

book review

**Sexual Origami**

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Annamarie Jagose

*Orgasmology*

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A story we tell so as to get ‘there’. A little death, we call it, when we’ve arrived. A death that won’t die, since we live it again and again. Stimulus, response, culmination on the *face*, if a pair of eyes or a camera catches it. Or a lab induces it.

Orgasm, often, is this turnstile. We turn in and around ourselves through it. No wonder ‘orgasmology’ makes me mix metaphors, makes me think of sexual origami, something presenting itself through a folding (myself on myself, someone on me, me on this story, a story driving me, a drive in time that bends back on me). This is the tip of this burning iceberg.

Surely, already I’m building false impressions about this inviting, fascinating book; this impressively researched panoply of histories, happenings, perspectives, and blindspots that I didn’t know I didn’t know or barely knew. I’m most likely making this book seem more jocular than it proves to be. Although not lacking in attractive ironies and not without its own sly wit—note its title, after all—

*Orgasmology* is scholarly, analytical and theoretical, even largely in its tone. The decision to make it so, I am guessing, was driven in part by the public's reaction to hearing that national funding was given to an academic study of something as obviously evident as orgasm: '\$48,000 for study into fake orgasm: Grant in addition to \$500,000 received by Auckland academic.' (16) Jagose relates this outrage as its own indictment of self-righteousness: god forbid anyone should think there are interesting angles to investigate concerning the thing only recently made evident (since the late 1950s) in terms of public speech, and then with no small scandal in attendance. Witness the US television show on Masters and Johnson that has appeared since *Orgasmology*, confirming any number of this book's assertions, though the show doesn't know what it knows half the time, or so it seems. Showtime's series *The Masters of Sex* depicts William Masters—the serious ob-gyn doctor and research-scientist—choosing as his sidekick sarcastic, libidinous Virginia Johnson—hardly an official, traditional scholar, but a very knowing woman. Together this pair makes orgasm speak: in the lab, on camera, caught by their eyes, and between their thighs, which they open for each other. What better context for reading Jagose, for making reply to her naïve detractors? Even more importantly, she plays Masters to her own Johnson, we might say. Striking a scholarly tone throughout the volume, she has supplied a more forceful stick in the eye to public outrage than a playful posture would have offered. Further, by presenting orgasm as *seriously* not evident—questioning its status as a thing or an object—Jagose jabs a poker at Masters and Johnson, as you might imagine.

So, who is the audience for *Orgasmology*? Readers lured by their interest in orgasm (a truly broad spectrum). And readers who read in the field of queer theory (a narrower scene). Funnily enough, these different groups may experience their interests in chiastic relation to each other's focus. Orgasm-enthusiasts may find that queer theoretical insights blow their assumptions out of the water, perhaps in surprisingly pleasing ways. Orgasm isn't a natural, normal physiological phenomenon? Not a phenomenon we've heroically laboured to free from centuries of baggage to progressively arrive at affirming it for both men and women? There's a problem with the notion of pleasure? Also with desire? Major theoreticians don't like these terms? Queer theory, of all things, has gotten over sex? It's worth remembering that all this is still beautifully jarring for readers out of field. However,

these unsettlingings are settled down in theory. True, it should jolt queer theoreticians that we have often eschewed talk of orgasm but it won't surprise us. We will recall why we gave up talking of it, not our practice of it. (Hopefully, we're practiced in its origami folds. Some are daily practiced.) Strangely, then, queer theory readers might get most engrossed in the detailed mini-histories and bizarre scenarios Jagose has finely researched and makes so captivating in her theorising. Her capillary claims made inside these presentations are the ones that most thrill me. They are often brilliant, compelling and bold, but also quite delicately wrought, tethered to the scenes from which they emerge. They do not reduce to deconstructing sex/sexuality/identity, however much another kind of reader will enjoy that persistent infrastructure, which this study should and does provide.

