



Solitary Sex : A Cultural History of Masturbation

By Thomas W Laqueur, Thomas W. Laqueur

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At a time when almost any victimless sexual practice has its public advocates and almost every sexual act is fit for the front page, the easiest, least harmful, and most universal one is embarrassing, discomfiting, and genuinely radical when openly acknowledged. Masturbation may be the last taboo. But this is not a holdover from a more benighted age. The ancient world cared little about the subject; it was a backwater of Jewish and Christian teaching about sexuality. Infact, solitary sex as a serious moral issue can be dated with a precision rare in cultural history; Laqueur identifies it with the publication of the anonymous tract *Onania* in about 1722. Masturbation is a creation of the Enlightenment, of some of its most important figures, and of the most profound changes it unleashed. It is modern. It worried at first not conservatives, but progressives. It was the first truly democratic sexuality that could be of ethical interest for women as much as for men, for boys and girls as much as for their elders. The book's range is vast. It begins with the prehistory of solitary sex in the Bible and ends with third-wave feminism, conceptual artists, and the Web. It explains how and why this humble and once obscure means of sexual gratification became the evil twin -- or the perfect instance -- of the great virtues of modern humanity and commercial society: individual moral autonomy and privacy, creativity and the imagination, abundance and desire.

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Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Laqueur's *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* is a classic work in history and gender studies, and a regular on syllabi around the world. In his latest study, the UC Berkeley historian maps out the changing nature of Western culture's ongoing obsession with manual self-pleasuring and its effects. Not surprisingly, masturbation's history is fraught with anxiety, particularly since it was often thought to irrevocably damage its practitioners, both morally and physically. As one nineteenth century medical dictionary warns: "However secret the practice... it leaves an indelible mark." Further back, in the 18th century, when expressions of "imagination, solitude, and excess became newly important and newly worrisome," masturbation was seen as representing a lack of self-discipline, "emblematic of all that was beyond social surveillance." Beginning in the politicized, post-free love 1970s, it became "a way of reclaiming the self from the regulatory mechanisms of civil society and of the patriarchal social order into which the Enlightenment and its successors had put it." In the 1990s, it was a pop culture mainstay, a staple of *Something About Mary* and *Seinfeld* jokes. More surprising is the fact that masturbation was of great interest to major writers and philosophers: Laqueur finds Voltaire, Mary Wollstonecraft, Swift, Rousseau, Kant and Whitman all thinking and writing about this "solitary vice." Laqueur calls masturbation both the "first truly democratic sexuality" and the "crack cocaine of sex": at once addictive and readily accessible to all. His writing is free from embarrassment and needless jargon (though it does not shy away from complex formulations of manual sex's complexes), and, with 32 b&w illustrations, it should be a big hit on campus. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From [The New Yorker](#)

How did masturbation, arguably the safest sexual act, come to be seen as a moral aberration with ghastly physical effects? Laqueur, a historian at Berkeley, traces this view to the anonymous publication, around 1712, of a tract entitled "Onania." The dangers of onanism became a key concern of Enlightenment thinkers, whose preoccupation with social order made them see this inherently private activity as self-abuse in the most literal sense. (Kant thought that it was worse than suicide.) Laqueur is persuasive, but his belief that masturbation was not a moral problem before the eighteenth century leaves him with a lot of medieval Christian guilt to explain away. An engaging writer, he has a penchant for with-it language—masturbation is both "the first democratic, equal-opportunity would-be vice" and "the crack cocaine of sexuality"—and in the later part of his book he devotes too much attention to transgressive artists whose cultural importance is marginal. His assertion that after the "post-porn" performance art of Annie Sprinkle masturbation "will never be the same" seems, to say the least, unlikely.

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Review

"Laqueur's scholarly courage—for it took courage to write this book—has reaped ample rewards: *Solitary Sex* is a brilliant exploration of the shadow side of the Enlightenment." Stephen Greenblatt, Harvard University

"A compendious and witty analysis of the subject." **Jenny Diski** *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

"A superb new volume... it's a helluva ride." **Emma Tom** *Weekend Australian*

"... [A] long, thoughtful meditation on privacy, solitude, the imagination and what Mr. Laqueur calls 'the morally autonomous, modern' self." **E. Eakin** *New York Times Website*

"As a work of scholarly research... Professor Laqueur's hefty tome is without equal." **Alexander Waugh** *Sunday Telegraph (UK)*

"... courageous... the celebration of the imagination has to include a place for solitary sex." **Stephen Greenblatt** *New York Review of Books*

"Deeply learned..." **Robert A. Nye**, PhD *JAMA*

"Enlightening." **Patty Lamberti** *Playboy*

"His writing is free from embarrassment and needless jargon...." *Publishers Weekly*

"[*Solitary Sex*] will, it almost goes without saying, become the standard work on the subject." **James Delingpole** *The Spectator*

"Laqueur argues entertainingly that 'onanism' went on to shape the way that we experience ourselves as modern, autonomous individuals." **Heather Findlay** *Girlfriends*

"Laqueur is an impeccable historian of ideas... he writes in an elegant, almost mesmerizing prose...." **Davenport-Hines** *TLS*

"Laqueur is persuasive. An engaging writer." Briefly Noted *The New Yorker*

"Laqueur tackles with aplomb what has been called the last taboo." *Kirkus Reviews*

"Laqueur's penetrating analysis will fascinate social historians and the intellectual public. Recommended."
Martha Cornog *Library Journal*

"That masturbation has unsettling truths to tell us about our sexuality has always seemed likely; that the history of masturbation has so much to tell us about the history of freedom and individualism—about the political paradoxes of solitude—is startling. The sheer wit and verve of Laqueur's scholarship—his marvellous possession of the facts and fantasies—makes *Solitary Sex* a remarkable and compelling book."
Adam Phillips, psychoanalyst

"... the best sort of contemporary historical scholarship, combining historical detective work and detailed explication with a long view." **Jeffrey Weeks** *Times Higher Education Supplement*

"This is no cute 'n' frothy pop-cultural round-up: it's a very scholarly work...." **T. Glyde** *Time Out*

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