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Forbidden by God, Despised by Men: Masturbation, Medical Warnings, Moral Panic, and Manhood in Great Britain, 1850–1950

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MASTURBATION IS a sexual manifestation extremely common in the male sex and almost universal in the male adolescent, at least in modern western societies. Its construction as a disease entity and the rise of the concept of masturbatory insanity in the wake of the publication of *Onania* and of Tissot's work in the eighteenth century has already been described.¹ Such attitudes to the practice were not monolithic, however, even though self-abuse was constructed as physically and mentally deleterious as well as sinful, not only by the medical profession but by groups with interests ranging from the religious to the commercial. The varying attitudes to this common sexual manifestation during a particular historical period in a particular society are worth consideration, especially in the context of what men themselves felt about a practice universally stigmatized but nevertheless indulged in by them.

This study therefore looks at beliefs about male masturbation that were promulgated in Britain from the middle of the nineteenth century, the height of the Victorian era and allegedly also the high-water mark of anx-

I am very grateful to my fellow participants in the conference on "The Role of the State and of Public Opinion in Sexual Attitudes and Demographic Behavior since the Eighteenth Century," Madrid, August 31–September 1, 1990, for the discussion on an earlier version of this essay and to the editor and the anonymous referees of the *Journal of the History of Sexuality* for their helpful comments on the draft of this expanded version.

¹E. H. Hare, "Masturbatory Insanity: The History of an Idea," *Journal of Mental Science* 108 (1962): 1–25; Robert H. MacDonald, "The Frightful Consequences of Onanism: Notes on the History of a Delusion," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 28 (1967): 423–31; H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., "The Disease of Masturbation: Values and the Concept of Disease," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 48 (1974): 234–48; Alex Comfort, *The Anxiety Makers: Some Curious Preoccupations of the Medical Profession* (London, 1967), pp. 69–113.

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icty over masturbation, to the middle of the twentieth century, by which time the notion that scaremongering about the habit did more harm than the habit itself had become prevalent. The impact of varying views of the subject on the man in the street between the two world wars, a period of transition, will be illustrated from correspondence received by Marie Stopes, whose book *Married Love*, first published in 1918, generated thousands of letters from the sexually troubled and bewildered of both sexes and all social classes for the subsequent thirty years.

The discourses on masturbation discussed below are discourses about male sexuality, its nature and its control. Men's attitudes toward masturbation were attitudes toward the nature of their own male sexuality, unmediated through the female. Writers of sex advice occasionally might warn young women against endangering male purity by provocative dress or by conduct leading to the arousal of desires that could only be slaked by masturbation or fornication, but men were subjected to a barrage of anxiety over solitary sexual activity, both willed (as in self-abuse) and unwilled (as in nocturnal emissions).² The negative feelings about sexuality that might also have been projected in misogyny were here directed by men against themselves.

I

William Acton's famous and much discussed *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life, Considered in their Physiological, Social, and Psychological Relations*, first published in 1857, is often considered to be the definitive Victorian work on sexual functioning. Was it not pointed out by Havelock Ellis as an exemplar of all that was wrong in Victorian attitudes to sex?³ For Acton, sexuality was a

²Winfield Scott Hall, M.D., with Jeannette Winter Hall, *Sexual Knowledge: In Plain and Simple Language; Sexology or Knowledge of Self and Sex for Both Male and Female; Especially for the Instruction of Youths and Maidens, Young Wives and Young Husbands, All Fathers and All Mothers, School-Teachers and Nurses, and All Others Who Feel a Need of Proper and Reliable Information on Sex Hygiene, Sex Problems, and the Best Way and the Best Time to Impart Sexual Knowledge to Boys and Girls about to Enter into Manhood and Womanhood* (Philadelphia, 1913; rpt., London, 1926), pp. 184–85; Norah March, *Towards Racial Health: A Handbook for Parents, Teachers, and Social Workers on the Training of Boys and Girls*, with a foreword by J. Arthur Thomson, 4th ed., rev. (London, 1920), p. 175.

³William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life, Considered in Their Physiological, Social, and Psychological Relations*, 3d ed. (London, 1862); Havelock Ellis, *The Erotic Rights of Women and the Objects of Marriage*, British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology, no. 5 (London, 1918), p. 9. See also Havelock Ellis, *Eonism and Other Supplementary Studies*, vol. 7 of *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (Philadelphia, 1928).

constant source of danger to the male. The pleasure of orgasm was too intense to be safely experienced often. While arguing that a man accustomed to gratifying his urges by self-abuse was undermining his self-discipline and therefore was less likely to be able to resist other temptations, Acton believed that waste of the vital spermatic fluid (even in legitimate marriage) itself could lead to debilitating disease. Masturbation was only one of the lurking perils of manhood, but far from the least of them.

Some historians have suggested that Acton was neither influential nor representative of the medical profession at large.⁴ But Victorian doctors, even if they did not subscribe completely to Acton's views on the subject, commonly were convinced of the physical as well as the moral evils of self-abuse. In his *Dictionary of Practical Medicine*, a more general guide than Acton's specialist work, Dr. James Copland was vehement about the dangers of "pollutions," in particular those produced by "manustupration," to which he attributed the decreased life expectancy and greater morbidity of those who remained unmarried. His views had considerable and enduring circulation.⁵

Sir James Paget's clinical lecture on "Sexual Hypochondriasis" published in 1875 (though presumably given earlier) admittedly contradicts the picture of every Victorian doctor threatening a string of ailments ending in insanity and death as the inevitable outcome of onanism. Paget, even though he wished that he "could say something worse of so nasty a practice; an uncleanness, a filthiness forbidden by God, an unmanliness despised by men," was emphatic that masturbation did no more harm than any other indulgence in excess and certainly did not lead inevitably to the lunatic asylum.⁶ While, as Jeanne Peterson has argued, Paget's ideas must have influenced his students, his writings on this subject had considerably less circulation than Acton's.⁷ *Functions and Disorders* was issued in three editions in its first five years and continued to be reprinted well after

⁴F. B. Smith, *The People's Health, 1830-1910* (London, 1979), pp. 294-315, and "Sexuality in Britain, 1800-1900: Some Suggested Revisions," in *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women*, ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington, IN, 1977); M. Jeanne Peterson, "Dr. Acton's Enemy: Medicine, Sex, and Society in Victorian England," *Victorian Studies* 29 (1986): 569-90, and "No Angels in the House: The Victorian Myth and the Paget Women," *American Historical Review* 89 (1984): 677-708; Peter Gay, *The Education of the Senses*, vol. 1 of *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud* (New York, 1984).

