 7, 2013, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R1K1U5K5NGR021/>

⁸⁴ Ex-sailorgirl, "Entertaining Read -- But Shocking!" Amazon, September 9, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R3DYJPKEGG8SL2/>

⁸⁵ renee s., "Let's Try For Impartiality *contains some spoilers*," Amazon, July 21, 2013, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R26TNQXQA9YUA/>

However, the idea that Ana, as virgin woman not virgin girl, is anomalous is far more common than this perspective in reviews. Quite when and how this transition between girlhood and womanhood takes place is quite nebulous, but this highlights another slippage in twenty-first century discourses of femininity: even if her desire should only take place in a romantic relationship, a woman, by a certain point in her life, should desire. Not to do this – to continue on in the asexual, non-desiring position ascribed to the girl – is abnormal.

This positioning of Bella as girl and Ana as woman is also key to the question of genre. The *Twilight* saga is generally placed within the young adult genre, its typical reader assumed to be the virginal girl reader I discussed in the last section. The typical reader of *Fifty Shades*, by contrast, is usually assumed to be a middle-aged woman, something clearly evident we can see in the moniker “mommy porn” often ascribed to the text in popular discourse. However, despite this, the virginal reader is repeatedly invoked in reviews. Indeed, it is suggested in some reviews that virgins are the only people who could possibly enjoy the book: one reviewer recommends it only if “you are a naive virgin who is curious about bondage”⁸⁶, and another thinks its “intended audience should be teens who fantasize about the day they will lose their virginity”.⁸⁷ Implicit in this is the assumption that only the virginal reader is ignorant enough to believe Ana and Christian’s spectacular multi-orgasmic sex life is possible.

Christian and Ana are not held up as examples for virgins in the same way that Edward and Bella are, but there is still considerable concern expressed about what effect the books might have on virginal readers. “I found this book to be misleading and, in a

⁸⁶ K. Hubbard, “Could’ve Had a V8,” July 26, 2012, Amazon, available at www.amazon.com/review/R24B6J1M3TRWS2/

⁸⁷ Iriss Barriga “Missirish”, “50 shades of crimson, twilight without vampires! A teen fantasy,” Amazon, May 24, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R2ZOJPTYRQGUZN/>

sexually ignorant culture, this is a problem,” one reviewer notes.⁸⁸ Another “hope[s] that our younger generation is not drawn to this type of behaviour or ideology.”⁸⁹ A third hopes that the teenage daughters of the middle-aged women readers “don't get hold of their copy because they will have unrealistic expectations about sex.”⁹⁰ Another writes that

this book isn't good for younger teens... That is not okay, they are given a false idea of sex. Ana was a virgin in the story and her first time was marvelous and she orgasms almost immediately every time. This probably is giving younger girls the idea that sex is always great and you don't have to love somebody to have sex.⁹¹

This speaks to the biggest issue that Amazon reviewers take with the book. The question of the morality of Ana's virginity loss experience is not raised in the same way in reviews of *Fifty Shades of Grey* as it was in reviews of *Breaking Dawn* (though it is, as we see above, raised). Instead, there is a focus on the realism of the scene. Ana's virginity loss is, as I noted previously, multi-orgasmic. A large amount of reviews express disdain about the representation of her pleasure:

And the account of Ana losing her virginity?!... I don't even know where to begin. Everyone has a unique experience, sure, but how many people have mind-blowing, pleasure-filled sex with NO PAIN and TWO ORGASMS their FIRST TIME?... Yeah, that's realistic.⁹²

⁸⁸ B. Dale “Rev Bev”, “Fifty Shades of Fanciful Misinformation on Sex,” Amazon, May 12, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R1A7GU0W7OFN5Y/>

⁸⁹ soul329, “Could not Continue Reading,” Amazon, June 25, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R360RIXKF3ABR/>

⁹⁰ Insimps, “Ever Heard of Penthouse Forum?” Amazon, May 30, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R3EAX2860V4Y3E/>

⁹¹ AD284, “So boring,” Amazon, June 22, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R2PAV47OLY126M/>

⁹² K. K. Wise, ““50 Shades of REFUND,” I murmured dryly with a wry smirk,” Amazon, June 9, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R2FFLZGK003ZSK/>

[N]o virgin woman has multiple orgasms the first time she has sex.⁹³

Ana the virgin explodes into a million pieces with orgasms twice in the first sex scene. It's flat out ridiculous.⁹⁴

Wow, she must be one lucky girl to go from virgin one day to a total temptress the next! ... I know little to no women who can orgasm that quickly and that often. Lets be real.⁹⁵

Everyone can relate to the time they lost their virginity however it was unrealistic that somehow Ana manages to score an orgasm first time out the gate...really?⁹⁶

So to come to the heroine (LMAO) she is 21 a virgine [sic] and has an orgasm on the first time (???????) . My first time was awful , it hurt and it was awkward at best , no orgasm for me (what did i do wrong?????).⁹⁷

Does anyone know someone who is virgin and when finally [sic] has sex has orgasme [sic] each time?⁹⁸

Most virgins that I know of will find the deflowering experience painful physically and immemorable [sic]. Strangely she climaxes on it and thoroughly enjoys the experience.⁹⁹

