

Discourse and Sexual Desire: German-Language Discourse on Masturbation in the Late Eighteenth Century

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DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND THE HISTORY of sexuality have enjoyed a brief but very stimulating relationship. Since the 1970s the historiography of sexuality has increasingly been written in terms of the history of discourses on things sexual. Over the same period there has also been debate about what should be understood by the term *discourse* and about what meanings can be attributed to discourses on sexual matters. Regardless of how *discourse* has been defined and understood, scholars have raised questions about the kind of discourse analysis that is most appropriate for the history of sexuality. Likewise, they have discussed how best to conceive of the relationship between discursive texts and social practices or sexual experiences. This interaction between discourse analysis and the history of sexuality has proven so productive because, over the years, considerable doubts have been raised about the viability of a historiography determined by discourse-led approaches. Radical critics of discourse-based histories of sexuality claim that it represents little more than a novel repackaging of the old “history of ideas,” whereby the construction of knowledge is examined without reference to the actual life-worlds inhabited by sexual actors. At the same time, other scholars have voiced their doubts about whether in earlier times sexual discourses impacted the lives of the average population and were able to influence actual sexual behavior.

This article explores the conflict-laden relationship between discourse analysis and the history of sexualities on a number of levels.¹ First, it shows how discourse and discourse analysis have become relevant to the study of sexual history. Then, it discusses the theoretical connections between

¹A German version of this article will be published in *Paedagogica Historica* 39 (2003): 719–35.

discourse and sexual experience along with the question as to which form of discourse analysis is best able to reflect the complexity of that relationship. The main part of the article examines in detail German-language pedagogical discourse on masturbation during the late eighteenth century. By applying an “interactive” concept of discourse this case study enables us to demonstrate just how fruitful so-called text-oriented discourse analysis can be for the study of the history of sexuality.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND THE HISTORY OF SEXUALITY

The troubled relationship between discourse analysis and the history of sexuality began in the 1960s and 1970s. According to the then-dominant psychoanalytic mode of interpretation, modern society led to the suppression of everything sexual.² This “repression hypothesis” postulated the existence of an active, biologically fixed sexual drive that stood in opposition to culture and society. In line with this approach the historiography of sexuality concentrated on specific periods of suppression and emancipation, which were then incorporated into historical grand theories—in particular, the “civilization process” proposed by Norbert Elias. This led to a special focus on the transition from early modern forms of sexuality to modern, bourgeois society. According to this schema, the hostility toward sexuality expressed by bourgeois society since the eighteenth century led to a lasting repression of the sexual, accompanied by public and private silence regarding sexual matters, frigidity, and neuroses. It was only the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s and 1970s that loosened these cultural constraints.

At the end of the 1970s, however, repression-oriented views of sexuality came under heavy fire from the likes of Mary MacIntosh, Jeffrey Weeks, Randolph Trumbach, and, especially, Michel Foucault.³ These authors pleaded for a break with the Freudian “steam-kettle” model and for a radical historicization and denaturalization of sex.⁴ Foucault’s agenda-setting work indicated that the notion of increasing sexual repression in bourgeois society was not to be discarded completely but argued that this obscured

²For typical examples of this approach see Jos van Ussel, *Geschiedenis van het seksuele probleem* (Meppel, 1968); and Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality* (London, 1969).

³See, among others, Mary McIntosh, “The Homosexual Role,” *Social Problems* 16 (1968): 182–91; Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain, from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London, 1977); Randolph Trumbach, “London’s Sodomites: Homosexual Behavior and Western Culture in the 19th Century,” *Journal of Social History* 11 (1977–78): 1–33; Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, Vol. 1: *La volonté de savoir* (Paris, 1976).

⁴Franz X. Eder, “Sexualunterdrückung oder Sexualisierung? Zu den theoretischen Ansätzen der Sexualitätsgeschichte,” in Daniela Erlach et al., eds., *Privatisierung der Triebe. Sexualität in der frühen Neuzeit* (Frankfurt am Main, 1994), 7–29.

the really important point. Foucault suggested that it was only in human sciences discourse in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that modern conceptions of “sexuality” first began to emerge. Foucault referred to “dispositives,” by which he meant sexual discourses and social technologies of sex. These dispositives drew more and more aspects of human life into the sexual realm during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, thereby sexualizing the modern individual’s search for truth and identity. For Foucault, discourses of sexuality thus formed the core of historical analyses precisely because they consistently mentioned suppression and the disappearance of sex. The “Foucauldian turn” had an enormous impact on the international historiography of the subject, and since then discourses have been viewed as a central factor in the construction of sexuality.

However, Foucault and other contemporary authors left unexplained the problem of how to think about the relationship between discourse and the practice of sexuality as well as which analytical tools might be applied to them. This theoretical and methodological obstacle arose mainly from the lack of clarity present in the concept of sexuality being employed. As the general criticisms made of “social constructionism” have also shown, the term *sexuality* must be defined anew: human sexuality can only be influenced by discourse if the former is defined as “interactive,” to use Ian Hacking’s term. According to Hacking, sexual classifications can “change the kind of personal experience undergone by individuals, as soon as a person or his/her fellow human beings are aware of them, or if institutions employ certain categories to classify people sexually.” Moreover, the process of classification can cause people “to develop their feelings and behaviour partly on the basis of those classifications.”⁵ However, this should not be understood as a purely structural-functionalist effect or as the automatic outcome of a one-sided social process. Discourses, along with the statements and strategies that accompany them, are not simply accepted uncritically by historical actors, because the latter possess a certain room for maneuver to interpret and evaluate those discourses on their own terms. Within any given cultural space sexual actors must decide what they feel and think and how to understand and respond to the discourses surrounding them. Social reality is created by the actors experiencing and appropriating (or rejecting) the discursive framework they inhabit. The social reality of the sexual realm is thus constituted by discursive conditions, which we can describe as the way in which sexual characteristics are ordered, and the behavior and interpretation of sexual actors, who continue the existing discourses or change and modify them. At the same time, this kind of “looping effect” can work in the opposite direction too, leading to a situation in which actors’ ideas, knowledge, and behavior in relation to matters sexual can influence discursive practice in a number of ways.