⁵James Copland, *A Dictionary of Practical Medicine: Comprising General Pathology, The Nature and Treatment of Diseases, Morbid Structures, and the Disorders Especially Incident to Climates, to the Sex, and to the Different Epochs of Life*, 4 vols. (London, 1844-58), 3: 441-48; *British Medical Journal*, 1881, no. 2:904.

⁶Sir James Paget, "Sexual Hypochondriasis," in *Clinical Lectures and Essays*, 2d ed. (London, 1879), pp. 275-98.

⁷Peterson, "Dr. Acton's Enemy."

Acton's death. While Paget represented one significant alternative to the Actonian view, it was clearly not the only, or even the predominant, trend of thought upon masturbation among the Victorian medical profession.

Even otherwise radical medical writers on sex condemned self-abuse. Dr. George Drysdale's Malthusian work *Elements of Social Science* (first published anonymously in 1854) advocated early marriage with the use of contraceptive measures, anathematized by most of the contemporary medical profession as "conjugal onanism." For Drysdale, a secularist and rationalist, the unnatural restraints society placed on the indulgence of natural urges during the years of youthful vitality led inevitably to the evils of masturbation, a practice that he was convinced was essentially pernicious.⁸ Horror over onanism was not merely about a distinction between non-procreative and potentially reproductive sexual activity. Drysdale warned against "injurious habits of self-pollution," which he believed would lay the foundations of lingering disease during the vulnerable period of puberty.⁹ Doctors and authorities who might disagree on everything else could nevertheless agree on this.

The application of brutal remedies for self-abuse is a charge often laid to the Victorian medical profession. Certainly, in 1870 *The Lancet* recommended, for cases of sexual debilitation, "guarding the penis for a time against improper manipulation" by "keeping up slight soreness of the body of the organ . . . sufficient to render erection painful." Cauterization might be routinely prescribed for "over-sensitivity" of the organ.¹⁰ But remedies that made erection uncomfortable were not the province of the orthodox profession alone. The "American remedy," consisting of "a ring of common metal, with a screw passing through one of its sides, and projecting into the centre, where it had a button extremity . . . to be applied to the 'part affected' at bed-time," was an expedient probably "extensively used," but it was purchased by sufferers at disproportionate expense from purveyors of quack nostrums, not imposed by doctors upon victimized patients.¹¹ The horror over masturbation and the related phenomenon of nocturnal emissions was widespread in popular belief. It was intensified and exploited by quacks and charlatans.

Wise to the widespread market for their wares, quacks found all sorts of niches to attract the attention of the sexually troubled: posters, handbills, and newspaper advertisements, as well as catchpenny "anatomical museums." Exploiting a desire for information as much as prurient voyeurism,

⁸George Drysdale, *Elements of Social Science; or, Physical Sexual and Natural Religion, An Exposition of the True Cause and Only Cure of the Three Primary Social Evils: Poverty, Prostitution, and Celibacy, by a Doctor of Medicine* (London, 1905), pp. 80–81.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 77–78.

¹⁰*The Lancet*, 1870, no. 2:159.

¹¹*The Lancet*, 1857, no. 2:537.

these establishments displayed wax models of the dreadful consequences of onanism next to those depicting venereal disease and horrific portrayals of monstrosities and of childbirth. The museums were also centers for the dissemination of quack pamphlets and “cures.”¹² The tracts put about by the vendors of patent devices and drugs painted lurid pictures of the dangers of self-abuse, nocturnal pollutions, and “spermatorrhoea.” They would then offer the poor victim hope of restoration through the use of “vegetable compounds,” or such devices as “Pulvermacher’s World Famed Galvanic Belts” and the “Electric Life Invigorator.”¹³ In a climate of sexual ignorance, guilt, and fear, the quacks were able to build a profitable edifice on the site of masturbation, giving shape to inchoate male anxieties.

Concern about masturbation had several aspects. It was a “fithiness forbidden by God,” morally reprehensible and a habit that decent men were united in believing to be disgusting. It was widely supposed to be depleting to health. Sometimes it was condemned as the first step in a course of impurity leading to fornication, disease, and death, eroding self-discipline and self-control. According to the Honorable Edward Lyttelton, a clergyman and a pedagogue, in *The Causes and Prevention of Immorality in Schools*, “the least defilement by hand enormously increases the difficulties of continence in manhood.”¹⁴

Opinions varied, particularly among the medical profession. In a pamphlet containing “The Testimony of Medical Men,” published and circulated by a purity organization called the White Cross League, some

¹²For general attacks on quacks offering cures for sexual disorders and their wiles, see *The Lancet*, 1870, no. 1:880, 889, and no. 2:72, 89–90, 124–26, 159–60, 224–25; *British Medical Journal*, 1885, no. 2:303–4; *The Lancet*, 1885, no. 2:350; *British Medical Journal*, 1892, no. 2:753. For the involvement of anatomical museums with the dissemination of quack remedies during the nineteenth century, see *British Medical Journal*, 1879, no. 1:823–24; British Medical Association Archives, Contemporary Medical Archives Centre (hereafter CMAC), Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, London, “Medico-Political” files, “Birth Control and Indecent Advertisements: Correspondence, c. 1929–1955” file (CMAC, SA/BMA/C.483) contains a description of such a museum, which had survived well into the 1950s and was still doing business without any attempt to update the exhibits, the descriptions, or the catalog.

