

The Taboo of Virginity: Purity Balls as Negative Rite of Passage

Christina Reimer, *University of Toronto*

For the past 10 years, events called “Purity Balls” have been held for fathers and daughters all across America. The Sioux Falls, South Dakota Purity Ball event flyer from 2006 reads:

Studies show fathers hold the key to a better future for their daughters. Showing your love today will help her be a better-adjusted person with a successful life and family tomorrow. This night is a dinner and ballroom dance event which celebrates your “little girl” and her gift of sexual purity . . . Who should attend? This event is for fathers and daughters aged 11 and older. Stepfathers, uncles, godfathers, grandfathers and other significant male figures may bring the young lady in their life!

Leslie Unruh, President of a sexual abstinence advocacy group called the Abstinence Clearinghouse said this of Purity Balls: “We believe . . . that it’s important for fathers to be the first ones to look into their daughters’ eyes and tell them that their purity is special.”² It seems that the safeguarding of these girls’ sexuality is entrusted to their fathers, who are also responsible for determining their sexual identity.

This paper will examine the phenomenon of Purity Balls in light of female coming-of-age rites of passage. In my analysis, I will employ the ritual theory of anthropologists Charles-Arnold Van Gennep, Victor Turner and Mary Douglas, concentrating particularly on van Gennep and Turner’s work on the liminal stage of transition rites and Douglas’ discussion of pollution. I will also briefly discuss Freud’s theory of the taboo of feminine sexuality. I hope to show that the Purity Ball is not the celebration of a coming-of-age rite of passage, as it claims to be, but serves to regressively bind girls to their childhood rather than initiate them into female adulthood.

1. Abstinence Clearinghouse, Purity Ball Flyer, 2006, www.abstinence.net/pdf/contentmgmt/purity_flier_fnl.pdf (accessed 2006).

2. PBS, “No Right to Choose?” transcript of Now, April 14th, 2006, www.pbs.org/now/transcript/transcriptNOW215_full.html (accessed 2006).

At the Purity Ball, fathers and daughters are dressed as if for the prom, or even a wedding. It is clear that it is a formal, ceremonial affair. But, unlike either a prom or a wedding, the daughters and fathers are each other's dates. During the program, fathers are asked to make this pledge:

I choose before God to cover my daughter as her authority and protection in the area of purity. I will be pure in my own life as a man, husband and father. I will be a man of integrity and accountability as I lead, guide and pray over my daughter and my family as the high priest in my home. This covering will be used by God to influence generations to come.³

Pastor Randy Wilson hosted the first Purity Ball in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Now, 10 years later, he is still hosting Purity Balls and numerous other states have been inspired to start their own Purity Ball tradition. At last year's Purity Ball, Pastor Wilson told the men: "Fathers, our daughters are waiting for us...They are desperately waiting for us in a culture that lures them into the murky waters of exploitation. They need to be rescued by you, their dad."⁴

Neela Banerjee, reporter for the *New York Times*, attended the Colorado Springs Purity Ball last year. She described the ballroom as having a seven-foot wooden cross at one end. Pastor Wilson and another father stood in front of the cross, making an arch over their heads with two large swords. Talk about a phallic symbol of power. Each father and daughter couple were invited to walk under the arch and kneel at the foot of the cross as Christian hymns played in the background. The fathers made their vows, some whispering additional prayers to their daughters, and the daughters each placed a white rose representative of their purity at the foot of the cross. Many girls, wearing purity rings placed on their wedding fingers by their fathers, whispered their own vows to be pure in thought and deed until marriage. One father, a jeweller, designed a one-of-a-kind ring for his daughter, decorated with two sapphires representing two watchful eyes.⁵

3. <http://generationsoflight.myicontrol.com/generationsoflight/index.cfm?ID=67C8F9DB-D1C8-4C6B-8562E3094336BBD0> (accessed 2006).

4. Neela Banerjee, "Dancing the Night Away, With Purpose," *New York Times*, May 19, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/19/us/19purity.html?_r=1&emc=eta1 (accessed 2009).

5. jcsms.jrn.columbia.edu/cus/2005-03-01/barrio-purityrings (accessed 2006).

