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BY  
SIGMUND  
FREUD

A STUDY IN PSYCHOSEXUALITY

A VINTAGE BOOK

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# Leonardo da Vinci

A STUDY  
IN PSYCHOSEXUALITY  
by Sigmund Freud

AUTHORIZED TRANSLATION

*by A. A. Brill, Ph.B., M.D.*



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*Leonardo da Vinci*

A STUDY IN PSYCHOSEXUALITY

# Introduction

BY A. A. BRILL, PH.B., M.D.

In the minds of most people, even among the intelligentsia, Freud is still closely associated with sex. To be sure, he threw much light on this primary instinct, yet this is only a very small part of his great achievements. This association, this linking of sex and Freud, as if they had appeared in the same breath, is based on the fact that, after sex had been kept more or less incarcerated for almost two thousand years in the nether regions of civilized mankind, Freud discovered it, as it were, and established that it was not only astir, but often very meddlesome. But as it had not been permitted to function openly and naturally since the passing of Pagan culture, sex went

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underground and behaved like an outcast who, plying his trade secretly and sneakily, often causes confusion by popping up where and when least expected.

However, when one looks back to the two generations that followed Freud's dictum that *no neurosis is possible in a normal sexual life*, one is amazed at the changes that have occurred since then in our whole mode of living. The riddle of the neuroses which had baffled mankind from the beginning of civilization had been solved as soon as Freud demonstrated that the neuroses were direct descendants of the despised Eros. The same happened to folklore, fairy tales and myths, which, like dreams, are now capable of solution. Indeed, all mental disciplines have thus been almost entirely rewritten since psychoanalysis came on the scene. But lest I be carried away by paeans to the great master, I must restrict myself to that part of Freud's discoveries which is still closely associated with his name, namely, sex.

There were many other scientists, daring thinkers, who wrote and speculated about the instinct of sex and its manifestations, even before Freud. We have in mind Havelock Ellis, v. Krafft-Ebing, Paolo Mantegazza, Magnus Hirsch-

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feld, Iwan Bloch and many others. They all left very valuable contributions, which laid the foundation for a scientific understanding of sex, but it remained for Freud to correlate all these findings with those he discovered psychoanalytically and thus give us a full understanding of normal and abnormal sexuality. For the writers who preceded Freud centered most of their investigations on sexual manifestations of adults, and to some extent on deviations from the normal. Hence what they described was usually regarded as something alien to the normal person. Indeed, up to the advent of Freud, the average person would only reluctantly admit that he had anything to do with sex, nor could he imagine that sex had any direct relation to children. If anything occasionally cropped up in scientific or lay publications concerning sex in children, it was quickly rejected as something inapplicable to innocent youngsters.

This neglect or side-stepping of sex in the face of great advances in other human problems was largely due to the fact that sex, which the Pagan world considered natural, was systematically suppressed by the new followers of the Messiah. The Greeks and Romans exalted beauty and even deified sex, but St. Paul, the ascetic apostle said

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in his First Epistle to the Corinthians: "It is good for a man not to touch a woman. . . ." "But if they cannot contain let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn." The early Church fathers not only made every effort to follow the Jewish austere views of sexuality, but, as is always the case in new movements, they surpassed them in rigidity. For the Jews were quite sensible about sex. They were, to be sure, against sex worship and everything that went with it, but they allowed sufficient play for Eros to insure healthy sex living. But the Church fathers lost all sense of proportion in their zeal to exterminate the erotic from their followers. Beauty, the ruling passion of the Greeks, soon gave way to ugliness, and cleanliness which was later put next to godliness, had no place in saintliness. On the contrary, "The purity of the body and its garments," said St. Paul, "means the impurity of the soul."<sup>1</sup>

Following the Dark Ages the Renaissance strove hard to revive the wisdom and splendor that was ancient Greece and Rome. Bold spirits began to undig the now-mutilated Venuses, and to record the forgotten thoughts of the Ionian

<sup>1</sup> Havelock Ellis; *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, Vol. IV, p. 31. Random House, New York.

