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Review of Thomas W. Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation.*

Jennifer Frangos
Texas Tech University

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Thomas W. Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation*. New York: Zone Books. 501 pp. ISBN 1890951323.

Reviewed by Jennifer Frangos, Texas Tech University

Sometime between 1710 and 1716, an anonymous pamphlet was published in London with the unwieldy title, *Onania, or, The Heinous Sin of Self Pollution, and all its Frightful Consequences, in both SEXES Considered, with Spiritual and Physical Advice to those who have already injured themselves by this abominable practice. And seasonable Admonition to the Youth of the nation of Both SEXES* . . . Like so many of the moral treatises of the time, *Onania* describes what it condemns in such detail that there is a fine line between decrying and enabling, if not promoting, the very practices it purports to erase. The impact of this pamphlet is fascinating. First is its phenomenal publishing success: *Onania* went through four editions by November of 1718; eighteen editions appeared between 1718 and 1788, some of which (the eighth and ninth) sold out 12,000 copies or more within a matter of months. Second is its form: each succeeding edition included letters to the author, testimonials, and requests for advice (perhaps authentic, perhaps written by the pamphlet's author to create a buzz, perhaps some combination of both), as well as the author's responses to various printed attacks and rival publications; the fourth edition was eighty eight pages long, the seventh was two hundred. In 1723, *A Supplement to Onania* was published; by 1730, the fifteenth edition, bound with the *Supplement*, was over 344 pages long. This evolving conversation in print clearly struck a chord with the eighteenth-century reading public, an audience that both delighted in the moral instruction and refinement available in *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* and made sexy or scandalous fiction like Delarivier Manley's *The New Atalantis* (1709) and *Love in Excess* by Eliza Haywood (1719) early best-sellers—and that continued to read *Onania* long after popular tastes in fiction changed to favor more refined novels like Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740-1) and Haywood's *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* (1751). The early eighteenth-century reading audience was one that seemed eager to both read and write back to the literary marketplace, to both absorb and influence the products that marketplace had to offer them. *Onania* is undeniably a creature of the print culture of the early Enlightenment, of the literary conversations that drove that society, combining as it did the moral elements of Addison and Steele's periodicals, the salacious details of "private" sexual behaviors, and the participatory features of the coffee-house culture. But there is a more intriguing element to this phenomenon, one that involves its effects on the sexual attitudes and behaviors of the society in which *Onania* circulated: for *Onania* concerns itself with sexual practices with a long and mostly benign history and sets out to convince its readers that everything they thought they knew about self-gratification is wrong. And in so doing, *Onania* writes itself into the history of sexuality and the history of the self by converting a physical activity into a sexual disease that has detrimental effects on those who partake in it, which leads to the creation and simultaneous pathologization of a specific sexual identity: the onanist or masturbator.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick makes passing mention of *Onania* in "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," an essay derived from a panel at the 1989 Modern Language Association conference, in which she makes the following statement:

I would suggest that, as one of the very earliest embodiments of "sexual identity" in the period of the progressive epistemological overloading of sexuality, the masturbator may have been at the cynosural center of a remapping of individual identity, will, attention, and privacy along modern lines that the reign of "sexuality," and its generic concomitant in the novel, and in novelistic point of view, now lead us to take for granted. It is of more than chronological import if the (lost) identity of the masturbator was the proto-form of modern sexual identity itself.

Sedgwick's more general call to explore sexual identities that have been erased from the impossibly simplistic and violently hierarchical "homo/hetero" dichotomy is a foundational moment for the emerging body of queer theory, and has been taken up in the intervening years by many talented and insightful scholars. The identity of the masturbator, however, and the status of masturbation as a specific (and autonomous) sexual practice have largely fallen through the cracks.

