

Making **SEX**

BODY AND GENDER FROM THE GREEKS TO FREUD

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sexual interest in relation to the menstrual cycle continue to be explored.⁹⁰ The puzzle, posed once it was definitively established that menstruation was not heat and that ovulation in women was indeed hidden, generated a new batch of tales that are close relatives of the nineteenth-century narratives, though based on a different set of biological beliefs. (I mean here stories like the one that says ovulation is hidden so as to keep females from knowing when they are fertile. Were they to know, far from desiring motherhood, they would shun intercourse to avoid its dangers.⁹¹)

The solitary vice, the social evil, and pouring tea

Wolstenholme and Westermarck wrote as if the body were only the sign of social practices, not their foundation: menstruation was not the cause of a peculiar female way of being in the world, as it had been for the doctors cited earlier; it was the consequence. Already the epistemological sands of the two-sex model have shifted so that culture and the body are no longer distinct and isolated categories. But still the focus there is on a peculiarly female function. Here I want to see how two human activities, masturbation and prostitution, may be regarded as social perversions visited upon the body rather than as sexual perversions with social effects.

It is often thought that the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century obsession with masturbation and prostitution are part of a new literature "dominated by a tone of total and repressive sexual intolerance."⁹² I want to argue instead that the "*solitary vice*" and the "*social evil*" were believed to be, as their new names imply, social pathologies that visited destruction on the body in the same way that in ages past blasphemy or lechery produced monsters. The insane, pale, quivering masturbator and the coarse, barren prostitute were the miscreants of the modern age produced, as had been their deformed predecessors, by a moral sickness.

As a very one-sex sort of activity, masturbation was also a one-sex vice. Although nineteenth-century worries about masturbatory perturbations have been given special attention by historians, the underlying pathogenesis of masturbatory disease in both sexes was thought to be the same: excessive and socially perverted nervous stimulation. Hence the supposed connection of tuberculosis and masturbation: "Let it be known that pulmonary consumption, whose horrible ravages in Europe ought to give alarm to all governments, has drawn from this very source [masturba-

tion] its fatal activity."⁹³ "Girls hide most of the ravages of the vice under 'general nervous excitement'; boys have not this convenient refuge."⁹⁴

One need also only read the various editions and translations of *Onania, or the Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution* or the Swiss Dr. Tissot's *L'Onanisme* or their many imitators—R. L. Perry's *The Silent: A Medical Work on the Dangerous Effects of Onanism*, for example—to know that Foucault was right: here is a literature that generates erotic desire in order to control it.⁹⁵ Story after story of young men and women discovering in their genitals the pleasures of solitary sex form a vast corpus of incendiary porn whose erotogenic power is not diminished by the obligatory horrifying, cautionary end.

Rousseau, who thought deeply about sexual desire and the making of the social order, condemned masturbation severely, as a social wrong. In *Emile* he cautions against it because it might substitute for marriage; in the *Confessions* he says he permits himself the practice because his involvement with Thérèse represented the undifferentiated desire of the state of nature (it was not "moral") while masturbation was the product of his own "lively imagination," a sort of moral self-love.⁹⁶

Although in traditional church teaching fornication was thought far worse than onanism, in the post-eighteenth-century world the "crime of solitude" was thought to "undermine the constitution and poison the mind ten times more than illicit commerce with a woman."⁹⁷ An advertising booklet that must have circulated in the tens if not hundreds of thousands in the nineteenth century cautions that indulging in the passions during youth "in a manner which is contrary to nature" is the road to ruin, and then goes on to lament that these practices arise only because of the "rigid custom" that allows unmarried females to indulge "in the natural gratification of the master-passion" only at the cost of total loss of reputation.⁹⁸ (A less commercially interested authority, R. D. Owen, son of the utopian socialist Robert Owen, makes the same point when he argues that the origins of onanism were probably in the convents of Europe while its growing popularity in the nineteenth century was the result of the continued "un-natural separation of the sexes."⁹⁹) "Immoderate use of enjoyment, even in a natural way," is debilitating, warns a nineteenth-century doctor, echoing ancient lore. But speaking as a modern man he asks: "What must then be the consequences when nature is forced [through self-abuse] against her will?"¹⁰⁰ The real trouble with masturbation in these dire warnings is not that it robs the body of pre-

cious fluids but that it violates Aristotle's dictum, given new life during the industrial revolution by fears that it might not be true, that man is a social animal.