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sages; slowly but surely the European world returned to sanity. Yet, despite continual progress in art and literature, sex, to which they were deeply indebted, was kept in the background. The science of medicine, which progressively developed new methods of medical and surgical treatment even for venereal diseases, kept discreetly silent about the normal manifestations of sex. Even when it was no longer a sin to indulge in legitimate sex, few if any scientists studied the normal sex functions in the same manner as those of the heart or stomach. This attitude continued into our own times, and when Freud made the provocative statement that all neurotic symptoms are traceable to sexual disturbances, his colleagues were impressively shocked. Since 1893, the new theories of Ferri<sup>1</sup> and Freud<sup>2</sup> on hysteria were hailed as brilliant and fruitful discoveries, but as Freud stressed the sexual factor in the neurosis, he was ostracized, excommunicated by his colleagues, his collaborator and his publisher abandoned him, but as the years passed, he withdrew himself, and finally he died.

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was surprised at this vehement reaction; as an experienced researcher and close observer, he could not quite understand this sudden outburst. In his *History of the Psychoanalytic Movement*<sup>3</sup> Freud relates that he really did not deserve the credit for the injection of sexual concepts into the genesis of the neuroses. He heard this view from two of his former teachers, Charcot and Chrobak, who independently observed that sex played a part in the etiology of the neuroses. Their remarks, casually expressed, lay dormant in his mind for a long time; he gave no thought to them for years, but as he continued to analyze his patients' mental productions they grew in intensity and took on definite form. The more analytic material he obtained, the more convinced he became of the ubiquity of sex in the etiology of the neuroses.

When I presented Freud's theories in New York City I had the same experience that he had in Vienna. Despite the repeated forewarnings which he had given me, I still wondered why psychiatrists and neurologists, my most implacable opponents, were so deeply shocked by Freud's theories of sex in the neuroses. I could

<sup>3</sup> *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, p. 933, transl. by A. A. Brill, Modern Library, 1938.

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not quite grasp why these scholarly gentlemen, most of them authorities in their respective fields, did not possess enough objectivity to see that sex did play an important role in everybody's life, and especially in the lives of those sensitive individuals designated as neurotics. Their seeming blindness to the role of sex in normal and neurotic life was a great surprise to me because I was well aware that physicians, particularly psychiatrists, have always attached importance to the role of sex in nervous and mental diseases. I recalled that long before I ever heard of Freud, in my pre-medical life, most young people thought that masturbation made one nervous, that it was likely to produce insanity and other dreadful maladies, and that *fellatio*, called by another name, was responsible for "softening of the brain." Later, as a medical student, our professor of neurology taught us that sex played a great part in the etiology of both organic and functional nervous diseases. Professor M. Allan Starr, in his lectures and in his book, repeated that sexual excesses played a part in the etiology of tabes, Friedrichs ataxia, myelitis, and neurasthenia. Yet only six or seven years later when I read a paper on Freud's theories of the neuroses in the New York Acad-

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emy of Medicine, Professor Starr vented violent opposition to Freud because he injected sex into the etiology of the neuroses.

In order to clarify this puzzling problem to myself I decided to examine the psychiatric literature of the pre-Freudian times. I wished to know what the older psychiatrists and neurologists of the last, and of the early part of this, century thought about the role of sex in the neuroses. From the large amount of material perused, I selected the following characteristic views: W. Griesinger<sup>4</sup> states: "*Sexual excesses* have a similar double injurious influence, in consequence of the mental excitement which is frequently associated therewith, and owing to the psychical exhaustion which results. The same may be said of onanism, which is likewise an important and frequent cause of insanity. Besides the emission of semen, and the direct action of the often permanent irritation of the genital organ on the spinal cord and the brain, onanism certainly has a still more injurious action on the mental state and a more direct influence on the production of insanity." He quotes authorities

<sup>4</sup> *Mental Pathology and Therapeutics*, p. 173, transl. by Robertson & Rutherford, London 1867.

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who ascribe the majority of all the cases treated in public asylums as due to onanism.

This statement plainly shows that Griesinger had pronounced views on the importance of sex in nervous and mental diseases. Like all the other psychiatrists and neurologists, not only of his time but also those who preceded and followed him, Griesinger attributed many mental ailments to sexual excesses and masturbation.

William H. Hammond<sup>5</sup> states that excessive venereal indulgence and masturbation are causes of insanity. His son, Graeme Hammond, followed in his father's footsteps. He too believed that sexual excesses or sexual transgressions must play a subsidiary part in the causation of tabes, in chronic myelitis, and even in progressive muscular dystrophy.

J. C. Bucknill, and Daniel Hack Tuke,<sup>6</sup> though doubting that the sexual vice is a cause of insanity, nevertheless quote the following outstanding authorities to confirm this view: Esquirol stated that 5 per cent of the female admissions to the Salpêtrière were attributed to prostitutes; Dr. Earl claimed that nineteen out of 572

<sup>5</sup> *A Treatise of Diseases of the Nervous System*, p. 377.

