

# *Making* SEX

BODY AND GENDER FROM THE GREEKS TO FREUD



THOMAS LAQUEUR

*Making* **SEX**

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**THOMAS LAQUEUR**

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Designed by Gwen Frankfeldt

*Making* **SEX**

*For Gail and Hannah*

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## Preface

This book began without my knowing it in 1977 when I was on leave at St. Antony's College, Oxford, doing research for what was to be a history of the life cycle. I was reading seventeenth-century midwifery manuals—in search of materials on how birth was organized—but found instead advice to women on how to become pregnant in the first place. Midwives and doctors seemed to believe that female orgasm was among the conditions for successful generation, and they offered various suggestions on how it might be achieved. Orgasm was assumed to be a routine, more or less indispensable part of conception. This surprised me. Experience must have shown that pregnancy often takes place without it; moreover, as a nineteenth-century historian I was accustomed to doctors debating whether women had orgasms at all. By the period I knew best, what had been an ordinary, if explosive, corporeal occurrence had become a major problem of moral physiology.

My life-cycle project slowly slipped away. I got married; we had a child; I spent a year in medical school in 1981–1982. Precisely how these changes in my life allowed this book to take me over is still not entirely clear, but they did. (Its relevant intellectual origins are more obvious: a group of friends started *Representations*; I taught a graduate seminar on the body and the body social in nineteenth-century literature with Catherine Gallagher; I encountered feminist literary and historical scholarship; my almost daily companion in the rational recreation of drinking cappuccino, Peter Brown, was working on his book about the body and society in late antiquity.) At first the question of disappearing orgasm was the focus of my research, and what follows still bears some marks of its

origins in that preoccupation. But gradually the *summa voluptas* was assimilated into the larger question of the relationship between the body and sexual difference and, indeed, the nature of sexual difference generally.

There might appear to be no problem here. It seems perfectly obvious that biology defines the sexes—what else could sex mean? Hence historians can have nothing much to say on the matter. To have a penis or not says it all in most circumstances, and one might for good measure add as many other differences as one chooses: women menstruate and lactate, men do not; women have a womb that bears children, and men lack both this organ and this capacity. I do not dispute any of these facts, although if pushed very hard they are not quite so conclusive as one might think. (A man is presumably still a man without a penis, and scientific efforts to fix sex definitively, as in the Olympic Committee's testing of the chromosomal configuration of buccal cavity cells, leads to ludicrous results.)

More to the point, though, no particular understanding of sexual difference historically follows from undisputed facts about bodies. I discovered early on that the erasure of female pleasure from medical accounts of conception took place roughly at the same time as the female body came to be understood no longer as a lesser version of the male's (a one-sex model) but as its incommensurable opposite (a two-sex model). Orgasms that had been common property were now divided. Organs that had been seen as interior versions of what the male had outside—the vagina as penis, the uterus as scrotum—were by the eighteenth century construed as of an entirely different nature. Similarly, physiological processes—menstruation or lactation—that had been seen as part of a common economy of fluids came to be understood as specific to women alone.

Some of these changes might be understood as the results of scientific progress—menstruation is not the same thing as hemorrhoidal bleeding—but the chronology of discoveries did not line up with reconceptions of the sexual body. Moreover, chronology itself soon crumbled and I was faced with the startling conclusion that a two-sex and a one-sex model had always been available to those who thought about difference and that there was no scientific way to choose between them. The former might indeed have come into prominence during the Enlightenment, but one sex did not disappear. In fact, the more I put pressure on the historical record, the less clear the sexual divide became; the more the body was

pressed into service as the foundation for sex, the less solid the boundaries became. With Freud the process reaches its most crystalline indeterminacy. What began with a history of female sexual pleasure and its attempted erasure has become instead the story of how sex, as much as gender, is made.