⁵Ian Hacking, *Was heißt ‘soziale Konstruktion’? Zur Konjunktur einer Kampfvokabel in den Wissenschaften* (Frankfurt am Main, 1999), 164–65.

Definitions of sexuality corresponding to the above understanding of discourse must therefore be conceived of as broadly as possible.⁶ In other words, the underlying concept of “sexual desire” must be interpreted in such a way as to include all the phenomena connected to sexual activity—that is to say, concepts, ideas, knowledge, imagination, actual practice, and experience. The sexual has always been—and is—constituted by the concrete ways in which it is lived out in practice. People draw on preshaped concepts, images, and modes of perception in order to describe and imbue with sense and meaning the experiences undergone by both body and psyche. Certainly, the cultural dimension is not inscribed on an “empty” body: biological drives are in themselves part of sexual desire, even if they are mostly “silent.” The term *sexual desire* is thus taken to be a way of understanding the sexual as a still undetermined, interactive, sociocultural form, which does not exclude the biological aspect. It must, however, be made very clear at the outset that sexual desire results primarily from the given discursive conditions and the actions and interpretations of sexual actors. In line with this definition, the object under investigation can be constituted on a number of levels such as sexual concepts and knowledge; the imagination of the subject, which is determined by the sexual sphere; and the concrete interaction between discourse and individual.

Existing concepts of discourse and analytical methods often fail to take sufficient account of this kind of interactive definition of sexuality because they either overemphasize the textual material of discourses or place the weight too much on social practices but without successfully combining the two dimensions.⁷ The resulting divergence between literary theory-influenced and sociological approaches is also a major reason why discourse analysis has continued to meet with a muted reception among the majority of historians and why opposing fronts have been built in the history of sexuality between historians who concentrate on “discourse” and those who work on “sexual experience.”⁸

However, Norman Fairclough’s concept of “text-oriented discourse analysis” offers a means of bringing together the analysis of language with social theory to provide a research methodology capable of investigating interactive subjects.⁹ Text-oriented discourse theory takes discourse to be a three-dimensional concept consisting of text, discursive practice, and social practice. Correspondingly, the actual process of discourse analysis follows three stages: the first involves close analysis of the form and language of

⁶For an extensive discussion of definitions of sexuality see Franz X. Eder, *Kultur der Begierde. Eine Geschichte der Sexualität* (Munich, 2002), 10–27.

⁷Cf. Reiner Keller et al., eds., *Handbuch Sozialwissenschaftliche Diskursanalyse. Bd. 1: Theorien und Methoden* (Opladen, 2001).

⁸An up-to-date overview can be found in Philipp Sarasin, “Diskurstheorie und Geschichtswissenschaft,” in *ibid.*, 53–80.

⁹Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge, 1992).

the text; the second includes the examination of how the text is produced, disseminated, and consumed; and the final stage requires an investigation of the social practices in which the former two dimensions are embedded. It must suffice here to cite the essential premises of Fairclough's theoretical approach: without doubt, the first and most significant assumption made by discourse theory is that conflicts over social power find expression in discourses in terms of both texts and discursive practices. These fights for hegemony occur in the form of inconsistencies in the characteristics of discursive texts. Second, texts are therefore understood as an integral part of social conflicts and constitute factors and techniques in the use of power in their own right. As such, they can have a conserving or mobilizing function. Third, texts are not assumed to be objective nor can they be made sense of entirely within themselves. Rather, texts must be seen as products to be understood in relational terms, with their meaning changing according to the respective context and interpreter. In order to be understood properly, texts must be viewed "intertextually": they must be placed in reference either to the rest of the discourse of which they form part or to other discourses. Fourth, in this way texts are constructed as processes, not as static artifacts. Fifth, within a social context texts perform the role of constituting knowledge and ideas, thereby influencing the subjective experience of individuals. Sixth, a subject's construction of experience does not represent a one-sided process but must be seen as part of a dialectical, or better, interactive relationship between the text and the participants in a particular discourse. Finally, discursive practices always form part of social practices. The way in which texts base themselves on other texts and how they are produced, disseminated, and consumed are all an expression of social practices, relations, and conflicts.