The political and sexual radical Richard Carlile (1790–1843) makes the best argument for how masturbation must be construed as a threat to “the nature of human solidarity,” and how little it appears to be a problem of excess or wicked sexual desire. Sociability, not repression, is at stake. Carlile's *Every Woman's Book* is a sustained attack on conventional sexual morality, a plea for freeing the passions, and a practical guide to birth control. Love is natural, only its fruits should be controlled, marriage laws constrain a passion that should not be shackled, and so on. Carlile advocates Temples of Venus for the controlled, healthy, extramarital satisfaction of female desire—five sixths of the deaths from consumption among young women resulted from want of sexual commerce, he thought, and perhaps as much as nine tenths of all other illness as well. But on the subject of masturbation, Carlile the sexual radical is as shrill as the most evangelically inspired moralist or alarmist physician. Born of the cloister or its modern equivalents, where diseased religion turns love into sin, “the appeasing of lascivious excitement in females by artificial means” or the “accomplishment of seminal excretion in the male” is not only wicked but physically destructive. Masturbation leads to disease of mind and body. Indeed, the “natural and healthy commerce between the sexes” for which he offers the technology is explicitly linked to the abolition of prostitution, masturbation, pederasty, and other unnatural practices.¹⁰¹

The contrast could not be clearer between a fundamentally asocial or socially degenerative practice—the pathogenic, solitary sex of the cloister—and the vital, socially constructive act of heterosexual intercourse. But the supposed physical effects of masturbation seem almost a secondary reaction to its underlying social pathology. The emphasis in the solitary vice should perhaps be less on “vice,” understood as the fulfillment of illegitimate desire, than on “solitary,” the channeling of healthy desire back into itself. The debate over masturbation that raged from the eighteenth century on might therefore be understood as part of the more general debate about the unleashing of desire in a commercial economy and about the possibility of human community in these circumstances—a sexual version of the classic “Adam Smith Problem.”¹⁰² And, as in the one-sex model, violating the social norm had horrible physical conse-

quences as well. The monster born to colonial Anne Hutchinson's follower lives on in the suicidal masturbator whose faculties are greatly impaired, whose thinking is impractical, memory weak, and body reduced to skin and bones. But even if not a complete wreck, the masturbator will never find comfort in married love and thus contributes to the social monstrosity of sterility.¹⁰³

Prostitution is the other great arena in which the battle against unsocialized sex was fought. Here too society and the body are intertwined. Whoring, of course, had long been regarded as wicked and detrimental to the commonweal, but so had drunkenness, blasphemy, and other disturbances of the peace. Not until the nineteenth century did it come to be *the* social evil, a particularly disruptive, singularly threatening vice. How this happened is a long story, and I will tell only part of it.

Prostitutes were generally regarded as an unproductive commodity. Because they were public women; because their reproductive organs bore such heavy traffic; because in them the semen of so many different men was mixed, pell-mell, together; because the ovaries of prostitutes, through overstimulation, were seldom without morbid lesions; because their Fallopian tubes were closed by excessive intercourse; or, most tellingly, because they did not feel affection for the men with whom they had sex, they were thought to be barren, or in any case unlikely to have children. One writer went so far as to argue that when prostitutes did become pregnant it was by men they especially liked; and when prostitutes who had been transported to Van Dieman's Land reformed and set up domestic situations, they suddenly found themselves fertile.¹⁰⁴

Of course not every expert would agree. Indeed, Jean-Baptiste Parent-Duchâtelet, a genuinely gifted nineteenth-century specialist in public health, insisted that there was nothing physically unusual about prostitutes. They did not have unusually large clitorises—only three out of six thousand did—and were therefore not attracted to prostitution by excessive sexual desire; if they had fewer children, it was because they practiced abortion or birth control. Prostitution, he argued, is not inherent in bodies; in its modern form it is purely a pathology of commercial urban society. But in disagreeing with the general wisdom, Parent-Duchâtelet is allying himself with what I take to be the main interpretive thrust of the idea of the barren prostitute: a confusion between the dangerously asocial world of commercial exchange and the healthy social world of married love.¹⁰⁵

To get at this, let me go back to the high Middle Ages when the observation that prostitutes are barren first appears. Aristotle, among others, had pointed out that the womb of a woman who was too hot—and the lascivious nature of prostitutes suggested this excess of *calor genitalis*—might well be inhospitable to conception: it might burn up the conjoined seeds. But Aristotle did not actually equate prostitution with excess heat. Lucretius points out that prostitutes use lascivious movements that inhibit conception by diverting “the furrow from the straight course of the plowshare and make[ing] the seed fall wide of the plot.” But this observation is in the course of a discussion of why “obviously our wives can have no use” for such twists and turns.¹⁰⁶

