

FIONA GILES

fear of
fantasy

THOMAS W LAQUEUR

*Solitary Sex: A Cultural History
of Masturbation*

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Laqueur's impressive tome on masturbation provides an exhaustive exhumation of Western discourse surrounding this ultimate intimacy, to which this short review cannot really do justice. From the ancient Greeks, through Talmudic and Christian texts to contemporary Hollywood, and with side trips to Japan and other cultures with celebrated traditions of erotica, the author travels from Aristotle and Galen through Kant, Kraft-Ebbing and Freud, to Betty Dodson and Annie Sprinkle, to name only a very few of those included in the journey. While ranging across medical and psychoanalytic history between the early eighteenth and late twentieth centuries, Laqueur also looks at the moral and religious discourse of these and earlier centuries, and, most importantly, points out the links between them, as well as their combined commercial interests. *Solitary Sex* is an exemplary cultural studies project, combining—through the prism of one subject—a history of medicine with a history of art, literature and popular culture. The author not only illustrates the symbiosis of these various discourses, but their relationship to the construction of modernity itself, and its creation of the individual subject. At the same time Laqueur's story takes us on a fascinating journey through the history of reading, since the printing press, the rise of a reading public and pornography (as well as the popular novel) are inextricably connected. The very idea of intimacy with oneself fuelled by a technology of representation could only become a populist concern once printing was invented. And that Laqueur ends the book with references to

Internet usage is a fitting reminder of the continuity between ideas of the self and the technologies available for the self's own representation. An interesting implication of Laqueur's book is that far from impeding intimacy (with oneself or others), technologies of representation—the telephone, the novel, the Internet, for example—can enhance it.

Until now, the subject of masturbation has remained the poor cousin in sexuality and cultural studies. As Laqueur has himself pointed out, and my own reading experience confirmed, jokes about his subject were a required element of his justification for writing the book, despite his academic status and the extensiveness of the project. In an online discussion organised by *The Chronicle* in 2003, he comments:

I was a little embarrassed, although not for fear of being labelled smutty or immoral. In some circles the source of my embarrassment was that I was not writing the book I was 'supposed to be writing,' a book on death and memory. Among other colleagues my embarrassment—irritation might be a better word—came from feeling that I had to explain myself, that somehow what I regarded as a work of serious scholarship to which I had devoted considerable energy in writing and research had to be justified far more than a book on other topics. A bad book on British naval policy gains a certain gravitas from the magnificence of its subject; anything about the Holocaust is assumed to be deep and thoughtful. A book about masturbation

seems to be burdened with the jokes of several millennia and the moral suspicions of the past three centuries.¹

In his review of *Solitary Sex* for the *New York Review of Books*, Stephen Greenblatt confirms that even among the highbrow of the US East Coast, the idea of discussing masturbation in a public forum such as the classroom caused a certain degree of consternation. (It should be remembered that this was the decade in which Clinton's Surgeon General, Jocelyn Elders, was asked to step down after commenting that the discussion of masturbation might be considered a normal part of any sex education curriculum.) In 1990 Greenblatt invited Laqueur to speak at a seminar for his history and literature undergraduates. He writes:

In fact he did enliven the semester, but a strange thing happened along the way: there was a tremendous outbreak of the jitters. Panic set in not among the students—a large number of whom must have come of age watching *There's Something About Mary*—but among the core of instructors who lead the seminars and conduct the tutorials. Though sophisticated and highly trained, when they were faced with the prospect of discussing the history of masturbation with the students, many of them blanched. Coprophagia wouldn't have fazed them at all, sodomy wouldn't have slowed them down, incest would have actively interested them—but masturbation: please, anything but that.²

Tellingly, Laqueur has received relatively little press for this work, given his prestige as a historian, and the book's obvious importance. During an online discussion he writes:

I think that the fact that the eighteenth century created masturbation as the prototypical private sexual act, as something that was deeply interior, has colored discussions ever since. Newspapers can discuss blow jobs in the Oval Office, but not as a form of advocacy for sexual education classes. It is a subject whose history makes it almost literally unspeakable.³

Laqueur's central argument is that masturbation was invented as a pathology early in the eighteenth century, in 1712 to be precise, at the dawn of the Enlightenment and the technological triumph of the printing press, with the publication of the long-winded and sensationally alarmist pamphlet, *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* . . . Laqueur attributes this snappily titled piece to the physician John Marten who went on to profit not only from its sales (by the time of its tenth edition the pamphlet had already sold 15,000 copies, immense sales for that day) but from the various unctions he sold as a cure for masturbatory disease. This was the McDonald's of publishing in its day, and became hugely influ-

ential, both through inspiring imitators on the continent and in America and through the invention of various 'cures', from medicines, to cages worn under the sheets—or shackles for girls—to prevent unintended nocturnal stimulation. By 1728 the term onanism had made its way into the prestigious eighteenth-century encyclopaedia of Ephraim Chambers, and for the next two hundred years remained virtually uncontested as a shameful and pathological sex act—one that could result in brain fever, madness and death.

Laqueur goes on to follow the journey of this discourse, showing how it interweaves with the history of pornography in print as well as discourse around reading practices and their ill-effects on health. He shows how the soft-core porn of many of these medico-moral homilies had it both ways, being titillating and damning simultaneously. Finally, with Freud, masturbation was accepted as a normal part of psychosexual development and there was some decrease in panic concerning its ill-effects. As a child of the Victorian era, however, Freud still frowned upon it as an immature sexual stage to be passed through on the way to heterosexual intercourse; masturbation was something to be left behind by healthy adults.