The usefulness of Fairclough's approach to discourse for the social and cultural history of sexuality can be illustrated by looking at German-language discourse on masturbation in the late eighteenth century. This discourse lends itself to a text-oriented analysis for two main reasons. First, discourse on masturbation has won a significant place in the historiography of sexuality. Indeed, it was for a long time considered to represent the first phase of bourgeois repression and to constitute a powerful instrument in the denial of sexuality. By way of contrast, Foucault saw in this discourse the origins of the sexualization of childhood, though he never sought to underpin his hypothesis with empirical research. Though there are now a number of studies on German-language masturbation discourse, a more theory-oriented analysis is still lacking—as is a proper history of the practice of onanism.¹⁰ Second,

¹⁰The most extensive treatment to date is provided by Karl Heinz Bloch, *Die Bekämpfung der Jugendmasturbation im 18. Jahrhundert. Ursachen—Verlauf—Nachwirkungen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1998); see also the literature listed by the author in the WWW database *Bibliography of the History of Western Sexuality, 1700–1945*, <http://www.univie.ac.at/Wirtschaftsgeschichte/Sexbibl>.

German-language masturbation discourse is a particularly interesting case for analysis because the late-eighteenth-century literature on masturbation, which was produced mainly by pedagogues, doctors, and clergymen, also includes a number of texts by (predominantly male) consumers. Without doubt, this constitutes an important source for research, the more so given that the history of sexuality is not especially rich in autobiographical works or texts that enable us to ascertain how discourse was understood.¹¹ An analysis of consumer texts allows us to investigate the appropriation of the content, concepts, categories, and metaphors contained in a particular discourse as well as the interaction between producer and consumer.

DISCOURSE ON MASTURBATION IN THE LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The most appropriate place to begin any analysis is surely with the contemporary German word for the discourse in question, namely, *Onanie* (onanism).¹² As with other texts, the semantic potential and conceptual tensions within this word can be interpreted as expressing conflicts for hegemony.¹³ According to some eighteenth-century authors, “onanism” was not even a permissible word because its very use already constituted a vice. Several writers referred to the biblical story of Onan, believing that the word required no further definition. Others termed “onanism” a “serious illness” and required dozens of pages in order to describe the symptoms and effects of the malady along with possible forms of therapy. Participants in the discourse on masturbation in German-speaking areas saw “onanism” essentially as a problem of upbringing and preferred to speak about prevention rather than the subject itself. None of the writers were of the opinion that masturbation represented a practice for creating sexual desire and/or satisfaction for oneself or others.

The difficulties that virtually all participants had with the term are a clear indication that its usage was not just part of an intellectual debate but comprised social confrontation as well. The different meanings attributed to the word reflect the views of the conflicting parties: members of the clergy (who usually wrote in an individual capacity) continued the church’s tradition of defining masturbation as a vice and sin. Doctors, who suspected that the practice amounted to a form of serious physical illness, concerned themselves with diagnosis and possible treatments. Pedagogues, who concentrated on the educational dimension, viewed masturbation by children

¹¹For a comparable example on the history of homosexuality see Harry Oosterhuis, *Stepchildren of Nature: Kraft-Ebing, Psychiatry, and the Making of Sexual Identity* (Chicago, 2000).

¹²On German-language masturbation discourse see Eder, *Kultur der Begierde*, 91–128; Franz X. Eder, “Erfahrung oder Diskurs? Das onanistische Subjekt im späten 18. Jahrhundert,” in Marguérite Bos et al., eds., *Erfahrung: Alles nur Diskurs? Zur Verwendung des Erfahrungsbegriffs in der Geschlechtergeschichte* (Zürich, 2004), 255–63.

¹³The analytical steps are summarized in Fairclough, 225–40.

and youths as a problem of upbringing. For the readers of such texts, the “onanism complex” functioned as an interpretative template within which they could problematize every possible physical and spiritual situation as well as social issues.

During the eighteenth century the multilayered semantic potential of “onanism” expanded considerably beyond its usage in the seventeenth century. Any analysis of discursive and textual interchange must therefore focus on the types of discourse referred to and must investigate where “foreign” texts were incorporated into the main discourse. Early German-language discourse on masturbation drew particularly on reformatory, puritan discourse and its notion of spiritual “self-defilement” and “impurity.” In the seventeenth-century writings on the subject masturbation was seen as endangering the pure life of the adult, who aimed to resist sin and behave in a manner that was “pleasing unto God.” Thus, masturbation would mean that people had succumbed to the earthly desires of the flesh—to concupiscence—and had defiled themselves with sin. The surrendering to bodily urges and the equally dangerous fantasies that accompanied them therefore jeopardized in its entirety the spiritual relationship between God and men and women. At the same time, reformatory, puritan discourse incorporated medical and theological ideas about masturbation stemming from ancient times, whereby the “unnatural” loss of semen disturbed the body’s humoristic and dietary balance as well as damaged the transcendental relationship to the divine.

Late-eighteenth-century masturbation discourse made only very selective and indirect reference to the seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century texts that mentioned the subject. In particular, the religious-transcendental dimension was no longer seen as sufficient justification for the battle against onanism. However, among the earlier writings there was one medical-style work to which later writers willingly made reference: the anonymous piece entitled *Onania, or the Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution*, which was published in London probably in 1716.¹⁴ It was above all the discursive practices of *Onania*, namely, the detailed case histories, that late-eighteenth-century authors so highly valued—and hence frequently cited.¹⁵ They made inter-discursive links to the genre of autobiographical narrative and intertextual connections to some of the histories contained therein.

¹⁴*Onania, or the Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution, and All Its Frightful Consequences, in Both Sexes, Considered* (London, ca. 1716). On the question of the publication date and authorship see Michael Stolberg, “Self-pollution, Moral Reform, and the Venereal Trade: Notes on the Sources and Historical Context of *Onania* (1716),” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, nos. 1–2 (2000): 37–61.

