

Sex and sexuality are two of the strongest forces we experience. They can be a means of bringing people together or keeping them apart. There are claims that we are in the midst of a sexual revolution, yet that 'revolution' has done nothing to free either women or men from the pressures of keeping up a role.

We are presenting Susan Lydon's article, *The Politics of Orgasm*, as part of a series on human sexuality. Lydon says, "Certainly the sexual problems of our society will never be solved until there is real and unfeigned equality between men and women."

We agree.

We believe also that if we can begin to break down the barriers between ourselves, and fight the pressures which force us to live up to norms which we ourselves do not set, that if we begin to deal honestly with our own feelings, we will create a strong base for further actions.

We must struggle with ourselves, as well as with our society, if we are truly to create a more human alternative. We must begin to free ourselves, to free our society; we must free our society to free ourselves.

**TIRESIAS, WHO HAD BEEN BOTH** man and woman, was asked, as Ovid's legend goes, to mediate in a dispute between Jove and Juno as to which sex got more pleasure from lovemaking. Tiresias unhesitatingly answered that women did. Yet in the intervening 2,000 years between Ovid's time and our own, a mythology has been built up which not only holds the opposite to be true, but has made this belief an unswerving ideology dictating the quality of relations between the sexes.

Woman's sexuality, defined by men to benefit men, has been downgraded and perverted, repressed and channeled, denied and abused until women themselves, thoroughly convinced of their sexual inferiority to men, would probably be dumfounded to learn that there is scientific proof that Tiresias was indeed right.

The myth was codified by Freud, as much as by anyone else. In "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality", Freud formulated his basic ideas concerning feminine sexuality: for little girls, the leading erogenous zone in their bodies is the clitoris, in order for the transition to womanhood to be successful, the clitoris must abandon its sexual primacy to the vagina; women in whom this transition has not been complete remain clitorally-oriented, or "sexually anaesthetic" and "psychosexually immature."

The fact that women change their leading erotogenic zone in this way, (Freud wrote) together with the wave of repression at puberty, which, as it were, puts aside their childish masculinity, are the chief determinants of the greater proneness of women to neurosis and especially to hysteria. These determinants, therefore, are intimately related to the essence of femininity.

**IN THE CONTEXT OF FREUD'S** total psychoanalytic view of women — that they are not whole human beings but mutilated males who long all their lives for a penis and must struggle to reconcile themselves to its lack — the requirement of a transfer of erotic sensation from clitoris to vagina became a *prima facie* case for their inevitable sexual (and moral) inferiority. In Freud's logic, those who struggle to become what they are not must be inferior to that to which they aspire.



# The Politics of Orgasm

Freud wrote that he could not "escape the notion (though I hesitate to give it expression) that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men . . . We must not allow ourselves to be deflected from such conclusions by the denials of the feminists, who are anxious to force us to regard the two sexes as completely equal in position and worth."

Freud himself admitted near the end of his life that his knowledge of women was inadequate. "If you want to know more about femininity, you must interrogate your own experience, or turn to the poets, or wait until science can give you more information," he said; he also expressed the hope that the female psychoanalysts who followed him would be able to find out more. But the post-Freudians adhered rigidly to the doctrine of the master, and, as in most of his work, what Freud hoped would be taken as a thesis for future study became instead a kind of canon law.

**WHILE THE NEO-FREUDIANS** haggled over the correct reading of the Freudian bible, watered-down Freudianism was wending its way into the cultural mythology via Broadway plays, novelists, popular magazines, social scientists, marriage counselors, and experts of various kinds who found it useful in projecting desired images of women. The superiority of the vaginal over the clitoral orgasm was particularly useful as a theory, since it provided a convenient basis for categorization: clitoral women were deemed immature, neurotic, bitchy, and masculine; women who had vaginal orgasms were maternal, feminine, mature, and normal.

Though frigidity should technically be defined as total inability to achieve orgasm, the orthodox Freudians (and pseudo-Freudians) preferred to define it as inability to achieve vaginal orgasm, by which definition, in 1944, Edmond Bergler adjudged between 70 and 80 percent of all women

frigid. The clitoral vs. vaginal debate raged hot and heavy among the sexologists — although Kinsey's writings stressed the importance of the clitoris to female orgasm and contradicted Bergler's statistics — but it became clear that there was something indispensable to the society in the Freudian view which allowed it to remain unchallenged in the public consciousness.

In 1966, Dr. William H. Masters and Mrs. Virginia E. Johnson published "Human Sexual Response", a massive clinical study of the physiology of sex. Briefly and simply, the Masters and Johnson conclusions about the female orgasm, based on observation of and interviews with 487 women, were these:

1) That the dichotomy of vaginal and clitoral orgasms is entirely false. Anatomically, all orgasms are centered in the clitoris, whether they result from direct manual pressure applied to the clitoris, indirect pressure resulting from the thrusting of penis during intercourse, or generalized sexual stimulation of other erogenous zones like the breasts.