The reasons given in late medieval and Renaissance literature for the barrenness of prostitutes are several: excess heat, a womb too moist and slippery to retain the seed, and the mingling of various seeds, reasons very much like those given by nineteenth-century doctors. But I want to draw attention to a less explicitly physiological explanation, which links the problem of barrenness with a more general derangement of the body politic. A twelfth-century encyclopedist, William of Conches, explains why prostitutes rarely conceive. Two seeds are necessary for conception, he reminds his readers, and prostitutes “who only perform coition for money and who because of this fact feel no pleasure, emit nothing and therefore engender nothing.” A sixteenth-century German doctor makes a similar argument. Among the causes of barrenness, Lorenz Fries notes, is “a woman’s lack of passion for a man as, for example, the common women (*gemeynen Frawlin*) who work only for their sustenance.” One might construe “common women” to mean not prostitutes but peasants who work *only* to earn their keep rather than, as Luther would have preached, for the greater glory of God. This would fit in with the analogies made by Calvin and others between sexual heat or passion and the ardor the heart ought to feel for God. It also fits in with the fact that Fries was a teacher at the new Protestant university in Strasbourg.¹⁰⁷

Here is yet another version of the old saw that orgasm is necessary for conception. But why do prostitutes not experience pleasure, and why are “common women” chosen to illustrate the point that an absence of passion ensures sterility? The friction of intercourse must be as warming in harlots as in other women, but their bodies respond differently. In the examples I have cited, money, or more precisely an illegitimate exchange of money, provides the missing middle term. Prostitution is sterile because the mode of exchange it represents is sterile. Nothing is produced

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because, like usury, it is pure exchange. As R. Howard Bloch argues, it was precisely in the twelfth century and in response to a nascent market economy that usury became of urgent concern to the church. And the particular wickedness of charging interest, it was held, is that nothing real is gained by it. Indeed, as Aristotle argues, usury is "the most hated sort" of exchange and is to be particularly censured because it represents the antithesis of the natural, the productive, household economy. A perverted economic practice, like perverted sex, breeds abominations or nothing: "Interest, which means the birth of money from money, is applied to the breeding of money because the offspring resembles the parent. That is why of all modes of getting wealth this is the most unnatural" (*Politics*, 1.10.1258b5-7). It is as if usury were incestuous intercourse. In Catherine Gallagher's terms, "what multiplies through her [the prostitute] is not a substance but a sign: money." (I have in a sense been arguing that this distinction between sign and substance is untenable in dealing with the history of the body.) Prostitution becomes, like usury, a metaphor for the unnatural multiplication not of things but of signs without referents.¹⁰⁸

A deep cultural unease about money and the market economy is couched in the metaphors of reproductive biology; this is in Aristotle's formulation. But, more to the point here, fear of an asocial market takes on a new guise in the claim that sex for money, coition with prostitutes, bears no fruit. This sort of sex is set in sharp contrast—one senses this especially in the German example—to the household economy of sex, which is quintessentially social and productive. Fries elsewhere in the text cited develops the metaphor of the womb protecting the fetus just as the crust of bread protects the crumbs. The image of baking, warmth, and kitchen contrasts with the cool barrenness of those who work, have intercourse, *only* for pay, outside the bounds of the household.

By the nineteenth century, the trope of the barren prostitute had a respectable seven-century pedigree. But the boundaries it guarded—between home and economy, private and public, self and society—were both more sharply drawn and more problematic in the urban-class society of Europe after the industrial revolution. Or at least so thought contemporary observers. Society seemed to be in unprecedented danger from the market place; the sexual body reflected all the anxieties of this danger; and, in this new version of the one-sex model, cultural meaning caused the flesh to bend to its dictates.

The problem with both masturbation and prostitution was essentially

quantitative: doing it alone and doing it with lots of people rather than doing it in pairs. Such sex is thus in the same category as other misdeeds of number, the withdrawal of the protagonist of Florence Nightingale's *Cassandra*, for example, who refuses to pour tea for the household and withdraws to her solitary couch. The social context, not the act, determines acceptability. The paradoxes of commercial society that had already plagued Adam Smith and his colleagues, the nagging doubts that a free economy might not sustain the social body, haunt the sexual body. Or, the other way around, the perverted sexual body haunts society and reminds it of its fragility, as it had done in other ways for millennia.