¹⁵A European-wide overview of the history of masturbation in the eighteenth century can be found in Thomas W. Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York, 2003), see esp. chaps. 4 and 5. I am grateful to the author for showing me the manuscript version of this work.

Why precisely did these interdiscursive and intertextual practices hold such appeal? Clearly, it had to do with the fact that these were texts modeled on the confessional. In other words, these were personal histories featuring “confessions of masturbation” whose narrative techniques aimed for a dramatic impact. As in the ritual surrounding confession, two figures are presented: a fatherly confessor (a teacher, doctor, or parent) and a sinner. By means of explanation and recognition of guilt the latter is brought back to the path of betterment. In some of the texts the confessional-style conversation was paraded in forthright fashion, laid out so as to encourage direct imitation. Structured as a dialogue, the text was designed to animate communication between the specialist, the author (or the person to whom the author gave his voice), and his client, the reader. As the following archetypal dialogue from a 1793 publication shows, the pattern of the text was supposed to enable even “speechless” teachers or priests to speak about sexual matters with children or youths without the necessity of having to use “dirty words”:

YOUTH: Is it possible to practice a vice and hold it to be a good thing?

TEACHER: Well, we don’t want to argue about the possibility. Do you know the vice? Do you know what onanism is?

Y: Onanism? I’ve never heard of the word! What does it mean then? Onanism! Onanism?

T: The word onanism comes from the sin committed by a certain Onan, about whom you can learn in the Book of Genesis. This is a vice that you will surely not have practiced, though I believe you will have done something else, just as shameful and more terrible. It is also known as self-pollution, the weakening of one’s own being, because those who practice it condemn themselves by their own hand. They pollute themselves and go to ruin, they grow weak and meet an early death, often accompanied by great pains. Or sometimes they no longer feel anything and become the most frightful figures in dying. It is also called the secret sin of youth, because so many young boys and girls carry it on in secret so long, until they have destroyed themselves completely and recovery is impossible.

Y: But I still don’t really know what this vice actually is!

T: You perform this vice when you misuse your . . .

Y: Ah-hah! Now I understand you. Yes, I’ve been doing that for a long time, and still do it every day. Before I started at grammar school, my student brother showed me how to do it. He’s dead now, he died of consumption. But tell me again properly, is this really as harmful as you say?

T: Oh yes, I’m afraid so! Come, let me lend you my copy of Tissot for a few days, and you can read it for yourself—that’ll convince you!

Y: How will that help me now? Perhaps I’m already lost! Oh, why didn’t anybody warn me about this? I would certainly not have done

it, if I'd only known! And can a youth such as me stop what I've been doing ever since I was nine years old? Oh, you shameful brother! Was that just a student prank?

So saying, he left us there, the copy of Tissot in our hands, full of doubt and shame. Thank God, that this little talk had warned me in time!¹⁶

The sample text cited here documents very nicely how terms such as onanism, self-defilement, and self-weakening provided a cover under which it was possible to speak about the vice of masturbation without actually having to describe the act itself. In addition, the dialogue names a work that German and other European authors called upon time and again in precarious situations—Samuel-Auguste Tissot's *De l'onanisme, ou dissertation physique sur les maladies, produites par la masturbation, dissertation physique*.¹⁷ This book was recommended because of its exemplary case studies, its detailed, empirical content, as well as its scientific—indeed, nonsuggestive—tone. In Tissot's work it was no longer the adult's self-defilement that formed the center of attention but instead the latter's sexual prehistory and masturbatory behavior in childhood and youth. In constructing onanistic life histories of this kind Tissot and also contemporary German authors employed the genre of the educational novel, in which childhood and youth were seen as part of the lineal development toward a bourgeois existence. Here, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's internationally renowned *Émile, ou de l'éducation*, published in 1762, served as the standard model.

Unlike the clerical, moralistic seventeenth-century texts, writings on onanism from Tissot onward laid claim to truth and authenticity because there were now enough texts available that contained "real life" experiences and case histories of onanists (even if some of these were invented). Scholars working on the social history of medicine have shown that medical case histories were particularly valued by the eighteenth-century public because the descriptions of the course of a disease enabled a kind of self-diagnosis. Successful therapy narratives not only communicated knowledge about healing methods and treatments but also gave cause for optimism as well.¹⁸ Onanism texts that were rich in autobiographies fulfilled a similar function and were interpreted by patients accordingly. The case histories were directed toward a common reference point, namely, those physical

¹⁶Friedrich Rehm, *Vorschläge wie man auch mit Beibehaltung der bisher üblichen Beinkleider Mädchen und Knaben durch Verbesserung ihrer physischen und moralischen Erziehung vor früher Unzucht bewahren könne* (Marburg, 1793), 29–31.

¹⁷Samuel-Auguste Tissot, *De l'onanisme, ou dissertation physique sur les maladies, produites par la masturbation, dissertation physique* (dissertation, University of Paris, 1760). Published in German as *Von der Onanie oder Abhandlung über die Krankheiten, die von der Selbstbefleckung herrühren* (Eisenach, 1770).

¹⁸Michael Stolberg, "Mein askulapisches Orakel! Patientenbriefe als Quelle einer Kulturgeschichte der Krankheitserfahrung im 18. Jahrhundert," *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 7 (1996): 385–404.

and psychological movements that could be traced back into childhood. It must be noted, however, that preference was usually given to investigating the origins and causes of the masturbatory vice and to pedagogical preventive measures rather than to the difficult therapies needed to remedy the subsequent consequences of having the “disease.” This was also because many experts believed that a cure for the effects of onanism was scarcely possible after long years of abuse. Prevention by all available means was therefore seen as the overriding imperative.