2) That women are naturally multi-orgasmic; that is, if woman is immediately stimulated following orgasm, she is likely to experience several orgasms in rapid succession. This is not an exceptional occurrence, but one of which most women are capable.

3) That while women's orgasms do not vary in kind, they vary in intensity. The most intense orgasms experienced by the research subjects were by masturbatory manual stimulation, followed in intensity by manual stimulation by the partner; the least intense orgasms were experienced by women during intercourse.

4) That the female orgasm is as real and identifiable a physiological entity as the male's; it follows the same pattern of erection and detumescence of the clitoris, which may be seen as the female equivalent of the penis.

5) That there is an "infinite variety of female sexual response" as regards intensity and duration of orgasms.

**TO ANYONE ACQUAINTED** with the body of existing knowledge of feminine sexuality, the Masters and Johnson findings were truly revolutionary and liberating in the extent to which they demolished the established myths. Yet four years after the study was published, it seems hardly to have made much of an impact at all. Certainly it is not for lack of information that the myths persist. "Human Sexual Response", despite its weighty scientific language, was an immediate best-seller, and popular paperbacks explicated it to millions of people in simpler

language and at a cheaper price. The mythology remains intact because a male-dominated American culture has a vested interest in its continuance.

Dr. William Masters had searched for a woman co-worker for his research because, as he said, "No male really understands female sexuality." Before Masters and Johnson, female sexuality had been objectively defined and described by men; the subjective experience of women had had no part in defining their own sexuality. And men defined feminine sexuality in a way as favorable to themselves as possible.

If woman's pleasure was obtained through the vagina, then she was totally dependent on the man's erect penis to achieve orgasm; she would receive her satisfaction only as a concomitant of man's seeking his.

With the clitoral orgasm, woman's sexual pleasure was independent of the male's, and she could seek her satisfaction as aggressively as the man sought his, a prospect which didn't appeal to too many men. The definition of normal feminine sexuality as vaginal, in other words, was a part of keeping women down, of making them sexually, as well as economically, socially, and politically subservient.

**IN RETROSPECT, PARTICULARLY** with the additional perspective of our own time, Freud's theory of feminine sexuality appears an historical nationalization for the realities of Victorian society. Culture-bound in the Victorian ethos, Freud had to play the role of *pater familias*. Serving the ethos, he developed a psychology that robbed Victorian women of possible politics.

In Freud's theory of penis envy, the penis functioned as the alterable determinant of maleness which women could symbolically envy instead of the power and prestige given men by the society. It was a refusal to grant women acknowledgment that they had been wronged by their culture and their times; according to Freud, woman's lower status had not been conferred upon her by men, but by God, who had created her without a penis.

Freud's insistence on the superiority of the vaginal orgasm seems almost a demonic determination on his part to finalize the Victorian's repression of feminine eroticism, to stigmatize the remaining vestiges of pleasure felt by women, and thus make them unacceptable to the women themselves. For there were still women whose sexuality hadn't been completely destroyed as evidenced by one Dr. Isaac Brown Baker, a surgeon who performed

numerous clitoridectomies on women to prevent the sexual excitement which, he was convinced, caused "insanities," "catalepsy," "hysteria," "epilepsy," and other diseases.

**THE VICTORIANS HAD NEEDED** to repress sexuality for the success of Western industrialized society; in particular, the total repression of woman's sexuality was crucial to ensure her subjugation. So the Victorians honored only the male ejaculation, that aspect of sexuality which was necessary to the survival of the species; the male ejaculation made women submissive to sex by creating a mystique of the sanctity of motherhood; and, supported by Freud, passed on to us the heritage of the double standard.

When Kinsey laid to rest the part of the double standard that maintained women got no pleasure at all from sex, everyone cried out that there was a sexual revolution afoot. But such talk, as usual, was deceptive. Morality, outside the marriage bed, remained the same, and children were socialized as though Kinsey had never described what they would be like when they grew up.

Boys were taught that they should get their sex where they could find it, "go as far" as they could. On the old assumption that women were asexual creatures, girls were taught that since they needed sex less than boys did, it was up to them to impose sexual restraints. In whatever sex education adolescents did manage to receive, they were told that men had penises and women vaginas; the existence of the clitoris was not mentioned, and pleasure in sex was never discussed at all.