A book that deals with so broad a range of time and materials as this one owes a multitude of debts. In the first place I could not have written it—both because the required scholarship was not in place and because the subject would not have been taken seriously—without the intellectual revolution wrought by feminism since World War II and especially during the past twenty years. My work is in some sense an elaboration of Simone de Beauvoir's claim that women are the second sex. It could also not have been written without the sustenance of my intellectual community at Berkeley and elsewhere. My colleagues on *Representations*, among whom I first went semipublic on this topic back in 1983, have offered advice, encouragement, criticism, and good company. Several of my friends and colleagues have not only read and offered detailed criticism of my manuscript but discussed it with me tirelessly in its many, many avatars over the years: Peter Brown, Carol Clover, Catherine Gallagher, Stephen Greenblatt, Thomas Metcalf, Randolph Starn, Irv Scheiner, and Reggie Zelnik. Wendy Lesser would not read it all, but she talked me through many drafts, published part of Chapter 1 in the *Threepenny Review*, and consistently represented the views of the general reader. My colleague David Keightley, leader of the Yuppie Bikers, has heard lots about sex over the miles and offered the perspective of ancient China. Marjorie Beale, Mario Biagioli, Natalie Zemon Davis, Evelyn Fox-Keller, Isabel Hull, and Roy Porter provided detailed comments on the manuscript in its penultimate form and greatly helped me to refine my arguments and the book's architecture.

The graduate-student History and Gender Group at Berkeley also read a draft and, although I have not accepted its suggestion that I bare my innermost feelings about the polymorphous perverse and erotic desire, I have profited greatly from the astute suggestions and numerous references provided by Lisa Cody, Paul Friedland, Nasser Hussain, and Vanessa Schwartz. And then, of course, a book that covers so many topics over so long a period is beholden to specialists: David Cohen, Leslie Jones, and Gregory Vlastos offered tough criticism, only some of which I accepted, on Chapter 2. Susanna Barrows, André Burguiere, William



Bouwsma, Caroline Bynum, Joan Cadden, Roger Chartier, Alain Corbin, Laura Englestein, Lynn Hunt, Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, Susan Kent, Jack Lesch, Emily Martin, Regina Morantz-Sanchez, Joan Scott, Nancy Vickers, and Judith Walkowitz have been immensely generous with references and advice. My research assistants since the early 1980s—Mary McGarry, Jonathan Clark, Eric Steinle, Ramona Curry, Jan Matlock, Catherine Kudlick, Russ Geoffrey, M.D., Alice Bullard, and Dean Bell—made it possible for me to read and begin to understand a wide range of sources. Alexander Nehamas not only answered many questions about Greek words but offered the support of an old friend and the limpid intelligence of a philosopher. My editor Lindsay Waters at Harvard University Press saw a book when none was there; he read early drafts with intelligent care and rightly forced a reluctant author back to the drawing board. Patricia Williams became my editor by adoption—she was on the spot in Berkeley—and, in addition to timely hand holding, helped me enormously in understanding what had to be done to turn what I thought was the final draft into the present book. Joyce Backman was a dream of a manuscript editor: funny, erudite, and careful.

I dedicate this book to my wife Gail Saliterman, who typed none but read most of it, and to my eight-year-old daughter Hannah, who recently pointed out that I have been working on it all her life. In ways too deep to articulate, they made my work possible.

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# Contents

- 1** Of Language and the Flesh 1
- 2** Destiny Is Anatomy 25
- 3** New Science, One Flesh 63
- 4** Representing Sex 114
- 5** Discovery of the Sexes 149
- 6** Sex Socialized 193
- Notes 245
- Credits 303
- Index 305

# O N E

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## Of Language and the Flesh

The first thing that strikes the careless observer is that women are unlike men. They are “the opposite sex” (though why “opposite” I do not know; what is the “neighboring sex?”). But the fundamental thing is that women are more like men than anything else in the world.

DOROTHY L. SAYERS  
“THE HUMAN-NOT-QUITE-HUMAN”

An interpretive chasm separates two interpretations, fifty years apart, of the same story of death and desire told by an eighteenth-century physician obsessed with the problem of distinguishing real from apparent death.<sup>1</sup>

The story begins when a young aristocrat whose family circumstances forced him into religious orders came one day to a country inn. He found the innkeepers overwhelmed with grief at the death of their only daughter, a girl of great beauty. She was not to be buried until the next day, and the bereaved parents asked the young monk to keep watch over her body through the night. This he did, and more. Reports of her beauty had piqued his curiosity. He pulled back the shroud and, instead of finding the corpse “disfigured by the horrors of death,” found its features still gracefully animated. The young man lost all restraint, forgot his vows, and took “the same liberties with the dead that the sacraments of marriage would have permitted in life.” Ashamed of what he had done, the hapless necrophilic monk departed hastily in the morning without waiting for the scheduled interment.