How did the texts account for children becoming onanists? A close reading of them enables us to answer this question because it shows us who the social actors are, how the process of “onanism” began, and who was to be considered responsible for the events. Interestingly, neither children nor youths appear as actors in the learned texts and autobiographical histories. Onanism is more or less something that happens to them rather than is effected by them. In the relevant sections of these texts two types of social agents appear. The first, connotated negatively and interpreted as malign influences, included servants and lascivious boarding-school pupils, novels, and general ignorance. These were opposed by the second type, a series of positive agents engaged in the struggle for children’s souls, such as professional teachers and educators, parents (particularly the father), doctors, nature itself, and God. Irrespective of whether these agents were positively or negatively defined, masturbation discourse always gave them a decisive role vis-à-vis children and youths. Responsibility for the vice never lay with the latter but always with the former, external agents.

Once infected with onanism children were overtaken by an all-powerful force and were unable to shake off its influence. It is at this stage of description at the latest that the texts begin to name the phenomenon an “illness” or “disease” that drives the onanistic behavior onward. Thus, in late-eighteenth-century texts it was pathological inscriptions on the body and psyche rather than lasciviousness or overexcited fantasy that provided the motor. Herein lay the difference between the “onanist” and his predecessors. Until the early eighteenth century those guilty of masturbation were presumed to have been capable of deciding freely for or against their actions. The “onanist,” however, was at the mercy of powers that he was barely able to resist. By shifting the role of agency in this way the sexual is declared to be a potentially pathological state of existence. Just as the “homosexual” was defined to be in the nineteenth century, so was the “onanist” someone marked for life by a special kind of illness or acquired deviation.¹⁹ In this sexual categorization the “onanist” was viewed solely in terms of his illness. He was one of the first “sexual subjects” whose entire behavior and mental characteristics were reflected through his sexuality.

The naming of onanism as an illness or disease was supported by a number of powerful metaphors that served to make knowledge about masturbation

¹⁹On constructions of homosexuality see Eder, *Kultur der Begierde*, 151–70.

more accessible and to make appropriation of that information easy to transfer into practice. Onanists, for example, were supposed to imagine their illness as a “thorn in the flesh” or as an animal that had worked its way into their bodies. The pictorial illustrations that can be found in some of the writings on the subject obviously had a similar purpose. Such is true of the frontispiece to Christian Gotthilf Salzmann’s work *Über die heimlichen Sünden der Jugend* (On the secret sins of youth), which appeared in Leipzig in 1785.²⁰ A gardener (standing for the teacher or doctor) is visible on the engraved title page. Surveying the work of a deadly insect (onanism), the helpless gardener can be seen lamenting the destruction of his precious plants (children and youth). Like his colleagues, the philanthropic pedagogue Salzmann encouraged onanists to become aware of the monster long at work in their bodies. In the texts dealing with the medical consultation process, the patients then represented themselves as having been overtaken by a monstrous disease and described the physical and mental consequences.

The use of metaphor, visual illustrations, and other textual devices are all an indication that late-eighteenth-century masturbation writings were not written primarily to further learned disputes but were intended for the broadest possible reception among the educated public. Were these texts able to reach their intended readers? To answer that question we must first ask how the texts on onanism were distributed at large. Dissemination of their contents occurred via pedagogical and medical literature, above all in the emerging specialist journals and publication series. At the same time, the burgeoning general literature devoted to education and marital guidance soon took up the theme as well. Finally, works on masturbation were also written as practical guides for a general public and were designed to encourage personal study and self-treatment. Inventories of private libraries testify to the fact that these writings were very popular with the educated bourgeois public. We also know a good deal about the dissemination and reception of this material because of evidence found in surviving consultation letters between patients and doctors such as in Samuel-Auguste Tissot’s papers.²¹ This correspondence would seem to prove that the consultation letters and autobiographical “confessions” found in published texts were certainly authentic in tone.

MASTURBATION AS AN “INTERACTIVE FORM”

It is possible to discern two kinds of response in the consultation texts and letters. On the one hand, consumers eagerly accepted the proposed model

²⁰Christian Gotthilf Salzmann, *Über die heimlichen Sünden der Jugend* (Frankfurt am Main/Leipzig, 1785).

²¹See Michael Stolberg, “An Unmanly Vice: Self-Pollution, Anxiety, and the Body in the Eighteenth Century,” *Social History of Medicine* 13 (2000): 12–16; Martin Stuber and Hubert Steinke, “Die ‘stumme Sünde’ in der Fernkonsultation. Der Onanist Ivo Sutton schreibt dem Universalgelehrten Albrecht von Haller,” *traverse—Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 6 (1999): 172–80.

of onanism, together with the concepts, images, categories, and ideas associated with it. These were incorporated in their own self-perceptions to the extent that pedagogues and doctors even began to mock some of their clients because their illness histories so closely aped the model of the “classic onanist.” The German doctor Ernst Gottfried Baldinger commented in 1790 on letters that he had received from onanists: “One believes that one is reading Tissot himself, so completely has the patient filled his memory from the reading of Tissot’s book. His deranged imagination corresponds entirely to that portrayed by Tissot. I could recount hundreds of such stories of illnesses among all classes of people, if only I had the time.”²² In many cases one gets the impression that the texts on masturbation were directly inscribed into patients’ self-perception and experience.

