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OUTLINE

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TEXT

- 1 In May 2005, on *Saturday Night Live*'s satirical "Weekend Update" segment, comedians Tina Fey and Amy Poehler sat side by side as they announced the top news stories of the evening.¹ About halfway through the segment, amid jokes about US politics, popular movies, and celebrity mishaps, Poehler made reference to a recently published academic monograph, consequently bringing a scholarly subject to national attention:

"A new book, called *The Case of the Female Orgasm* argues that the female orgasm has no evolutionary function. Regardless, the book is a real departure for the Hardy Boys. They're looking for it."²

- 2 Poehler's joke was accompanied by an image of a fake book cover, with the two Hardy Boys brothers, in their typical roles as amateur detectives, examining evidence.³ Though this was a brief, two-sentence gag in around a ten-minute segment, suddenly the author of *The Case of the Female Orgasm: Bias in the Science of Evolution*, Elisabeth A. Lloyd, was receiving phone calls from NBC for an interview. Why? For the same reason that the joke played well when Poehler delivered it on SNL: women's pleasure is a topic with great modern relevance, shrouded in centuries of obfuscation—and people want to know more.

- 3 But perhaps more importantly, the female orgasm is something of a taboo subject. As Lloyd herself argues in the book, data on women's orgasmic experiences in modern studies are severely skewed due to differences in community and cross-cultural sexual norms and the influence of these on self-reporting.⁴ The biases in these findings, as Lloyd further points out, result in an overwhelming androcentrism—the (often unconscious) privileging of the male point of view.⁵ This androcentrism is, in fact, what is parodied in the SNL Hardy Boys joke. It is funny that these two, male figures are hunting around for evidence of a woman's climax because the female orgasm has a long history as something elusive—for men. In the well-known scene from the 1989 film *When Harry Met Sally*, for example, in which Meg Ryan fakes an orgasm in a diner, Ryan's "Sally" clearly knows when she is not having an orgasm, but also knows what men think these climactic experiences look like for women. Her performance is much to the dismay of Billy Crystal's "Harry," who realizes in that moment that he might not know as much about pleasing women as he thought.⁶
- 4 This male ignorance is on evidence in modern sexology as well, informed particularly by the assumption that women's bodies work in the same way as men's—one of Lloyd's primary conclusions in the book. Lloyd makes accessible statistics compiled from medical studies available at time of publication, revealing that only around 25% of women can achieve orgasm through vaginal intercourse alone—and, as mentioned above, that many studies are skewed because they rely on women's (and men's) self-reporting.⁷ Representations in movies and television of women reaching orgasm through intercourse only serve to perpetuate the myth that, if a woman does not climax during sex, someone is doing something wrong—a clear androcentric notion. Our cultural understanding of a woman's orgasm, then, is more informed by *When Harry Met Sally* than by scientific fact.
- 5 As these androcentric biases have crept into modern medical scholarship, they have retroactively shaped people's understanding of classical texts.⁸ The result has been a long line of translations, commentaries, and studies that mistakenly identify female orgasms in ancient texts in a manner that accords with our modern interests. I argue here, on the contrary, that a woman's "climax" in the sexual act appears not to have been a focus for the Greeks and Romans,

according to the extant textual evidence. “Completion” of the sexual act was a male phenomenon; a woman’s pleasure, when it was acknowledged, was an ongoing as opposed to momentary sensation that ended with male ejaculation. I first discuss the evidence, or lack thereof, for a woman’s orgasm in ancient medical texts before turning to explore evidence of what I call the female pleasure “process” in works of Greco-Roman literature, considering these texts alongside the ancient medical corpora as potentially illuminating social commentaries. Finally, I bring the discussion to the modern day and, thinking with Lloyd’s work, highlight how modern studies of both classical literature and medical scholarship have misconstrued the ancient discourse on women’s sexual pleasure, and how these often-distinct fields would benefit from a greater exchange of ideas.

I. The Medical

- 6 In her book, Lloyd promotes a nonadaptive explanation for the case of the female orgasm, that is, an explanation which sees orgasm in female humans as an evolutionary byproduct of the male orgasm. The latter is a reproductive necessity; the former is not. This phenomenon is similar to that of the nipple, which serves as a crucial component of reproductive success in females and appears in human males only as a byproduct of this latter function. The nonadaptive argument was advanced by Donald Symons in 1979 but remained until the time of Lloyd’s book the minority scholarly opinion. Most studies, as Lloyd notes, take as their foundation the assumption that orgasm in females assists with reproductive systems.⁹ Symons’ account, however, aligns with findings of low occurrence of orgasm with intercourse in women across the majority of medical studies.¹⁰ If orgasm had adapted in women to increase reproductive success (so Lloyd, advancing Symons) it would not appear only an average of 25% of the time.
- 7 Why, then, do most American investigations, at least, make an assumption of adaptation? This is largely due to cultural norms, and the extent to which orgasm is viewed as something desirable and encouraged in women. On this point, I quote from Lloyd directly:

“...when we consider the fact that in some cultures, women’s ability to have orgasms is highly developed, while in others, it is apparently not, we can see that the basic female human being could either be trained to experience orgasm with appropriate stimulation or not; it seems to depend quite a bit on her cultural context. [...] ...even if there is a cultural context in which female orgasm is valued and women are led to participate in it, it occurs unreliably with intercourse. It must be remembered that somewhere between 88% and 96% of women in studies of these cultures are capable of having orgasms; they just do so at varying rates with heterosexual copulation.”¹¹

- 8 Lloyd’s point, then, suggests that when we look at the Greco-Roman worlds and any evidence for an understanding of the experience of orgasm in ancient women, we must consider the cultural norms regarding female sexuality in these ancient communities, and what kind of pleasure women were encouraged to experience. This is no easy task, for two reasons: first, because women’s sexuality appears to have been publicly guarded, whether or not it was privately explored¹²; and second, because the extant written works in general, and medical texts in particular, bring their own kind of male-centered expectations to the subject matters they describe, albeit with assumptions defined by different cultures and time periods.¹³ Still, we can observe a notable emphasis on intercourse when passages typically understood as referring to “orgasm” or terms translated as “ejaculation” appear. Such a correspondence, in light of the work of Symons and then Lloyd, should send up red flags. Here, I will walk through some of the best-known passages from the ancient medical corpora to trace this pattern and offer some reflections on how we might read these passages while considering sexual norms in Greco-Roman antiquity.
- 9 The Hippocratic *On Generation*, for example, states that women can experience sex in two fashions. In one scenario, women are not eager for sex with a man, in which case intercourse is still pleasant, but the pleasure is coextensive with the sexual act and ends with the man’s ejaculation (4.1):

τῆσι δὲ γυναιξὶ <φημι> ἐν τῇ μίξει τριβομένου τοῦ αἰδοίου καὶ τῶν μητρῶν κινευμένων, ὡσπερ κνησμὸν ἐμπίπτειν ἐς αὐτάς καὶ τῷ ἄλλω

σώματι ἡδονὴν καὶ θέρμην παρέχειν. μεθίει δὲ καὶ ἡ γυνὴ ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος ὅτε μὲν ἐς τὰς μήτρας, αἱ δὲ μήτραι ἰκμαλέαι γίνονται, ὅτε δὲ καὶ ἔξω, ἣν χάσκωσιν αἱ μήτραι μᾶλλον τοῦ καιροῦ. καὶ ἡδεταί, ἐλπὴν ἄρξεται μίσησθαι, διὰ παντὸς τοῦ χρόνου, μέχρι αὐτῆς μεθῆ ὁ ἀνήρ· κῆν μὲν ὄργᾳ ἡ γυνὴ μίσησθαι, πρόσθεν τοῦ ἀνδρὸς ἀφίει, καὶ τὸ λοιπὸν οὐκ ἔτι ὁμοίως ἡδεταί ἡ γυνή· ἣν δὲ μὴ ὄργᾳ, συντελεῖει τῷ ἀνδρὶ ἡδομένη.

Now in women, I assert that as their vagina is rubbed and their womb moved during intercourse, a kind of tickling sensation befalls these parts and gives rise to pleasure and warmth in the rest of their body. And women, too, ejaculate from their body, sometimes into their uterus—the uterus then becomes moist—and sometimes externally, if the uterus gapes open more than it should. And a woman feels pleasure, once intercourse begins, for the whole time until the man ejaculates in her; if the woman is eager for intercourse, she ejaculates before the man, and from then on she no longer feels as much pleasure, but if she is not eager, her pleasure ends with the man's.

