

Thomas W Laqueur, *Solitary sex: a cultural history of masturbation*, New York, Zone Books, 2003, pp. 501, illus., £22.50 (hardback 1-890951-32-3).

Is there anything new to be said about the history of masturbation? A fifty-year tradition of articles as well as at least one preceding monograph have explored the perennially intriguing cultural construct of masturbation within the western medical tradition as a medically, as well as morally, deleterious practice, enduring from the first decades of the eighteenth century until the early twentieth century. Although a number of questions remained outstanding, these have not all been addressed in *Solitary sex*.

Laqueur displays a curious (in more than one sense) interest in female masturbation. In gazing at the masturbating female, he seems to have overlooked the extent to which the discourses about the evils of onanism were to a significant degree about anxieties to do with the male body and masculinity. Undoubtedly there were recurrent, if highly localized, panics about self-abuse among women, but a case could be made that for long periods the masturbating woman was largely perceived as an innately pathological figure with some physical or mental defect, rather than anywoman.

Whereas for men, masturbation was seen as something which could, unless precautions were taken, overcome *any* male, with dire consequences. All men were menaced by this spectre, as can be seen from the vast torrent of literature, from sermons to commercial quack handbills, directed towards the habit. Laqueur does not engage with, or even acknowledge, several articles which have taken this approach, although he has, on internal evidence, encountered them. He even tries to account for the differential between the vast number of anguished queries received by Marie Stopes (*not*, as Laqueur implies, a medical doctor, but a PhD in botany, one of a number of in themselves minor, but cumulatively irritating, errors) from men about the harm potentially done by masturbation, and the extremely few, largely much less agonized, queries from women, by

arguing that women *were* worried about it, but would not have written to Stopes. Given the lack of other resources of advice for the sexually perturbed at the time, it is hard to believe that if women had been as concerned as men were about autoerotic practice, they would have failed to consult her in large numbers. His argument for this line of reasoning, that “in the clinical casework of Freud and his colleagues, women seemed to suffer the most from solitary sex” (pp. 374–5), is not entirely convincing. One is tempted to murmur, given the pervasive male fears on the topic among that very generation, “projection . . .”. And indeed, does not Laqueur’s claim that female masturbation has been, historically, characterized as “liberating, ecstatic, dreamy and lyrical”, in contrast to the male act, perceived as “abject, humiliating, and decidedly second-rate” (p. 406), speak of a cultural disgust at the sexual male body, from which this practice liberates the fortunate woman?

While some accounts of masturbation have made far too much of the Victorians, or perhaps one should say “the Victorian” as popularly imagined, is it really possible to make a segue from the late eighteenth century to the very late nineteenth or early twentieth century with only passing allusions to the interim period (refreshing though the absence of William Acton may be)? This tends to lead to an assumption that, once it was in place, the masturbation discourse was fixed and unchanging until it was eventually superseded or eroded (there is also little attention paid to the significant variations between different national cultures). This is related to what appears to be the ambition to create a grand narrative of the rise and decline of masturbatory panic. Might it not rather be possible that there is not one story, but several, overlapping and intertwining, stories? Perhaps the reason for the initial success and enduring significance of the fears begun by *Onania* was that they could occupy many niches, that they enabled a variety of narratives.

Solitary sex, in spite of its length, and although some areas are dealt with in minute detail, fails to provide an exhaustive or definitive account of the rise and decline of

masturbation mania. It will doubtless be of interest to the general reader unacquainted with the existing historiography, but for specialists in the history of gender, sexuality, and medicine, it will come as something of a disappointment.

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Anne L McClanan and Karen Rosoff Encarnación (eds), *The material culture of sex, procreation, and marriage in premodern Europe*, New York and Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002, pp. xiv, 285, £42.50 (hardback 0-312-24001-5).

Most of the twelve essays in this interdisciplinary anthology were originally presented as papers at the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women in 1999 or at the International Medieval Congress in Leeds in 2000. They all point to the significance of material culture in studying the histories of medieval and early modern sex, procreation, and marriage. Although sex and gender in pre-modern times have received increasing attention in recent years, their historical analysis, the editors claim, has tended to privilege texts over material objects.

The editors successfully avoid discussing the multiple meanings of and the many methodological uncertainties surrounding “material culture” by presenting their collection as a reflection of some of the existing approaches to this topic in the humanities. They need to, for the contributions cover many different disciplines, among them history, art history, classics and archaeology, women’s history, medical history, and literature. The chapter topics are as wide-ranging materially as the geographical area covered—northern and southern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean. Early Byzantine magical marriage jewellery (Alicia Walker) rubs shoulders with abortion tools (Anne L McClanan), images of women on Roman sarcophagi in the ancient world (Janet Huskinson), Spanish paintings representing Maria’s breasts (Charlene

Villaseñor Black), anatomical fugitive sheets from Germany (Karen Rosoff Encarnación), the fertile heart of a Italian saint (Katharine Park), and the magical clothes of Swiss sodomites in the late Middle Ages and the early modern period (Helmut Puff).

My preference is for the essays that emphasize the transient status of material objects and their diverse meanings over those that focus more on material aspects, or the physical quality, production, and use of things. The papers by Park and Puff are best. It is only partly my interest in medical history which prompts this view: they illustrate admirably the way in which the messages of material objects continuously shift. More interestingly, both authors claim that in the Middle Ages and the early modern period the boundaries between material objects and persons were drawn differently from today.

Park explores the meaning of religious relics in early fourteenth-century Italy. Clare of Montefalco’s strange “autopsy”, undertaken rather unprofessionally by her fellow nuns after her death in 1308, generated actual objects: a crucifix in her heart and Trinitarian stones in her gall bladder. The debates over Clare’s holiness as part of the canonization process (the first ever systematically attempted in order to authenticate the visions and revelations of a holy person), revolved around the possible status of these objects. Park shows convincingly that the notion of human bodies generating relics cannot be simply dismissed as a product of the visions or entranced minds of Clare’s fellow nuns, but rather, resonates and was couched within contemporary medical, theological and juridical practices. The flesh objects were explained, debated, and considered “real” or “fakes” within this context, depending on the onlooker. By examining this specific historical example from various perspectives, Park shows that medieval relics belong to a group of “things” that lay at the boundary between those physical bodies identified as persons and those identified as objects. Thus, for Clare’s fellow nuns, the crucified Christ found in her heart was more person than thing, while for some of the opponents of Clare’s canonization it was a mere artefact.