However, it would be misleading to assume that onanists were simply passive recipients who accepted everything that pedagogues and doctors stipulated. They often closed themselves off to some of the proposed meanings of the phenomenon, formulating their own interpretations and thereby contributing considerable amounts of new material to the ongoing discourse. Thus, one anonymous onanist sent the above-mentioned Christian Salzmann a letter of protest that stated: “I happened to fall into this sin in my thirteenth year. . . . My peace of mind was in no way disturbed by this, and I was able to continue praying quite happily, even directly before or after the deed. I indulged in this vice without any feeling of guilt whatsoever, to such a degree that I would certainly have revealed this to anybody who might have asked me about it without any reservation or feelings of shame and embarrassment.”²³ This particular onanist claimed to have begun masturbating on his own initiative without having been led into it by someone else, as the conventional discourse required. Moreover, this individual’s reinterpretation of his life history did not in his case lead to a complete rewriting of his masturbation history. Regarding the first years of his masturbatory activity at least, the anonymous letter writer displayed a positive memory of the experience and continued to speak about his “guilt-free” urges and the minimal impact that masturbation had had at the time on his “peace of mind.”

It must also be recognized that correspondents expressed their own interpretation in that they applied the onanism model to ever more spheres of life. This did not just affect boys and girls but increasing numbers of women and even small children and suckling infants. Specialists such as the German doctor Johann Georg Zimmermann gratefully acknowledged this expansion of the illness complex. Writing in 1779 after receiving information about several cases, Zimmermann suspected that masturbatory practices could occur in girls as young as five or six and that they would “fall

²²Ernst Gottfried Baldinger, “Vorbericht zum Artikel: Traurige Krankheitsgeschichte eines Onanisten,” *Neues Magazin für Ärzte* 12 (1790): 85.

²³Salzmann, *Über die heimlichen Sünden*, 16.

headlong into every possible kind of nervous illness, fevers, consumption, and hundreds of other evils. In some cases, the tendency to lasciviousness might even be so deeply implanted in their souls that one must fear they will become whores before they are properly sexually mature or of marriageable age."²⁴ It seems clear, however, that Zimmermann went rather too far in his prognosis, for an anonymous author replied by calling for the "salvation of innocent female children from the false attribution of self-defilement."²⁵

It is noticeable that patients placed a special emphasis on the physical "symptoms" accompanying onanism. Among the sexual and nonsexual behaviors and characteristics that came under discussion are several forms that were no longer taken as understood by the emerging bourgeois society. Also appearing were new types of behavior that were not yet securely in place—the importance of reading and its impact on the imagination, the control of mind over body by means of strict etiquette, and the high value accorded to upbringing and education, which were seen as guarantees for a successful future. In this way, the psychophysiological implications of the onanism model helped to work out what the contours and transitional changes, the shallows and empty spaces of the new bourgeois individual's body and soul would be.

As suggested above, texts from onanists going against the dominant narrative clearly show that neither the notion of social reality being passively inscribed onto individuals nor the idea of communication being a one-way process corresponds to historical practice. Contrary to what has often been postulated, masturbation discourse was not merely a strategy employed by authoritarian scholars and scientists to overwhelm their clients with a series of professional techniques of power. Though superficially it may appear as if the discourse on onanism was purely repressive in nature, in actual fact there was a process of interplay between the professionals and consumers. However, these interchanges only become visible when discourse is understood as a social practice. The "performance" of the texts could only succeed because scholars and onanists shared a common socio-cultural "body" and could therefore understand, accept, and sense within themselves the importance and meaning of onanism. As Michael Stolberg has shown, the learned writers on masturbation and their "clients" shared the same "habitus" (in the meaning of Pierre Bourdieu), which embodied the transition from feudal to bourgeois culture and involved both in the discursive process.²⁶

²⁴Johann Georg Zimmermann, "Warnung an Aeltern, Erzieher und Kinderfreunde wegen der Selbstbefleckung, zumal bey ganz jungen Mädchen," *Neues Magazin für Ärzte* 1 (1779): pt. 1, 51.

²⁵"Rettung unschuldiger Kinder weiblichen Geschlechts von fälschlich beschuldigter Selbstbefleckung gegen Herrn Leibarzt Zimmermann," *Neues Magazin für Ärzte* 1 (1779): pt. 1, 52–60.

²⁶Stolberg, "An Unmanly Vice," 18–21.

One of the chief characteristics of this habitus was a changing perception of the body itself. Previously, the body was seen as something open, consisting of humors that flowed into one another, but the new view was founded upon the idea of the body as closed and held together by nerves and fibers. Whereas the earlier notions of the body supposed that the daily flow and exchange of fluids and semen achieved the necessary equilibrium quite naturally, it was now thought that the “closed” person’s health would be endangered by excessive “ejections” of fluids or by irritation of the nerves. Via the nervous system, the bourgeois individual’s new body was closely linked to fragile psychosocial character features, such as mental steadfastness, cognitive power, and moderate emotions. From this point of view, masturbation seemed more likely than any other form of nervous irritation or loss of fluids to cause catastrophic, irreparable damage.