Freud's problem

Freud's account of how the clitoral sexuality of young girls gives way to the vaginal sexuality of mature women powerfully focuses on the issues of my book. On the one hand, Freud is very much a man of the Enlightenment, inheritor of its model of sexual difference. Anatomy is destiny, as he said in a phrase he did not really mean; the vagina is the opposite of the penis, an anatomical marker of woman's lack of what a man has. Heterosexuality is the natural state of the architecture of two incommensurable opposite sexes. But Freud, more than any other thinker, also collapses the model. Libido knows no sex. The clitoris is a version of the male organ—why not the other way around?—and only by postulating a sort of generalized female hysteria, a disease in which culture takes the causative role of organs, does Freud account for how it supposedly gives up its role in women's sexual lives in favor of the "opposite organ," the vagina. Here, in other words, is a version of the central modern narrative of one sex at war with two.

The story begins in 1905 when Freud rediscovered the clitoris, or in any case clitoral orgasm, by inventing its vaginal counterpart. (Recall Renaldus Columbus' prior sixteenth-century claim.) After four hundred, perhaps even two thousand, years there was all of a sudden a second place from which women derived sexual pleasure. In 1905, for the first time, a doctor claimed that there were two kinds of orgasm and that the vaginal sort was the expected norm among adult women. This generated an immense polemical and clinical literature. More words have been shed, I suspect, about the clitoris than about any other organ, or at least about any organ its size.¹⁰⁹

I want to make two points in particular. In the first place, before 1905

no one thought that there was any other kind of female orgasm than the clitoral sort. It is well and accurately described in hundreds of learned and popular medical texts, as well as in a burgeoning pornographic literature. It simply is not true, as Robert Scholes has argued, that there has been "a semiotic coding that operates to purge both texts and language of things [the clitoris as the primary organ of woman's sexual pleasure] that are unwelcome to men." The clitoris, like the penis, was for two millennia both "precious jewel" and sexual organ, a connection not "lost or mislaid" through the ages, as Scholes would have it, but only (if then) since Freud.¹¹⁰ To put it differently, the revelation by Masters and Johnson that female orgasm is almost entirely clitoral would have been a commonplace to every seventeenth-century midwife and had been documented in considerable detail by nineteenth-century investigators. A great wave of amnesia descended on scientific circles around 1900, and hoary truths were hailed as earth-shattering in the second half of the twentieth century.

My second point, more central to the concerns of this book, is that there is nothing in nature about how the clitoris is construed. It is not self-evidently a female penis, and it is not self-evidently in opposition to the vagina. Nor have men always regarded clitoral orgasm as absent, threatening, or unspeakable because of some primordial male fear of, or fascination with, female sexual pleasure. The history of the clitoris is part of the history of sexual difference generally and of the socialization of the body's pleasures. Like the history of masturbation, it is a story as much about sociability as about sex. And once again, for the last time in this book, it is the story of the aporia of anatomy.

"If we are to understand how a little girl turns into a woman," Freud says in the third of his epochal *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, "we must follow the further vicissitudes of [the] excitability of the clitoris." During puberty, the story goes, there occurs in boys "an accession of libido," while in girls there is "a fresh wave of repression in which it is precisely cliteroidal sexuality that is affected." The development of women as cultural beings is thus marked by what seems to be a physiological process: "what is overtaken by repression is a piece of masculine machinery."¹¹¹

Like a Bahktiari tribesman in search of fresh pastures, female sexuality is said to migrate from one place to another, from the malelike clitoris to the unmistakably female vagina. The clitoris does not, however, entirely lose its function as a result of pleasure's short but significant journey.

Instead it becomes the organ *through which* excitement is transmitted to the "adjacent female sexual parts," to its permanent home, the true locus of a woman's erotic life, the vagina. The clitoris, in Freud's less than illuminating simile, becomes "like pine shavings" used "to set a log of harder wood on fire."

This strangely inappropriate identification of the cavity of the vagina with a burning log is not my concern here. Stranger still is what happens to biology in Freud's famous essay. A little girl's realization that she does not have a penis and that therefore her sexuality resides in its supposed opposite, in the cavity of the vagina, elevates a "biological fact" into a cultural desideratum. Freud writes as if he has discovered the basis in anatomy for the entire nineteenth-century world of gender. In an age obsessed with being able to justify and distinguish the social roles of women and men, science seems to have found in the radical difference of penis and vagina not just a sign of sexual difference but its very foundation. When erotogenic susceptibility to stimulation has been successfully transferred by a woman from the clitoris to the vaginal orifice, she has adopted a new leading zone for the purposes of her later sexual activity.