⁹³ Jo, "Disappointed," Amazon, June 7, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R11B27M59VOZRC/>

⁹⁴ Amazon Customer, "Awful Book," Amazon, August 18, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R2YCKS6O7C1FFH/>

⁹⁵ Melanie, "If she bites her lip one more time, I'll beat her too," Amazon, May 22, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R3S6626EJ5P05U/>

⁹⁶ mzione, "DisappointingI expected MORE," Amazon, July 10, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/RPQRB43ZZSLPC/>

⁹⁷ vaso, "Ashamed" Amazon, July 14, 2013, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R2L7XX54ZAP3O1/>

⁹⁸ maga47, "1st book ok, second ok, last terrible," Amazon, April 23, 2013, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/RYFJMIDIWY5ZJ/>

⁹⁹ bernard tsai, "fifty shades of grey, book 1," Amazon, August 20, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R19QU9VEL9LQ5V/>

Losing your virginity as a female is not fun and it's not pleasant, yet alone having 2 orgasms the first time you've ever had sex.¹⁰⁰

There are a number of ways of reading this response. Firstly, and most obviously, we can read it as a rejection from a non-virginal reader of an experience that to them seems hyperbolic and ridiculous. The emergence of the virginity loss confessional genre in the 1990s and 2000s is part of a larger cultural shift which brought sexual stories into popular discourse, and we can see here a reliance on a “realistic” narrative for virginity loss that positions it as absent of pleasure for women. In this sense, the insistence on realism seems to suggest that the spectacular nature of the virginity loss experience is jarring for the reader, and they are figuratively “thrown out” of the narrative. However, if, as we saw above, we assume that these responses are assuming a virginal reader, then we can read this a little differently. If virgins receive the message that virginity loss might be pleasant, that might tempt them to have sex – something which would be especially problematic if they lost their virginity, like Ana does, outside a committed monogamous romantic relationship.

This is the same suspicion of female pleasure that we see invoked in reviews of *Breaking Dawn*, although it is articulated somewhat differently. Generally, reviews of that text tended to insist on the “innocence” of the books, something which Bella’s pursuit of pleasure (particularly post-virginity loss) somehow marred. *Fifty Shades* is not imbued with the same innocence, although the word is often invoked in regards to Ana. Instead, it worries that the text will engender unrealistic expectations of sex in its readers: that they will expect the ideal, instead of the real. Considering that *Fifty Shades* is an erotic romance, it seems somewhat strange to expect that any sexual episode, including virginity

¹⁰⁰ frosty, “too much unrealistic sex, if that’s possible,” Amazon, November 1, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R2SPY60YLYXWJC/>

loss, would be coded as disappointing: if this is, after all, “mommy porn”, why should the sex represented be “realistic” – and if it is not, why is this a problem? It is additionally strange when we consider that Ana is coded as woman, not as girl: if Ana’s virginity makes her abnormal, surely the loss of it should be recuperating her into a pleasurable normative heterosexuality? It makes sense, however, when we include this image of the virginal reader in the discourse. As I noted in the first section of this chapter, several scholars have noted the absence of female pleasure from scripts of virginity loss. The virgin is allowed romantic fantasies, it appears, but fantasies that are explicitly pleasurable are more problematic. We can see this highlighted more clearly in reviews of *Fifty Shades of Grey* that explicitly critique Ana’s decision to have sex outside the romantic paradigm. “[W]hy this woman, who was a virgin, valued herself, and was supposedly intelligent would consent to being beaten by a sadistic, emotionally withholding man is beyond me,” one reviewer writes.¹⁰¹ Another wonders why “[s]he just loses [sic] her virginity to some guy she’s doesn’t know, that doesn’t love her, and has already shown her his ‘room of torture’. Are girls that naive? Is there so little respect for someone’s first time anymore? I could at least respect the character if she’d thought he loved her.”¹⁰² Another writes that, “Anna [sic] kept her virginity for 20 something years just to give it up to this very strange man after knowing him for what, a week? I call BULLSHIT!!!”,¹⁰³ while a fourth sums this up very neatly by writing, “[f]or a virgin, Anastasia is pretty easy.”¹⁰⁴ There is an assumption implicit here that the virgin must (or, at least, should) be waiting for love, particularly one of Ana’s age. By having sex outside the romantic paradigm and still

¹⁰¹ DJY51, “Deeply Disturbing,” Amazon, July 10, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R1S8LAEB9GSMF0/>

¹⁰² C. McGowan “CL McGowan”, “Fifty Shades of ‘Gray’,” Amazon, June 3, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R12JFLBMXN1EMZ/>

¹⁰³ allth3worldismad, “‘My inner goddess’ refused to let me finish this book...” Amazon, September 20, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/REEYRZ1Z58LU7/>

¹⁰⁴ Elle Mills, “Fifty Shades of WTF,” Amazon, May 10, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R3D35LPZUNLUQD/>

having a positive experience, Ana becomes problematic: what if virginal readers begin to think they can do the same?