- 10 While the statement ἣν δὲ μὴ ὄργᾳ, “but if she is not eager,” may suggest a range of experiences for women (e.g., being penetrated before reaching full arousal; being unopposed to penile penetration despite a lack of arousal), the phrase may speak especially to the amount of nonconsensual sex the female subjects considered were likely subjected to. It also, therefore, calls into question how legitimate the evidence in Hippocratic texts for women's sexual experiences can really be—a topic both Lesley Dean-Jones and Helen King have taken up.¹⁴ In the other scenario, the woman is eager to experience vaginal penetration and in fact she, like the man, “ejaculates.” Notably, however, she “ejaculates” before he does. The author uses the verb μεθίει both for male and female “ejaculation,” which makes apparent that the language for a visible male phenomenon is being applied to an internal process assumed to be performed by a woman's body. After all, her “ejaculation,” even when external (ἔξω), is only external to the uterus.¹⁵
- 11 What is more, as the text continues, we find that confirmation of such female emissions comes only via observation of the types of offspring women can bear. Indeed, the author discusses at length that women can beget both male and female children because they can

produce both male *and* female “sperm” (*Gen.* 6.1-8.2). Ultimately, the moisture generated by the woman’s body nearer the beginning of the sex act is more likely to be vaginal lubrication than female ejaculation, on which there is not even medical consensus today.¹⁶ If this is the case, then the above passage again sheds light on the frequent occurrence of forced sexual intercourse¹⁷ experienced by women in antiquity, in that lubrication was not seen as a necessary requirement for sex. The perceived pleasure referenced above points to the potential for enjoyment of the sex act with men on the part of ancient women; the mention of “ejaculation,” however, ought not to be equated with any climactic experience within the sexual act.

- 12 Evident from this passage is also the fact that a desire for pleasure was not imagined as the main motivation for women to have sexual intercourse, as Dean-Jones has further emphasized with reference to the Hippocratic corpus.¹⁸ If it were, it would undermine the normative social practice of young women being married off by their male guardians to (typically) older men, for whom they may have felt more fear than attraction.¹⁹ In the centuries-later *Gynecology* of Soranus, however, there is an acknowledgement of the necessity of women’s pleasure in sex, as evidenced in the following selection (1.37):

προσέθηκαμεν δὲ ὅτι καὶ ὄρμῆς καὶ ὀρέξεως πρὸς συνουσίαν ὑπαρχούσης· ὡς γὰρ χωρὶς ὀρέξεως οὐκ ἐνδεχόμενον ὑπὸ τῶν ἀρρένων τὸ σπέρμα καταβληθῆναι, τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον χωρὶς ὀρέξεως ὑπὸ τῶν θηλειῶν οὐκ ἐνδεχόμενον αὐτὸ συλληφθῆναι. καὶ ὡς ἡ τροφή χωρὶς ὀρέξεως καταποθεῖσα καὶ μετὰ τινος ἀποστροφῆς οὐ καλῶς κατατάσσεται καὶ τῆς ἐπιβαλλούσης <ἀπο> τυγχάνει πέψεως, οὕτως οὐδὲ τὸ σπέρμα δύναται ἀναληφθῆναι τε καὶ κρατηθὲν κυοφορηθῆναι δίχα τοῦ παρεῖναι πρὸς συνουσίαν ὄρμην καὶ ὄρεξιν. καὶ γὰρ εἴ τινες βιασθεῖσαι συνέλαβον, ἔστι καὶ ἐπὶ τούτων εἰπεῖν, ὅτι τὸ μὲν τῆς ὀρέξεως πάντως πάθος καὶ ταύταις παρῆν, ἐπεσκοτεῖτο δὲ ὑπὸ ψυχικῆς κρίσεως·

We added that the urge and desire for intercourse be present; for just as without desire it is impossible for the seed to be released by the male, in the same way without desire it cannot be taken up by the female. Just as food swallowed without desire and with a certain aversion is not well absorbed and when taken in fails at gaining digestion, thus the seed is not able to be taken up and prevail so that pregnancy can occur without the urge for intercourse and desire

being present. And if some women who were subjected to forced sexual intercourse conceived, one can say regarding them that the feeling of desire at all events was present in them also, but that it was masked by the mind's judgment.

- 13 For Soranus, then, a woman's pleasure serves mainly a reproductive function.²⁰ It is only when the woman experiences a kind of longing for sex that she is able to "take up" the man's seed. This supposition persists within medical papers today, where it is referred to as uterine "upsuck." It is, in fact, the argument which most modern studies promoting an adaptive rationale for orgasm in human females use as foundational.²¹ Orgasm is an evolutionary adaptation if it contributes to reproductive success, and if orgasm results in better absorption or "upsuck" of sperm, then its evolutionary selection appears to be confirmed. Yet Lloyd reveals the theory of upsuck to be a deeply controversial hypothesis, with the essential studies offering "at best equivocal evidence" and containing "fatal statistical problems."²² To return to Soranus, then, even though the above selection does not use a term that may refer to orgasm in particular, it hinges discussions of a woman's pleasure in intercourse upon reproductive efficacy in what we can now see are problematic ways. It is already unlikely that an orgasm is occurring in Soranus' description—especially considering his assertion of desire in cases of rape (καὶ γὰρ εἴ τινες βιασθεῖσαι συνέλαβον)—and indeed his parallel diction for male desire and female desire points more to isomorphism, that is, the equating of male and female sexual mechanisms. Such isomorphic constellations are often coupled with androcentric views since they take male phenomena as their starting point, as it appears Soranus does here.
- 14 Just as importantly for my purposes, the "desire" a woman experiences in Soranus' account is not (necessarily) coincident with one single moment of climax; she appears to experience pleasure for a duration of time, at least until the perceived upsuck is thought to occur (i.e., around the moment of male ejaculation). A moment of climax for women, however, may be suggested in another passage from Soranus (*Gyn.* 1.31):

ὅσπερ γὰρ τὸν ἰδρῶτα προσκαλεῖν μὲν ἢ τῶν ὅλων σωμάτων κίνησις εἴωθεν, ἐπέχειν δὲ καὶ παρακρατεῖν ἢ ἀκίνησια, καὶ ὡς τὸ σίελον ἢ

προσφορὰ τῆς φωνητικῆς ἐνεργείας πρὸς ἔκκρισιν ἄγει μᾶλλον, ταῖς δὲ διόδοις τοῦ πνεύματος πέφυκεν συνεπακολουθεῖν, οὕτως καὶ ἡ περὶ τὰ γυναικεῖα μόρια συγκίνησις ἐν τοῖς ἀφροδισίοις συναναχαλᾷ τὸν ὄγκον ὅλον. διὰ τοῦτο δὲ καὶ τὴν ὑστέραν ἀνίησιν, ὥστε καὶ τὴν κάθαρσιν ἀπαραλόδιστον φυλαχθῆναι.

For just as movement of the whole body usually brings on sweat, and the absence of motion keeps it in check and prevents it—and as use of speech leads saliva to greater secretion, and this naturally accompanies the passage of breath—in the same way the movement around the female genitals in sexual pleasures relaxes the entire body. And through this it also loosens the uterus, so as to keep menstruation unobstructed.