¹³S. Gould, E.B.P. (medical herbalist), *A Brief Treatise on Venereal Disease and Spermatorrhoea, Its Cause and Cure. (For Private Circulation Only. Entered at Stationers’ Hall.) Manhood, How Lost, by Acquired Diseases; How Regained, by Vegetable Compounds* [?Bradford, c. 1910]; “A Graduate,” *A Lecture to Young Men on the Preservation of Health and Personal Purity of Life*, 7th ed., published by Pulvermacher’s World Famed Galvanic Belt Company (London, 1892); *Nature’s Revelations for the Married Only*, printed for private circulation only by Electric Life Invigorator Company, G. W. Ventnor, The Limes, Painswick Road, Gloucester [?1904], contains, besides advertisements for the eponymous Electric Life Invigorator and other appliances, details of other publications issued by G. W. Ventnor, including *Startling Revelations for Men Only*.

¹⁴Edward Lyttelton, *The Causes and Prevention of Immorality in Schools*, printed for private circulation by the Social Purity Alliance (London, 1887), p. 15.

medical authorities agreed with Lyttelton that masturbation was the high road to a career of diverse debauchery. They contended that “the precocious indulgence of boyhood may . . . ripen into the ungovernable passion of manhood and become responsible for the support of prostitution.”¹⁵ Others believed that the vice of masturbation itself would become an overriding obsession: “the habit of solitary sin, learned and contracted at school, and not discontinued even in later and more mature years,” would ultimately “become the one absorbing and uncontrollable passion of life.”¹⁶

This latter view led to the apocryphal prescription of fornication as the remedy for self-abuse. So harmful was masturbation supposed to be that copulation was often supposed to be the “cure.” In spite of the purity literature warning against medical men who advocated fornication as essential for male health, it is exceptionally hard to find evidence of doctors (or anyone) actually recommending this remedy. One elderly man (age seventy-six in 1924) did write the following account to Marie Stopes about his own younger days during the Victorian era: “The doctor . . . strongly advised me to drop masturbation. He even suggested certain houses where I might meet women of a better class, and advised the use of sheaths or injections. . . . The doctor even advised woman as a lesser evil than the risk of disease in masturbation.”¹⁷ This advice, remarkably, was proffered during treatment of the patient for “a clap” contracted during earlier (unprotected) application of such remedy. Such an account, given in a private communication, is hardly evidence of widespread prescription of such a remedy by the medical profession, although there are reports in the same correspondence of (perhaps jocular) hints by doctors in the interwar years to men suffering from the strains of continence that they should “find a woman.”¹⁸ Dr. J. Charsley Mackwood, M.C., qualified in 1910 and therefore of a younger generation than the above correspondent, suggested in 1920 that the campaign to make the horrors of sexually transmitted disease more widely known was such a success that “the convert practices self-abuse rather than risk infection,” and this could be considered “a crime against humanity.”¹⁹ This is tenuous evidence compared to the fulminations—not only by purity campaigners but by doctors influenced by the purity movement—against the prescription of fornication. The influence of man-to-man, subcultural, almost folkloric communications on this subject, however, should not be discounted.²⁰

¹⁵F. Le Gros Clark, quoted by Arthur T. Barnett, “The Testimony of Medical Men,” in *The Blanco Book* (London, 1913), p. 223.

¹⁶C. G. Wheelhouse, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 226.

¹⁷Marie Stopes Papers, CMAC, PP/MCS/A.1/25.

¹⁸CMAC, PP/MCS/A.19 DHB, A.165 DML, A.205 HWT.

¹⁹*British Medical Journal*, 1920, no. 1:130.

²⁰Consider the persistence of the superstition (reported at least as late as the Second World War) that venereal disease could be cured by “passing it on” to a virgin.

There was another, still somewhat hydraulic, model of the male sexual function. This model too assumed an inevitable build-up of pressure within the male genital system requiring release but promulgated the theory that, in a state of health, nocturnal emissions occurring infrequently (monthly, paralleling menstruation in women) were "Nature's way" of dispelling pent-up sexual tensions. Anything more frequent was indicative of a general state of impurity and signaled the undermining of health. Deliberate masturbation would undermine health and probably lead to excessive involuntary emissions as well by stirring up feelings and functions best left in quiescence.

II

In the 1880s a growing concern over the need to protect the young from sexual danger produced a new genre of warning against masturbation. The works previously described were written either by medical men at least implicitly for other members of the profession, by individuals (radical medical men or proponents of alternative health systems) who wished to enlighten adult members of the public, or by quacks anxious to make a quick profit out of ignorance and anxiety. In the wake of the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts, leading to the formation of a self-conscious, though far from monolithic, purity movement, arose a discourse on masturbation emanating from figures of establishment authority (doctors, clergymen, educators) and directed principally at the young or those with responsibility for them. Tension between perception of an urgent need to warn of impending dangers and fear of putting undesirable ideas into formerly untouched minds meant that this departure was far from universally accepted as being necessary or desirable.²¹ However, the amount of literature produced in this connection and its wide dissemination would perhaps suggest that the era of greatest masturbation anxiety was not (as is usually thought) the mid-Victorian period but the late Victorian to Edwardian era, indeed up to the outbreak of World War I.

Organizations such as the White Cross League and the Alliance of Honor emerging out of the anti-Contagious Diseases Acts campaigns published numerous pamphlets aimed at youths and young men, with the intention of inculcating a high and single standard of chastity. These attained wide dissemination: *True Manliness* by J.E.H. (purity worker Jane Ellice Hopkins) had sold over one million copies by 1909, presumably not including its further circulation in *The Blanco Book*, a compilation of White Cross League pamphlets produced for issue to troops.²²

²¹*British Medical Journal*, 1881, no. 2:904; 1885, no. 2:303-4; 1892, no. 1:1266-67; *The Lancet*, 1885, no. 2:350-51.