Freud goes even further by suggesting that the repression of female sexuality in puberty, marked by abandonment of the clitoris, heightens male desire and thus tightens the web of heterosexual union on which reproduction, the family, and indeed civilization itself appear to rest: "The intensification of the brake upon sexuality brought about by pubertal repression in women serves as a stimulus to the libido of men and causes an increase in its activity."¹¹² When everything has settled down, the "masculine machinery" of the clitoris is abandoned, the vagina is erotically charged, and the body is set for reproductive intercourse. Freud seems to be taking a stab at historical bio-anthropology, claiming that female modesty incites male desire while female acquiescence, in allowing it to be gratified, leads humanity out of the savage's cave.

Perhaps this is pushing one paragraph too hard, but Freud in these passages is very much in the imaginative footsteps of Diderot and Rousseau, who argued that civilization began when woman began to discriminate, to limit her availability. Freud in the *Three Essays* is not quite so explicit, but he does appear to be arguing that femininity, and thus the place of women in society, is grounded in the developmental neurology of the female genitals.

But could he really have meant this? In the first place, the long written

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history of the body would have shown that the vagina fails miserably as a "natural symbol" of interior sexuality, of passivity, of the private against the public, of a critical stage in the ontogeny of woman. In the one-sex model, dominant in anatomical thinking for two thousand years, woman was understood as man inverted: the uterus was the female scrotum, the ovaries were testicles, the vulva was a foreskin, and *the vagina was a penis*. This account of sexual difference, though as phallogentric as Freud's, offered no real female interior, only the displacement inward to a more sheltered space of the male organs, as if the scrotum and penis in the form of uterus and vagina had taken cover from the cold.

If Freud was not aware of this history, he surely must have known that there was absolutely no anatomical or physiological evidence for the claim that "erotogenic susceptibility to stimulation" is successfully transferred during the maturation of women "from the clitoris to the vaginal orifice." The abundance of specialized nerve endings in the clitoris and the relative impoverishment of the vagina had been demonstrated half a century before Freud wrote and had been known in outline for hundreds of years. Common medical knowledge available in any nineteenth-century handbook thus makes Freud's story a puzzle, if it is construed as a narrative of biology. Finally, if the advent of the vaginal orgasm were the consequence of neurological processes, then Freud's question of "how a woman develops out of a child with bisexual dispositions" could be resolved by physiology without any help from psychoanalysis.

Freud's answer, then, must be regarded as a narrative of culture in anatomical disguise. The tale of the clitoris is a parable of culture, of how the body is forged into a shape valuable to civilization despite, not because of, itself. The language of biology gives this tale its rhetorical authority but does not describe a deeper reality in nerves and flesh.

Freud, in short, must have known that he was inventing vaginal orgasm and that he was at the same time giving a radical new meaning to the clitoris. Richard von Krafft-Ebing may have anticipated him a bit when in the 1890s he wrote that "the erogenous zones in women are, while she is a virgin, the clitoris, and, after defloration, the vagina and cervix uteri." But this is in the context of a discussion of a variety of erogenous zones; immediately following is the observation that "the nipple particularly seems to possess this [erogenous] quality." Krafft-Ebing, like many of his contemporaries, believed that the "normally developed mentally and well bred" woman's sexual desires were small. He

also regarded woman's supposed sexual passivity (a symbol for her passivity in public life) as imbedded in "her sexual organization."¹¹³

But neither he nor anyone else drew social consequences from the distinction between vaginal and clitoral eroticism. There was, in fact, no evidence at all in the contemporary literature for the sort of vaginal sexuality Freud postulates. Nor was there any special interest in denying it. The stark contrasts we shall see below are the result of a historical juxtaposition of texts. Authorities in French, German, and English during Freud's time, and stretching back to the early seventeenth century, were unanimous in holding that female sexual pleasure originated in the structures of the vulva generally and in the clitoris specifically. No alternative sites were proposed.

The major English-language medical encyclopedia of Freud's day begins the "clitoris" subheading of a lengthy and up-to-date entry on "Sexual Organs, Female" by citing the Viennese anatomist and philologist Joseph Hyrtl, who derived the word "clitoris" from a Greek verb meaning "to titillate" and observed that these etymological roots are reflected in the German colloquial term *Kitzler* (tickler).¹¹⁴ Its anatomy is presented as the homologue of the penis, although the clitoris' nervous supply is "far greater, in proportion to its size." Indeed,

its cutaneous investment is supplied with special nerve endings, which give it remarkable and special sensitivity . . . At the base of the papillae are the endings which Krause believes to be related to the peculiar sensibility of the organ and has named corpuscles of sexual pleasure (*Wollustkörperchen*). They are usually called genital corpuscles.¹¹⁵

On the other hand, the upper and middle portions of the vagina are enervated by "the same sources as the uterus." It is "not very sensitive," and indeed the anterior wall is so insensitive that it "can be operated on without much pain to the patient." This may be hyperbole, but it suggests that to nineteenth-century authorities the vagina was an unlikely candidate for the primary locus of sexual pleasure in women.