- 15 That relaxation occurs after orgasm has been widely accepted in modern medicine,²³ yet the relaxation discussed here by Soranus does not appear to be an after-effect of involuntary climax. Indeed, it occurs ἐν τοῖς ἀφροδισίοις, coextensive with movement around the genitals, and thus may indicate vaginal lubrication more generally (hence the comparison with saliva). As King has emphasized, passages like this one in Soranus—those that come closest to suggesting that stimulation of a woman’s genitals brings about orgasm in particular—in fact look to treating menstrual suppression, not to inducing pleasure in woman in one climactic moment. As she puts it, “There is no mention of anything that could be interpreted as orgasm.”²⁴
- 16 What we see from Soranus and the Hippocratics, then, is sensations of warmth, relaxation, and even pleasure during intercourse, specifically coincident with the movement of certain organs (a number of which may be indicated by terms like “the genitals,” “the womb,” and even “the vagina”). The pleasures that may arise from these movements are not momentary; what they call “ejaculation” may be, though there is no indication that this emission refers to what is even in modern medicine a rare occurrence (female ejaculation, or the related but distinct “squirting”²⁵). Rather, these pleasures are seen as occurring during intercourse and ending with a *man’s* ejaculation.
- 17 In Galen we find further discussion of movement around the female genitals, this time with greater emphasis on the motions of the womb during sex (cf. *Gen.* 4.1 above, in which the womb is moved during intercourse). In his *On the Natural Faculties*, Galen describes a sensa-

tion at the time of conception of the uterus “moving and contracting” (κινουμένων τε καὶ συντρεχουσῶν), which aids in the retention of semen (3.3.150):

τῆς μὲν οὖν καθεκτικῆς δυνάμεως ἔργον περιστεῖλαι τὰς μήτρας τῷ κινουμένῳ πανταχόθεν, ὥστ' εὐλόγως ἀπτομέναις μὲν ταῖς μαιευταῖς τὸ στόμα μεμυκὸς αὐτῶν φαίνεται, ταῖς κούσαις δ' αὐταῖς κατὰ τὰς πρώτας ἡμέρας καὶ μάλιστα κατ' αὐτὴν ἐκείνην, ἐν ἧπερ ἂν ἡ τῆς γονῆς σύλληψις γένηται, κινουμένων τε καὶ συντρεχουσῶν εἰς ἑαυτὰς τῶν ὑστερῶν αἴσθησις γίνεσθαι καὶ ἢν ἄμφω ταῦτα συμβῆ, μῦσαι μὲν τὸ στόμα χωρὶς φλεγμονῆς ἢ τινος ἄλλου παθήματος, αἴσθησιν δὲ τῆς κατὰ τὰς μήτρας κινήσεως ἀκολουθῆσαι, πρὸς αὐτὰς ἤδη τὸ σπέρμα τὸ παρὰ τάνδρὸς εἰληφέναι τε καὶ κατέχειν αἱ γυναῖκες νομίζουσι.

It is thus the work of its capacity for retention to make the uterus contract around the embryo from every side, so that, reasonably, the mouth (of the uterus) appears to the midwives as they examine it to be closed, and to the pregnant women themselves, throughout the first days, and especially that day when conception occurs, a sensation comes about of the uterus moving and contracting into itself, and if both of these things come to pass—that the mouth (of the uterus) closes without inflammation or any other condition, and a feeling of movement in the uterus accompanies it—then women think that they have taken up the semen from the man and that they are retaining it.

- 18 This “moving and contracting” appears similar to the female body’s reaction during orgasm; the seminal 1966 study by William Masters and Virginia Johnson identifies involuntary spasms or contractions of the pelvic muscles which last “a few seconds” as indicative of the orgasmic experience in women.²⁶ Yet the focus here lies in demonstrating how women retain semen after intercourse and an embryo after conception—not in their experiences of pleasure. It is of course possible that female orgasm is implied, and that this passage of Galen’s is an early medical argument for the phenomenon of uterine upsuck, discussed above. It is, however, a significant argument to the contrary that there is no mention of pleasure here, on the part of either partner. Galen’s description of the womb’s closure and the motions of the uterus align more with our modern understanding of implantation of a fetus, at which point the uterine lining thickens, the

mucus plug forms (closing the cervix), and cramping may occur—perhaps the “contracting” to which Galen refers.²⁷ These mechanisms have nothing to do with orgasm in female subjects and even the language for pleasure and ejaculation used in other ancient medical texts is absent.

- 19 A similar “contracting” is also related by Galen in his *On the Affected Parts*, in the story of a widow who has been experiencing retention of female sperm. Galen explains that, after a midwife used the “customary remedies,” the woman experienced contractions similar to those that attend the pain and pleasure of sexual intercourse, until finally she released a great deal of sperm (6.5):

ἐν ταύταις μού ποτε ταῖς ἐννοίαις ὄντος ἐφάνη τοιόνδε συμβᾶν ἐκ πολλοῦ χρόνου χηρευούση γυναικί. κατεχόντων γὰρ αὐτὴν καὶ ἄλλων μὲν τινων ὀχληρῶν καὶ νευρικῶν διατάσεων, εἰπούσης δὲ τῆς μαιᾶς ἀνεσπᾶσθαι τὴν μήτραν, ἔδοξε χρήσασθαι βοηθήμασιν οἷς εἰώθασιν εἰς τὰ τοιαῦτα χρῆσθαι· χρωμένης δ’ αὐτῆς, ὑπὸ τα τῆς αὐτῶν θερμασίας καὶ τῆς κατὰ τὴν θεραπείαν ψαύσεως τῶν γυναικειῶν τόπων, ἐγένοντο συνολκαὶ μετὰ πόνου τα ἅμα καὶ ἡδονῆς ὅμοιαι ταῖς κατὰ τὰς συνουσίας, ἐφ’ αἷς ἐκκριθέντος παχέος τε καὶ πολλοῦ σπέρματος, ἀπηλλάγη τῶν κατεχόντων αὐτὴν ὀχληρῶν ἢ γυνή.

When I was reflecting on these things, a certain symptom appeared for a woman who had been widowed for a long time. For when some other ailments and tensions of the nerves were afflicting her, with the midwife saying that her uterus was retracted, it seemed best to use the remedies which are customary to use for such things. And when this method was used, because of their heat and because touching of the womanly parts was used in the treatment, contractions arose with pain and at the same time pleasure, similar to those in intercourse, and after them a thick and abundant seed was secreted, and the woman was set free from the ailments that afflicted her.

- 20 King’s in-depth analysis of this passage vis-à-vis its implications for the history of therapeutic masturbation has revealed that there is little to be sure of in what it presents. This is not a patient of Galen’s (as King puts it, “Galen ‘met’ this story—not the patient”), and there is little specification regarding the “customary remedies” the midwife applies.²⁸ It is significant that pleasure is mentioned here—

though, of course, it is mentioned in the same breath with pain, and so may not, in fact, point to the kind of pleasure experience that can induce orgasm.²⁹ And the “contractions” (συνολκαὶ) with their attendant release of female seed (σπέρματος)—neither a phenomenon observed by this physician, nor one whose stimulation can be determined—can therefore not be taken with any certainty as pointing to orgasm. If they do, then it is key to note that it comes in a story, not of female-male intercourse, but of medical treatment of one woman by another, and that there is still no *language* of orgasm present—that is, there is no one word for this phenomenon. Indeed, Flemming notes the “coyness” with which Galen relates this story, in contrast to his more explicit descriptions of a man’s masturbation to orgasm in an earlier passage.³⁰

- 21 In Pseudo-Aristotle’s *On the History of Animals* Book 10,³¹ on the other hand, we see another example of language that seems to come close to describing orgasm, most especially because it arises in a discussion of involuntary bodily responses during dreams. There is mention (634b29-30) of a woman emitting fluid during intercourse into a place just in front of the uterus (εἰς τὸ πρόσθεν γὰρ αὐτῶν καὶ ἡ γυνὴ προίεται). Given as proof of this is a similar occurrence when women have dreams of an erotic nature, which they experience “to completion” (ἐξονειρώττωσιν αὐταὶ τελέως). This latter word, τελέως, seems to suggest that here sexual intercourse accompanied by desire and pleasure is something goal-driven even for women, with a clear “end.” Dean-Jones notes that the author of this text is operating under the assumption that women emit sperm as men do, and that the fluid emitted here is to be differentiated from vaginal lubricant.³²
- 22 Can τελέως, then, point to female ejaculation as may (albeit rarely) occur with orgasm in women? Are the women either during, or waking from, these dreams experiencing orgasm? Perhaps. But it would be surprising if this were the reality that the author of HA 10 is describing, given the lack of consensus regarding female ejaculation in medical studies of the modern day.³³ While the language used for this emission (προίημι) differs from that used elsewhere in the same text of vaginal lubrication during sexual activity (ὕγραινω),³⁴ this divergence could represent confusion on the part of the author of vaginal lubrication with the female ejaculation (of “sperm”), the latter of which is rare and debated today, but considered by the author of