When time for burial came, indeed just as the coffin bearing the dead girl was being lowered into the ground, someone felt movement coming from the inside. The lid was torn off; the girl began to stir and soon recovered from what proved not to have been real death at all but only a

coma. Needless to say, the parents were overjoyed to have their daughter back, although their pleasure was severely diminished by the discovery that she was pregnant and, moreover, could give no satisfactory account of how she had come to be that way. In their embarrassment, the innkeepers consigned the daughter to a convent as soon as her baby was born.

Soon business brought the young aristocrat, oblivious of the consequences of his passion but far richer and no longer in holy orders because he had come into his inheritance, back to the scene of his crime. Once again he found the innkeepers in a state of consternation and quickly understood his part in causing their new misfortune. He hastened to the convent and found the object of his necrophilic desire more beautiful alive than dead. He asked for her hand and with the sacrament of marriage legitimized their child.

The moral that Jacques-Jean Bruhier asks his readers to draw from this story is that only scientific tests can make certain that a person is really dead and that even very intimate contact with a body leaves room for mistakes. But Bruhier's contemporary, the noted surgeon Antoine Louis, came to a very different conclusion, one more germane to the subject of this book, when he analyzed the case in 1752.<sup>2</sup> Based on the evidence that Bruhier himself offered, Louis argues, no one could have doubted that the girl was not dead: she did not, as the young monk testified, look dead and moreover who knows if she did not give some "demonstrative signs" in proof of her liveliness, signs that any eighteenth-century doctor or even layperson would have expected in the circumstances.

Bruhier earlier on in his book had cited numerous instances of seemingly dead young women who were revived and saved from untimely burial by amorous embraces; sexual ecstasy, "dying" in eighteenth-century parlance, turned out for some to be the path to life. Love, that "wonderful satisfactory *Death* and . . . voluntary Separation of Soul and Body," as an English physician called it, guarded the gates of the tomb.<sup>3</sup> But in this case it would have seemed extremely unlikely to an eighteenth-century observer that the innkeepers' daughter could have conceived a child without moving and thereby betraying her death.<sup>4</sup> Any medical book or one of the scores of popular midwifery, health, or marriage manuals circulating in all the languages of Europe reported it as a commonplace that "when the seed issues in the act of generation [from both men and women] there at the same time arises an extra-ordinary titillation and delight in all members of the body."<sup>5</sup> Without orgasm, another widely

circulated text announced, “the fair sex [would] neither desire nuptial embraces, nor have pleasure in them, nor conceive by them.”<sup>6</sup>

The girl *must* have shuddered, just a bit. If not her rosy cheeks then the tremors of venereal orgasm would have given her away. Bruhier’s story was thus one of fraud and not of apparent death; the innkeepers’ daughter and the monk simply conspired, Louis concludes, to escape culpability by feigning coma until the last possible moment before burial.

In 1836 the tale was told again, but now with a new twist. This time, the reality of the girl’s deathlike comatose state was not questioned. On the contrary, her becoming pregnant under these conditions was cited by Dr. Michael Ryan as one among many other cases of intercourse with insensible women to prove that orgasm was irrelevant to conception. (In one story, for example, an ostler confesses that he came to an inn and had sex with, and made pregnant, a girl who was so dead asleep before the fire that he was long gone before she awoke.) Not only need a woman not feel pleasure to conceive; she need not even be conscious.<sup>7</sup>

Near the end of the Enlightenment, in the period between these two rehearsals of the tale of the innkeepers’ daughter, medical science and those who relied on it ceased to regard the female orgasm as relevant to generation. Conception, it was held, could take place secretly, with no telltale shivers or signs of arousal; the ancient wisdom that “apart from pleasure nothing of mortal kind comes into existence” was uprooted.<sup>8</sup> Previously a sign of the generative process, deeply embedded in the bodies of men and women, a feeling whose existence was no more open to debate than was the warm, pleasurable glow that usually accompanies a good meal, orgasm was relegated to the realm of mere sensation, to the periphery of human physiology—accidental, expendable, a contingent bonus of the reproductive act.

This reorientation applied in principle to the sexual functioning of both men and women. But no one writing on such matters ever so much as entertained the idea that male passions and pleasures in general did not exist or that orgasm did not accompany ejaculation during coition. Not so for women. The newly “discovered” contingency of delight opened up the possibility of female passivity and “passionlessness.”<sup>9</sup> The purported independence of generation from pleasure created the space in which women’s sexual nature could be redefined, debated, denied, or qualified. And so it was of course. Endlessly.