No one took it to be such. Freud's contemporary, the gynecologist E. H. Kisch, for example, cites Victor Hensen's article on the physiology of reproduction in the authoritative *Handbuch der Physiologie* (1881) to the effect that direct stimulation of sexual feeling is through the dorsal nerve of the penis and the clitoris. Kisch then notes that sexual pleasure in women is due chiefly to friction on the clitoris through the intromitted

penis that stimulates the nerve fibers connected to Krause's genital ("voluptuary") corpuscles.¹¹⁶ The major French medical reference work of the late nineteenth century describes the clitoris as an erectile organ situated at the upper end of the vulva which has the same structure as the corpus cavernosum of the penis, the same erotic functions, but lacks a urethra. The vagina, on the other hand, is defined simply as the passage from the vulva to the uterus which serves to evacuate the menses, contain the male organ during copulation, and expel the product of fecundation. Most of the article is devoted to its pathologies.¹¹⁷

As early as 1844, with the publication of Georg Ludwig Kobelt's massively documented *The Male and Female Organs of Sexual Arousal in Man and Some Other Mammals*,¹¹⁸ the anatomy of genital pleasure was firmly established. Kobelt, first of all, devised a technique for injecting the vasculature of the clitoris so that an organ notoriously difficult to study in post-mortem material could be readily examined. He then proceeded to describe its structure and function in exquisite detail and concluded, based on the clitoris' erectile tissues and its blood and nerve supply, that the glans cliteroides was the primary locus of sexual arousal in both humans and other mammals; it was the precise homologue of the male organ, the glans penis. (Kobelt distinguished the passive male and female organs, or the glans of the penis and clitoris, from the active organs, or the shafts of these structures.) The function of all this machinery, according to Kobelt, is to provide sexual pleasure, which will make women want to have intercourse despite the dangers of pregnancy and the trials of motherhood.¹¹⁹ Its physiology is described in clinical detail. When outside stimuli

come into contact with the glans of the clitoris, then the blood which is causing the *bulbus* to swell, by way of the reflex spasms of the *musculus constrictor cunni*, is propelled through the exposed *pars intermedia* into the glans, now ready for the stimulus; and thereby the purpose of the entire passive apparatus (the sensation of sexual pleasure) is achieved. The sexually pleasurable titillation increases with continuing stimulation up to its final transformation into indifference [orgasm] and return to the usual quiescent state of the affected parts. The process is further supported by the same sort of auxiliary means as in the male.

The vagina, Kobelt thinks, is so well known that it warrants no extended description. But he nevertheless pauses to point out that it plays a minimal role in genital orgasm: "The small number of nerves which, singly,

make their way down into the voluminous vaginal tube puts the vagina so far behind the glans—small but very rich in nerves—that we can grant the vagina no part in the creation of the specific pleasurable sex feelings in the female body.”¹²⁰

Kobelt’s book was by far the most detailed account of the clitoris ever published, but it did not radically revise established views. An earlier French medical encyclopedia came to roughly the same conclusions. “Clitoris,” it says, derives from the Greek verb *kleitoriazsein*, meaning to touch or titillate lasciviously, to be inclined to pleasure. A synonym is “oestrus veneris,” a frenzy of sexual passion. The clitoris is like the penis in form and structure and “enjoys an exquisite sensibility,” which makes it highly susceptible to “abuse.” The author of this entry disapproves strongly of titillating the clitoris, as some colleagues recommend, to cure certain nervous disorders like catalepsy. (Although unacknowledged, this was a therapy derived from a famous case of Galen’s in which a widow, laboring under a purported backup of “semen,” suffered from backaches and other pains until the pressure was relieved by a midwife who rubbed her genitals.) A subsequent entry on “clitorisme,” the female equivalent of masturbation, discusses further abuses invited by this site of pleasure.¹²¹

In the “vagin” entry, on the other hand, the subject is defined as the “cylindrical and elastic passage from the uterus to the external parts.” There follows a short discussion of nomenclature which warns against confusing the vagina with the cervix, the part that used to be called “the neck of the womb,” but there is no discussion of its innervation or erotic functions.¹²²

These articles from the nineteenth century refer back in turn to a seventeenth-century text by François Mauriceau, one of the luminaries of French obstetrics. He notes that the clitoris is “where the Author of Nature has placed the seat of voluptuousness—as He has in the glans penis—where the most exquisite sensibility is located, and where he placed the origins of lasciviousness in women.” Indeed, the pudendum more generally has the capacity to engender delight because the nerves that supply the clitoris supply it too. Mauriceau, after describing for almost six pages the clitoris’ muscles, nerves, and vasculature, concludes that it functions just like the penis.¹²³