Scholars writing about sex in *Fifty Shades* tend not to focus on the portrayal of pleasure, but on the way the text normalises and romanticises sexual violence.¹⁰⁵ This is something that is mirrored in popular discourse: Sarah Harman and Bethan Jones, for example, have published work examining the “anti-fandom” surrounding the book. Anti-fans, they contend, focus largely on the fact that the trilogy is “bad literature” and “bad erotica” with a pernicious cultural message.¹⁰⁶ Ruth Deller and Clarissa Smith discuss a number of publicly condemnatory responses to the text, including the launch of an anti-*Fifty Shades* campaign by the director of a charity that assists domestic abuse victims, who argued that the books were “instruction manual[s]” for the abuse of vulnerable young women.¹⁰⁷ Whether or not these claims have substance is a subject I do not have the space to tackle here (although I tend to follow Pamela Regis’ line of thinking – she argues that “the claim that these books [romance novels] are powerful enough to relegate women to patriarchy... is simply not true,” and, indeed, it seems difficult to contend that one text, no matter how popular, could so powerfully impact such a large amount of women.¹⁰⁸) What I find particularly interesting about these criticisms is that they perpetuate this idea of the female reader – particularly the young female reader – as virginal: a blank slate on whom texts can leave a lasting (in this case, bad) impression. Ana and Christian’s romance is

¹⁰⁵ For example, see: Amy E. Bonomi, Lauren E. Altenburger, and Nicole L. Walton, “‘Double crap!’ Abuse and Harmed Identity in *Fifty Shades of Grey*,” *Journal of Women’s Health* 22.9 (2013): pp. 733-744; Amy E. Bonomi, Julianna M. Nemeth, Lauren E. Altenburger, Melissa L. Anderson, Anastasia Snyder, and Irma Dotto, “Fiction or Not? *Fifty Shades* is Associated with Health Risks in Adolescent and Young Adult Females,” *Journal of Women’s Health* 23.9 (2014): pp. 720-728.

¹⁰⁶ Sarah Harman and Bethan Jones, “Fifty Shades of Ghey: Snark Fandom and the Figure of the Anti-Fan,” *Sexualities* 16.8 (2013): pp. 951-968.

¹⁰⁷ Ruth A. Deller and Clarissa Smith, “Reading the BDSM Romance: Reader Responses to *Fifty Shades*,” *Sexualities* 16.8 (2013): p. 936.

¹⁰⁸ Regis, *Natural History*, p. 13.

presented as a dupe in which violence is concealed: a dupe which this naïve reader cannot help but fall for.

The idea that this virginal reader naturally mimics behaviours in texts is obviously a flawed one, but it is revealing when we are interrogating how virginity is portrayed in the twenty-first century. This is particularly true in American sexual culture, where the emphasis on abstinence-only education, which essentially promotes sexual ignorance, seems to send the message that if students do not know about sex, or how to have sex, they will not have it – if the “don’t have sex” message is the only one they receive, it will be the only choice they can make, and therefore, they should be protected from having other messages written on the blank slate of their psyches. We see something similar in responses to the texts I have discussed here. While, taken literally, there are certainly problematic and pernicious aspects of both *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades*, the cultural anxiety expressed over these texts is largely concern over the effect they might have on virginal readers. It casts the virgin as passive and exploitable, denying her agency and capacity for intelligent decision, and instead insists that the texts she consumes be didactic, full of culturally approved messages when it comes to sex, lest she be duped by the portrayal of the romance it is assumed she so desperately desires. It is fearful of her desire and of her pleasure: what if the virgin desires the wrong things? And what if she enjoys them?

Conclusion: Haunting the Text

The fact that virginity loss is so central to two of the most iconic texts in the popular culture of the last decade demonstrates to us that virginity is still a major cultural preoccupation: a locus of concern and also of eroticism. While not overtly religious, Meyer’s *Twilight* saga clearly draws on the renewed religious rhetoric that surrounds

virginity in contemporary American culture; while James' *Fifty Shades* trilogy draws on romantic tropes surrounding virginity loss as well as pornographic ones, in which the previously asexual virgin is transformed into a nymphomaniac after her first sexual experience. (The fact that several reviewers wonder whether or not a man wrote the text – “Did a woman really write this? I'm not saying that women can't have orgasms during their first sexual encounter, but a virgin being body slammed by a man with an enormous penis who then experiences several ‘bone crushing’ orgasms is just a bit outside the realm of real life,” one reviewer writes¹⁰⁹ – is telling in this regard.) However, reactions to these representations of virginity loss are perhaps more revealing than the texts themselves. The virginal reader is a ghost haunting the discourse around these two texts. Both Bella and Ana's virginity loss experiences are policed for this lurking virginal reader – even if, as in the case of *Fifty Shades*, she is not actually the text's assumed reader.

This archetypal virginal reader is constructed as a reader who will consume these texts blindly, and who will thus aspire to the examples set: whether to Bella's teenaged marriage and motherhood, or Ana's sexual relationship with an emotionally closed off and damaged billionaire. In this figuration, the romance within the texts functions as a dupe: the virginal reader, it is assumed, naturally aspires to romance, but contained within these pleasurable portrayals of heterosexual monogamous love are pernicious assumptions she cannot fail to internalise.¹¹⁰ Therefore, the texts she consumes should be didactic, filled only with appropriate relationship models. Her desire and pleasure are treated with suspicion: what if the virginal reader encounters a text, finds it pleasurable, and learns the wrong sexual script?