Many texts provide evidence that letter writers and authors actually felt this link to their “nerves” in their own bodies. In the prize-winning *Versuch einer Beantwortung der pädagogischen Frage* (Essay on the answering of a pedagogical question) written by Friedrich Oest in 1787, the author cited the following anonymous letter:

My motivation for writing to you is to put the humble question: how can I return again to that feeling of tranquillity which I have lost since so weakening my body by the vice of onanism? My frame and figure, which God had built well, have crumbled. Sunken, pale cheeks, weaknesses of the nervous system, the blackest melancholy, and frequent hypochondriacal accidents are the distressing consequences of this dissolute life. What is more, I feel utter indifference towards the beauties of nature, which I used to admire so much. I often walk without feeling through nature’s bountiful autumn, and weep frequently, though I scarcely notice it. If I chance upon a person glowing with health, I envy him and think: so could you be too, if you had not wasted your body away by the most shameful of all vices! And so you see, I am heavy of heart and the most unhappy wretch.²⁷

The question as to whether we are dealing with a genuine onanist’s letter or a scholarly description drawn from contemporary discourse is perhaps of secondary importance, given the existence of a common bourgeois habitus as regards onanism.

²⁷Johann Friedrich Oest, “Versuch einer Beantwortung der pädagogischen Frage. Wie man Kinder und junge Leute vor dem Leib und Seele verwüstenden Laster der Unzucht überhaupt, und der Selbstschwächung insonderheit verwahren. Oder, wofern sie schon davon angesteckt waren, wie man sie davon heilen könne?” in Joachim Heinrich Campe, ed., *Allgemeine Revision des gesammten Schul- und Erziehungswesens* (Wolfenbüttel, 1787), 6:44. On the prize question set by Campe see Bloch, 351–411.

MASTURBATION AND SOCIAL PRACTICE

To restrict the discourse on masturbation to the interaction among the participants would certainly be to leave out crucial social historical aspects, above all the fact that the discourse was embedded in wider social practices and was influenced by them. In the first instance German-language discourse on masturbation formed part of a wider European discussion on pedagogy. In this respect the professional interests of a discipline still in its infancy were at stake, as its representatives sought to establish their own territory over and against that of received teachings and domestic experts. Contrary to feudal maxims on childrearing, the bourgeois ideal of education offered the new professionals an opportunity to air pedagogical theories and models in scholarly fashion and to institutionalize the occupational training of teachers. It was therefore not by chance that philanthropic pedagogues played an especially prominent role in the discourse on masturbation. Prevention of onanism by means of education enabled the new generation of teachers to occupy the ground on which—so it was claimed—the traditional purveyors of education in the household, such as nannies, governesses, and private instructors had all failed, just as the priests and doctors had done. In view of the allegedly lifelong physical and psychological damage caused by onanism, it seemed that (sexual) education was an essential prerequisite for the creation of healthy bourgeois individuals and the successful socialization of the new “class.”

Following Rousseau, German pedagogues were of the opinion that badly informed and barely trained personnel represented a real threat to children. Peter Villaume, who helped work on Joachim Heinrich Campe's *Allgemeiner Revision des gesammten Schul- und Erziehungswesen* (General revision of the entire school and education system), identified in 1787 some of the greatest potential sources of danger: “Servants who want to ingratiate themselves with their young superiors teach them dangerous vices. Out of lasciviousness and winsomeness, nannies teach children fornication, do it with them, and let themselves be used to such ends. . . . But worse still are the instructors, if one can believe it! Somebody once told me that a dance instructor had ‘weakened’ a little girl; a little girl, I tell you! For physical relations are meanwhile nothing new between teachers and older pupils.”²⁸ Professional educators had to be especially attentive with regard to their charges. By masturbating, children and youths would alienate not only their parents but their teachers too. As a consequence, they would become isolated and degenerate into inferior members of the bourgeois social group.

Ultimately, onanism would end in solipsism. Total surrender to sexual fantasy and autoeroticism would turn into antisocial attitudes. Rousseau had already set out the appropriate preventive measures in *Émile*:

²⁸Peter Villaume, “Über die Unzuchtssünden in der Jugend,” in Campe, ed., 7:50.

Watch carefully therefore over the young male; he can protect himself above all if you protect him from himself. Do not leave him alone either night or day; at least make sure to sleep in his room: when he is overcome by sleep he must lie down to bed, and he should get up the moment he awakes. Distrust instinct as soon as you no longer confine yourselves to it alone: for instinct is a good thing, so long as it is left to work on its own. Yet, instinct becomes suspect whenever it gets mixed up in the education of people. One should not disturb instinct, but one must restrain it, which is perhaps more difficult than destroying it altogether. It would be dangerous if instinct taught your pupil to delude his senses and to make use of that same instinct as a substitute for the other opportunities available to satisfy the former. If the pupil follows this redress but just once, then he is surely lost. From then on, his body and soul are devoid of their nerves. The pupil carries with him to the grave the tragic effects of this habit, the worst that a young man can have. . . . If the excitement of a hot temperament should prove unconquerable, then, my dear *Émile*, I'm afraid to say that I would not hesitate for a moment in not tolerating nature's purpose being circumvented. If you must bow under a yoke at all, then I would rather put you under one from which you can free yourself. No matter what comes, I can tear you away from women more easily than from yourself.²⁹

Without doubt, pedagogues and doctors accumulated part of their symbolic power from their generally very positive attitude toward sex: was it perhaps possible to combine enlightened ideas and biologically fixed sexual energies in a way that was useful for bourgeois society? Could the sexual sphere be employed productively in a social entity freed of corporate restrictions? In answering questions such as this the pedagogical discourse on masturbation functioned as a kind of intellectual experiment in which the productive (as well as the negative) side of sexuality for bourgeois society could be thought through.³⁰ The direction of the educational impulse was clear: it was the pedagogue's job not to destroy the "sexual instinct" but to channel it and to ensure that it did not impose upon the upbringing process. Hence, even the most "anti-onanistic" authors were not against all forms of sexual desire but argued that the latter should be positively integrated into an individual's being. Sexuality had above all to be steered toward sexual activity within a marital context, thereby contributing to successful bourgeois marriage as well as to compliance with society.