The old valences were overturned. The commonplace of much contemporary psychology—that men want sex while women want relation-

ships—is the precise inversion of pre-Enlightenment notions that, extending back to antiquity, equated friendship with men and fleshliness with women. Women, whose desires knew no bounds in the old scheme of things, and whose reason offered so little resistance to passion, became in some accounts creatures whose whole reproductive life might be spent anesthetized to the pleasures of the flesh. When, in the late eighteenth century, it became a possibility that “the majority of women are not much troubled with sexual feelings,” the presence or absence of orgasm became a biological signpost of sexual difference.

The new conceptualization of female orgasm, however, was but one formulation of a more radical eighteenth-century reinterpretation of the female body in relation to the male. For thousands of years it had been a commonplace that women had the same genitals as men except that, as Nemesius, bishop of Emesa in the fourth century, put it: “theirs are inside the body and not outside it.”<sup>10</sup> Galen, who in the second century A.D. developed the most powerful and resilient model of the structural, though not spatial, identity of the male and female reproductive organs, demonstrated at length that women were essentially men in whom a lack of vital heat—of perfection—had resulted in the retention, inside, of structures that in the male are visible without. Indeed, doggerel verse of the early nineteenth century still sings of these hoary homologies long after they had disappeared from learned texts:

though they of different sexes be,  
Yet on the whole they are the same as we,  
For those that have the strictest searchers been,  
Find women are but men turned outside in.<sup>11</sup>

In this world the vagina is imagined as an interior penis, the labia as foreskin, the uterus as scrotum, and the ovaries as testicles. The learned Galen could cite the dissections of the Alexandrian anatomist Herophilus, in the third century B.C., to support his claim that a woman has testes with accompanying seminal ducts very much like the man’s, one on each side of the uterus, the only difference being that the male’s are contained in the scrotum and the female’s are not.<sup>12</sup>

Language marks this view of sexual difference. For two millennia the ovary, an organ that by the early nineteenth century had become a synecdoche for woman, had not even a name of its own. Galen refers to it by the same word he uses for the male testes, *orcheis*, allowing context to

make clear which sex he is concerned with. Herophilus had called the ovaries *didymoi* (twins), another standard Greek word for testicles, and was so caught up in the female-as-male model that he saw the Fallopian tubes—the spermatic ducts that led from each “testicle”—as growing into the neck of the bladder as do the spermatic ducts in men.<sup>13</sup> They very clearly do not. Galen points out this error, surprised that so careful an observer could have committed it, and yet the correction had no effect on the status of the model as a whole. Nor is there any technical term in Latin or Greek, or in the European vernaculars until around 1700, for vagina as the tube or sheath into which its opposite, the penis, fits and through which the infant is born.

But then, in or about the late eighteenth, to use Virginia Woolf’s device, human sexual nature changed. On this point, at least, scholars as theoretically distant from one another as Michel Foucault, Ivan Illich, and Lawrence Stone agree.<sup>14</sup> By around 1800, writers of all sorts were determined to base what they insisted were fundamental differences between the male and female sexes, and thus between man and woman, on discoverable biological distinctions and to express these in a radically different rhetoric. In 1803, for example, Jacques-Louis Moreau, one of the founders of “moral anthropology,” argued passionately against the nonsense written by Aristotle, Galen, and their modern followers on the subject of women in relation to men. Not only are the sexes different, but they are different in every conceivable aspect of body and soul, in every physical and moral aspect. To the physician or the naturalist, the relation of woman to man is “a series of oppositions and contrasts.”<sup>15</sup> In place of what, in certain situations, strikes the modern imagination as an almost perverse insistence on understanding sexual difference as a matter of degree, gradations of one basic male type, there arose a shrill call to articulate sharp corporeal distinctions. Doctors claimed to be able to identify “the essential features that belong to her, that serve to distinguish her, that make her what she is”:

All parts of her body present the same differences: all express woman; the brow, the nose, the eyes, the mouth, the ears, the chin, the cheeks. If we shift our view to the inside, and with the help of the scalpel, lay bare the organs, the tissues, the fibers, we encounter everywhere . . . the same difference.<sup>16</sup>

Thus the old model, in which men and women were arrayed according to their degree of metaphysical perfection, their vital heat, along an axis

whose telos was male, gave way by the late eighteenth century to a new model of radical dimorphism, of biological divergence. An anatomy and physiology of incommensurability replaced a metaphysics of hierarchy in the representation of woman in relation to man.