One full-length study of autoeroticism is Jean Stengers and Anne Van Neck's *Masturbation: The History of a Great Terror* (published in 1984 in French, tr. 2001), a historical study that charts the growth and proliferation of the fear of masturbation from the publication of *Onania* into the twentieth century. The central question of this work is, "Was *Onania* [. . .] influential, and did that influence last?" Not surprisingly, their answer is yes, and the documentation is extensive (fifty of the book's 239 pages are notes and sources). Less satisfactory is the relentlessly progressive trajectory that Stengers and Van Neck describe: the concern over masturbation starts as a money-making quack theory aimed to sell books and cures and snowballs into oppressive and superstitious social policy as it gets taken up by Swiss physician Samuel-August Tissot (1728-97), the French *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une Société de Gens de lettres* (where an entry on *manustupration* appeared in 1765), and the medical profession in general. In the face of sexological and psychological advancements around the turn of the twentieth century, the concern over masturbation begins to erode and, by the end of that century, finds itself regarded as a quaint and archaic, almost laughable belief of our unenlightened ancestors. One would think, from this narrative, that masturbation had ceased to be a major concern in Western culture. But even as recently as 1995, cultural historian Thomas Laqueur points out, the United States was still arguably feeling the effects of this "great terror" when President Clinton fired his surgeon general, Jocelyn Elders, ostensibly over a remark taken to be an endorsement of teaching young people about masturbation in sex education programs.

Laqueur's latest book, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation*, approaches the matter of masturbation from a different perspective; skipping the *yes/no* questions and taking for granted that *Onania* had (and has) an influence on modern Western culture, he sets out to explore *why and how* masturbation came to so solidly (and anxiously) represent the relationship between the individual and the social world, both in an Enlightenment context and in Freudian/post-Freudian psychology and society. He covers much the same ground as Stengers and Van Neck, but the trajectory of *Solitary Sex* hinges on considering what it was about masturbation that suddenly caught and held the public's interest and caused it to think differently about itself and its relation to pleasure and sexuality. It was not, of course, that people hadn't known of and practiced self-gratification before 1712 (Laqueur splits the difference in estimated publication dates for *Onania* to arrive at 1712 as an approximate moment of genesis), but rather that the particular

combination of market capitalism, scientific and medical inquiry, and print culture of the early eighteenth century combined to create solitary sexual activity as the number one threat to modern subjectivity, even as its central features—imagination, exploration, luxury, autonomy, sexuality—were becoming central to the culture itself. (It should be noted that, like many histories of modern concepts, *Solitary Sex* is primarily concerned with Western culture, and, like many studies of the Enlightenment that highlight print culture and capitalism, it is focused mainly—though not exclusively—on England.)

Masturbation is interesting to Laqueur because of its status as "a new highly specific, thoroughly modern, and nearly universal engine for generating guilt, shame, and anxiety" (13); it is a sin that needs no witnesses or assistance, that the sinner may not even realize is a sin, and that is equally available (and equally detrimental) to men and women, adults and children alike. Furthermore, this pathology, this cultural reluctance to talk about self-pleasure, has had remarkable longevity: despite medical "discoveries" that no longer link masturbation with blindness, impotence, and insanity, despite psychological reconfigurations of the role of autoeroticism in individual development, and despite the sexual revolution(s) of the late twentieth century.

The first two chapters of *Solitary Sex* cover *Onania* and its eighteenth-century cultural context, along with masturbation and its history. This involves the worlds of publishing and quack medicine in eighteenth-century London, the spread of attention to onanism from England through Europe, the range of anti-masturbation cures and treatments, and a flurry of literary and philosophical representations of masturbation and masturbators: Rousseau's *Émile*, Kant's pronouncement that masturbation is worse than suicide, the onanism of Keats's poetry (according to Byron), Dickens's "Charley Bates, Master Charles Bates, Master Bates" (*Oliver Twist*). Along the way, Laqueur aims to settle a long-standing mystery by arguing that *Onania*, published anonymously, was in fact written by John Marten, surgeon, quack, and author of several proto-medical texts that read a lot more like soft-core pornography, who was prosecuted in 1708 for obscenity (30-1). Laqueur skips over most of the nineteenth century—perhaps because we think we already know that we will find there nothing more interesting than the perspective of Sir James Paget, Queen Victoria's physician, that although masturbation may be no worse than "sexual intercourse practiced with the same frequency," it is nonetheless "an uncleanness, a filthiness forbidden by God [and] despised by men" (17; qtd. in Laqueur). Attitudes, in other words, established in the eighteenth century seem to have changed little until the medical profession began to turn its attention to sexual practice. However, in 1899, sexologist Havelock Ellis coined the term *autoeroticism*, and not long afterward Freud began his long engagement (theoretical, of course) with self-pleasure and the human psyche. Partly as a result of critiques of Freudian theory, the late twentieth century seems to have heralded a widespread—though not wholesale—reevaluation of masturbation.