<sup>6</sup> *Manual of Psychological Medicine*, 1874.

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male admissions to the Northampton State Lunatic Hospital (Massachusetts) were attributed to masturbation; Drs. Bell and Ray of the McLean Asylum (Massachusetts) described cases (p. 343) of a form of moral insanity due to masturbation, and Schroeder Van der Kolk, who, describing (p. 345) such forms of insanity, stated: "If one perceives in a young man a certain shyness, and an evasion and castdown look, and a dull irresolute character, which are soon accompanied by stupidity and confusion of head, and weakness of memory, then one must be mindful of this sad vice."

Dr. Charles H. Handfield<sup>7</sup> quotes Dr. Copeland to the effect that "increased reflex excitability of the nerves of the female generative organs is one of the principal causative conditions of hysterical effects, and that an erethism proceeding from the generative apparatus might, I can well conceive, give rise to erotomania."

From the quotations just cited it can be readily seen that these authors knew very little, if anything, about sex and its functions. Their statements, as everybody now knows, were not based on scientific facts, but followed a cliché which had existed for centuries. Kraepelin, the

<sup>7</sup> *Clinical Observations on Functional Nervous Diseases.*

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father of modern psychiatry, clearly showed toward the end of the last century that masturbation, frequently observed in psychotics of both sexes, is the effect rather than the cause of the disease. For masturbation is practically a universal phenomenon in normal life, and has long been considered by sexologists as a part of the normal evolution of modern sex life.

However, as time went on, the perniciousness of sex in nervous and mental diseases, though doubted, was by no means entirely abandoned. Thus Dr. Jerome K. Bandy, Professor of Psychological Medicine and Diseases of the Nervous System,<sup>8</sup> states: "It has often been said that hysteria is generally developed in spinsters, widows, or women who live separated from their husbands and that it is an unrelieved erethysm of the sexual organs that produces the hysterical manifestations. This view has caused many older writers to advise marriage as a means of curing hysteria in single women. But I am far from concurring in this opinion, considering it an injustice to many pure and noble women to misjudge them in this respect simply because they are hysterical." Dr. Bandy goes on to say that hysteria is found in prostitutes whose erotic

<sup>8</sup> *Lectures on Diseases of the Nervous System*, p. 292, 1876.

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faculties are sufficiently developed and satisfied, and that many husbands told him that far from being sexually very excitable, their hysterical wives are disagreeably cold and indifferent, which shows that passion has nothing to do with the disease.

Despite Dr. Bandy's admonition that marriage is not a cure-all for hysteria, I have seen many women who were married against their will in order to cure them of a nervous or mental disease. Moreover, although Dr. Bandy absolved unrequited sex from any responsibility for the production of hysteria in spinsters, widows and single women, he nevertheless considers it an injustice to think that "pure and noble women" are in any way affected by sex. Dr. Bandy seemed to have sensed something which he did not quite understand, because he did not know anything about the nature of sex.

Dr. Henry Maudsley, whose works of three generations ago can be read with interest and profit by modern psychiatrists, states: "The development of the sexual system at puberty and the great revolution which is thereby affected in mental life must needs often give a color to the phenomena of insanity occurring after

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puberty.”<sup>9</sup> Dr. Maudsley then cites cases of insanity in both sexes as due to masturbation.

After I had perused the numerous books from which I have quoted, I wondered what the “Patron Saint” of American psychiatry had to say on the subject. For my opponents were all members of the American Psychiatric Association, whose flag is adorned with the portrait of Benjamin Rush, who was not only a great psychiatrist but a great American, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. In his *Medical Inquiries and Observations upon the Diseases of the Mind*<sup>10</sup> he had this to say on sex and mental diseases: “This appetite which was implanted in our natures for the purpose of propagating the species, when excessive, becomes a disease both of the body and mind. When restrained, it produces tremors, a flushing of the face, sighing, nocturnal pollutions, hysteria, hypochondriasis, and in women the *furor uterinus*.” He then goes on to say that sexual excesses and onanism produce impotence, dysuria, tabes dorsalis, “pulmonary consumption,” dyspepsia,

<sup>9</sup> Maudsley: *The Physiology and Pathology of the Mind*, p. 251. Appleton & Co. New York, 1867.

<sup>10</sup> Philadelphia, 1827.