HA 10 to be a medical certainty. Τελέως is the word that most suggests orgasm in the modern sense, and yet read with modern medical considerations in mind, in my view it denotes only that the women mentioned conjured the duration of intercourse in their dreams. Completion of the sex act, as we have seen in every other text thus far, has appeared only as a male phenomenon and these women could have imagined the same.³⁵

23 In considering some of the most cited *loci* for female orgasm in the medical works of Greco-Roman antiquity, I hope to have suggested, not that ancient women could not or did not experience orgasm (they almost certainly did, as I will discuss below), but that the ancient medical writings should not be read as talking about orgasm. Pleasure, when discussed in these texts as something experienced by women during intercourse, is not one climactic moment but a process including urge and desire beforehand and enjoyment (or not) during sex, resulting at times in a perceived female ejaculation (which may be vaginal lubrication) and ultimately ending with *male* ejaculation. These texts span centuries and continents and assuming that there was a kind of united cultural understanding is problematic at best. Yet it is these texts that have underpinned many modern considerations of intercourse, orgasm, and more for further centuries and over further continents. No one has demonstrated this more decisively than King in her 2011 “Galen and the Widow,” in which she famously dismantles an ostensibly scientific argument about the history of the vibrator using the same ancient medical sources that were cited as evidence.³⁶ That such a misuse of these ancient texts is possible demonstrates the difficulties of approaching ancient medicine as modern readers. It is for this reason that I will now turn to look at Greco-Roman literary accounts of women’s sexual pleasure, to see what light these can shine on cultural understandings of the female body and its mechanisms.

II. The Literary

24 I begin this section with a caveat. As Lloyd notes, there is a tacit assumption that “the female orgasm should be examined only as it appears with intercourse,” a bias which colors many modern considerations of the orgasm, both medical and otherwise.³⁷ It is also

something that colors the Greco-Roman literary record; an account of female sexual expression outside of sexual encounters with men is a rare occurrence. Myths like that of Tiresias—who lived as a man, then a woman, then a man again and claimed in a debate between Jupiter and Juno that women experience more pleasure in intercourse—confirm male perceptions. After all, it is Jupiter who asserts that women’s pleasure is greater (*maior vestra...voluptas*, *Ov. Met.* 3.320-321) and Tiresias sides with the male god. As Tara Mulder has underlined in public-facing commentary on this myth, male perceptions that women enjoy sex more inform stereotypes of female sexuality: “Women could be assumed to always want sex, and (when they got it) to enjoy it substantially more than men, giving rise to the need for men to control sexual interactions and the sexuality of women.”³⁸

- 25 When considering women’s personal sexual expression in Greco-Roman antiquity, the first author who likely comes to mind is Sappho. Jack Winkler has written compellingly on the nuances of Sappho’s poetry as relates to her own sexuality, considering both “her attitude to the public ethic and her allusions to private reality.”³⁹ He applies W. E. B. Du Bois’s famous formulation of the double-consciousness (*Souls of Black Folk* 1903) and reads her poetic compositions as mirroring a private, woman-centered world and another more public, male-centered world from which she is inevitably alienated. Woven throughout these double-minded poems are “sexual images...in part private to women, whose awareness of their own bodies is not shared with men.”⁴⁰ Winkler uses as an example fragment 105a, which euphemizes what may be a clitoral image (“Just as the sweet-apple at the end of the bough grows red,” οἶον τὸ γλυκύμαλον ἐρέυθεται ἄκρω ἐπ’ ὕδω, 1) as, he asserts, a private joke between women, who knew their own bodies in a way that men did not.⁴¹ Fragment 94, moreover, seems to speak specifically to female sexual pleasure, offering an image of a woman satisfying her desire (ἐξίης πόθο[ν, 23), but without any language evoking an image of “climax.”⁴² This is to say that Sappho’s poems contain inherent tensions around the androcentrism of Greek society and so convey a symbolic, rather than explicit sexuality. It is unsurprising, then, that even though the poems Sappho creates contain the language of pleasure and emotions directly relating to sexual experience, they stop short of exploring the most personal details of sexual intimacy—

including, perhaps, a kind of erotic enjoyment that readers today might name “orgasm.”

26 Among male-authored works, there are some literary texts that directly treat the subject of sexual intercourse and sexual enjoyment for women and which engage, like Sappho’s poems, with the topic of female pleasure. These, however, do not typically describe an experience that could be interpreted as female orgasm in our modern sense. In Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*, for example—a play overtly engaged with stereotyping women’s sexuality for comic effect—there is a joking reference to the dildos that might be a “leather aid” to the women denying intercourse to their husbands (ὄλισβον ὀκτωδάκτυλον, ὃς ἦν ἄν ἡμῖν σκυτίνη ἐπικουρία, 109-110).⁴³ Yet the play ultimately reinforces what must have been the reality of most married women in the ancient Greek world: that their sexuality was not something over which women typically had agency. Flemming, in a pithy response to Thomas Laqueur’s history of masturbation in his *Solitary Sex*, notes that for the ancient Greeks, “female self-sufficiency of any kind – be it sexual or somatic, social or economic – was more problematic.”⁴⁴ Does the dildo comment, then, in fact point to women experiencing pleasure—or even orgasm—from penetration by a leather object designed for the purpose? It could, though following Jackie Murray, it is more an example of “male subjectivity of female sexuality” used to support the “patriarchal status quo.”⁴⁵ It thus, for the modern reader, readily underlines the concealment and control of women’s pleasure, the degrading of attempts to achieve it, and the anxieties for women surrounding it—all of which suggest a culture where, to return to an earlier quotation from Lloyd, “the basic female human being” is not “trained to experience orgasm with appropriate stimulation,” and where there is not “a cultural context in which female orgasm is valued and women are led to participate in it.”⁴⁶

27 Within the Greek literary canon, we encounter a fair amount of focus on male sexuality, pleasure, and even ejaculation. Plato’s *Symposium* is perhaps the primary *locus* for a literary discussion of male erotica, though with significant commentary on *eros* in a woman’s *persona*. Diotima’s views on spiritual childbirth, as related by Socrates, display an interesting occurrence of a reverse isomorphism relating to childbirth, resulting (for the modern reader) in further confusion about

the female orgasm. In this speech, seed-birth by a man is equated with his ejaculation (206b-e). Such an image emphasizes orgasm in men as a desired “end” of sexual intercourse with a defined deliverable (i.e., a child). Those who comment on this image of male ejaculation-as-birth often assume, therefore, an analogous process in women, with the misleading language of women’s “ejaculation” in ancient medical texts as their guide.⁴⁷ By contrast, E. E. Pender points out that, in Plato, the process of male-birth and female-birth are not analogous; man’s ejaculation of sperm and woman’s birth of a child are equated, not male and female ejaculation.⁴⁸ This is telling, as it suggests a defined “end” of sexual intercourse for men, but lack of a defined one for women; their “end” is the birth of a child, not a climactic moment of pleasure. As Diotima underlines with her emphasis on man’s attraction to the beautiful, arousal is necessary for men to produce children (of the mind, and of the body) with a tacit implication that, for women, it is not. This constellation accords with the sexual norms of ancient Greek society, which safeguarded legitimate procreation via control of women’s sexuality.

- 28 Governance of women’s sexual activity in the Roman world operated under much the same objectives, though in Latin poetry we do get a few notable glimpses of female pleasure. One, perhaps surprisingly, comes in the poetry of Lucretius—a scientist and philosopher well known for his unfavorable portrayals of women. Book 4 of his *On the Nature of Things* contains a diatribe against erotic attachments, encouraging men to satisfy carnal desires, but not to fall in love. It is here where Lucretius asserts that women, too, seek shared pleasures, *communia gaudia*, in sexual intercourse with men (4.1192-1196):

nec mulier semper ficto suspirat amore,
quae complexa viri corpus cum corpore iungit
et tenet adsuctis umectans oscula labris.
nam facit ex animo saepe et, communia quaerens
gaudia, sollicitat spatium decurrere amoris.

Nor does a woman always sigh with feigned love—
she who has embraced the body of a man and joins it with hers
and holds him, moistening his mouth and sucking his lips.
You see she often does this from the heart and, seeking shared
pleasures, incites him to run the course of love.

