

With hymens on hand: probing the chastity ring

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True Love Waits Purity Ring
sterling silver, \$29.95 (was \$40)



Love Waits Chastity Ring
sterling silver, diamonds, \$105.80



Unblossomed Rose Chastity Ring
sterling silver, \$24.99



Crucifix Chastity Ring
sterling silver, \$42



Dove and Heart Purity Ring
sterling silver, diamonds, \$89.95



Crown of Thorns Purity Ring
stainless steel, enamel, \$29.95

A series of rings culled from online vending platforms. Prices as advertised in January 2016. Photos: Kennebug Boutique, Purity rings catalogue, Purityringsonline.com, Reeds Jewelers and Walmart

One of the oldest and most vital functions of adornment is to signal readiness, or unavailability, for courtship. Within this genre, which might be called “mating jewelry,” can be found Claddagh rings, wedding bands, and contemporary abstinence ornament. Although chastity is certainly not new, nor is the desire to preserve it, donning a ring to avow sexual abstinence is a rather recent, and fraught, endeavor.

Chastity rings, also known as purity rings, symbolize a wearer’s commitment to refrain from sex until marriage. Emerging in the 1990s as part of the abstinence-only movement, purity rings were proffered by religious groups seeking to counter casual sex, teen pregnancy, and sexually transmitted disease.¹ As a leader in this crusade, the Silver Ring Thing program has staged hundreds of showy recruitment events urging teens to take a virginity pledge and wear a ring to affirm their decision.² Celebrities including Miley Cyrus

and Britney Spears have sported such rings, boosting the jewelry’s popularity albeit tarnishing its record for preventing premarital coitus.

Initially sold at Christian stores, chastity rings are now offered by major American retailers such as Target, Walmart, and Sears. Sterling silver is the metal of choice, and the iconography of purity includes hearts, flowers, crosses, crowns, angels, and keys. Many abstinence rings feature phrases that declare one’s non-promiscuous stance, among them: “True Love Waits”; “One Life, One Love”; “Guard My Heart, Dear Lord”; and “Pure Before God.” While worn by both genders of varying ages, the ring’s primary subscribers are female teens and young women.

Intended to signify a condition of *purity*, the mixed messages conveyed by chastity rings are far from clear. Foremost is the conflation between the personal and social spheres. Although the subject of chastity

NO HYMEN?

NO



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ornament is keenly private, i.e. the use of one's genitalia, it is openly flaunted like a badge or announcement. The target audience is also uncertain, as abstinence jewelry is extolled for its dual ability to remind wearers of their vow while also educating viewers who might be swayed to the same path. At minimum, such public displays of one's pubic persuasion could be judged in bad taste, as assessed by Miss Manners: "polite society does not recognize such a thing as a chastity ring. ... it presumes that a lady is chaste unless publicly proven otherwise."³

Within the abstinence movement itself, there remains confusion about what constitutes "chasteness." Whereas the Silver Ring Thing holds that "Your private areas are not to be used or touched by a member of the opposite sex,"⁴ others only exclude intercourse from their definition of a chaste life. Furthermore, virginity is not seen as a formal requirement for wearing purity ornament. Even the sexually seasoned can be born again into chastity's kingdom as so-called "secondary virgins"; they simply don a Second Time Virginity Ring and pledge to renounce further sex until wedlock.

Among those chastely adorned, purity and its namesake ring are not ends in themselves, but rather means to an end: another ring. For most wearers, chastity rings serve as placeholders while they await the ultimate prize of a wedding band, which gets swapped

upon marriage. The trade-in value of purity rings, and the virginity they imply, is blatantly expressed in the "No Hymen, No Diamond," campaign launched by a male rights group in quest of marriageable virgins.⁵

Courtship is notoriously rife with deception, and matrimonial buyers must beware. Just as purity rings do not always adorn virgins, a woman's hymen cannot be trusted as the test of virginity. Although commonly thought to be the vagina's unbroken "freshness seal,"⁶ a hymen can be compromised by non-sexual causes. Nonetheless, within many cultures a woman's hymen is her destiny and a determinant for marriage. Which raises the issue of cultural relativity in the conspicuous display of chastity. While in the U.S. abstinence has become a lifestyle choice, replete with fashion accessories, throughout much of the world purity rings are either redundant or unthinkable. Instead of vowing to be "secondary virgins," women in the Middle East, Asia, and other regions are compelled to become "surgical virgins" to conceal former intercourse or ensure that their membranes meet tightness standards. These hymen repair operations are secretly endured by thousands of women who fear losing potential husbands, or worse, losing their lives in honor killings.⁷ Catering to this mired demographic, the Artificial Hymen Repair Kit offers a "cheaper and more convenient way to become a virgin again," by prosthetically simulating an intact hymen that even

oozes blood-like liquid.⁸ With a price tag of \$29.95, this kit costs the same as the average silver purity ring.

Ultimately what is being negotiated with abstinence ornament, as with all jewelry, is the human body itself. Jewelry is the body's signage; it maps our carnal ground. In the case of chastity rings, at stake is the fate of a small private chamber, through which newborns enter the world and in which others seek re-entry as adults.

- 1 The abstinence-only movement is primarily an American phenomenon. Programs and organizations that promote abstinence-only sex education to youth have continued to receive millions of dollars in federal support under the Adolescent Family Life Act, established in 1981.
- 2 According to the Silver Ring Thing website: "The SRT defies the meet-up, hook-up, break-up mindset of today and inspires students to a pure life centered in Jesus Christ."
- 3 Miss Manners advice column, 2007.
- 4 Stephanie Rosenbloom, "A Ring that Says No, Not Yet," *The New York Times*, December 8, 2005.
- 5 www.facebook.com/No-Hymen-No-Diamond.
- 6 From the satirical "Iron Hymen Abstinence-Only Pledge," at <http://georgewbush.org/georgewbush/ironhymen>.
- 7 Lynn Sherr, "Women Have Surgery to 'Restore' Virginity," *ABC News*, June 20, 2015.
- 8 Artificial Hymen Repair Kit available at www.hymenshop.com.

Further reading

Dagmar Herzog, *Sex in Crisis: The New Sexual Revolution and the Future of American Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2008)