These girls wear the purity rings until their wedding day, when they give them to their husbands.⁶

The message is oedipal in nature—that little girls are married to their fathers until they wed their husbands. Virginity, as guaranteed by the token of the purity ring, is the commodity that is exchanged between men; between fathers and husbands. One female attendee of the 2008 Colorado Springs Purity Ball got a bracelet from her father instead of ring. The bracelet had a lock and her father held onto the key until her eventual wedding day. She explained: “On my wedding day, he’ll give it to my husband...It’s a symbol of my father giving up the covering of my heart, protecting me, since it means my husband is now the protector. He becomes like the shield to my heart, to love me as I’m supposed to be loved.”⁷

To date, more than 2.5 million young people across the United States have pledged to be virgins until marriage. Peter S. Bearman of Columbia University has led an extensive study of the youth who make these pledges as well as pledge efficacy. He reports that sex for virginity pledgers is largely defined as genital intercourse between a man and a woman, although some pledge mentors even advise that one should not kiss anyone until one is married.⁸ He found that pledges are effective at delaying first intercourse, but only by an average of 18 months. Other forms of sexual activity are not discussed openly and have proven to be pervasive among surveyed pledgers. In fact, surveyed pledgers reported having *more* oral and anal sex than surveyed non-pledgers. Intercourse, when it does happen, is often spontaneous and pledgers commonly fail to use protective contraception, since sex is unplanned.⁹ Therefore, sexually transmitted disease rates are virtually the same for pledgers and non-pledgers.¹⁰ The conservative rhetoric of this virginity movement stresses the importance of family values associated with traditional gender roles and traditional definitions of

6. Ibid.

7. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1823930,00.html> (accessed 2009).

8. See: Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 1997).

9. Peter S. Bearman and Hannah Brückner. “Promising the Future: Virginity Pledges and First Intercourse” in *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 106, No. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, January, 2001): 859–860.

10. Bearman and Brückner, in a 2005 follow-up study in the *Journal for Adolescent Health*, 36: 271–276.

marriage and the nuclear family. Homosexuality and any sexual partnerships existing outside of the marriage of a man and woman are deemed sinful and psychologically, spiritually and physically harmful.¹¹

Heather Hendershot in her book *Shaking the World for Jesus*, notes that there is a fundamental problem in the logic of essentialist gender dichotomies in the discourse of the Christian chastity movement. On the one hand, certain behaviours and instincts are seen as “natural” for boys, such as an overwhelming sexual drive which makes self-control nearly impossible, while others are “natural” for girls, like the impulse to be passive and to submit to male advances. On the other hand, boys and girls are taught that they should not give in to lust or sexual desire, despite it being a part of their natures.¹² Hendershot reports that the True Love Waits abstinence youth rally of 1994 featured different sessions for boys and girls. Boys repeatedly chanted “we are real men!” in an effort to make chastity macho, while girls were “told a sentimental fairy tale about true, eternal love and the achievement of the feminine dream of romance through the preservation of virginity.”¹³

The pop music boy band The Jonas Brothers proudly told *Details* magazine that they “promised ourselves and God that we’ll stay pure until marriage.”¹⁴ But, you’ll notice that the promise to stay pure is a direct one between these boys and God, not between these boys and their mothers. Fathers, for pledging girls, are the priestly intermediaries between their daughters and God. There has been an attempt to start what’s called an Integrity Ball, but there have only been a handful of them to date. The rhetoric of the integrity ball is diametrically opposed to that of the purity ball. Like at the True Love Waits conference sessions, male integrity ball attendees are encouraged to build up their will power so that they have good self-control and can development a strong moral character, while purity balls do not seem to expect any moral agency from girls, but instead encourage fathers to be responsible for their daughters’ protection. Daughters, in this

11. Ibid.

12. Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 92–93.

13. Ibid.

14. Jeff Gordinier, “The Total Awesomeness of Being the Jonas Brothers,” *Details*, February 19, 2008, <http://men.style.com/details/blogs/thegadabout/2008/02/the-total-aweso.html> (accessed 2008).

culture, are treated as the precious property of their fathers who are directed by the movement to be good managers of this property.

Purity Ball founder Pastor Wilson and his wife Lisa went on to co-author a well-selling book about raising Christian girls in the midst of today's promiscuous "hook-up culture". Wilson writes:

I have been involved with the Father-Daughter Ball for two years with my daughters, Sarah and Anna. It is impossible to convey what I have seen in their sweet spirits, their delicate, forming souls, as their daddy takes them out for their first, big dance. Their whole being absorbs my loving attention, resulting in a radiant sense of self-worth and identity. Think of it from their perspective: My daddy thinks I'm beautiful in my own unique way . . . My daddy really loves me!¹⁵

Fathers of virginity pledging girls are encouraged to teach their daughters to wait for true love, in fact, the hope for true love is a central tenet of the abstinence movement. True love appears in fairy tales, romance novels and romantic movies and usually includes the heroic male protagonist sweeping the female off her feet. These stories often feature strong-willed women whose secret fantasy is to have their agency taken away and their wild wills tamed by love. They long to be ravished by a strong man who will make them feel beautiful, cherished and safe, like their fathers. Ravishment can be defined as being "seized," "carried off" or even "removed from sight" and has the same etymological root as rape.