²²Edward Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance: Purity Movements in Britain since 1700* (Dublin, 1977), p. 138.

True Manliness, as its title suggests, portrayed an ideal of the true male as pure and chivalrous, emphasizing the virile struggle that the maintenance of continence required. The sexual dangers faced by men were depicted by dramatic metaphors: man was “an intelligent being mounted on a spirited horse,” which he had to master. Would the young man “run the risk of tainting your blood and making it a fountain of corruption, till you have to loathe your body, the temple you have made into a charnel-house, reeking with the very breath of the grave,” or would he “play the man, and fight against everything low and beastly, determined that your life shall have no shameful secrets in it”? Medical messages were blended with the religious and moral: “stored-up passion” would generate “splendid energy.” The literature warned against quacks but suggested that reputable medical men were to be consulted if advice were needed. “Dirty, shameful, secrets in your life” may have subsumed both fornication and masturbation, but “a forbidden pleasure within your reach, forcing itself on your notice,” surely must allude to self-abuse.²³

Anxiety over self-abuse began at an early age. Child-rearing manuals warned parents to be on the lookout for the early manifestation of auto-eroticism in infants, but it is not easy to establish the extent to which the recommendations of stringent preventive methods were carried out.²⁴ Warning literature, or literature aiding parents in giving warnings to their offspring, targeted younger and younger age groups, in spite of fears that warnings would put ideas into innocent minds. By the 1890s a number of such books were available. One of the most popular and typical was *What a Young Boy Ought to Know*, by Sylvanus Stall, an American divine. After forty-seven pages on “God’s purpose in endowing plants, animals and Man with reproductive organs,” it moved straight on to the danger of abusing the reproductive organs.²⁵ Stall attributed this danger to the existence of the hand: “Man is possibly the only animal which persistently pollutes and degrades his own body, and this would not have easily been possible if God had not given him hands, which He designed should prove useful and a means of great help and blessing to him in his life upon the earth.” Stall threatened (echoing quacks) “idiocy . . . early decline and death . . . consumption . . . total mental and physical self-destruction” to those who failed to resist this temptation.²⁶ Even when the unfortunate victim of the pernicious habit lived to manhood and managed to become a father, the “inferior quality” of his “sexual secretion” would be manifested in his off-

²³J.E.H., *True Manliness*, in *The Blanco Book*, pp. 115–43.

²⁴Christina Hardyment, *Dream Babies: Child Care from Locke to Spock* (London, 1983), pp. 137–38.

²⁵Sylvanus Stall, *What a Young Boy Ought to Know*, Self and Sex Series (Philadelphia, 1897), pp. 25–72.

²⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 80–83.

spring.²⁷ Stall's prescriptions for avoidance of self-abuse, and for recouping strength if succumbed to, involved life-style rather than patent remedies: wholesome light diet, healthy exercise, early rising, hard beds, the pursuit of mental improvement, cold baths. The book is nevertheless a horrifying and prurient work, with its detailed description of the vice it so roundly condemns.

Works such as Lord Baden-Powell's *Scouting for Boys* (1908) and *Rovering to Success* (1922), which aimed to regenerate the imperial race with a much broader program, probably reached an even wider audience than books specifically on sex education. Initially reserved to the "Notes for Instructors" in the appendix of *Scouting for Boys*, the remarks on "Continence" advised dealing with this problem in a frank and open manner, giving "clear and plain-spoken instructions." Self-abuse, according to Baden-Powell, "brings with it weakness of head and heart, and, if persisted in, idiocy and lunacy."²⁸ In later editions the cautions were given directly to scouts themselves: "There is one temptation that is pretty sure to come to you at one time or another and I want just to warn you against it."²⁹

For a somewhat older age group, Baden-Powell produced *Rovering to Success*. "Rocks you are likely to bump on" included "Women," but during the "rutting season" masturbation was at least as dangerous as actual relationships with women.³⁰ Readers were reminded that "the Germ is a Sacred Trust for carrying on the race." The best precaution against excessive nocturnal emissions or the temptation to self-abuse was to keep "the organ clean and bathed in cold water every day."³¹ At least Baden-Powell was convinced that recuperation was possible through leading a healthy scouting life. His ideas on the deleteriousness of masturbation remained the same over the years during which his works continued to be republished and were not influenced by the changing ideas discussed below. Like many other individuals and organizations involved in the field of sex education, he received "a heavy burden of correspondence with young men."³² Among those letters which survive are several dealing with that particular "Rock."³³

Although the importance of eschewing self-indulgence in solitary vice in order to build up self-discipline to resist later temptations was often em-

²⁷Ibid., p. 113.

²⁸Lord Baden-Powell, *Scouting for Boys: A Handbook for Instruction in Good Citizenship* (London, 1908), p. 279.

²⁹Ibid., 10th ed. (London, 1922), p. 209.

³⁰Lord Baden-Powell, *Rovering to Success: A Book of Life-Sport for Young Men* (London, 1922), p. 103.

³¹Ibid., p. 104.

³²Bristow, p. 147.

³³Baden-Powell Papers, Scout Association Archives, Baden-Powell House, London, "Rovering to Success Correspondence, c. 1922," TC/2.

phasized, enormous weight was given to the deleteriousness of the habit itself. The practice was supposed to be dangerously depleting to the vital forces of the adolescent at a time of life when these were needed for the maturing process, but it was equally pernicious for the mature male. In this period the middle-class male was often not in a position to marry before the age of thirty or so, and despite claims made by the works of advice that men were not fully mature and fit for marriage and reproduction until the age of twenty-five at least, there was a profound awareness of the strains such prolonged continence caused and the dangers that might ensue.