¹⁰⁹ V. Lipkovic, “This is Tween Porn,” Amazon, May 24, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R1FMEOC6R7SOYT/>

¹¹⁰ The aspirational view of romantic love itself is also troubling for many critics, particularly those approaching the texts from a feminist perspective.

But what is the “right” sexual script? There is no consensus on this: what is deemed an appropriate relationship model for the virginal reader to consume differs significantly between critics. Broadly speaking, we can see some inherent assumptions about female virginity loss in the twenty-first century: for example, it is assumed that the young woman will and should lose her virginity at some point – Ana, a virgin woman, is clearly positioned as anomalous, whereas girl virgin Bella is not. This seems to signal a cultural movement towards what Laura Carpenter has called the “process” script, where virginity loss becomes a rite of passage in a journey towards adulthood and sexual maturity;¹¹¹ however, there does not seem to be a suggestion that virginity loss is what makes a girl into a woman.¹¹² The point at which virginity transitions from appropriate to anomalous is unclear. Romantic rather than sexual initiation seems to be privileged, positioning the establishment of a monogamous heterosexual romantic relationship as a key step towards maturity, and one which should be undertaken by young women at a certain – apparently arbitrary – time.¹¹³ It is to this relationship, not to sex, that the virgin is culturally permitted to aspire, and within this relationship that she should lose her virginity. This is the paradigm of compulsory demisexuality, which, as I have discussed in this thesis, is the dominant paradigm governing female sexual behaviour, particularly the behaviour of virgins, today.

However, even within this paradigm, there are still cultural restrictions placed on the twenty-first century virgin. The paradigm sets boundaries (albeit nebulous ones) around what is appropriate female sexual behaviour, which perpetuates a split between good girls and bad girls. Within the boundaries is a relatively safe space for sexual activity, and it is

¹¹¹ Carpenter, *Virginity Lost*, pp. 141-177.

¹¹² By contrast, as Janet Holland, Carolina Ramazanoglu, Sue Sharpe and Rachel Thomson have noted, virginity loss is regularly positioned as the event which makes a boy into a man. This is a key difference in male and female discourses around virginity. [Holland et al, “Deconstructing Virginity,” p. 223.]

¹¹³ This is perhaps why so many readers found *Breaking Dawn* lacked the “innocence” of the previous books in the *Twilight* saga: despite its lack of sexual content, Bella moved from the space of girlhood to the space of womanhood, which perhaps coded the book as too “mature” for the virginal girl reader.

this space that both *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades* invoke so as to legitimise their more radical aspects: Ana is allowed to indulge in “kinky fuckery” with Christian because it will ultimately be recuperated into romance, while Bella’s solid relationship with Edward allows her to take on the role of desiring subject and sexual aggressor so often denied to girls. This safe space is, I contend, a large part of what has made these texts (and arguably the romance genre more broadly) so pleasurable for many female readers. But outside the paradigm’s boundaries is a sexual landscape in which women are not supposed to tread: here there be monsters, and the women who walk in this landscape are regularly coded as monstrous themselves. And it is a wilderness that it is apparently difficult to return from, particularly if the first steps into it are taken as a virgin: once a monster, it seems, always a monster.

A key part of this monstrosity is female desire, which, existing independent of romantic love, is regularly culturally coded as dangerous. The ideal virgin – the good girl – should aspire to a romantic relationship for emotional, not sexual fulfilment. While, as some scholars have suggested, female sexual pleasure might be entering the script for virginity loss, it is essentially as a side effect of emotional pleasure.¹¹⁴ Aspiring to sexual pleasure, even within a romantic relationship, is suspicious, lest it signal too strong, too monstrous a desire. We can see this evident in reviewer criticisms such as this one: “Bella goes through with marriage for the right reasons? No, mostly to have sex with Edward.”¹¹⁵ In this script, sex should certainly not pre-date the romantic relationship, even if said relationship is aspired to, and even if, like Ana, virginity has passed the arbitrary line from appropriate to anomalous. If it does pre-date the relationship, sex should be emotionally disastrous, as we can see in this review:

¹¹⁴ Suchi P. Joshi, Jochen Peter, and Patti M. Valkenburg, “Scripts of Sexual Desire and Danger in US and Dutch Teen Girl Magazines: A Cross-National Content Analysis,” *Sex Roles* 64.7-8 (2011): p. 471.

¹¹⁵ C. Johnson “book reader”, “Weird...” Amazon, August 4, 2008, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/RA7TXJ0Q5DX3Q/>

No 21 year-old virgin worth her salt is going to be deflowered in such a way and then dance around... the next morning making pancakes with no sense of shame... [She] would be sobbing in a locked bathroom, trying not to make any noise while coming to terms with what had happened.¹¹⁶

In this context, the repeated insistence that Ana's virginity loss in *Fifty Shades of Grey* be "realistic", despite the fact that the series is clearly erotic romance, makes sense. Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe and Thomson have noted that virginity loss is often positioned as the "man's moment", something which prioritises his pleasure, which "leaves women to cope with first experiences that do not match their expectations of love, romance or the earth moving."¹¹⁷ These expectations are what these demands for "realism" seem to be seeking to mitigate, perpetuating the idea that women should understand that virginity loss is not to be enjoyed, but endured, even if it does take place within the acceptable romantic script (although it also speaks to the explosion of real-life, often mediocre virginity loss stories we see in the virginity loss confessional genre). This positions virginity loss as a romantic but not necessarily erotic milestone, constructing sex as something the woman does for the man, whose sex drive is constructed as stronger, and as independent from feelings of love, in return for emotional fulfilment. When virginity loss takes place outside the romantic script, as it does for Ana, it is thus coded as exploitative and as a mistake on the part of the virgin: how could she possibly want to have sex outside a romantic context, and how could it possibly be pleasurable? In this discourse, the virgin is positioned as innately demisexual: for her, sexual desire is entirely linked to an emotional connection, and it is falling in love, not virginity loss, which enables her to transition to the next stage of womanhood.

