

**Laqueur, Thomas.**

***Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation.***

**New York: Zone, 2003 (501 pp)**

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Thomas Laqueur's recent extensive study on masturbation is exhaustive both in terms of the time span that it covers and in terms of the discourses it explores. The book traces the history of masturbation from classical antiquity to postmodernity, in a multiplicity of texts: religious, philosophical, historical and medical documents, pornography, diaries, autobiographies and novels. *Solitary Sex* examines a variety of diverse discourses from the Jewish and Christian traditions to Enlightenment theories of atomism, to twentieth-century psychology, to modern feminist and gay movements, postmodern art and the World Web. The reader who might confront with skepticism a 500-page study on what has been considered a "deviant" sexual practice, is offered a well-justified confutation: the history of masturbation, as Laqueur characteristically points out, is the history of freedom and individualism, and it is not accidental that modern masturbation coincides with the birth of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Defoe's early novels, and the first stock-market crashes (13).

Secret, democratic and luxuriantly available, masturbation is a creature of the Enlightenment, the sexuality of modernity and the bourgeoisie. In Chapter I ("The Beginning") its birth is dated "in or around 1712" with the appearance of *Onania*, a bestseller by an anonymous author, detected by Laqueur to be John Marten, a "surgeon of sorts who wrote soft-core medical pornography" (15). With the publication of *Onania* science claims the authority of religion, and, for the first time in history, private sex is pronounced a form of "self-pollution," a threat to moral integrity. The central and most intriguing question that is posed in Laqueur's study is why solitary sex became a problem at a time when individualism was celebrated and sexual pleasure was secularly approved. Its answer, though, lies suspended until chapters four and five ("The Problem with Masturbation" and "Why Masturbation Became a Problem"), as chapters two and three ("The Spread of Masturbation from *Onania* to the Web" and "Masturbation Before *Onania*") analyze with methodical precision and detail the deployment of masturbation, as well as the reasons why it played such a small role in the ethics of the body before the eighteenth century. Aware of impatient readers, however, the author wittily advises them to feel free to ramble through the book's pages and move to parts of greater interest to them.

Why is masturbation, a mere mockable substitute for the real thing in classical tradition, transformed into such a disturbing practice that took on negative meanings in the eighteenth century? The reader is guided towards the most plausible answer to this puzzle only after all possible hypotheses have been attentively examined and refuted. No increase in the cases of masturbation can be observed in the eighteenth century and no medical discoveries proved it to

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be dangerous. Neither Protestantism, nor an attack on sexual pleasure were the reasons why masturbation became a problem, since the Enlightenment defended the individual's need for satisfaction and luxury. There were three main factors that converted it into an unnatural practice: masturbation was secretive, fictive and unlimited. As a result, it aggravated the most perplexing problem that eighteenth-century moral philosophy and political theory had to face, namely, that of how the individual was to become part of the new social order that no longer believed in a hierarchic, organic universe.

Although the Enlightenment exalted privacy as a foundation of the self, masturbation was socially inappropriate and suggested uncontrolled privacy, into which the civilizing process could not reach (232). It was, interestingly enough, like the then newly-burgeoning habit of novel reading, the only sin without a witness (223). As such, it achieved the impossible: "a totally self-contained system of fetish and arousal that nowhere touches down in social reality" (231), and proved that the private, autarkic self did exist despite all efforts to mobilize it for the public good (235). Furthermore, masturbatory desire was fictive, its pleasure was "a sham version of real pleasure," "virtual reality orgasm" (220), "the crack cocaine of sexuality" (21), as it was motivated by a phantasm and substituted fantasy objects for reality. And, finally, it was a seductively and addictively easy transgression, an excessive, self-sufficing practice of which anyone could have as much as one wanted and which could neither be sated nor moderated (210). In one of the book's most engaging arguments, Laqueur illustrates how this masturbatory spermatic economy of unlimited, free pleasure is a clear reflection of the innovative economy of the time that valued credit, promising something for nothing. Masturbation, in a nutshell, was a mercantilist's dream and a moralist's nightmare (224).

The last chapter of the book ("Solitary Sex in the Twentieth Century") delves into modern views of masturbation, according to which it begins to be considered a healthy and liberating practice. By the 1930s it became medically benign, and was no longer a sin, but a problem of ego psychology. It still marked, though, the moral boundaries of the self, as for Freud it is denial of masturbation that indicates the beginning of civilization. In the 1960s and beyond masturbation becomes a means of "reclaiming the self from the regulatory mechanisms of civil society and of the patriarchal sexual order into which the Enlightenment and its successors had put it" (277). For women's and gay movements, which fought for direct, unmediated and autonomous pleasure, masturbation is a sign of self-control. Still, Laqueur contends, oscillating between "self-discovery and self-absorption, desire and excess, privacy and loneliness, innocence and guilt" (420) masturbation, loaded with contrasted meanings, remains one of the most enigmatic sexualities of our era.

In conclusion, its interdisciplinarity, its painstaking investigation of the

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subject across time, as well as its acute perspective, render *Solitary Sex* the first complete and impressive study on masturbation. The book can prove to be remarkably engaging and inspiring not only for historians, or eighteenth-century specialists, but for numerous scholars in fields as variant as sociology, art history, philosophy, psychology, religion, or literary criticism.

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