The vagina is a far duller organ. It is the tube leading from uterus to the outside, “a slack canal (*mol & lache*) which during coition embraces the penis.” Only the glands near its outer end are relevant to sexual plea-

sure because they pour out great quantities of a saline liquor during coition, which increases the heat and enjoyment of women. These are the substances, Mauriceau suggests, to which Galen was referring when he spoke of needing to use other means to cause their release when the carresses of a man were not available. And this takes the history of the clitoris back to where I left it earlier. In 1612 Jacques Duval wrote: "In French it is called temptation, the spur to sensual pleasure, the female rod and the scorner of men: and women who will admit their lewdness call it their *gaude mihi* [great joy]." ¹²⁴

The French physician echoes the certainties and tensions of later as well as earlier accounts. On the one hand, the clitoris is the organ of sexual pleasure in women. On the other, its easy responsiveness to touch makes it difficult to domesticate for reproductive, heterosexual intercourse. This was Freud's problem, and I will now return to it.

Although Freud may not have been aware of all the detailed history of genital anatomy I have just recounted, it is impossible that he would not have been familiar with what was in the standard reference books of his day. He was, after all, especially interested in zoology during his medical-student days and was an expert neurologist. Furthermore, one did not have to be a scientist to know about clitoral sexuality. Walter, protagonist of the notorious *My Secret Life*, notes in his review of the copulative organs that the clitoris is an erectile organ which is "the chief seat of pleasure in a woman." Probably thousands of tracts about masturbation proclaimed its sensitivity. And of course Freud himself points out that biology has been "obliged to recognize the female clitoris as a true substitute for the penis," though it does not follow from this that children recognize that "all human beings have the same (male) form of genital" or that little girls therefore suffer penis envy because their genital is so small. ¹²⁵

Freud, in short, must have known that what he wrote in the language of biology regarding the shift of eroticogenic sensibility from the clitoris to the vagina had no basis in the facts of anatomy or physiology. Both the migration of female sexuality and the opposition between the vagina and penis must therefore be understood as re-presentations of a social ideal in yet another form. On a formal level, the opposition of the vagina and penis represents an ideal of parity. The social thuggery that takes a polymorphously perverse infant and bullies it into a heterosexual man or woman finds an organic correlative in the body, in the opposition of the sexes and their organs. Perhaps because Freud is the great theorist of

sexual ambiguity, he is also the inventor of a dramatic sexual antithesis: between the embarrassing clitoris that girls desert and the vagina whose erotogenic powers they embrace as mature women.¹²⁶

More generally, what might loosely be called patriarchy may have appeared to Freud as the only possible way to organize the relations between the sexes, leading him to write as if its signs in the body, external active penis versus internal passive vagina, were "natural." But in Freud's question of how it is that "a woman develops out of a child with a bisexual disposition," the word "woman" clearly refers not to natural sex but to theatrical gender, to socially defined roles. The supposed opposition of men and women, "exclusive gender identity," in Gayle Rubin's terms, "far from being an expression of natural differences . . . is the suppression of natural similarities."¹²⁷ In *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud seems poignantly aware of the painful processes through which body parts are sorted out and come to represent the most telling of differences. Civilization, like a conquering people, subjects others to its "exploitation," proscribes "manifestations of sexual life in children," makes "heterosexual genital love" the only permitted sort, and in so doing takes the infant, "an animal organism with (like others) an unmistakably bisexual disposition" and molds it into *either* a man or a woman.¹²⁸ The power of culture thus represents itself in bodies, forges them, as on an anvil, into the required shape. What Rosalind Coward has called in another context "ideologies of appropriate desires and orientations" must struggle—one hopes unsuccessfully—to find their signs in the flesh.¹²⁹ Freud's argument, flying as it does in the face of centuries of anatomical knowledge, is a testament to the freedom with which the authority of nature can be rhetorically appropriated to legitimize the creations of culture.