**ADOLESCENT BOYS GROWING UP** begging for sexual crumbs from girls frightened for their "reputations" — a situation that remains unchanged to this day — hardly constitutes the vanguard of a sexual revolution. However, the marriage-manual craze that followed Kinsey assumed that a lifetime of psychological destruction could, with the aid of a little booklet, be abandoned after marriage, and that husband and wife should be able to make sure that the wife was not robbed of her sexual birthright to orgasm, just so long as it was vaginal (though the marriage manuals did rather reluctantly admit that since the clitoris was the most sexually sensitive organ in the female body, a little clitoral stimulation in foreplay was in order), and so long as their orgasms were simultaneous.



The effect of the marriage manuals of course ran counter to their ostensible purpose. Under the guise of frankness and sexual liberation, they dictated prudery and restraint. Sex was made so mechanized, detached, and intellectual that it was robbed of its sensuality. Man became a spectator of his own sexual experience. And the marriage manuals put new pressure on women. The swing was from repression to preoccupation with the orgasm.

**MEN TOOK THE MARRIAGE** manuals to mean that their sexuality would be enhanced by bringing women to orgasm and again coopting feminine sexuality for their own ends, they put pressure on women to perform. The endorsement by the marriage manuals of the desirability of vaginal orgasm insured that women would be asked not only, "Did you come?", but also, "Did you conform to Freud's conception of a psychosexually mature woman, and thereby validate my masculinity?"

Rather than being revolutionary, the present sexual situation is tragic. Appearances notwithstanding, the age-old taboos against conversation about personal sexual experience still haven't broken down. This reticence has allowed the mind-manipulators of the media to create myths of sexual supermen and superwomen.

**SO THE BED BECOMES** a competitive arena, where men and women measure themselves against these mythical rivals, while simultaneously trying to live up to the ecstasies promised them by the marriage manuals and the fantasies of the media ("If the earth doesn't move for me, I must be missing something," the reasoning goes.) Our society treats sex as a sport, with its record-breakers, its judges, its rules, and its spectators.

As anthropologists have shown, women's sexual response is culturally conditioned; historically, women defer to whatever model of their sexuality is offered them by men. So the sad thing for women is that they have participated in the destruction of their own eroticism. Women have helped make the vaginal orgasm into a status symbol in a male-dictated system of values. A woman would now perceive her preference for clitoral orgasm as a "secret shame", ignominious in the eyes of other women as well as those of men. This internalization can be seen in the literature: Mary McCarthy's and Doris Lessing's writings on orgasm do not differ substantially from D. H. Lawrence's and Ernest Hemingway's, and even Simone de Beauvoir, in "The Second Sex", refers to vaginal orgasm as the only "normal satisfaction."

**RATHER THAN WORKING** to alleviate the pressure on them, women have increased it. Feeling themselves insecure in a competitive situation, they are afraid to admit their own imagined inadequacies, and lie to other women about their sexual experiences. With their men, they often fake orgasm to appear "good in bed"



and thus place an intolerable physical burden on themselves and a psychological burden on the men unlucky enough to see through the ruse.

One factor that has made this unfortunate situation possible is ignorance: the more subtle and delicate aspects of human sexuality are still not fully understood. For example, a woman's ability to attain orgasm seems to be conditioned as much by her emotions as by physiology and sociology. Masters and Johnson proved that the orgasm experienced during intercourse, the misnamed vaginal orgasm, did not differ anatomically from the clitoral orgasm.

But this should not be seen as their most significant contribution to the sexual emancipation of women. A difference remains in the subjective experience of orgasm during intercourse and orgasm apart from intercourse. In the complex of emotional factors affecting feminine sexuality, there is a whole panoply of pleasures: the pleasure of being penetrated and filled by a man, the pleasure of sexual communication, the pleasure of affording a man his orgasm, the erotic pleasure that exists even when sex is not terminated by orgasmic release. Masters and Johnson's real contribution was to stress an "infinite variety of female sexual response." One should be able to appreciate the differences rather than impose value judgments on them.

**THERE IS NO DOUBT** that Masters and Johnson were fully aware of the implications of their study to the sexual liberation of women. As they wrote, "With orgasmic physiology established, the human female now has an undeniable opportunity to develop realistically her own sexual response levels." Two years later this statement seems naive and entirely too optimistic. Certainly the sexual problems of our society will never be solved until there is real, and unfeigned equality between men and women.

This idea is usually misconstrued: sexual liberation for women is wrongly understood to mean that women will adopt all the forms of masculine sexuality. As in the whole issue of women's liberation, that's really not the point. Women don't aspire to imitate the mistakes of men in sexual matters, to view sexual experiences as conquest and ego-enhancement, to use other people to serve their own ends. But if the Masters and Johnson material is allowed to filter into the public consciousness, hopefully to replace the enshrined Freudian myths, then woman at long last will be allowed to take the first step toward her emancipation, to define and enjoy the forms of her own sexuality.