²⁹Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emil oder Über die Erziehung* (Paderborn, 1993), 359–60.

³⁰On this see Isabel V. Hull, *Sexuality, State, and Civil Society in Germany, 1700–1815* (Ithaca, 1996), 266–67.

Part of this intellectual experiment was to locate the bourgeois body in relation to those of the other “estates,” above all those of the nobility. In doing so the bourgeois image of the body was defined partly by accepting some of the noble features and partly by distancing it from the latter.³¹ Thus, the bourgeois body differed from its noble counterpart not just in terms of its steadfastness, health, controllability, and general rationality of purpose but also in terms of its procreative, future-oriented seed. As a form of investment in the future, this “bodily fluid” was supposed to guarantee that subsequent generations too would display bourgeois physical and mental qualities, thereby demonstrating that investment in education and training promised success. By way of contrast, noble privileges of birth were considered as being condemned to extinction on the grounds of sexual excess alone and the squandering of bodily resources that accompanied it.

Gender differences were clearly expressed in many of these considerations of social status. Most participants in the discourse were primarily concerned with the male bourgeois body. Reflections about men and their sexual prehistory in childhood and adolescence took up the largest part of the debate. By using the onanism model it was possible to further the self-construction of the bourgeois male and to articulate the formation and protection of gender differences. Many of the men involved in this discussion were concerned with a coherent, consistent gender and sexual identity, which they believed to be endangered by masturbation. They detected in themselves feelings attributed to the female sex, such as fluidity and softness, and argued that they shed their virility with their semen. Holding back one’s semen or regulating its ejection in doses made it clear from personal experience whether or not the individual was in control of his body and constituted an autonomous bourgeois man.³² Villaume viewed this mastering of the body and its effect in stabilizing the subject from a physiological standpoint: “The semen are not designated for the purpose of procreation alone but should also strengthen the subject himself, to stir and improve him. Not all the seeds produced in the organs should be ejaculated; the greater part should flow back into the bloodstream and the bodily fluids.”³³ If over the years men were to masturbate, then they would lose the willing control over their body and no longer be master over their senses and reason—both of which marked them out from women.

Alongside the leveling of gender differences, physical and mental self-obsession was reckoned to be the ultimate stigma attached to the male onanist.

³¹Examples can be found in Ulrike Döcker, *Die Ordnung der bürgerlichen Welt. Verhaltensideale und soziale Praktiken im 19. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main, 1994), 71–85.

³²Compare Simon Richter, “Wet-Nursing, Onanism, and the Breast in Eighteenth-Century Germany,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 7 (1996): 17–19.

³³Villaume, 45.

Anyone who remained fixated with his own male body could develop “unnatural” sexual desires. A latent lack of interest in the female sexual object might emerge that might in turn threaten marital sexual relations and the production of offspring—to say nothing of the potentially negative emotional impact on the marital relationship. Alternatively, some authors believed that the masturbatory “irritation” would prevent attachment to a single female object and encourage the breakdown of marriages. A still graver consequence could be a lifelong feeling of attraction for the male body and the male sexual object. Ever since the beginning of the discourse on masturbation, onanism was considered as a likely first step on the way to pederasty or same-sexual desires. Both of these were forms of sexual identity that were supposed to be of no concern to bourgeois men. Stable male heterosexuality would only be achieved if adult men stayed immune from homosexual desires.³⁴

For the majority of pedagogical authors it was by this point clear that speaking about sexual matters could not only contribute to the prevention of masturbation and its loss of potency but actually have the opposite effect as well. Owing to the interactive nature of the discourse, the reader’s attention was awakened by the very fact that masturbation changed from being an “innocent” activity into a phenomenon that was designated as problematical, leading to illness and—in the worst cases—becoming life-threatening. Indeed, thanks to the language of onanism it was precisely men themselves who became capable of developing a more sensitive perception of their bodies and of articulating a verbal confrontation with their various feelings. Salzmann recognized very well the performative power of discussion and immediately wrote on this theme in 1785 under the title *Ists recht über die heimlichen Sünden der Jugend öffentlich zu schreiben?* (Is it right to write openly about the secret sins of youth?).³⁵ Whatever the possible disadvantages Salzmann and others saw in the discursive communication about autoeroticism, nevertheless, the general consensus was that the sexual sphere could only be guided if the subject in question could be grasped in words and pictures. In this respect the texts and pictures produced in the discourse on masturbation stemmed as much from the pedagogical and medical ideas of scholarly experts as they did from the sexual experience of the onanists themselves.

Translated from the German by Laurence Cole

³⁴Similar arguments were made in London during the first half of the eighteenth century. Compare Randolph Trumbach, *Sex and the Gender Revolution: Heterosexuality and the Third Gender in Enlightenment London* (Chicago, 1998), 63–65.

³⁵Christian G. Salzmann, *Ists recht über die heimlichen Sünden der Jugend öffentlich zu schreiben* (Schnepfenthal, 1785).