For these reasons the book's introduction, which seems to address today's queer theorising—what's been ignored, who is ignoring it and who is the exception—might most grab the general reader, while serving as an excellent reminder to theorists of where we've been on the matter of climax. Where we've been—don't try this at home—is decidedly dismissive. Jagose shows us why: orgasm has been considered too idealised, normalised, medicalised and banalised, not to mention grandly teleological in its drives. Taking a tour through Foucault, Deleuze and Baudrillard—three heavy-hitters and persuasive touchstones for her observations—Jagose reveals the shape that each dismissal takes, making her revisiting of them illuminating even if one recalls their separate leanings. The major exception inside queer theory is Leo Bersani, who famously invests in orgasmic self-shattering in his blockbuster, wide-ranging essay 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' Some may feel the implied force of 'only Bersani' is diminished by the obvious size of his influence in the field. (Indeed, Bersani leapt so immediately to my mind as a key exception that I found myself waiting for this particular shoe to drop.) Others may wonder where to draw the line in the scene of critical theory more generally. Are the French feminists in or out? Does the *jouissance* central to Lacan, Irigaray and others—via Saint Theresa in ecstasy, moreover—count as orgasmic or something else?

Whatever one's perspective, Bersani is surely a fascinating figure to interrogate at length, which Jagose does and prompts us to do. In the wake of her foray—valuable, insightful—something about the metaphorical status of material

orgasm in Bersani's thought remains to be said, I would say. (You see I feel prompted.) Orgasm, if one follows his thought to its logical conclusion, is a *figural penetration*, even in acts that aren't penetrative (some oral sex, some digital sex). Everyone is penetrated/punctured/shattered no matter what they're doing, as long as they're coming. If I come, when I come, I am boldly shattered, making my orgasm the very organ, to put it metaphorically, that penetrates me. Everyone's a catcher to orgasm's pitcher. Everyone's a bottom to their own climax. All this is strange in an essay (Bersani's) that wants us for a moment to be strictly literal when it comes to sex, that wants us to combat our love of 'displacements' in queer theory, leaving us to wonder, then, what kind of literal-non-displacement figural penetration might prove to be. More intriguingly, I sense a sneaky mysticism hovering about Bersani's naked orgasm insofar as he brings in Bataille to explain how climax is a 'non-anecdotal self-debasement' involving the kind of bleeding-of-pain-into-pleasure characteristic 'of certain mystical experiences'. (Bersani, quoted 217) In fact, Bersani ends by claiming '*jouissance* as a mode of ascesis' since the self is sacrificed, making us exit his essay as ecstatic ascetics, if not Saint Theresas. (Bersani, quoted 222) All of which demonstrates why Jagose's focus on a focus denied—namely, orgasm—is so rich. In this early section, I felt most acutely that Jagose has nailed it when she claims that queer theory and orgasm might be seen as 'co-relevant', as 'usefully extend[ing] each other's reach'. (10)

As I've said, then, it is Jagose's remarkable conveyance of orgasm-case-study-history-factoids, if I can call them that, and her exquisite explorations surrounding them, that make this book such a pleasure to read. Who knew—I didn't—that the clitoris has 'been discovered' *again*. To quote Jagose quoting Susan Williamson in the *New Scientist*:

"The clitoris, it turns out, is "no little hill" as its derivation from the Greek ... implies. Instead it extends deep into the body, with a total size at least twice as large as most anatomy texts show, and tens of times larger than the average person realizes.' (27)

Moreover, citing research by Helen O'Connell, Jagose explains that the clitoris need not be oppositional to the vagina (as it is in Freud and the popular imagination), since it's now thought to comprise 'a triangular complex' *with* the vagina and urethra, best designated, according to O'Connell, as 'the clitoro-urethrovaginal

complex' (which my spell check just rejected). Jagose well knows, as does any theorist teaching or engaging psychoanalysis, how this news of a 'new biological model might facilitate altered cultural understandings'. (28) (After all, Luce Irigaray attempted something similar with her figure of the genital lips: a metaphor for women's orgasmic touching.) Take as a different index of this claim a *Huffington Post* article from 2013, entitled 'Cliteracy 101: Artist Sophia Wallace Wants You to Know the Truth about the Clitoris', implying that spreading this news would have an untold impact on people's conceptions of 'female' anatomy. Jagose, of course, would counter that one can't fathom in advance exactly what this impact would be. That's what excites her: the temporal openness that comes with not knowing what 'coming' and coming knowledge surrounding coming (when is it coming?) will unfold.