- 29 It is tempting to translate the first verse above with the modern, orgasm-focused notion of “faking it.” Yet what Lucretius describes here is hardly orgasm.⁴⁹ The emphasis is on the woman’s enjoyment of sexual intercourse for the amount of time that it takes the man to complete the act, that is, to “run the course of love.” What supports this reading is that Lucretius describes male ejaculation in some detail—both involuntary nocturnal emissions and voluntary release after arousal—using the word for “seed,” *semen* (e.g., 4.1269-1273), and water-related words like *umor* (e.g., 4.1048-1058) and *fluctus* (e.g., 4.1030-1036). The *gaudia* which Lucretius uses above connote a kind of fulfilled sexual “joys,” experienced by men and by women (hence *communia gaudia*), yet one that is separate from the phenomenon of orgasm as he earlier delineates it for men. The fact that Lucretius describes a man’s orgasm and the pleasures a woman derives from sex as two distinct processes is notable and corresponds with the statistics cited by Lloyd via Symons of women’s (in)ability to experience orgasm during sex.
- 30 It is this Lucretian conceptualization of *gaudia*, as I argue elsewhere, that begins to permeate the Latin literature after his time.⁵⁰ After all, it is initially in Lucretius that *gaudia* take on a definitively sexual connotation (where in earlier literature they connote “joys” of other kinds) and in which they are first attributed to a woman. Though females both human and animal in Lucretius only ever experience *communia gaudia* or *mutua gaudia* (that is, pleasures dependent on their male sexual partner—evidence of a persistent androcentrism), nevertheless the desirous woman in the verses above is an agent of her own sexual enjoyment in a way that the women of Greco-Roman medical texts are not. This type of woman, actively seeking her own *gaudia* in sexual relationships, appears also in the poems of Sulpicia,⁵¹ in Ovid’s *Heroides*,⁵² and in his *Ars Amatoria* Book 2. This latter woman, in a departure from the androcentric “shared pleasures” in Lucretius, seeks *sua gaudia*, “her own pleasures” (688-692):

officium faciat nulla puella mihi.
me voces audire iuvat sua gaudia fassas,
quaeque morer meme sustineamque rogent.
aspiciam dominae victos amentis ocellos:
languet, et tangi se vetet illa diu.

Let no girl perform a duty for me.
It is pleasing for me to hear her words confessing their
own pleasures,
and asking that I hold back and that I keep going.
Let me look upon the overcome eyes of my mistress, out of her mind:
let her lay out, and avoid being touched for a long time.

- 31 Contrary to the focus on mechanics and emissions in the medical corpora, Ovid's focus here is entirely on the sensations of pleasure—and the woman's pleasure at that. His description of eyes that are "overcome" or "conquered" (*victos*, 691) uses language of an end goal, of "finishing" in the modern sense. There is still no one word or expression here that corresponds with orgasm, but such sensory depictions begin to suggest the kind of feelings and environment necessary to induce one.
- 32 As Ovid goes on, we see even more language intimating an end to sexual acts—for women and for men. He spends some time presenting a sensual scene between a man and a woman, before encouraging the pair to "hurry to the finish line at the same time" (717-730):

crede mihi, non est Veneris properanda voluptas,
sed sensim tarda prolicienda mora.
cum loca reppereris, quae tangi femina gaudet,
non obstet, tangas quo minus illa, pudor.
aspicies oculos tremulo fulgore micantes,
ut sol a liquida saepe refulget aqua.
accedent questus, accedet amabile murmur,
et dulces gemitus aptaque verba ioco.
sed neque tu dominam velis maioribus usus
desere, nec cursus anteat illa tuos;
ad metam properate simul: tum plena voluptas,
cum pariter victi femina virque iacent.
hic tibi versandus tenor est, cum libera dantur
otia, furtivum nec timor urget opus.

Believe me, the pleasure of Venus must not be hurried,
but little by little must be enticed by a slow delay.
When you've found the places where a woman enjoys being touched,

don't let modesty stand in the way of your touching them.
You will see her eyes shining with a trembling flash,
as the sun often reflects in clear water.
Moans will come about, a loving murmur will come about,
and sweet groans and playful words.
But neither leave your mistress behind by using greater sails,
nor let her surpass your pace;
hurry to the finish line at the same time: then that's full pleasure,
when equally man and women lie out, conquered.
This is the course you should use, when you are at leisure,
and neither a secret task nor fear is urging you on.

- 33 Here again, Ovid uses language of being “conquered” (*victi*, 728) to describe women and men after a kind of “completion” of sexual acts. Several commentators on this passage overlook the fact that there is no explicit reference to intercourse here, and that this may in fact be a description of mutual masturbation—even to orgasm.⁵³ It may then be that Ovid is the first classical author to embrace a goal-oriented understanding of female pleasure, talking here about a woman and a man “finishing,” with his metaphor of the *meta* standing in for the modern “finish line” (*ad metam properate simul*, 727). And if indeed this passage does refer to mutual masturbation, that is a more scientifically likely way to induce orgasm in a woman.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the pleasure “process” is still present, and in fact emphasized; Ovid does not so much change the script as he does expand it to include some kind of end-goal of women’s sexual enjoyment.
- 34 The satires of Juvenal contain a similar description of erotic touch to that which Ovid offers. Here, there is digital manipulation of what may be the clitoris (euphemistically called the *crista* or “cock’s comb”⁵⁵) leading to what appears to be an intense experience of pleasure for the woman touched (6.418–423):

gravis occursu, taeterrima vultu
balnea nocte subit, conchas et castra moveri
nocte iubet, magno gaudet sudare tumultu,
cum lassata gravi ceciderunt bracchia massa,
callidus et cristae digitos inpressit aliptes
ac summum dominae femur exclamare coegit.

Serious to encounter, most foul to look at
she goes to the baths at night, and at night orders that her oils and
her quarters
be moved, and she takes pleasure in sweating amid a
great commotion,
when her arms have fallen down tired from the heavy weights,
and a clever anointer has pressed his fingers to her clitoris
and causes the woman's upper thigh to cry out.

- 35 Despite the lampooning genre of Juvenal's text, we do appear to see here an acknowledgment that touching a part of a woman's anatomy can induce extreme pleasure. The word *crista* may refer to the clitoris, labia, the vulva more generally, or another "crest"-like anatomical feature without dismantling this observation; lack of specificity surrounding female anatomy (and lack of understanding of the clitoris in particular) has a long history.⁵⁶ Yet Rufus of Ephesus's medical consideration of this organ does call touching it (κλειτοριάζειν) an act which can be done "licentiously" (ἀκολάστως), suggesting the clitoris as a *locus* of sensual overindulgence.⁵⁷ Interestingly, in Juvenal, is the *femur* that "cries out" and not the woman herself, which could indicate some sort of motion of the areas around the genitals. Again, though, there is no specific word or phrase used to mark orgasm.⁵⁸
- 36 It is, I believe, important that the above scene and the scene in Ovid are not necessarily ones of intercourse, and therefore more likely moments for the experience of orgasm to have taken place. We have already seen that women's pleasure is consistently acknowledged as something that can exist as a process alongside male penetration, and in Ovid and Juvenal perhaps even independent from that. Yet there is little we can know with certainty regarding the motivations of literary authors—particularly given generic conventions—and without more of the voices of women themselves we cannot be certain whether orgasm *was* acknowledged among women (perhaps as a matter privately discussed, and even with its own vocabulary, likely euphemistically applied⁵⁹). As I will address in the final section of this paper, however, even women in the modern world who felt freer to speak about their own sexual pleasures did so with great initial hesitation and with words that expressed the deep emotional toll that social taboos around sexual matters had taken upon their

lives. It is necessary, I think, to bear such relatively recent realities in mind when we consider the experiences of women in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds.