¹¹⁶ Marylynn, "Dreadful," Amazon, May 18, 2012, available at <http://www.amazon.com/review/R3K7NY8NFC AE0D/>

¹¹⁷ Holland et al, "Deconstructing Virginity," p. 228.

Unlike Ana, Bella follows the demisexual script almost perfectly: her virginity loss takes place in a romantic (and marital) relationship, one in which she can be totally emotionally secure and have complete trust in her partner. This may be why the demand that her virginity loss be “realistic” was not iterated as often as it was about Ana’s in *Fifty Shades of Grey*. However, her desire and particularly her pleasure were treated with strong suspicion: Bella’s post-coital desire to keep having sex with her husband, despite his reticence, drew particular ire, leading to, as I noted above, her characterisation as a “sex maniac” and as a bad example for girl readers. Evident here is a sexual script in which women are consistently supposed to prioritise the emotional over the sexual: it appears that female desire and pleasure is suspicious even within a romantic relationship. Female desire, it would seem, is supposed to go without saying – it can, perhaps, be a side effect of romantic love, but even thinking about sex too much is problematic. Bella and Ana as desiring subjects become problematic here, because they *think about their desires*. Ana is troubling because her desire is strong enough for her to begin and continue a sexual relationship with Christian even without the guarantee of emotional fulfilment. Bella is troubling because she gets married not because of any specific emotional reasons, but primarily so she can access sexual pleasure with Edward. For both heroines, desire is a part of the equation: it is an important, non-negotiable variable in the romantic negotiations that characterise both texts. This is, I would argue, key to the pleasure of the text for many female readers, as well as engendering what we might (perhaps hyperbolically) call a “moral panic”.¹¹⁸ What effect will the representation of an active female desire have on the virginal reader?

¹¹⁸ This term began to be used by British sociologists such as Stuart Hall in the 1970s, and was used to apply to instances “when the official reaction to a person, groups of persons or series of events is out of all proportion to the actual threat offered.” [Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 16.]

There is also discourse – mostly discourse that adopts an explicitly feminist position – surrounding both texts that treats romantic love with suspicion, arguing that the texts encourage the virginal reader to pursue romance and heterosexual fulfilment at the expense of other, more worthy goals. This discourse recognises the importance of an autonomous female desire and sexual agency; however, it still relies on this problematic idea of the reader as essentially virginal – a blank slate with no critical capacity on which the text can write. In this sense, it is a throwback to much of the second-wave criticism of the romance novel, which, as I have discussed, worried that the representations of love in those novels would reconcile women to subordinate positions in patriarchal marriage. This, however, is more focused on a specific female reader. This is true particularly when it comes to *Twilight* but also, as I have shown, when it comes to *Fifty Shades*: the reader that is the subject of the majority of anxiety is the young woman: the girl reader, that possessor of an untouched virginal mind, who must be taught to desire appropriately as well as shown what is appropriate to desire.

The twenty-first century virgin exists in a confusing space. The restrictive social rules that existed around female virginity loss in earlier decades no longer seem to apply. Love has supplanted marriage as the thing which makes her sexual activity legitimate, but this too is confusing, because what love is and what love looks like are nebulous concepts. Dominant cultural discourse suggests that she must couch any sexual desire in the context of romantic love, and that love should be more powerful than desire: as Deborah Tolman puts it, “[w]e have desexualised girls’ sexuality, substituting the desire for relationship and emotional connection for sexual feelings in their bodies”.¹¹⁹ Feminist discourses that allow her this autonomous desire and push back against compulsory demisexuality are becoming

Tolman has argued that “[g]irls who step out of the bounds of appropriate, controlled female sexuality instigate... a moral panic.” [Tolman, *Dilemmas of Desire*, p. 8.]

¹¹⁹ Tolman, *Dilemmas of Desire*, p. 5.

more prominent, and this is certainly a productive cultural move; however, these discourses still have a tendency to insist on a necessary didacticism in the texts the virginal reader consumes, lest she take the wrong message away. Generally speaking, there is far more cultural concern over the texts that girls find pleasurable than those that boys do: girls' pleasure, it seems, must be the right kind of pleasure – there is an anxiety that her desire be properly directed, even if there is not a cultural consensus on what this proper direction is.