Words such as ravish, rape and rapture all indicate a kind of forceful abduction of the female by the male. The gender essentialist chastity rhetoric that stresses the "natural" aggression of boys and the "natural" passivity of girls, plays on these perilous romantic stereotypes. Hendershot writes, "Boys and girls who are repeatedly told that at a certain point they are no longer in control may as a result feel less in control, and it may actually be more difficult to stop sexual activity if one conceives of one's body as a runaway train."¹⁶ The true love type of romantic conventions that accompany traditional gender constructions are so commonplace in the purity ball movement, that they are not sufficiently deconstructed.

What has happened to mother-daughter relationships here? Why isn't there a rite of passage facilitated by older women for younger women

15. Randy and Lisa Wilson, *Celebrations of Faith* (Colorado Springs: Cook Communications Ministries, 2001), 140–141.

16. Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus*, 93.

that celebrates a woman's coming of age, her maturing sexuality and her increasingly independent ability to make her own informed decisions about her sexuality? The purity balls are a kind of regressive anti-initiation for daughters by their fathers that ensure that they will *not* mature into healthy, sexually responsible young women, but will rely on their fathers to help stagnate their development. Fathers get to feel powerful and important, capable of sweeping their daughters off of their feet.

There are many coming of age rituals around the world that celebrate female initiation and a girl's entrance into adult society. I will only mention a few that are relevant to the North American context. In the Jewish Bat Mitzvah, for example, a 13-year-old girl often celebrates her coming-of-age with a party and a religious service in which she is invited to speak about her new obligation to Jewish law and what it means for her to take responsibility for herself.

Another coming-of-age ritual that is celebrated by the Amish community is the Rumspringa, which means "running around" in the Pennsylvania German language. 16-year-old boys and girls are allowed to step out of their community and its ethico-social mores, to lead a so-called secular life for a period of time. Their experimentation includes everything from drug and alcohol use, to discarding their modest traditional dress, including female head coverings, in favour of more modern clothes. It is also not frowned upon for these teens to explore their sexuality outside of the bonds of marriage. The Rumspringa ends when the teen chooses to come back to be baptized into the church as an adult and to re-enter the community. The other option is to be shunned from their family and community from then on. The Rumspringa stresses the voluntary nature of adult baptism and community membership.¹⁷

Psychologist Erik Erikson warns that adolescents and teens who do not rebel in some way will fail to mark their separation from their parents; a separation which is crucial for healthy identity formation.¹⁸ Rebellion, by its very nature, even instituted rebellion, such as the Amish Rumspringa,

17. See: John A. Hostetler. *Amish Society: 4th edition*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); and Thom Schachtman. *Rumspringa: To Be or Not to be Amish* (New York: North Point Press, 2006).

18. Erik H. Erikson. *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.), 1968.

has its attendant dangers such as the contraction of sexually transmitted diseases, the possibility of teen pregnancy, the health risks involved in drug and alcohol abuse, as well as the psychological dangers that accompany the dissolution of childhood identity and the fears that come with a new sense of independence. But, rebellion, while being dangerous, is also a time of immeasurable creativity and growth. A coming of age rite of passage, should, therefore, not pull the young person back from rebellion, but provide her with the freedom to experience all of the confusion, ambiguity and exhilaration of independence, while hoping that the foundation that has been provided for her throughout childhood by her parents and community will guide her back to her community along with a new sense of commitment.

Charles-Arnold Van Gennep, in *Rites of Passage*, his classic text on ritual theory, classifies all rites of passage, such as birth, puberty, marriage, etc., as having 3 stages: the pre-liminal, or separation stage, in which the initiate is removed from his community either physically or metaphorically; the liminal, or transition stage, which I will describe in more detail in a minute; and the post-liminal, or re-integration stage, which sees the initiate re-incorporated into society as a new person, in our case, an adult with all of its attendant responsibilities. I think that Purity Balls fit Van Gennep's ritual category of a "negative rite" better than a rite of passage, since they are more about the prohibition of an undesired event, like the defloration of virginity, for example.

Van Gennep is famous for his introduction of what he calls "liminality" to the field of anthropology. This word comes from the Latin "limen", meaning threshold. Van Gennep likens the liminal to a no man's land that must be traversed in the midst of a journey from one's home to one's future destination. Victor Turner further develops Van Gennep's theory of liminality, describing the liminal initiate (who he often refers to as the "neophyte") as "at once no longer classified and not yet classified."¹⁹ The liminal one is both no more a child and not yet an adult, but caught in the world between worlds. Life and death metaphors are used to depict this stage. Turner writes:

19. Victor W. Turner. "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage" in ed. June Helm, *Symposium on New Approaches to the Study of Religion* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964), 6.

