

# Finding the Hymen

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The hymen has long been an elusive membrane. In the 16th and 17th centuries, physicians and surgeons argued about whether it was possible to determine if a woman were a virgin. Although medical men wrote pages and pages on the topic, they usually confessed that absolute knowledge of virginity was impossible to attain.

In part, these discussions of virginity were constructed with an eye to court cases. One book tells a long story of a young woman who swore she had been raped. At the trial, when medical testimony suggested that she was still a virgin, she confessed all: The defendant had preferred another woman to her, and she had sought revenge through a false accusation of rape.

More generally, discussions of virginity suggest that the potential for female deception loomed large in 16th- and 17th-century culture. The illustration above is taken from a ballad called “The Lass of Lynn’s New Joy.” It tells the tale of an unmarried woman who finds herself pregnant. Her mother advises her to marry George, owner of a local alehouse, and to conceal her pregnancy from him.

Most of the ballad consists of the stories the Lass tells George. She has a round belly, for example, because the wedding feast was so tasty. Five months after the wedding, a healthy baby boy is born, but the Lass has another story for George: The midwife explains that 5 months of days and 5 months of nights added together equal the requisite 10 months of pregnancy.

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As the Lass of Lynn’s tale suggests, virginity was often women’s knowledge, and male physicians and surgeons rarely claimed that they could know a woman’s sexual status for certain. The French physician Laurent Joubert, for example, tackled the question of virginity in a 1578 book designed to expose popular errors and misbeliefs about medicine. He scorned the idea that a woman’s nipples change color when she first has intercourse, or that a virgin will urinate immediately if she smells the smoke of burning dock leaves. However, Joubert carefully analyzed the anatomical signs of virginity given by midwives and matrons, and, although he concurred with many of their find-

ings, he concluded that no sign is fully reliable.

In England, medical men compared the “civilized” marriage customs of the English with those of other peoples. These physicians criticized what they described as the Mediterranean custom of hanging out a bloodied sheet from the marriage bed to prove virginity. Instead, the English believed that there was no absolute anatomical sign of virginity, and viewed the acceptance of this ambiguity as indicative of their sophistication.

The many pages of 16th- and 17th-century medical books devoted to the topic of virginity thus speak to a range of issues. Male physicians, increasingly involved in midwifery, needed to develop their expertise. But the issue of virginity was a troubling one, echoing anxieties about illegitimacy and gender relations, and raising questions about national identity. While the issue was still vigorously discussed, physicians concluded that no absolute answers were possible. ❧