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Pure Resistance: Queer Virginity in Early Modern English Drama

By Theodora A. Jankowski

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2000

Reviewer: Jyotsna G. Singh

“The possession of biological virginity—an unperforated hymen—has consistently set certain women apart from others throughout history. Some cultures may validate the virgin and highly fetishize the intact hymen; others may demonize the intact female and denigrate her uncommon status. But whether validated or denigrated, the virgin woman does differ from (usually the majority of) women who are not virgins, whether that difference is physically located in biology or culturally/socially located in lack of ‘alliance’ with a man” (4). Theodora Jankowski’s book sets itself to the task of addressing why and how such a “virgin/not virgin binary” for women has been deployed in early modern English culture and literature. What are the society’s investments in culturally managing the biological virginity of women?

Jankowski addresses this provocative question to a variety of cultural and literary texts via the mediations of contemporary gender and “queer” theory. Drawing in theorists ranging from Theresa De Lauretis, Judith Butler, and Marilyn Frye, Jankowski is interested in exploring a multitude of gender and/or erotic positionings to show how virginity represented a queer space within a constraining early modern sex/gender system. Where she departs from Butler and others is by considering celibacy and chastity as a category of sexuality—and more importantly, as “a specific choice and manifestation of sexuality” rather than simply a rejection of it (8). Thus,

she makes an important political claim for virginity as “a queer space within the otherwise restrictive and binary early modern sex/gender system” (8).

While Jankowski usefully points to instabilities in the discursive and material productions of virginity, the strength of her argument lies more in its historical underpinnings than in its ideological aim of “disrupting the regime of heterosexuality.” A strange dissonance runs through a highly original work that skillfully explores the material and discursive formations of virginity. While the author carefully charts the shifts and turns in the shifting attitudes and deployments of the notion of virginity, she seems curiously fixed in her definition of “patriarchy.” At the outset, she states her aim of demonstrating “how implicated in patriarchy and male need is the traditional definition of the biological virgin” (5). While Jankowski does consider specific patriarchal versions of inheritance laws, among other practices, she seems to imply an unchanging male/patriarchal need to dominate and oppress, underpinning the sex/gender arrangements. Having said this, I would nonetheless like to stress the historical and literary significance of the book. What I take issue with is more a question of style and tone than substance.

To get a sense of the substance of the book, let us first turn to its historical contribution. Giving considerable evidence, Jankowski demonstrates how Catholic medieval Europe afforded a “plurality of sexual/erotic arrangements” in contrast to the “more limited, and therefore restrictive, sex/gender arrangements of early modern Protestant England” (11). Buttressing these claims, the author offers a compelling narrative of the two trends in chapters 2 and 3. In the first account (the strongest chapter of the book), she explores the early ascetic Christian movements and the importance of virginity and celibacy for both men and women. Here, the author demonstrates how the Roman Catholic discourse of sexuality organized gender relations not only around the traditional “man/woman binary,” but also around the “theological virgin/non-virgin one as well” (10). The monastic traditions articulated by the early Church fathers, and affording both men and women the choice of celibacy and virginity, resulted in many religious houses for women being founded from the sixth to the twelfth century, specifically as retreats of aristocratic widows and daughters. Initially, Jankowski explains, the women’s monasteries were centers of power and learning, but after 800, the women’s abbeys were also caught up in the struggles resulting from “the Church’s attempts in the eleventh,

twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, to take control over all religious houses" (67). Clearly, as Jankowski demonstrates, the history of how these discourses of sexuality and virginity operated from the sixth to the twelfth century is complex and unstable. Overall, she shows us how this period was one "of intense and continual negotiation of the virgin's power both within the Roman Catholic Church and within the monarchical system" (66).

To understand why women's monasteries and religious communities were stripped of their power in Catholic Europe, Jankowski offers a credible historical explanation in the development of the cult of the Virgin Mary, namely Mariolatry. By the twelfth century, restrictions on the power of consecrated virgins in monasteries were enabled and promoted by the image of the humble and obedient virgin. Here Jankowski notes that the cult of Mariolatry enabled edicts such as the "Fourth Lateran Council's mandate that no new orders be established," which was "used to restrict women to [existing orders] that demanded claustration" (73). This was reinforced by the Papal bull, *Periculoso*. The power of virgins was well on its way to being restricted by the time of the Reformation promotion of marriage.