While there was intense anxiety about these "evil habits" being learned from "evil companions" during schooldays, rather surprisingly the fears were not of creating a permanent homosexual or "inverted" tendency through adolescent homoerotic experimentation. The anxiety seems to have been far greater that mutual experimentation would lead to solitary self-abuse. Homosexuality sometimes might be attributed to a continued habit of masturbation, just as it sometimes was seen as the ultimate vice into which the worn-out heterosexual debauchee would decline, the end of all "excess."³⁴ But the prime danger of self-abuse usually was perceived as the establishment of a habit of dangerous indulgence in sensual pleasure, eroding self-discipline and leading to a career of self-gratification likely to involve fornication with harlots, ending in venereal disease.

This apparent paradox may be related to the rise of concepts of a distinct "invert" identity, mutual and group masturbation being recognized as too prevalent among male adolescents to be connected with what was coming to be perceived as a congenitally anomalous, physically distinctive minority.³⁵ Another factor may be the persistent association of homosexuality in many minds with the specific act of buggery, or anal intercourse. While writers on gay sexual practice and history have indicated that within the subculture a considerable range of sexual practices would have been pursued, common assumptions, slang, and jokes connect homosexuality with this one particular sexual act.³⁶ Masturbation, singly or with "evil compan-

³⁴For example, this would seem to be what Acton (n. 3 above) was implying, very covertly, in his descriptions of ancient debauchees "pandering to their vile desires and gratification of every sensuality" (pp. 198–99).

³⁵Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800*, Themes in British Social History (London, 1981), pp. 96–121.

³⁶Barry R. Burg, *Sodomy and the Perception of Evil: English Sea-Rovers in the Seventeenth-Century Caribbean* (New York, 1983), pp. 135–38; R. Davenport-Hines, *Sex, Death, and Punishment: Attitudes to Sex and Sexuality in Britain since the Renaissance* (London, 1990), pp. 77–83. The latter argues that the association of buggery with the sodomite identity enabled many men to distance themselves from the latter; however, see Jeffrey Weeks, "Discourse, Desire, and Sexual Deviance: Some Problems in a History of Homosexuality," in *The Making of the Modern Homosexual*, ed. Kenneth Plummer (London, 1981), in which he argues the very loose and inexact connotations (legally and popularly) of buggery. Brigid McConville and John Shearlaw, *The Slang of Sex: A Dictionary of Modern Sexual Terms* (London, 1984), cite a number of terms that imply buggery, for example, "arse bandit."

ions," was seen as one of a variety of deleterious habits to which male adolescents were prone, such as smoking, swearing, talking smut, and hanging about streetcorners.

The danger of some form of seduction by older men was sometimes recognized as a distinct threat. A work entitled *What a Boy Should Know* included the dangers threatened by "men who take an evil delight in telling young boys about this habit," and in such a way as "to encourage them to commence or continue this injurious habit." Such men, it was feared, "will lead you further, and towards more injurious and disgusting practices," which certainly sounds like a covert warning against homosexual advances. The reader should be prepared, in such a case, to "punch his head."³⁷

What the authors were alluding to (though only to condemn it) was a wholly different discourse about masturbation, in which the practice was created as a site not of fear and guilt but of manly pride. Wicked men would not only declare that "it will do you no harm," but they even would assert that "it will make a man of you."³⁸ This faint hint of a persistent sub-cultural, even folkloric, set of beliefs about masturbation is also found in occasional remarks made in the letters to Stopes: "I was told by grown men that it was good for me and that kind of thing made a man of one."³⁹ How much this has to do with masturbation being seen as a necessary adolescent stage in sexual development, which would shortly be transcended and possibly even condemned if continued beyond that stage, is even harder to confirm than the existence of this alternative viewpoint on the practice.

Attitudes toward solitary pleasure were bound up with assumptions about masculinity. A "real man" had sexual urges, or at least the potential for them; however, a true man was able to control these. He was in charge of what his body did, not its victim. If this dynamic were reversed it boded ill, reflecting upon his very manhood. Masturbation was a temptation many men found themselves unable to resist, while involuntary emissions, apparently being completely beyond the effort to achieve conscious control, were experienced as even more threatening, a kind of "automatism."⁴⁰

It might be argued that opinions about the ill effects of masturbation and "pollutions" in general simply were effusions by the medical profession, clergymen, and schoolmasters, and that all these diatribes had little effect upon the average young man. Such an argument ignores the fact that masturbation was equally, or even more strongly, represented as pernicious by underground and alternative sexual advice. It cannot be assumed that contact with either purity leaflets or quack pamphlets had no effect upon

³⁷Dr. A. R. Schofield and Dr. P. Vaughan-Jackson, *What A Boy Should Know*, Questions of Sex Series (London, 1913), p. 50.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹CMAC, PP/MCS/A.107 CHG.

⁴⁰See, for example, G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education* (London, 1904), p. 457.

individuals, or that young men could ignore a climate of opinion that blamed masturbation for a variety of ailments from warts on the fingers to impotence, consumption, convulsions, insanity, and death for the man himself, as well as the corruption of his posterity. The existence of these pervasive discourses suggests that masturbation was a practice with the potential for generating enormous anxieties connected with manhood, strength, and sexuality.

III

While the production of anxiety-generating literature about masturbation continued, however, some authorities began to suggest that the guilt and shame aroused by purity literature and quack horror stories also were damaging. As early as the 1880s Sir T. S. Clouston, writing on the "Insanity of Masturbation," thought the quack scare advertising to be as productive of insanity as the vice itself, and similar arguments from time to time were expressed in the columns of the medical press.⁴¹ This did not mean, however, that self-abuse was perceived as completely harmless.