III. The Modern

- 37 From 1969 to 1973, a group of women in Boston, frustrated by the lack of frank and accurate medical advice they could access regarding their own bodies, worked to publish a record of both scientific information and anecdotal experiences regarding subjects such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, sex, sexual orientation, orgasm, and much more. They called themselves the Boston Women's Health Book Collective and their publication *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (ultimately operating under a nonprofit of this latter name). In the extensive records of their publication history⁶⁰ are glimpses into the lives of American women who faced social oppression in matters of sex and sexuality, yet who were themselves innately sexual beings, seeking to enjoy intercourse with partners of varying gender identities and who were routinely experiencing, and enjoying, orgasm. Even studying their work today—both the original publication and the many updated editions that have come from it—a modern reader feels keenly aware of the lack of information about sex that *still* frustrates women in the contemporary (American) world, due largely to a combination of social taboos and an overwhelming androcentrism.
- 38 In a draft of their piece before its 1973 publication are signs of the Collective considering what elements ought to be included (e.g., easily accessible statistics on women and sex; detailed diagrams of the female anatomy) and what needed to be carefully edited (e.g., the “problems around orgasm”; discussions of “doing it when we don't want to”⁶¹). The group writes about feeling dependent on men for their self-esteem, noting that, “This carried over to our sexual life where we felt that pleasing men was more important than pleasing ourselves. The focus of our sex was genital. We thought about our sexuality in male terms; intercourse was the goal and foreplay was almost a dispensable preliminary.”⁶² Elsewhere, they talk more specifically about orgasm—what the mechanics are (relying primarily on Masters and Johnson), and how important it is to be aroused, relaxed, and patient to achieve one. These words of advice are

attended by anecdotes from women who consider sexual intercourse with men as “a disguised ritual rape,” who feel trapped in marriage, and who feel “disregarded” by medical professionals.⁶³

39 Their frustrations echo back through centuries. Setting aside the fact that *Our Bodies, Ourselves* represents positive steps toward embracing female sexuality in the voices of women, what remains is a culture of masculine privilege and feminine dismissal. It is both shocking and frustrating to find more similarities than differences between 20th century America and 4th c. Greece when it comes to women’s health. Yet what these similarities can help make clear is how difficult it can be for women to experience orgasm via vaginal penetration by a man, especially within the context of a marriage in which the male partner is not sexually desired by his wife. Such circumstances in the modern world are carefully considered by Lloyd in her analysis of medical studies of female orgasm. Yet these same circumstances are routinely overlooked by those modern writers who discuss ancient orgasm.

40 As an example, I refer to Korda et al. 2010, who offer a history of female ejaculation. Their introduction claims that, “most scientists are not aware that historians of medicine and psychology described the phenomenon of female ejaculation approximately 2,000 years ago”; their findings report, “Physicians, anatomists, and psychologists in both eastern and western culture have described intellectual concepts of female ejaculation during orgasm,” (emphasis mine) and in particular that, “In ancient Western writings the emission of female fluid is mentioned even earlier, depicted about 300 B.C. by Aristotle and in the 2nd century by Galen.”⁶⁴ While it is true that Aristotle, pseudo-Aristotle, and Galen all mention female emissions, they do not appear to do so in the context of orgasm. The authors do in fact concede this within the body of the article, observing of Aristotle’s *On the Generation of Animals*, “Whether he was referring to vaginal lubrication or female ejaculation is difficult to distinguish, in particular because he did not explain this phenomenon in the context of orgasm.”⁶⁵ Nevertheless, nuances and doubts of the ancient texts in question do not appear in their results, which (as above) they insist contain long-standing evidence of ejaculation during orgasm. As they write, “This article aims to demonstrate that the phenomenon of female ejaculation has been discovered, described and forgotten in

eastern and western culture repeatedly over the last 2,000 years.”⁶⁶ The study, then, remains somewhat misleading regarding medical texts of the Greek and Roman worlds, yet it is cited uncritically by later studies—even those offering a history of female ejaculation with orgasm.⁶⁷

- 41 The modern focus on orgasm and ejaculation similarly colors the analyses of passages in non-medical, classical texts. Juvenal’s Satire 6 on women, for example, has been the subject of much orgasmic debate. In addition to the above discussion of an anointer’s digital manipulation of a woman’s “cock’s comb,” there is a further scene which describes two women who urinate on a statue of *Pudicitia* and then proceed to engage in sexual acts—either with the statue or with each other (309-311):⁶⁸

noctibus hic ponunt lecticas, micturiunt hic
effigiemque deae longis siphonibus implent
inque vices equitant ac nullo teste moventur...

They place their litters here at night, here they urinate
and they fill up the statue of the goddess with far-reaching jets
and in turn they ride and become excited with no witness...

- 42 Much of the disagreement about this passage has centered around whether or not the women are orgasming, with some voices claiming it depicts “all-out orgasm”⁶⁹ and others asserting that this analysis goes much too far.⁷⁰ The reading hinges on interpreting the verb *micturiunt*, “they urinate,” with an added meaning of “they ejaculate,” and thus an obvious problem with this reading becomes the conflation of female orgasm with ejaculation.⁷¹ T. H. M. Gellar-Goad, however, straddles the line here in a way that makes the most sense: these women may be “ejaculating” or even “orgasming,” but only because they are acting like men. Their sexual acts and excretions are, in fact, delineated with language solely used to refer to male sexual behavior (*equitant*, *siphonibus*) and there is an established, euphemizing use of urination for male ejaculation in Latin literature.⁷² If a culmination of the sexual act for women in a phenomenon that we would call “orgasm” was not something with a long-standing conceptualization for (Greek or) Roman readers, as I argue, then it makes most sense to read Juvenal here as describing

male acts satirically and unbelievably performed by women—particularly as the emissions (of urine or semen, or both) in a way “penetrate” a statue of female modesty.

43 In light of all I have argued, I will acknowledge that preventing the modern focus on orgasm from coloring debates about ancient texts is a difficult thing; it likely happens without much conscious thought on the part of those commenting or translating. When a line in Achilles Tatius’s *Adventures of Leucippe and Clitophon* refers to a woman “in the peak of sexual pleasure” (ἐν δὲ τῇ τῆς Ἀφροδίτης ἀκμῇ, 2.8), its translation with the words “in the orgasm of Love” as we get in the Loeb edition might not give a modern reader pause. Yet I hope to have shown how the passages from the ancient textual record I have discussed, both medical and literary, do not necessarily describe a woman’s orgasm, specifically—even those few that talk about a “peak” or a “goal” of intercourse. Modern vocabulary like “orgasm” and “ejaculation,” common in translations of ancient texts, influenced scholar Rachel P. Maines, whose 1999 book *The Technology of Orgasm* promotes the idea that therapeutic masturbation was performed on women as a treatment for hysteria, and claims that descriptions of this treatment appear throughout the ancient medical corpora. Maines, a scholar of the history of technology, may have benefitted from translators of classical texts taking greater care to exclude vocabulary with such strong modern connotations as “orgasm” or (in the modern, orgasm-related sense) “ejaculation.” Classical translators, in turn, would benefit from a deeper knowledge of the modern science behind sexology—books like Lloyd’s, which would provide a caveat that the ancient women in question were likely not climaxing on a regular basis.

44 Ironically, Lloyd’s book, far more accurate yet not engaged with an attractive subject like classical reception, has not received as much attention as Maines’ less accurate attempt at creating a history for the disease “hysteria” from Hippocrates to today. Though King corrects the classical aspects of Maines’ work,⁷³ the book’s grounding in the classical past remains a major selling point and one of the reasons her theories have been largely accepted as fact. While Maines’ *Technology of Orgasm* went on to inspire two movies and one stage play, the more scientifically rigorous *Case of the Female Orgasm* by Lloyd was merely lampooned one week on

Saturday Night Live. The popularity of Maines' book is evidenced by the fact that, though Lloyd does not cite Maines once in her work, the first quote on the back cover in praise of Lloyd's publication is by "Rachel Maines, author of *The Technology of Orgasm*." Maines' inaccurate references to ancient medical texts now appear in medical journals and in the publications of major science writers as quick facts on ancient sexology.⁷⁴ What her book represents, then, is the precipitous juncture among the fields of ancient medicine, modern medicine, the history of medicine, and reception studies—and how scholars in each of these fields would benefit from widening their areas of examination, particularly regarding orgasm.⁷⁵

IV. Conclusions

- 45 While examining ancient medical texts within their own historical and literary contexts is a crucial undertaking for understanding the findings of ancient science, it is equally important to examine the evolution of scientific thought as pertains to the findings of ancient medical texts, particularly when those findings are misunderstood or misused by later scholars. Discrepancies in understanding ancient medical texts on sex and problems in accurately communicating information about the female orgasm stem, I believe, from a historical discomfort with talking about these topics, particularly in non-clinical settings and especially with non-euphemistic vocabulary. Thus, notions like "finishing" and phrases like "faking it" creep from conversational expressions among friends and the reaction-targeted dialogue of movies into scholarship, where they actually impede understanding and obfuscate meaning.
- 46 As I stated earlier, I do not mean to say here that women in antiquity never experienced orgasm. I only want to emphasize that a woman's orgasm as it is understood today, often as a desired "end" for the sex act, was not an ancient social construct. We may see the very beginnings of such an idea in Imperial Rome, albeit outside of male-female intercourse and with a markedly euphemistic occlusion. Medical writers, when interested in women's sexual pleasure, focused on it as coextensive with penetration by a man (preferably a husband) in the act of sexual intercourse; rather than something momentary and marking "completion," women's pleasure (when present) was a

process that lasted for the duration of intercourse and ended with male ejaculation. One benefit of including authors like Lucretius (who bridges the scientific and the literary) or Ovid (who bridges the literary and the personal) in discussions of the medical history of women's orgasms is the potential to further clarify important medical discourses and remove modern notions—like that of a climactic experience for women, particularly in intercourse with men—from an ancient discourse in which they played little part.