The rest of *Solitary Sex* is devoted to asking "Why, in or around 1712 (at the dawn of the Enlightenment) does masturbation move from the distant moral horizon to the ethical foreground?" Chapter Three is about "masturbation before it became a big deal" (83), about how people seem to have thought about and related to self-pleasure before *Onania*'s publication. The first section covers the medical profession's treatment of masturbation before 1712 (virtually nonexistent) and Tissot's failed attempt, in 1758, to write an authoritative study of *L'Onanisme* that drew on classical sources ("the data simply were not there. His failure in creating a scholarly

ancestry suggests, in fact, just how sharp the rupture was between the eighteenth century and the classical medical world" [86]). The second section explains that classical Greece and Rome, though they had words for and depicted masturbation in their writing and art, apparently had neither the physical nor the moral concerns about masturbation that came to dominate Enlightenment discussions. Chapter Three also discusses the Biblical character of Onan (whose sin against God is not masturbation but, depending on how you read the story, refusing to lie with his brother's wife or *coitus interruptus*) and the question of masturbation in the Jewish tradition. Noting that Hebrew has "neither words for masturbation nor euphemisms and circumlocutions that are anywhere near as specific as they are, for example, in Latin" (111), Laqueur reminds us that this probably has less to do with an absence of self-gratification, and more to do with the fact that in rabbinical commentary, masturbation did not fit easily into the conceptual categories of idolatry, pollution, and procreation, and thus was not easily addressed. Next, Laqueur offers an extended discussion of Christian doctrine as it relates to masturbation, concluding that, although masturbation was occasionally mentioned and generally disproved of, "[t]he sexual sins that mattered were, as before, sins with a social consequence, sins that affected the relationship between people, between individuals and society, or between generations: incest, fornication, sodomy, abortion, contraception. Private vice counted for relatively little" (168). Finally, the reader is brought to "the eve of *Onania*," including the first use of the word *masturbation* in English in 1621 in an anti-Catholic pamphlet, and Samuel Pepys's famous struggle with his masturbatory urges.

Always good at framing questions and then at troubling the apparent self-evidence of those questions, Laqueur turns to "The Problem with Masturbation" in Chapter Four, but must first work through several variations of "What, exactly, is the problem?" before he can get around to asking why it became a problem at all. He begins with some "ground clearing," entertaining and dismissing the following possibilities for what prompted the sudden focus on masturbation: Is the problem an increase of the incidence of masturbation? Is it a more general attack on sexual pleasure? Is it the result of a fairly straightforward substitution of medicine for religion as the moral authority in the increasingly secular world of the eighteenth century? None of these explanations is quite satisfactory as an overall explanation, either because it relies too much on speculation or because it is not borne out by other historical facts. The only thing that all of the opponents of masturbation seem to agree on is that self-gratification is "unnatural," which leads Laqueur to ask "what was so unnatural about solitary sex?" The answers he arrives at resonate at the core of the Enlightenment project: masturbation relies on the imagination (rather than nature or reality), its practice is solitary and secret (rather than social or observable), and it arouses desires that can neither be satiated nor moderated (and thus override reason). It was, in effect, a byproduct of the changes that the Enlightenment had wrought, an embodiment of both the qualities that the age idealized and the prospect of those qualities gone bad.