Speaking of temporality, it rose, it fell, it rose. I refer to something else I apparently didn't know, something Jagose tells the history of so potently. I am alluding to the story of simultaneous orgasm. I had no idea this erotic ideal was strongly in vogue in the early part of the twentieth century, then was discredited by mid-century, before it rose again as a sign of 'virtuosity' by the century's end. Most interestingly, Jagose performs her own 'speculative reading' of what this wave-like motion means. To put it succinctly and without giving too much away (I stop shy of a spoiler alert), Jagose explains how the figure of simultaneous orgasm works 'both to modernize its heteroerotic subjects and defend them against the shocks of the modern'. (42) A reader can probably guess what was thought modern about hetero-simultaneity—'equality', 'unity', 'complementarity', 'companionate eroticism' (58)—but she'll have to read this book to learn what it defended couples from in modern life. No surprise in the end, except the journey there: the remarkable history of simultaneous orgasm has served at all points to 'secure the timelessness of erotic relations between men and women'; 'more than it is about timing, simultaneous orgasm is about time'. (77)

And if there were space and time to do so, I'd take you further into orgasm's folds. Suffice it to say, Jagose has stimulating observations about 'the double bind of modern sex'. (105) This bind is the 'bond' between personal and impersonal sexual predilections (or are they presumptions?), which her reading of John Cameron Mitchell's *Shortbus* (2006) illuminates via the film's attempts to celebrate a naïve community (personal, face-to-face) despite its own erection of 'erotic stranger-

relationality'. (100) This is the edgier simultaneity—the impersonal personal—we must not deny and, indeed, can't escape at the heart of modern sex. Isn't orgasm deeply (im)personal, however intimate one is with a 'partner'? Perhaps this matter bears a family resemblance to another conceptual challenge to consider: the challenge to so-called *personal behaviour* in the realm of sex. In ways the reader will have to discover by reading *Orgasmology*, the odious manoeuvres of behavioural therapies used against gay men from the 1960s to the 1970s swing round *conceptually* (god knows not practically or politically) to hold hands with thoughts (really, cherished tenets) of queer theorists. How? Why? Seductive hint: 'From a queer theoretical perspective there is something unexpectedly refreshing and potentially productive about behavior therapy's insistence on sex as a behavior unindexed to any broader characterological system—its insistence, that is, on the possibility of sexuality without a subject.' (134) And thus without a face? You'll have to read on. You'll have to explore the chapter 'Face Off'. You'll have to be prepared to find cinema's obsession with facialisation—certainly when implying orgasm—*coming together* with Masters and Johnson's medical effacement of their subjects in the throes, people being imaged and measured in their lab.

You'll also have to ready yourself for cessation not apex to climax. Perhaps you've seen this dynamic coming from what I've been describing. A certain kind of reader, to be sure, will wish the author had made more running connections across her figures and her chapters, even if Jagose wants to question *telos*. At times I, too, was seeking more threading. Then I realised that part of the pleasure of my reading was my juggling wishes for an author-fostered gathering (do it for me, do it to me) with wishes for my own (private? personal? impersonal?) detections of connections that touched me. How fitting, after all.

How this toggle accords with the book's ending on the note of faking orgasm—a really strange sort of political hope in the midst of disappointment, taking a measure of control, dare I say, *from* disappointment—is something you'll have to glean for yourself. Not to disappoint you, but I can't turn you on to this ending. Not by myself. Not without the reading behaviour that is 'yours'. And I don't truly know what that is.

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