The metaphor of dissolution is often applied to neophytes—they are allowed to go filthy and identified with the earth, the generalized matter into which every specific individual is rendered down...The neophytes [are also symbolized by] processes of gestation ... likened to ... embryos ... [for they are] both living and dead ...Their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories ... Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions ... but ... more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise.²⁰

The initiate's former childhood identity, which has been established in a large part by the parents, is fragmenting, like a decomposing body. But, the initiate is also like a foetus that is growing in potential and forming a new identity. This intermediary stage can be seen as a microcosmic symbol of the falling apart and the rebirth of all social constructions. This is clear in the Rumspringa, in which teens do exactly the opposite of what their parents are doing and would typically want them to do.

And, because the liminal initiate threatens society's boundaries, it threatens the established order with chaos. This is why it is so dangerous. Pastor Wilson's own daughter, Khrystian Wilson, told a reporter, at her Purity Ball: "The culture says you're free to sleep with as many people as you want to...What does that get you but complete chaos?"²¹ While it is tempting to protect your children from the big bad culture out there where everything is "chaos", it perpetuates a paranoia about those perceived and constructed as "others". Maybe one of the reasons why Bearman reported that virginity pledges are not particularly effective at ultimately keeping teenagers from having sex is not because the so-called "others" have infiltrated the ranks of the pure and holy, but because sexuality is an innate drive within all of us.

In her book, *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas describes the danger that is associated with liminality as pollution. She argues that what is "unclear" is generally seen as "unclean". In other words, that which threatens the social order, like liminality itself, is a polluting force.²² Furthermore, the concept of pollution is "a reaction to protect cherished principles and categories from contradiction."²³ Feminine sexuality, in general, has often

20. Ibid., 7.

21. Banerjee, "Dancing the Night Away, With Purpose," http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/19/us/19purity.html?pagewanted=1&_r=2&emc=eta1 (accessed 2009).

22. Mary Douglas. *Purity and Danger* (England: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1966).

23. Douglas, as quoted in Turner, "Betwixt and Between", 7.

been treated as a dreaded, polluting force. Perhaps this is why it must be purified in the Virginity Pledge and Purity Ball movement.

In his controversial essay *The Taboo of Virginity*, Freud explains that the defloration of a betrothed virgin through the perforation of the hymen in certain so-called “primitive” cultures was displaced onto a holy person who was psychologically prepared to deal with blood. This ritual was intended to preserve the immature psyche of the young male groom from the harm associated with blood. Turner too, describes the horror many cultures associate with hymenal or menstrual blood because of its believed association with miscarriage and death. But, Freud extends the taboo from virgins to include women in general who were believed to be able to paralyze “seminal” male power. For example, sex with women was to be avoided before a hunt, so that male hunters would not be weakened. It was feared that the hunter would become the prey if he was in contact with the feminine. Or, as Freud puts it: the man could become “infected with passive femininity.”²⁴

I will conclude by discussing a few of Freud’s observations on virginity and female sexuality. Despite its seeming sexism, or its sheer antiquatedness, one can still see resonances of Freud’s description of the dread of the feminine today. For example, many sports coaches forbid their male players from having sex before big games. The Swedish soccer team was prohibited from having sex before the Euro Cup in 2000, for instance. Mohammed Ali would not do it and Rocky’s trainer tells him in the movie that he cannot have sex before a big fight because “women weaken legs.” Freud does not prescribe or necessarily condone these practices or beliefs. He describes something that I fear is alive and well in certain cultures like the Purity Ball culture.

Popular North American movies also display this attitude toward female sexuality and pollution. Horror films like *the Exorcist*, *Carrie*, and the more recent *Ginger Snaps*, all show pubescent and teenage girls at the age of menstruation as portals of evil. Perhaps female sexuality is still viewed with some horror. Perhaps it still corresponds to the liminal, to that space that Turner calls “betwixt and between” that is dangerous

24. Sigmund Freud. “The Taboo of Virginity” [1905] in ed. and trans. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Collected Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 7 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953).

and threatening to the established social order in patriarchal cultures like Purity Ball culture. These purification ceremonies do not result in the emergence of a new, more mature and independent identity for these girls, but bind them regressively to their childhood, in which they were partially undifferentiated from their parents. These rituals also subject daddy's little girls to an oppressive form of paternal narcissism, diminishing them to mere reflectors which bear the image of the way their fathers would like to look. In The United States, 1/3 of every American young person is taught, in their public school, that abstinence until marriage is the only legitimate method of contraception. Abstinence-only is the only type of public school sex education that is funded by the government. Hopefully that will change with this administration. I am all in favour of sexual abstinence as one option that can be made by a well-informed teenager, but that choice should not be made for them by their educators, their pastors, or their fathers.