This is not to say that any or all of the critiques mounted are incorrect or without merit – a diverse portrayal of the desire, pleasure, and sexual agency of young women is certainly necessary. Indeed, seeing female-driven texts as the basis of widespread cultural discussion is somewhat refreshing, although the fact that both the texts I have discussed here are generally treated with ridicule (often because of their preoccupation with female desire) is telling. The next step for criticism should be to question this notion of the virginal reader – that is, the assumption that the female reader, particularly the girl reader, is a passive sponge for all a text's messages, her desire awakened and directed by the text and duped by its pleasures. The virginal reader is neither necessarily a passive nor innocent object on which the text imprints: rather, we should allow her to be an active, critical, agentic, desiring subject – something which requires a cultural shift in twenty-first century visions of virginity.

Positioning the virgin as active instead of passive is a necessary next discursive step. The virginity loss confessional genre has shown us that female virgins who think and make active decisions about their virginity loss experiences are more likely to have positive experiences, even if it takes place outside the romantic narrative that is the culturally acceptable “right” way for a girl to lose her virginity. However, as I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the confusing web of discourse surrounding girls, sex,

desire, and pleasure can often cause girls to symbolically “opt out”, and regularly leads to “it just happened” experiences, which are far less likely to be enjoyable. The missing discourse of desire in figurations of girlhood make it very difficult for girls to take on this active subject position and think seriously about their own pleasure – whether within or without a romantic relationship – without being deemed to have stepped outside socially policed acceptable cultural boundaries into a wilderness that makes her monstrous. For a more productive female virginity loss discourse with a higher chance of female pleasure to develop, the virgin’s voice must be prioritised and de-stigmatised, and disentangled from a fetishised innocence and the idea of virginity as valuable object.

Romantic narratives such as those I have discussed in this and the previous two chapters have offered an opportunity for female desire and pleasure to be prioritised and accessed (albeit sometimes covertly), both in regards to virginity loss and in the context of a broader narrative of female sexuality, because they are governed by a compulsory demisexuality which ties sex to love in a way that is culturally coded as acceptably feminine. This has offered radical possibilities for desiring female subjectivities, but it is also a space with boundaries. As the discourse of female sexuality more generally moves forward, positioning women as sexual subjects and desiring agents without as well as within these boundaries will become key. In terms of virginity, this means prioritising the virgin’s voice and desires – what Gagnon and Simon would call the intrapsychic sexual script, as opposed to interpersonal and cultural scripts – and moving away from a discourse that positions romantic love as the only acceptable space for her to access pleasure, while not inverting the discourse and suggesting that romantic love is an inappropriate place for pleasure to be located. This should also mean moving away from an idea of virginity that suggests that it is an irretrievable valuable object that is lost in heterosexual contact – a sacrifice that is made worthwhile for the woman by romantic love, and that will damage

her if she loses it sans love – and towards a more inclusive discourse that is neither so pernicious nor heteronormative. This discourse should recognise the virgin's capacity for desire and pleasure, and acknowledge her as a critical, active sexual agent, capable of making sexual decisions that are neither right nor wrong, but simply hers.

Conclusion – Virgin Territory

If we were to isolate the most important shift in the sexual politics of virginity loss in the last hundred years, the answer would surely have to be the rise of the paradigm of compulsory demisexuality. The idea that romantic love, instead of marriage, functions to make sex legitimate or appropriate for women, has brought with it several changes. The ephemerality of love – that is, the notion that one can fall out of love as well as into it – has given rise to serial monogamy, rather than lifelong marriage, as the dominant model for relationships in the Anglosphere. The availability of reliable contraception abetted the development of this new love-based model, because it provided opportunities for women to seek sex for pleasure, rather than for reproductive reasons that might tie them to a single partner for a lifetime. Combined with the steady eroticisation of romantic love that occurred over the twentieth century, this has led to the yoking together of sex, love and pleasure for women.

This would seem to suggest a move away from an emphasis on virginity, as it signified an important shift away from the politics of property that had once been so strongly inherent in marriage in Western culture, where virginity lost (in licit circumstances) could signify the formal transfer of woman from father to husband, the female body functioning as a vehicle of economic transmission. As I have discussed in this thesis, romantic love has offered radical possibilities for women: even in a system where they have no political power, it (theoretically, at least) allows women an opportunity to wield emotional power that forces men to recognise them as autonomous individuals with a voice – a subject, rather than an object. (This is one of the active fantasies in popular romance fiction, particularly historical romance.) A move away from marriage to love as

the culturally legitimating force for virginity loss, combined with the growing notion of romantic relationships as serial and not necessarily lifelong, would seem to make virginity less important: a matter of individual choice, made for the virgin's pleasure, not of social symbolism.