Jankowski also offers a complex and nuanced account of the gradual devaluation of the spiritual benefits of virginity and the valorization of marriage and the family in Protestant England (in chapter 3), drawing on the commonly accepted connection between the emergence of the bourgeois family structure under a nascent capitalism and the privileging of marriage over virginity for women. But in an unusual move, Jankowski shows us how two Catholic theorists and humanists of the early sixteenth century, Juan Luis Vives and Desiderius Erasmus, also come out in favor of the "necessity and inevitability of marriage for women," and the "importance of virginity only as a transitory, premarital condition" (90). In doing so she demonstrates the resilience of patriarchal traditions—both Catholic and Protestant—regarding the role of women, though she does make clear the doctrinal distinctions between the two camps in the shifting meanings of terms like "virginity" and "chastity."

Jankowski's description of Protestant discourses ranging from the doctrine laid down by Luther and Calvin to popular marriage manuals also makes some important observations regarding these semantic and substantive shifts in social attitudes toward women's sexuality. While it is a commonplace assumption that Luther and

Calvin discounted vowed celibacy in order to repudiate Catholic monastic vows and validate a companionate marriage, Jankowski adds to this discussion by showing how the word “virginity” is eliminated as a term of discourse in Protestant marriage manuals. Instead “‘chastity’ is used equally to describe the unmarried (virgin) daughter and the sexually active, faithful wife” (96). As a result, Protestant discourses of marriage viewed virginity as a “transitory, solely premarital condition for women” (114).

Part 2 Jankowski’s book applies this historical account to a new reading of the women characters in several Renaissance dramatic texts. These works, as the author approaches them, can be viewed as sites of ideological struggle relating to cultural attitudes toward women’s roles as virgins and wives. In the three chapters of this section, somewhat predictably, Jankowski examines the roles of virgins in terms of their varying degrees of resistance to patriarchal authority, specifically in terms of marriage. She describes under three labels: dutiful virgins who see their virginity as a transitional state to marriage; “challenging virgins” who marry but question the institution itself; and “resistant virgins who completely repudiate marriage and the patriarchal sexual economy” (115). Within these categories, Jankowski makes a further distinction between “queer” virgins and “nonqueer” ones—whose resistance to marriage is nominal or temporary. Furthermore, in recognizing the relation between “textual women and real ones” as a complex one, Jankowski offers illuminating readings of a large number of plays, ranging from comedies like *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Roaring Girl* to more problematic plays like *Measure for Measure* and *The Convent of Pleasure*.

In these accounts of the plays, we look afresh at the roles of the women characters specifically as virgins, ranging from the “dutiful,” “nonqueer” virgins like Hero, Viola, and Perdita to the “non-marrying queer virgins” like Isabella in *Measure for Measure* and Happy in *The Convent of Pleasure*. In fact, one of the most compelling chapters of the book is one that deals with the situations of these two “cloistered characters” who demonstrate that “lives lived in isolation from men provide a space within which traditional notions of gender and gender-marked pleasure can be challenged, redefined, and reinvented” (172). Jankowski’s historicized reading of Isabella’s role as a nun is particularly illuminating in the way it shows how Roman Catholic discourses about virginity intrude into the Protestant ideology of the play. Jankowski also notes

Isabella's reference to flagellation in erotic terms ("keen whips I'd wear as rubies") as signifying a range of possibilities for "queer sexual practices open to virgins."

According to the author, "the possibility that she maintains an erotic life without male contact—and outside the patriarchal sexual economy—makes her doubly threatening by suggesting that queer virgins could live with sexual pleasure and without men" (177).

If one of the aims of *Pure Resistance* is to explore the "correlation between textual women and real ones," representations of Elizabeth the Virgin Queen in Lyly's *Gallathea and Endymion* (in the introduction and conclusion respectively) obviously offer great examples for such a study. In these readings of the allegorical aspects of these plays, Jankowski shows us how their engagement with the idea of virginity "has the potential to question dominant social constructions of virginity" (27). Yet ultimately Jankowski does not consider Elizabeth a "queer virgin," since Elizabeth's iconic construction inevitably stresses her unique and anomalous nature. Were other women "'allowed' to be perpetual virgins, Elizabeth's position would not have been unique" (198). Conclusively, Jankowski argues, her aggrandizement does little to challenge the restrictive Protestant sex/gender system, and thus, the Virgin Queen could never be a "queer virgin" in the terms set up by this book. Overall, this is a useful book for early modern historians and literary critics, and especially feminist scholars. Despite its ideologically fixed reading of patriarchy, this is a book worth reading.

Shakespeare's Tribe: Church, Nation, and Theater in Renaissance England

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Reviewer: Michael Schoenfeldt

Shakespeare's Tribe is an important book, which will be required reading for all who are interested in the period, in religion, and in