It is, however, an argument that works on its own terms and thereby illustrates just how powerfully culture operates on the body. In the first place, Freud remained a Lamarckian all his life. He believed in the inheritance of acquired characteristics, which he generalized to include traits of the psyche—aggressions and need, for example. Need, he wrote to his colleague Karl Abraham, is nothing other than the "power of unconscious ideas over one's own body, of which we see remnants in hysteria, in short, 'the omnipotence of thought.'"¹³⁰

Hysteria is the model for mind over matter. The hysteric, like the patient who feels pain or itches in a missing limb, has physical symptoms that defy neurology. The hysteric's seizures, twitches, coughs, and squints are not the result of lesions but of neurotic cathexes, of the pathological

attachment of libidinal energies to body parts. In other words, parts of the body in hysterics become occupied, taken possession of, filled with energies that manifest themselves organically. (Freud's term *Besetzung* is translated by the English neologism "cathexis." The verb *besetzen* also has the sense of "charge," as with a furnace, or "tamp," as with a blasting charge, or "set in place," as with a paving stone or a jewel.)

Freud knew that the natural locus of woman's erotic pleasure was the clitoris and that it competed with the culturally necessary locus of her pleasure, the vagina. Marie Bonaparte reports that her mentor gave her Felix Bryk's *Neger Eros* to read. The author argued that the Nandi tribes engaged in clitoral excision on nubile seventeen- and eighteen-year-old girls so as to encourage the transfer of orgasmic sensitivity from its "infantile" zone to the vagina, where it must necessarily come to rest. The Nandi were purportedly not interested in suppressing female pleasure but merely in facilitating its redirection to social ends. Freud drew Bonaparte's attention to the fact that Bryk must have been familiar with his views and that the hypothesis regarding Nandi orgasmic transfer was worth investigating.

Bonaparte's efforts to discover the fortunes of "clitoroidal" versus "vaginal" sexuality in women whose clitoris had been excised proved inconclusive, but she did offer a theoretical formulation of the transfer of erotic sensibility that fits my understanding of Freud's theory of female sexuality. "I believe," writes Bonaparte, "that the ritual sexual mutilations imposed on African women since time immemorial . . . constitute the exact physical counterpart of the psychical intimidations imposed in childhood on the sexuality of European little girls."¹³¹ "Civilized" people no longer seek to destroy the old home of sensibility—an ironic observation for Bonaparte, since she collected cases of European excision and herself underwent painful and unsuccessful surgery to move her clitoris nearer her vaginal opening so that she might be "normally orgasmic"—but enforce the occupation, or cathexis, of a new organ by less violent means.

If we put all of this together, Freud's argument might work as follows. Whatever polymorphous perverse practices might have obtained in the distant past, or today among children and animals, the continuity of the species and the development of civilization depend on the adoption by women of their correct sexuality. For a woman to make the switch from clitoris to vagina is to accept the feminine social role that only she can fill. Each woman must adapt anew to the redistribution of sensibility that

further this end, must reinscribe on her body the racial history of bisexuality. But neurology is no help. On the contrary. Thus the move is hysterical, a recathexis that works against the organic structures of the body. Like the missing-limb phenomenon, it involves feeling what is not there. Becoming a sexually mature woman is therefore living an oxymoron, becoming a lifelong "normal hysteric," for whom a conversion neurosis is termed "acceptive."

And this gets us back to Freud's concern, which like Shakespeare's at the end of *Twelfth Night* is somehow to assure that bodies whose anatomies do not guarantee the dominance of heterosexual procreative sex nevertheless dedicate themselves to their assigned roles. But Freud is at the same time a product of nineteenth-century biologism, which postulates two sexes with distinctive organs and physiologies, and of an evolutionism that guarantees the adaptation of genital parts to heterosexual intercourse. In the end, the cultural myth of vaginal orgasm is told in the language of science. And thus, not thanks to but in spite of neurology, a girl becomes the Viennese bourgeois ideal of a woman.

I end this book with Freud not because he comes at the end of the making of sexual difference but because he posed its problems so richly. I might have ended with the scientists, including my great-uncle Ernst Laqueur who in the 1930s worried about endocrinological androgeny when male hormones were found in the female and female hormones in the male. But that worry is only a chemical version of the sorts of issues already raised by nineteenth-century embryology. Freud, precisely because he shattered the old categories of man and woman, had to work hard and ingeniously to establish new ones. With all his passion for biology, this preeminent twentieth-century thinker showed how difficult it is for culture to make the body fit into the categories necessary for biological and thus cultural reproduction. Two sexes are not the necessary, natural consequence of corporeal difference. Nor, for that matter, is one sex. The ways in which sexual difference have been imagined in the past are largely unconstrained by what was actually known about this or that bit of anatomy, this or that physiological process, and derive instead from the rhetorical exigencies of the moment. Of course the specific language changes over time—Freud's version of the one-sex model is not articulated in the same vocabulary as Galen's—and so does the cultural setting. But basically the content of talk about sexual difference is unfettered by fact, and is as free as mind's play.