Chapter Five finally addresses why masturbation became a problem by putting the three features of masturbation (imagination, solitude, and addiction) into a larger cultural context, specifically through an analysis of the interrelations between the marketplace, literary production and consumption, and the solitary vice. In doing so, Laqueur modifies Michel Foucault's theory of "biopower" with attention to historical and cultural specificity for the eighteenth century context, remarking:

I do not think that the general view, explicit in Foucault's account in the first volume of his history of sexuality, of how modern subjectivities were created through the incitement of desire and then its domination by new technologies of power is quite right. And this is because the political story—or at least the part that focuses on "the modern self" and not on how power is exercised—is an aspect of another, more compelling one: the story of the joint march of commercial culture and civil society. (274)

The links Laqueur draws between consumerism, reading, writing, sexuality, and civil society are provocative. He sees the promise of abundance offered by the new commercial economy, with its reliance on credit, as strikingly similar to the lure of masturbation, with its addictive pull and reliance on the imagination; the consumer, the speculator, and the masturbator were thus all engaged in the same kind of activity, and the anxiety about masturbation can be understood as "an expression of anxiety about a new political economic order writ on the body" (280), the very desiring sexual body that the state expected to be morally self-regulating. The relatively new practice of silent, private reading, especially reading novels, plays into the construction of masturbation as a problem as well in that "the cultural energy of certain sorts of reading and books—creatures of the marketplace themselves, crucial in the creation of desire and in its ethical management, predicated on solitude, fantasy, the free play of imagination, the capacity to dwell within the self—was the cultural energy of solitary sex" (303). Masturbation, then, serves as the lightning rod that purifies and protects other culturally valued practices and allows them to appear productive and not dangerous. Laqueur also discusses pornography (which took off as a genre, skillfully exploiting the connections between private reading and fantasy) and the visual arts' engagement with masturbation, noting an eighteenth-century motif of women masturbating to a letter or a novel, or having fallen asleep after having done so; these images echo and reinforce the association of masturbation with textuality and, as they were largely produced as objects to be purchased and enjoyed in private, also reflect and maintain the commercial element of the new cultural landscape of this sexual practice.

Chapter Six concerns masturbation in the twentieth century. After a brief discussion of the way that writers and artists of the Modernist movement incorporated the anti-social and primitive characteristics of the onanist in their celebration of the anti-hero, Laqueur discusses the development of sexology as a medical discipline, and psychoanalysis' reconfiguration of masturbation not as a problem in and of itself, but rather as a stage of human development that, if not properly negotiated, could result in psychological disorders. The later decades of the century, especially in the United States, saw a politicization of masturbation as a symbol of health, independence, and self-determination, as well as a proliferation of representations in popular culture and mainstream media, most notably the Internet. While these things may seem a far cry from *Onania* and its revulsion-fascination with a relatively benign sexual practice, Laqueur shows that in many significant ways they mark a continuation of the phenomenon started with the publication of *Onania*, especially in the interactions between the marketplace, modern subjectivity, and civil society that form the core of his argument about how and why masturbation came to matter so deeply in Western culture.

For all that has changed in the almost three hundred years since John Marten's pamphlet, Laqueur's well-documented and informative book makes it clear that masturbation is nonetheless still firmly embedded at the core of modern sexuality and subjectivity, a nexus of both pleasure

and anxiety, personal satisfaction and political implication, and—perhaps most significantly—like many other sexual practices, something people like to read about. Though notably downplayed in the final chapter, the particularly literary component to Laqueur's history of masturbation fleshes out this study and makes for compelling reading. If some of the strokes are overly broad (e.g., skipping over the nineteenth century) or go by more quickly than one might like (Chapter Five), we might observe that, in a clever nod to its source material, *Solitary Sex* participates in the very processes it describes, falling in line with the eighteenth-century tradition of "reading with one hand": teaching readers enough to get us started, providing room for our imagination to fill in the gaps, and leaving us wanting more.