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NOTES

1 I want to acknowledge from the start the binary-gendered nature of my discussion, which is reflective of both the language of ancient Greco-Roman medical and literary texts, and the focus of modern scientific studies of orgasm in human females on biological sex. More can and should be written on orgasm and gender diversity in the ancient world, and I hope this paper will provide a stepping off point for those important investigations. My sincere thanks to the editors, to the anonymous reviewers, to Tawny L. Holm for the generous departmental support, and to Bianca N. Calderon, Mathias Hanses, Jay Kennedy, Tracy L. Rutler, Jessica Shuman, and Jill M. Wood for their insights, suggestions, and encouragement. All translations are my own (unless otherwise specified), as are any remaining errors.

2 <https://snltranscripts.jt.org/04/04tupdate.phtml>. Accessed March 14, 2024.

3 The teenage Hardy Boys brothers act as amateur sleuths in a youth-oriented American book series, first published in 1927. Covers of the books typically depict the two youths with flashlights or binoculars, peering around corners and into buildings, searching for clues in whatever new mystery is noted in the title.

4 Lloyd 2005: 41-43, 115-116, 132-133.

5 Recent studies of the cognitive effects of androcentrism make clear that, in fact, the problem is not only that men are privileged but that they are considered by default neutral, whereas women are distinctly gendered. See, e.g., Bailey, LaFrance, and Dovidio 2019 and 2020. For the broad impacts of androcentrism (via data in healthcare, economics, social sciences, etc.) on most aspects of our modern world, see Criado Perez 2019.

6 The now-iconic scene from this American romantic-comedy depicts the two title characters having a frank conversation in which “Sally” questions how “Harry” can be sure that all the women he sleeps with are experiencing orgasm. While her convincing faking of an orgasm in front of the other patrons of the diner proves him wrong, the scene is problematic for all the same misconceptions I will discuss in this article; “Sally” asserts in the scene that most women have faked an orgasm at one point or another,

implying that *not* experiencing orgasm is the exception, when the reality may be the opposite.

7 Lloyd 2005: 25-39, 197-219 (esp. 212-215, on Thornhill et al.'s 1995 study, which asked both men and women to report whether a woman experienced orgasm).

8 E.g., Korda, Goldstein, and Sommer 2010, which claims mentions of "emission of female fluid" by both Aristotle and Galen as evidence of long-standing knowledge of female ejaculation as a product of orgasm. I discuss the problems with this account in the third section of this paper.

9 See discussion at Lloyd 2005: 13-16, 107-148.

10 Symons 1979: 75-95.

11 Lloyd 2005: 132-133, noting that Kinsey et al. 1953 cites a 91% orgasm rate in women with masturbation.

12 Studies of the social lives of Greek and Roman women constitute a large body of scholarship, but for some of the most illuminating and influential studies, editions, and sourcebooks, see Pomeroy 1975; Flemming 2000; D'Ambra 2007; James and Dillon 2012; MacLachlan 2012; Richlin 2014.

13 Compare Dean-Jones 1994: 43; Flemming 2000: 3-5. See also Green 2008 for a study on notions of male authority in pre-modern gynecology.

14 See esp. Dean-Jones 1992 and King 1998, who makes the additional and important push back against the assumption that "there is some common 'reality' lying beneath the surface of medical texts such as the Hippocratic corpus" (6).

15 Notably, the author of *On Gen.* specifies shortly after this passage (4-5) that a woman's uterus experiences more "contraction" when the uterus is too dry or when it will take up male seed to conceive. The latter of these references could suggest that contractions were thought to accompany ejaculation, though see my discussion below on uterine upsuck for the unreliability of this argument as one supporting the occurrence of orgasm.

16 See discussion at Lloyd 2005: 108-109 and 264 n. 1, under "The Byproduct Account."

17 When I say "forced sexual intercourse," I include intercourse that is felt to be socially compulsory, even if not directly coercive or violent *per se*.

18 Dean-Jones 1992, esp. 54-55, where she discusses that in the Hippocratic corpus a woman's appetite for sex is a purely physiological need, and

neither something for which women necessarily have desire, nor something over which they possess any control.

19 We may consider here the works of later poets like Callimachus (fr. 110) and Catullus (62, 66), who make vivid the fears of young women on the eve of marriage.

20 For discussion of the *Gynecology* more generally (though not the topic of pleasure in particular), see Flemming 2000: 230-246, esp. 236-238 on Soranus' "relentlessly reproductive message."

21 See Lloyd 2005: 197-219. For a more recent study arguing for the possibility of uterine upsuck, see Levin 2017, which pushes back against the oft-cited problem of human "exceptionalism" in upsuck as a function of reproduction. See also Levin 2020a which argues that clitoral stimulation can play an important role in "facilitating the possibility of reproductive success" and thus sees clitoridectomy as a "reproductive disability" (136), as well as Levin 2020b, which catalogues and critiques news media responses to this earlier 2020 publication.

22 Lloyd 2005: 249, in critique of the studies of Fox et al. 1970; Smith et al. 1984; Baker and Bellis 1993.

23 Masters and Johnson 1966 remains the foundational study, which identifies four phases of the process of orgasm: the excitement, plateau, orgasmic, and resolution phases (dubbed the "EPOR" model). This final phase of resolution has as its marker a subsiding of vascular congestion, i.e. the "relaxation" apparent after orgasm (3-8). Notably, Masters and Johnson observe that women are able to experience orgasm multiple times at any point within the resolution phase—most especially if they return after a first orgasm to the tension-level of the plateau phase (6). This suggests a modern medical understanding of female pleasure as something less momentary than male orgasm.

24 King 2011: 214, within a discussion of *Gyn.* 3.14 which describes genital massage to open the neck of the womb.

25 See Salama et al. 2015 for "squirting" as involuntary emission of urine during sexual activity.

26 Masters and Johnson 1966: 6. They write, "Subjective (sensual) awareness of orgasm is pelvic in focus, specifically concentrated in the clitoral body, vagina, and uterus of the female."

27 I offer this possible interpretation based on anecdotal evidence and personal experience. As further testimony to the shortcomings of scholarly research into women's health, neither I nor the medical doctors I consulted were able to find any current studies of implantation in non-pathologized pregnancies. Recent studies focusing on IVF do exist, but sensations involved in this process may differ. These were the public-facing articles recommended to me for medical discussion of implantation: <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/implantation-symptoms> and <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/symptoms/24536-implantation-bleeding> (both accessed July 5, 2024).

28 King 2011: 222, 224. The article is in critique of Maines 1999.

29 Indeed, orgasm is examined in modern sexology as a relief from different kinds of pain, including that of childbirth (Mayberry and Daniel 2016). A 2023 study by Komisaruk et al. notes that orgasm uses the pain pathway, and thus could be characterized as a “nonaversive pain.” Nevertheless, this study underlines how chronic pain, like the vulvar pain associated with vestibulodynia, blocks orgasm. See also Hämmerli et al. 2013 on chronic pelvic pain from endometriosis preventing orgasm, though only during sexual intercourse and not with masturbation. This latter point may in fact be most relevant to the above passage, since to my mind the pain referenced more likely arises from penetration, not orgasm.

30 Flemming 2000: 335.

31 Dean-Jones 2012 proposes that the author of the first five sections of HA 10 was a doctor whose accounts Aristotle collected among his *ἐνδοξα* (professional opinions and empirical observations).