Part of Laqueur's project entails looking back to discourse prior to Marten's document of 1712. He convincingly shows that although masturbation was looked down upon as something people did only when they were deprived of partnered sex, it barely registered as an ethical issue to do with individual conduct. Diogenes the Cynic famously claimed that it

should be as unremarkable as eating breakfast in public; and in this period masturbation to orgasm was also recommended as a means of relieving the congestion of bodily fluids, thereby improving the health when 'real' sex was absent. (Though Laqueur doesn't seem to have encountered a period in which masturbation was actively encouraged on purely recreational grounds, Antiquity seems to have been the time when it was viewed most benignly.) The Greek physician Galen was particularly vocal on the therapeutic benefits of masturbation, recommending that doctors rub the clitoris of female patients suffering hysteria or 'green sickness'—and this was something still being practised by doctors into the early twentieth century. In her cultural history of the vagina, *The Story of V: Opening Pandora's Box*, Catherine Blackledge quotes an amusing complaint from one such doctor who claims this is an onerous task taking up 'a painstaking hour' of his time.⁴ It is perhaps for this reason that the vibrator, which could be purchased in the 1890s for five dollars US, 'was the fifth household appliance to be electrified, after the sewing machine, fan, kettle and toaster'.⁵

Among many other insightful and fascinating revelations, two crucial points are made for the cultural historian. First, onanism as practised by Jacob in the book of Genesis was a sin of refusing to procreate, not a sin of self-pleasure. The reason Jacob was slain by God was not for sensual indulgence but for his refusal to impregnate the wife of his dead brother. While the Christians frowned on masturbation as they did on any sexual activity performed outside a married couple's desire to

procreate, it was barely sinful in comparison to adultery, sodomy and other transgressions. Second, the popularity of Marten's text was due to its impeccable timing; that is, the Enlightenment distrusted any activity which was intrinsically private, based on fantasy, and could not be sated. Nor did (or does) masturbation require the consumption of any product—it is anti-social and anti-economic; and though the success of the pornography industry belies this latter point, it remains true that masturbation needn't rely on consumption for its success. Stephen Greenblatt writes that 'Masturbation ... epitomized all of the fears that lay just on the other side of the new sense of social, psychological and moral independence'.⁶ He summarises Bernard Mandeville's point in *Defense of Public Stews* (1724), that masturbation is 'unstoppable, unconstrained, unproductive, and absolutely free of charge'.⁷ So for two hundred years, at least, masturbation became a contested ground for the policing of the imagination and relationship to oneself—the frontline of resistance to autarky. Only with Freud did its positive meaning advance beyond the Ancient Greeks' view that masturbation relieved sexual tension, to the view that it might be a normal human form of sexual expression.

While Laqueur's study is occasionally repetitive in its own way, this is a small price to pay for its thoroughgoing unearthing of the process by which a human habit that might have been of little more interest than any other grooming activity became the engine of vast amounts of medico-moral discourse, with a mass of inventions and medicines designed for its cure, and even greater quantities of guilt and

suffering for those who couldn't, despite all, resist themselves.

With the advent of Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, in 1968, the famous apple pie scene in the first of the *American Pie* films, and the rise of 'virtual communities of onanists' such as the New York Jacks, and the Melbourne Wankers, (419) there is a sense now that masturbation might defy its essential solitude and become more social, if not communal—or at the least become less furtive and shameful. One memorable fictional masturbation scenes occurs in Brett Easton Ellis's novel *Less Than Zero* (1985), in which the MTV-addicted protagonists mutually masturbate behind their Ray Bans. Here the solitary act becomes not only social, albeit in an erotically veiled manner, but also linked to consumption, since they're not just any old sunglasses. Perhaps this is masturbation's first fashion statement?

The arguments of *Solitary Sex* offer interesting implications for the way we conceptualise contemporary anxieties about allegedly addictive solitary activities, such as video games and Internet use. The book shows the ways in which history has attempted to police the human imagination and predict its relation to action. The point Laqueur makes concerning the way masturbation was viewed once its pathological potential had been rebutted could easily be applied to other currently suspect solitary interests:

With the threat of disease fading into the background, at least in public discussion, the cultural anxieties that had produced modern masturbation came fully into their

own. No longer a threat to health, sex with oneself could represent a rejection not only of socially appropriate sexuality, not only of appropriate sociability, but of the social order itself. (359)

It is insights such as these, linking what might be termed masturbation studies to many other contemporary cultural practices around which public anxieties swirl, that make *Solitary Sex* an invaluable work. A handsomely produced hardback containing a wealth of scrupulously researched facts and anecdotes, readable discourse analysis, and a multitude of luscious images, it also promises to become a beloved, and well-thumbed—if not fondled—reference.

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1. 'Studying "Solitary Sex": A Discussion With Thomas W. Laqueur' <<http://chronicle.com/colloquyive/2003/03/sex>>, accessed September 16, 2004.
 2. Stephen Greenblatt, 'Me, Myself and I', *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 51, no. 6, <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1701>>, accessed September 16, 2004.
 3. <<http://www.chronicle.com>>.
 4. Catherine Blackledge, *The Story of V: Opening Pandora's Box*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 2003, p. 259.
 5. Blackledge, p. 260.
 6. Greenblatt.
 7. Greenblatt.