A new perspective on masturbation began with Havelock Ellis's *Auto-Erotism*, part of volume 1 of *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, first published in 1899. Ellis turned a radically critical gaze on the received wisdom concerning masturbation and commented: "It seems to me that this field has rarely been viewed in a scientifically sound and morally sane light, simply because it has not been viewed as a whole. . . . The nature and evils of masturbation are not seen in their true light and proportions until we realize that masturbation is but a specialized form of a tendency which in some form or in some degree affects not only man but all the higher animals." He went on to explode contemporary myths that autoerotic practice was inevitably physically, mentally, or morally debilitating, a uniquely human trait, and a sad side effect of civilization. Boys, he thought, particularly were prone to the risk of internalizing very negative attitudes toward masturbation, through encountering prevalent attitudes that it was an "unmanly" practice, as well as "exaggerated warnings and quack literature."⁴²

Ellis was by no means altogether in favor of deliberate masturbatory practices. But while he attributed the traditional "morbid heightening of self-consciousness without any co-ordinated heightening of self-esteem" to the practitioner, it was only in the case of the persistent and habitual masturbator.⁴³ Although Ellis certainly did not ignore the possibility of

⁴¹Sir T. S. Clouston, "The Insanity of Masturbation," in *Clinical Lectures on Mental Diseases*, 6th ed. (London, 1904); see also n. 12 above.

⁴²Havelock Ellis, *Auto-Erotism*, vol. 1 of *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (Philadelphia, 1910), pp. 98, 263.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 261.

undesirable results in certain cases of masturbation (prolonged, habitual, or combined with a morbid constitution), his view of masturbation as inevitably deleterious only in specified circumstances, rather than universally, must have put many minds at rest. His writings on the subject foreshadowed changing attitudes toward masturbation. Given the limited circulation of *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, however, their direct effect must have been somewhat circumscribed.

Well after the publication of Ellis's work, the old beliefs continued to be propounded in works of sex education. Norah March in *Towards Racial Health* gave prescriptions for discouraging "sexual laxity and distress" in the growing boy, which, in spite of the lip service she paid to Freud, had a familiar ring: "[He] should absolutely free himself from the dominion of eroticism. . . . The male mental attitude should be pure and cool enough to refrain from susceptibility. . . . The more frequently he exerts his will-power to triumph, the more easily will it act for him in the day of sudden emergency."⁴⁴ While the stress was on mental attitude rather than physical measures, the underlying attitude about the need for and the struggle involved in control was still there. March reiterated the usual exhortations about early rising, hard beds, wholesome diet, and cold baths. In dealing with masturbation in infants, she advocated making sure the hands were outside the bedclothes and distracting any child engaged in "unhealthy pursuits."⁴⁵ This policy of distraction seems to have been the new idea of the post-World War I period: some authorities even suggested that, as far as possible, the genital aspect was to be played down and preventive measures made to seem general rather than localized.⁴⁶

As late as 1925, *For Men Only*, a work purporting to be written by "A Physician," discussed "Secret Habits and Vices" in terms that echoed the medical views canvassed by the White Cross League nearly fifty years earlier, with the imagery of "patches of deceptive quivering slime" threatening to engulf the unwary after a single misstep. The author warned of "a secret and hideous travesty of the marriage embrace that is practised alone under the cloak of night, a travesty more exhausting and more demoralising than any excess in married life," and added that "many a youth has had his life utterly ruined by this habit."⁴⁷

However, a less gruesome view of the outcome of onanism was being disseminated by sex educators. (At this period most sex educators were to be found among those with an overall commitment to the ideals of the purity movement, anxious to promote a single standard of sexual morality.) In

⁴⁴March (n. 2 above), p. 175.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 54.

⁴⁶Hardyment (n. 24 above), p. 204.

⁴⁷*For Men Only*, by a Physician, author of "How to Be Healthy" and "For Women Only" (London, 1925), pp. 73-81.

a volume by the Reverend A. Herbert Gray issued by the National Sunday School Union during the 1920s, it was clearly stated that masturbation “does not permanently injure physical vigour, sexual power, or mental capacity.” Nevertheless, it was “a bad habit” and liable to have “mischievous” psychological effects. Furthermore it militated against “full efficiency and full nervous vigour.”⁴⁸

Similar views were debated in a textbook for the medical profession on *Male Disorders of Sex*, in which the genitourinary specialist Kenneth M. Walker argued that masturbation in the mature male was dangerous only because of “the mental conflict it engenders and the excess that it encourages.” He was inclined to believe that in the young, and if “practised to excess, . . . physical health and growth may suffer.” For Walker, masturbation was “an unpleasant and unsatisfactory practice,” and in some cases, where great strain was being caused by continence, he was prepared to advocate coitus as being the preferable outlet for unbearable sexual desire. He emphasized, however, that for many patients, however good for health, coitus would be counterproductively fraught with guilt. Another expedient he suggested for the patient “overwhelmed with ungratified sexual desire” was “a single act of masturbation, deliberately undertaken.” This would “cause no harm” if seldom resorted to; it should not be employed as a “source of pleasure.”⁴⁹

There is some evidence that counselors of young men (clergymen, schoolteachers, and youth workers) had sometimes recommended this occasional hygienic outlet in private interviews. One of Baden-Powell’s correspondents, writing about his son’s difficult struggle for continence, said that his son had been told by religious, medical, and educational authorities that fortnightly self-abuse was consistent with leading a pure life.⁵⁰ It is not much before the 1920s that such a view was advocated in print, and usually with the proviso that it should not be in any way a sensual indulgence.

Although some writers claimed that the idea that masturbation was harmless was gaining entirely too much acceptance,⁵¹ most writers on the subject seem to have been trying to tread a fine line between exploding the old scaremongering myths about masturbation and continuing to discourage the practice. For all their up-to-date parlance of “repressions” and “sublimation” and their self-consciously modern appeals to the science of

⁴⁸A. Herbert Gray, *Sex Teaching* (London, [n.d.]), pp. 50–57.