32 Dean-Jones 2023: 181-182. Night emissions in dreams have a presence in other ancient texts (e.g., *Mul.* 2.175, *Genit.* 1.7.470-472), though Dean-Jones goes on to offer a caveat about the divided opinion of modern medical researchers on the possibility of female ejaculation, citing Salama et al. 2015.

33 See, e.g., Korda et al. 2010 and Rodriguez et al. 2021, both of which offer a history of female ejaculation.

34 HA 10.635b15-31, 637a15-34. See Dean-Jones 2023: 33-34, 181.

35 This androcentric reading is in line with Aristotelian teleology regarding sex in *On the Generation of Animals*, where male seed is the efficient cause of offspring, while female seed is nutritively deficient and thus a teleological failure. So Nielson 2008, which further posits that “a female results when

the final cause that would have produced a male is defeated by a material cause. A male results when the final cause is allowed to operate unhindered” (375). Perceived female ejaculation of seed, then, can be read as *an* end, but not *the* end, which supports my reading of *τελέως* as indicating male ejaculation. See esp. Laqueur 1990 for the “one-sex” model in which the female is an inverted male, stemming from Aristotle via Galen.

36 King 2011, in critique of Maines 1999.

37 Lloyd 2005: 223. In particular, she critiques the studies by Fox et al. 1970; Smith et al. 1984; Baker and Bellis 1993, all of which deal with uterine upsuck as evidence of female orgasm as an adaptation for reproductive success.

38 <https://eidolon.pub/what-women-dont-want-eb24e6a457de>. Accessed October 10, 2024. It bears noting that Tiresias’ afterlife in modern psychoanalysis, both in Lacan as well as post-Lacanian theorists, complicates these claims. Cavanagh 2023 provides an overview of these debates, highlighting the potential import of Tiresias for studies of trans* subjectivity.

39 Winkler 1996: 64.

40 Winkler 1996: 77. On this woman-centered nature of Sappho’s world, see in particular Snyder 1997.

41 The verses are more typically discussed as a comparison of the apple with a type of women: so Harris 1985 (suggesting female excellence, with or without erotic emphasis), Griffith 1989 (reading the poem as epithalamium and the apple as bride), and Stehle 1996 (as an example of Sapphic comparisons of women to fruit or flowers).

42 Winkler offers that in a phallogocentric tradition like this, such words may have been lacking altogether (79-80).

43 See Nelson 2000 on the lack of a true *vox propria* for dildo in Ancient Greek and the use, therefore, of euphemism in comedy and satire (*ὄλισβος* was originally the term for a “slide” in music).

44 Flemming 2006: 193, on the same Galen and the widow episode analyzed in King 2011.

45 Murray 2021: 275-276.

46 Lloyd 2005: 132-133. See also Ruffell 2023: 207 on the *Lysistrata* as a play that “highlights the constructed nature of sex, sexuality, and gender,” where there is “a clear recognition that full and satisfying sexual expression, on both sides, is much more than a goal-driven exercise in achieving orgasm.”

47 See, e.g., Dover 1980: 147.

48 Pender 1992, esp. 72-80.

49 Pace Jacobson 1990 and Allen 1991, who engage in what Nugent (1994: 199, n. 82) calls “a remarkable sequence of masculine philological dickering over the linguistic details of orgasm in this passage.”

50 See discussion at Hanses 2024: 61, with n. 24; and 76, with n. 62.

51 On sex with Cerinthus during the hunt: *ne Veneris cupidae gaudia turbet aper*, “lest the boar disturb the joys of eager Venus” (3.9.18); on revealing her own sexual pleasures: *mea gaudia narret*, “let [anyone] tell of my pleasures” (3.13.5).

52 Medea to Jason: *haec de te gaudia sola feram*, “I will take only these joys from you” (12.24), implying by the negative that she will not get from him the sexual joys she desires.

53 E.g., Jacobson 1990 and Allen 1991, both of whom use this Ovidian passage to claim that Lucretius’ pleasure-seeking woman is experiencing an orgasm via penile-vaginal intercourse (see n. 49 above).

54 So Lloyd 2005: 24-25.

55 See Adams 1982: 98, though with caution as there is an inevitable vagueness to euphemism. The body part referenced here could be anything viewed as a “crest.”

56 See Malabou 2020 for an account of historical clitoral erasure, philosophical clitoral “unthinking,” and ultimately a discussion of how this organ marks the distance between pleasure and reproduction. See also Flemming 2022, however, which demonstrates that the clitoris was well-known to ancient medicine, certainly from the 2nd c. CE.

57 Ruf. *Onom.* 109-112 (147.5-11 Daremberg-Ruelle). See discussion at Flemming 2022: 6-7.

58 King 2011: 215-216 discusses this passage in detail within the history of therapeutic masturbation, ultimately concluding that “it cannot be read as telling us anything about the realities of women’s lives in the ancient world.”

59 See the above discussions of both Sapphic lyric and comedic scenes.

60 Archival material for the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective accessed on May 31, 2024 in the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study in Cambridge, MA.

61 Records of the Boston Woman's Health Book Collective, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, MC 503. Series XVI. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (OBOS), Subseries B. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* 1973 edition. Corrected photocopies of draft manuscript, 41. Quotations are handwritten notes in the document.

62 Records of the Boston Woman's Health Book Collective, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, MC 503. Series XVI. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (OBOS), Subseries B. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* 1973 edition. Corrected photocopies of draft manuscript, 1. Wells 2008: 698 highlights that the narrative "we" used by the authors throughout creates an "unmediated universalism," which while empowering in some respects certainly opens the work to criticism.

63 Records of the Boston Woman's Health Book Collective, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, MC 503. Series XVI. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (OBOS), Subseries B. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* 1973 edition. Corrected photocopies of draft manuscript, 34-57. The caveats of Wells 2008 about the "rich literacy practices of second-wave feminism" (706) that informed the writing of this work are well made. The publication has changed significantly in the intervening years, from its 1973 edition to its most recent edition in 2011, as the original references to a universal feminine experience were realized to be essentializing and lacking in inclusivity.

64 Korda et al. 2010: 1965.

65 Korda et al. 2010: 1970.

66 Korda et al. 2010: 1974.

67 See, e.g., Rodriguez et al. 2021.

68 See discussion at Gellar-Goad 2020: 104-105, with n. 2. Watson and Watson 2014: 20 claims that the scene represents "lesbian couplings."

69 Nadeau 2011: 83, in a commentary on the sixth satire.

70 Watson 2012, in a review of Nadeau's commentary.

71 Pace Richlin 1986: 54, who claims that *moventur* in this scene means to "reach orgasm."

72 Gellar-Goad 2020: 104-107.

73 I will underline that much of King's argument centers around Maines' reliance on translations that paint an inaccurate picture of the scenes

in question.

74 See a further critique of her work in Lieberman and Schatzberg 2018, which begins with the statement, “The *Technology of Orgasm* by Rachel Maines is one of the most widely cited works on the history of sex and technology” (24).

75 My sincere thanks to Bianca N. Calderon, MD and Jessica Shuman, MD whose advice on medical sources for this paper has allowed me to begin my own mental bridge between fields that previously felt enormously disparate.

ABSTRACT

English

The Greco-Roman ancient medical authors who discuss women’s pleasure in sex are often misinterpreted as talking about the female orgasm. In fact, their interest is ultimately in a woman’s desire for and pleasure during sex (ὄρεξις, ἐπιθυμία, ἡδονή), not in orgasm as a climactic end to the sexual act for women. Accordingly, I argue here that the ancient medical discussion of a woman’s gratification in sex (with men) focuses on a “process” of pleasure, and not on a culmination in the orgasm. A comparison with literary depictions of women’s pleasure illuminates the emphasis on a process-oriented understanding of female sexual enjoyment. This contribution considers these ancient texts, medical and literary, in light of the work of biologist Elisabeth A. Lloyd, who contradicts long-standing assumptions that orgasm in women evolved as a reproductive necessity. Shifting our thinking about the ancient discourse in response to modern scientific research can provide a helpful basis for reframing current studies in sexology and the history of medicine. Many of these rely on translations of Greek and Latin texts that use the vocabulary of orgasm, when this is not the concept presented in the ancient works.

INDEX

Keywords

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