To an extent, this is true. Virginity has indeed been largely relocated from a social to an individual sphere. However, compulsory demisexuality continues to perpetuate a division between licit and illicit virginity loss for women in a way that does not exist for men. While this new narrative has created a space where women can pursue sexual pleasure that did not previously exist in the discourse – a space regularly drawn on in popular romance, which often allows transgressive sexual fantasies to be explored with the proviso that they will eventually be recuperated into a normative romantic relationship – it is still a space with fences. While a tacit acknowledgement (though I would not go so far as to say an acceptance) is beginning to arise that women might perhaps seek pleasure outside a romantic relationships, this idea does not exist for girls: the notion that girls might desire is culturally troublesome. As the archetype of the virgin has now come to inhere in the girl rather than in the unmarried woman, we can also read this as a cultural problem with the concept of the virgin as desiring subject – something evident in reader reactions to *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades* (particularly the former), as reviewers worried over the effect the books might have on a virginal reader. While, as Laura Carpenter has argued, virginity has come to be almost wholly located in the body in the last century, associations with innocence, purity and virtue remain.¹

Virginity thus becomes a complex, difficult liminal space, filled with problems that, as I observed in my chapter on virginity in the twenty-first century, many girls fail to

¹ Laura Carpenter, *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005), p. 47.

adequately resolve. Carpenter has observed that there are three major extant scripts for virginity loss – figuring virginity as a gift, as a stigma, or virginity loss as a step in a process or rite of passage.² All of these fit into an emerging modern narrative for female virginity loss as a kind of coming of age, as opposed to an older script, which was tied to a politic of ownership. This is different to the male narrative, although it also imagines virginity loss as coming of age. For boys, virginity loss has regularly been figured as the act that transforms them into a man: an experience gained that enables them to attain a new status.³ For girls, however, virginity loss is more fraught: it functions as (usually hetero-) sexual initiation, but it is also linked with ideas of loss and sacrifice. Virginity lost is innocence lost: a coming of age, but at the expense of something figured as valuable. While the woman might be permitted to desire, the girl (and thus the virgin) is not, her desire disappeared beneath this fetishised innocence. What she is allowed to aspire to is a romantic relationship. Virginity loss within this paradigm becomes more permissible: she may seek sex for reasons of emotional closeness, but not for her own pleasure. In short: she may aspire, but not desire.

Virginity becomes constituted as a space of resistance for girls: not resistance of their own desires, but those of boys. To “respect yourself” – rhetoric often espoused in virginity discourse – is to maintain your virginity until the “right time”: a time when virginity loss can constitute coming of age in a way that incorporates the now ex-virgin into a sort of romantic heterosexuality. This positions the girl body as an object of male use, and suggests that she must wait to have sex until she finds a boy she loves and who loves her enough to respect her, perhaps in spite of the fact she permits him to use her body. Sex becomes something done to the female body, rather than something the female

² Ibid.

³ Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Sharpe and Rachel Thomson, “Deconstructing Virginity: Young People’s Accounts of First Sex,” *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* 15.3 (2000): p. 223.

body participates in, denying the capacity to the virgin to be a desiring subject in her own right, and problematising both her desire and her potential for pleasure.

In the virginity loss confessional genre, this space where *petit récits* trouble grand narratives, we can see resistance to this idea. This is particularly evident in active stories where the virgin has deliberately scripted her own virginity loss outside a romantic paradigm (examples of which I discussed in the third chapter of this thesis), but we can also see it in active stories that take place within a romantic relationship, where the virgin considers her own needs – emotional and sexual – and so engineers a virginity loss experience to her liking. As my discussion of these stories shows, female storytellers were far more likely to have positive experiences under these circumstances, rather than in “it just happened” experiences, where they succumbed to male pressure, coercion, or social narratives which suggested that sex was the next logical step in a relationship, even if it was not necessarily what they wanted to do. This notion – that sex is better for women when they know they want to do it – seems so simple and logical it is not worth saying; but it also highlights the ambivalence that many women feel around sexual debut, caught as they are in a confusing maelstrom of ideas that constitute a narrow space of culturally acceptable femininity (and, in particular, girlhood). The problematisation of girl desire and absence of a rhetoric of subjective pleasure (rather than that of the objectified girl body providing male pleasure) makes it difficult for girls to shape these active stories. This is true particularly outside of the romantic paradigm, but also within it, where emotionality is supposed to take precedence over desire for the girl: “Traditionally, shouldn’t you be arguing my side, and I yours?” Edward asks Bella in the *Twilight* saga, after she has once again tried to convince him to have sex with her and he has refused.⁴

⁴ Stephenie Meyer, *Eclipse* (New York: Little, Brown, 2007), p. 451.

In this thesis, I have highlighted the ways in which discourses of virginity and romantic love have intertwined, and the effects this has had on narratives surrounding female virginity loss. Romantic love has, I contend, been a key tool in giving the virgin a voice when it comes to her sex life, and has been vital in incorporating female pleasure back into sexual narratives. Not only does romance emphasise the importance of a loving, respectful partner who will prioritise female sexual enjoyment, the quest for romance can position the virgin as an active agent, rather than as an object in a patriarchal economy: in fairy tale terms, she has adopted some of the characteristics of the questing prince. However, a “princess in the tower” ideology still continues to inform ideas of virginity in the cultural imagination, positioning the virgin as passive and as object in a patriarchal sexual politic. While she is encouraged to actively resist male intrusion, the virgin is still positioned as an object to be won by the right Prince Charming. This is also a politic that worries about and fetishises her innocence and discourages her from thinking too much about sex, a practice that continues into the twenty-first century, as we saw in my chapter on the virginal reader.