⁴⁹Kenneth M. Walker, *Male Disorders of Sex* (London, 1930), pp. 100–111.

⁵⁰Baden-Powell Papers (n. 33 above), TC/2.

⁵¹Meyrick Booth, *Youth and Sex: A Psychological Study* (London, 1932), p. 102n.; Marie Stopes, *Enduring Passion: Further New Contributions to the Solution of Sex Difficulties, Being the Continuation of “Married Love,”* 2d ed. (London, 1929), pp. 62–63.

psychology, these writers still were in the business of issuing warnings against self-abuse. Serious repercussions upon eventual normal sex life were threatened, either through establishing negative mental connotations with sexual arousal⁵² or (according to Marie Stopes) by accustoming the organ to a particular type of stimulus coarsening to the sensitive response of the nerves.⁵³ These warnings, however, applied only to a persistent habit: the dangers of occasional lapses were minimized.

An often almost unconscious repugnance to the idea of masturbation was still prevalent. Although the possibility of microscopic study of semen for investigations into fertility had been known since at least the beginning of the twentieth century, doctors seem to have been extraordinarily reluctant to employ it. The mechanisms of fertility were little understood, but nonetheless doctors were happy to recommend and perform major abdominal operations of sometimes dubious value on women to correct infertility, while neglecting to perform a simple and noninvasive test upon their husbands. While this was part of a nexus of attitudes regarding male reproductive functioning as a simple healthy matter, unlike the innately pathological female system, is it fanciful to imagine that there was also a repugnance toward the mode of obtaining the specimen?⁵⁴ The somewhat scanty evidence presented by Stopes's correspondents on this subject appears to indicate that men, reluctant to submit their wives to the knife unless it were strictly necessary, were less horrified at the prospect than their doctors, in occasional cases actually raising the possibility of such an examination themselves.⁵⁵

Advocates of artificial insemination for eugenic purposes, one must assume, must have come to terms sufficiently with a procedure regarded in most circles with repugnance or horrified condemnation to recommend it or even regard it as more desirable than the usual haphazard method of increasing the race. Nevertheless they went through enormous convolutions in working out how such desirable genetic material might be obtained, apart from what one would imagine to be the obvious method of "crude masturbation."⁵⁶

Sex education continued to adhere to the new orthodoxy on the subject. By the late 1940s Cyril Bibby was writing in *Sex Education* that "the

⁵²Gray, p. 52; Walker, p. 108; Leonora Eyles, *Commonsense about Sex* (London, 1933), pp. 38–39.

⁵³Stopes, *Enduring Passion*, pp. 65–67.

⁵⁴See Naomi Pfeffer, "The Hidden Pathology of the Male Reproductive System," in *The Sexual Politics of Reproduction*, ed. Hilary Homans (Aldershot, 1985).

⁵⁵CMAC, PP/MCS/A.36 B, A.38 HHB.

⁵⁶See correspondence between Herbert Brewer and C. P. Blacker, general secretary of the Eugenics Society, in Eugenics Society Archives, CMAC, SA/EUG/C.43.

trouble is not so much in the habit of masturbation . . . as in the mental conflict which may arise from its condemnation.⁵⁷ Dr. Eustace Chesser in *Grow Up—and Live*, while stating that masturbation “has no ill-effects, physical or mental” and speaking out against “those bruises which may be caused to the young mind when the child . . . is made to have a feeling of guilt and shame,” nevertheless considered that although “it is not wrong . . . it is something you might make an effort to do without.” While “masturbation may be regarded as quite ‘normal’ . . . it is wise and healthy to consider the reasons for doing your best to refrain.” Chesser, a prolific and popular writer on sex matters, offered similarly ambiguous advice in his most famous work, *Love without Fear*.⁵⁸

Such constant reassurance suggests that notions of the harm caused by masturbation were still widespread, which perhaps is not surprising. A mail-order lending library operating in North London and specializing in works on sex continued to circulate all sorts of Victorian horormongering volumes in 1949, such as Walling’s *Sexology* or MacFadden’s *The Virile Powers of Superb Manhood*.⁵⁹ Readers who came into contact with such works, or even sought them out for prurient purposes of their own, did not necessarily realize that they were—or ought to have been—“amusing museum relics,” as Cyril Bibby described them.⁶⁰ Underground tales of sexual mythology doubtless persisted and must have gone on producing their own horrors.⁶¹ Even relatively enlightened works of sex advice and education, in spite of their stated intention of setting minds at rest, were profoundly ambivalent about self-abuse.

IV

It is possible to make some essay toward ascertaining how men actually thought and felt about masturbation during an era when attitudes were undergoing considerable change. In 1918 Marie Stopes, a scientist (not a

⁵⁷Cyril Bibby, *Sex Education: A Guide for Parents, Teachers, and Youth Leaders* (London, 1946), p. 109.

⁵⁸Eustace Chesser, *Grow Up—and Live* (Harmondsworth, 1949), p. 237; *Love without Fear: A Plain Guide to Sex Technique for Every Married Adult* (London, 1942), pp. 91–100.

⁵⁹This catalog is to be found among the papers of the Mass Observation “Sex Survey” in the Tom-Harrison Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex, A.9 file 16/A, “Sex Survey 1949: Advertising and Publications: Published Material on Sex.” Bernard A. MacFadden, *The Virile Powers of Superb Manhood: How Developed, How Lost, How Regained* (New York, 1900); and W. H. Walling, *Sexology* (Philadelphia, 1902), both give gruesome accounts of the outcome of masturbation and the dangers of sexual “excess.”

⁶⁰Bibby, p. 128.