By the late nineteenth century, so it was argued, the new difference could be demonstrated not just in visible bodies but in its microscopic building blocks. Sexual difference in kind, not degree, seemed solidly grounded in nature. Patrick Geddes, a prominent professor of biology as well as a town planner and writer on a wide range of social issues, used cellular physiology to explain the “fact” that women were “more passive, conservative, sluggish and stable” than men, while men were “more active, energetic, eager, passionate, and variable.” He thought that with rare exceptions—the sea horse, the occasional species of bird—males were constituted of catabolic cells, cells that put out energy. They spent income, in one of Geddes’ favorite metaphors. Female cells, on the other hand, were anabolic; they stored up and conserved energy. And though he admitted that he could not fully elaborate the connection between these biological differences and the “resulting psychological and social differentiations,” he nevertheless justified the respective cultural roles of men and women with breathtaking boldness. Differences may be exaggerated or lessened, but to obliterate them “it would be necessary to have all the evolution over again on a new basis. What was decided among the pre-historic Protozoa cannot be annulled by an act of Parliament.”<sup>17</sup> Microscopic organisms wallowing in the primordial ooze determined the irreducible distinctions between the sexes and the place of each in society.

These formulations suggest a third and still more general aspect of the shift in the meaning of sexual difference. The dominant, though by no means universal, view since the eighteenth century has been that there are two stable, incommensurable, opposite sexes and that the political, economic, and cultural lives of men and women, their gender roles, are somehow based on these “facts.” Biology—the stable, ahistorical, sexed body—is understood to be the epistemic foundation for prescriptive claims about the social order. Beginning dramatically in the Enlightenment, there was a seemingly endless stream of books and chapters of books whose very titles belie their commitment to this new vision of nature and culture: Roussel’s *Système physique et moral de la femme*, Brachet’s chapter “Etudes du physique et du moral de la femme,” Thompson and Geddes’ starkly uncompromising *Sex*. The physical “real” world in



these accounts, and in the hundreds like them, is prior to and logically independent of the claims made in its name.

Earlier writers from the Greeks onward could obviously distinguish nature from culture, *phusis* from *nomos* (though these categories are the creation of a particular moment and had different meanings then).<sup>18</sup> But, as I gathered and worked through the material that forms this book, it became increasingly clear that it is very difficult to read ancient, medieval, and Renaissance texts about the body with the epistemological lens of the Enlightenment through which the physical world—the body—appears as “real,” while its cultural meanings are epiphenomenal. Bodies in these texts did strange, remarkable, and to modern readers impossible things. In future generations, writes Origen, “the body would become less ‘thick,’ less ‘coagulated,’ less ‘hardened,’” as the spirit warmed to God; physical bodies themselves would have been radically different before the fall, imagines Gregory of Nyssa: male and female coexisted with the image of God, and sexual differentiation came about only as the representation in the flesh of the fall from grace.<sup>19</sup> (In a nineteenth-century Urdu guide for ladies, based firmly in Galenic medicine, the prophet Mohammed is listed at the top of a list of exemplary women.<sup>20</sup> Caroline Bynum writes about women who in imitation of Christ received the stigmata or did not require food or whose flesh did not stink when putrifying.<sup>21</sup> There are numerous accounts of men who were said to lactate and pictures of the boy Jesus with breasts. Girls could turn into boys, and men who associated too extensively with women could lose the hardness and definition of their more perfect bodies and regress into effeminacy. Culture, in short, suffused and changed the body that to the modern sensibility seems so closed, autarchic, and outside the realm of meaning.

One might of course deny that such things happened or read them as entirely metaphorical or give individual, naturalistic explanations for otherwise bizarre occurrences: the girl chasing her swine who suddenly sprung an external penis and scrotum, reported by Montaigne and the sixteenth-century surgeon Ambroise Paré as an instance of sex change, was really suffering from androgen-dihydrotestosterone deficiency; she was really a boy all along who developed external male organs in puberty, though perhaps not as precipitously as these accounts would have it.<sup>22</sup> This, however, is an unconscionably external, ahistorical, and impoverished approach to a vast and complex literature about the body and culture.