The popular literatures I have discussed in this thesis offer intriguing ways of dealing with this virgin problem. The virginity loss confessional genre regularly reinforces the romantic script as the “right” way for girls to lose their virginity, but it also troubles dominant narratives with its postmodern project. While some texts in the genre might have an explicitly didactic purpose, and some stories encourage the virginal reader to learn from their “mistakes”, it also offers an explosion of potential stories of virginity loss, not just one script – a literalised example of Kenneth Plummer’s claim that “sexual stories of the Essence, the Foundation, the Truth are fracturing into *stories of difference*, multiplicity and

a plural universe.”⁵ The development of the popular romance genre proves likewise interesting, particularly when we read it against the climate in which it was written. Contemporary category romances have alternatively upheld and subverted dominant virginity politics of various eras, and in more modern texts, offer a space in which transgressive sexual fantasies – that is, those not involving romantic partners – can be explored in a “safe” way, due to the guarantee that they will be recuperated into a romantic relationship at the end. Historical romances portray modern love in an unfriendly, patriarchal world, and feature virgin heroines symbolically “winning” even if they transgress that world’s dominant sexual politics. Mistakes are not irreparable in either romantic sub-genre. The paradigm of compulsory demisexuality that governs romance novels may mean they exist within the dominant sexual politics of modern Western society, but they can also mobilise the safe space this creates in quite a radical way: as Alison Light argues, if they are not necessarily progressive, they can be transgressive.⁶

Romance is a genre with an almost exclusively female readership. Given that many texts in the virginity loss confessional genre focus exclusively on female experiences, it is difficult not to imagine that the readership of this genre also includes many girls and women. Women are consuming both these realistic and idealistic narratives about virginity loss, something which leads to the panicked social concern we see evident about the virginal reader. Even if the assumed reader of a text is not virginal – as with *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which is often assumed to have a middle-aged female reader – this concern about what message virgins take from virginity loss narratives is extant, signalling a widespread cultural anxiety with what virgins know about sex. They must receive the “right” messages: what they know about sex should be imbued with a kind of didacticism.

⁵ Kenneth Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change, and Social Worlds* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 134. Emphasis in original.

⁶ Alison Light, “Returning to Manderley: Romance Fiction, Female Sexuality, and Class,” in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Mary Eagleton (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 143.

This is something we can see evident in the debate over abstinence-only versus comprehensive sex education in the United States, which appears to be predicated on the notion that virgins who know too much about sex (especially contraception, which divorces sex from reproduction and can thus relocate sex to a space of pleasure) will immediately have it.⁷ However, it is, I contend, also a broader cultural problem in the English-speaking West. We can see this in the fetishisation of innocence surrounding female virginity which does not allow for the virgin's desire, and also in more nominally progressive discourse which worries that virgins, particularly female virgins, are receiving only idealistic and not realistic images of virginity loss. The virgin must imbibe the right message so she can make the right choice and lose her virginity in the right way at the right time with the right person with the right expectations. Is it any wonder, given this extensive checklist of "rights", that virginity loss is imbued with so much anxiety?

In addition to this, concepts of virginity are themselves unstable. The notion that virginity is lost upon first instance of penetrative heterosexual is far too narrow for a modern sexual climate which incorporates LGBTQI identities and recognises their sexual experiences. Indeed, in the virginity loss confessional genre, we see several storytellers, dissatisfied with the dominant idea of virginity, redefine it. Part of the difficulty of defining virginity comes from the fact that it is a reified absence: constituted by "not-doings" rather than doings, a lack of experience figured as a tangible object that can be given away only once and never regained (although the idea of secondary or born-again virginity attempts to subvert this.).⁸ Ideas of virginity lost, rather than experience gained, are particularly potent in female sexual narratives, and virginity is imbued with value, even if what that value actually constitutes is unclear. Virginity is a confusing, valuable absence figured as

⁷ Alesha E. Doan and Jean Calterone Williams, *The Politics of Virginity: Abstinence in Sex Education* (Westport: Praeger, 2008), p. 66.

⁸ Jamie Mullaney, "Like A Virgin: Temptation, Resistance, and the Construction of Identities Based on 'Not Doings'," *Qualitative Sociology* 24.1 (2001): pp. 3-24.

an object that must be lost in the right way. This “right path” is love: but love is itself ephemeral, difficult to identify and define. The never-having-done-ness of virginity means that this is not a situation that allows for dress rehearsals: virginity is a finite resource, and a mistake once made cannot be undone (one of the reasons why the recuperation of “wrong” virginity loss experiences in modern contemporary category romance into the “right” romantic paradigm might be so satisfying for many readers).

It is this discourse of “mistake” that needs to be moved away from, with its implication that virginity lost in the wrong way might damage a now ex-virgin forever and colour all her future sexual encounters. Moving forward, the idea of virginity itself needs to be questioned: not only is it heteronormative, but by endowing never-having-had-sex with value, it perpetuates this idea of right and wrong sexual behaviours. It also needs to be decoupled from ideas of innocence, which repress the virgin’s desire and curiosity by fetishising girlhood as a “pure” time (implying then the harmful message that sex and desire make her impure). The anxiety around the messages imbibed by the virgin regularly deny her a critical capacity and make it difficult for her to proactively address her own desires. The romantic relationship has, in the late twentieth and twenty first centuries, begun to allow her a space to speak her desire and seek pleasure more openly. In the future, this is a discursive space which I hope to see broaden, allowing for female virgins to make sexual decisions in which they can feel comfortable as desiring agent and sexual subject.

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