



The Myth of Chastity Belts

According to tradition, the use of chastity belts—metallic straps locked over female genitalia with padlocks—dates back to the time of the Crusades, when knights in departure for the Holy Land supposedly used them to ensure their wives’ fidelity in their absence. Recent studies, however, show that such instruments were never in use during the Middle Ages.

There are in fact some logical problems with the use of such belts, chief among them hygiene: even if the belts had small holes for bathroom functions, such devices would soon cause wounds followed by infections, serious sepsis, and finally death. Furthermore, it is quite plausible that before leaving the knights would sleep one last time with their wives, maybe hoping to find a baby on their return. It is quite obvious that a locked chastity belt would have prevented any birth. And finally, the most obvious problem: any medieval lock could be opened by a locksmith in a few seconds.

In addition to such logical faults, the fact that medieval chastity belts are just a legend is suggested by the absolute absence of such belts that can be dated back to the Middle Ages.

Abstinence

The idea of sexual abstinence is certainly quite old. The Latin term for chastity belt, *cingulum castitatis*, appeared in some works by Gregory the Great, Alcuin of York, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, and Nicolas Gorranus start-



Figure 1. This sixteenth-century engraving of a woman in a chastity belt is attributed to Sebald Beham.

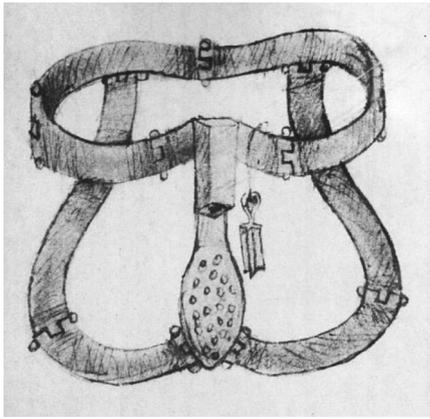


Figure 2. Konrad Kyeser's 1405 military encyclopedia the *Bellifortis* contains the first visual depiction of an object that vaguely resembles a chastity belt.

ing in the fifteenth century. However, in all such cases it is meant as a symbol of moral purity, not as a physical object.

The concept of a fidelity pact between lovers appears in poems of the twelfth century, such as the “Lai of Guigemar” by the famous poetess Marie de France. In this tale, when Guigemar departs from the woman he loves, they exchange love tokens: the woman ties a knot in his shirt that only she can untie, while the knight ties a tight girdle around her loins that only he knows how to untie. Thus they can become lovers with others only if they cut off their clothes. But, as it can be seen, this is a symbolic pact and, significantly, it is the woman who initiates it.

In order to find the first visual depiction of an object that vaguely resembles a chastity belt, we need to look to a 1405 codex, Konrad Kyeser's military encyclopedia the *Bellifortis*. Among descriptions of weapons, catapults, and torture devices, an instrument that resembles armor more than a chastity belt (figure 2) is presented as being used “unto the women of Florence.” However, Kyeser's tone is ironic; he in fact writes: “These

are hard iron breeches of Florentine women which are closed at the front. Padlocks unto the four-legged creatures, breeches unto the women of Florence, A joke binds this lovely series together, I recommend them to the noble and obedient youth.” This, then, would imply that even if the device really existed in the fifteenth century, it was certainly quite rare. Surely there are no traces of such apparatus in the Florence of the times.

A sixteenth-century engraving attributed to Sebald Beham, a minor German master, shows a woman wearing a “chastity belt” locked with a padlock, standing between two men giving her money (see figure 1). An interpretation given for the engraving is that she is a prostitute standing between her protector and a client. So, even if the belt was an actual physical object rather than a metaphorical concept, it is represented in the Beham engraving merely as a professional instrument and not as a constriction by a jealous lover.

Fakes

The earliest known “real” chastity belts date to around 1840 and are found today in the museums of Europe. For example, at the Musée de Cluny in Paris, devoted to medieval art, until recently one could find a belt that was said to have belonged to Catherine De Medici. It was only in 1990 that the museum's curators noted that the object was most likely a forgery from the nineteenth century. Another piece from the British Museum in London, originally thought to date to the sixteenth century, was recently established to be from the 1840s and removed from the exhibition.

It is only in the nineteenth century, especially in countries like England and

the United States where Puritanism was again in vogue, that chastity belts became widespread. However, these were more refined and were meant to be worn for only a short time, used by working women with the purpose of avoiding rape or imposed on adolescents in order to prevent masturbation, which was considered bad for the health (or at least for the soul) by the bourgeois moral hypocrisy.

The Psychological Researcher

The historian primarily responsible for the creation in the twentieth century of the myth of medieval chastity belts is none other than Eric John Dingwall, who in 1931 published his monograph *The Girdle of Chastity* (still in print today). Dingwall is quite famous in psychological research history. He worked with both the British Society for Psychological Research and its American counterpart. He conducted celebrated investigations on such mediums as Eva C., Eusapia Palladino, Margery, and the Schneider brothers. He was friends with Houdini and an accomplished magician himself who was not easily fooled by the deceptions that some pseudo-psychics employed. He also contributed to the debunking of the Borley Rectory “haunting” case. And yet he was convinced that chastity belts really existed in the Middle Ages. “As a monument of human folly,” he wrote in his book, “the girdle of chastity is a good example: as an indication of the lengths to which jealousy unchecked will lead it is unique.” Not so. However, he can be excused, for in his time some of the belts on display in museums, and whose pictures are included in Dingwall's book, were still thought to be authentic. At that time it was impossible to date them with accuracy.

Furthermore, in Dingwall's defense, it can also be said that chastity belts were actually publicized in medical journals of the early twentieth century as a means to ensure fidelity, which helps explain how one of the many myths attributed to the Middle Ages became reality in modern times. ■

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