⁶¹Regrettably, the Mass Observation “Sex Survey” of the late 1940s (see n. 59 above) did not ask questions about attitudes toward masturbation. However, numerous pejorative comments about the male subculture, within which many men first learned about sex, deplored the “smutty” and unpleasant associations thus acquired.

doctor of medicine), published at her own expense a little volume entitled *Married Love*.⁶² In spite of her publisher's lack of confidence in the work and war restrictions, the book became a runaway best-seller, reprinting several times within the first year and selling over half a million copies within seven years, more than famous fiction best-sellers of the period. She subsequently produced other works of sex advice: *Wise Parenthood*, giving detailed instructions on the subject of birth control; a short pamphlet clearly explaining to working-class women how to protect themselves from weakening pregnancies; a book of advice for mothers entitled *Radiant Motherhood*; a sex education manual, *Sex and the Young*; a short volume containing *The Truth about Venereal Disease*; and a textbook on *Contraception* aimed at the medical profession.⁶³

These books sold well, by which we can make some assumptions about the need for sexual instruction during the period, although salacious interest cannot be excluded entirely as a motive for their purchase. (One young man admitted that he had initially purchased *Married Love* for autoerotic stimulus.)⁶⁴ But reader response went beyond purchase or perhaps recommendation to others. From the first publication of *Married Love* Stopes received a torrent of correspondence from nearly all social classes that continued until her death in 1958, although it declined radically after World War II. Several thousand of these letters survive. Over 40 percent of her correspondents were men.⁶⁵ In spite of what appears to the present-day reader as her explicit bias in favor of monogamous heterosexual marriage at an early age, consequent upon a chaste youth, what seems to have struck her contemporaries was her sympathy on the seldom-discussed topic of sex. Men confessed their premarital and extramarital affairs, mercenary or otherwise, and revealed their anxieties over masturbation as well as problems affecting sex life within marriage. She was even consulted by a few men describing themselves as homosexual or at least as having "effeminate" or "inverted" sides to their nature in the expectation of a certain sympathy, and even the hope that she might write something particularly geared toward their problems.⁶⁶ The overwhelming majority of her correspondents, however, implicitly were heterosexual and either married or hoping to be.

We therefore have at our disposal a collection of letters revealing at-

⁶²Marie Stopes, *Married Love: A New Contribution to the Solution of Sex Difficulties, with a Preface by Dr. Jessie Murray, and Letters from Professor E. H. Starling, F.R.S., and Father Stanislaus St. John, S.J.* (London, 1918).

⁶³Peter Eaton and Marilyn Warnick, *Marie Stopes: A Checklist of Her Writings* (London, 1977); Billie Melman, *Woman and the Popular Imagination in the 1920s* (London, 1988), p. 3.

⁶⁴CMAC, PP/MCS/A. 168 AMM.

⁶⁵Lesley A. Hall, "The Stopes Collection in the Contemporary Medical Archives Centre of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine," *Bulletin of the Society for the Social History of Medicine* 32 (1983): 50-51.

⁶⁶CMAC, PP/MCS/A.240 CDW, A.159 PL, A.174 CTM.

titudes to sex and to sexual conduct from thousands of men of all social classes, covering the period 1918–45. Most of these men had grown up with exposure to the traditional Victorian and immediately post-Victorian views on marriage, sex, and the roles of the sexes. They were also exposed to the new ideas being promulgated by Stopes herself and by other writers reacting against “Victorianism.” Thus they are a valuable source for study of changing (or persisting) attitudes during an age of transition. While these letters obviously represent a self-selected sample, on the basis of the other issues about which correspondents consulted Stopes it seems reasonable to assume that they were typical of a considerable proportion of the population, distinguished largely by the determination to do something about their problems that led them to write to Stopes.

The majority of the men who wrote to Stopes displayed a remarkable enthusiasm for her ideals of marriage. In some cases with a certain hesitation, they were receptive to her doctrines concerning birth control within marriage, and they were passionately engaged by her vision of sex within marriage as a mutual and reciprocal pleasure. Apparently, therefore, they were very receptive to the new morality of the 1920s, if in many cases they had difficulties with the practicalities, from actually obtaining contraceptive devices to locating the clitoris.⁶⁷ It is possible, of course, that preceding attitudes toward marriage were less Victorian and less patriarchal than is often assumed.

This attitude toward marriage and its possibilities contrasts surprisingly with the way correspondents presented problems relating to masturbation. Sufferers (in their own eyes it was suffering) decried “that pernicious and shameful habit, self-abuse” and “the exquisite but pernicious soul and body-destroying sin of masturbation.”⁶⁸ They declared of themselves, “I was a slave to the vile practice,” and “I have been a weak and miserable rotter.”⁶⁹ Such pejorative terms suggest considerable internalization of prevalent attitudes toward the solitary vice. The practice was said to have been picked up from “undesirable and debased characters” or “a rotten set.”⁷⁰ (Those who stated that they had acquired the habit as the result of homosexual seduction [or “degradation”] at an early age at school seem in all cases to have been approaching Stopes about a habit they found themselves unable to overcome, not about any particular sense of having thus become “inverted” by nature.)⁷¹ Self-abuse was described as “folly,” a “mistake,” even

⁶⁷See Lesley A. Hall, *Hidden Anxieties: Male Sexuality, 1900–1950* (Oxford, 1991), chaps. 3 and 4, for discussion of the changing ideology of marriage at this period and the response of Stopes’s correspondents.

⁶⁸CMAC, PP/MCS/A.157 ML, A.220 WS; similar feelings were often expressed: see also A.228 AGS, A.245 MW, A.168 AMM, A.17 CH, A.128 JSH, A.244 WPW, A.64 GWC.

⁶⁹CMAC, PP/MCS/A.183 JM, A.157 FJL.

⁷⁰CMAC, PP/MCS/A.54 C, A.32 B.

⁷¹CMAC, PP/MCS/A.115 HPH, A.244 WPW, A.232 CT, A.157 ML, A.65 C.

a "disease,"⁷² and it was presented to Stopes as something of which the sufferer was a victim: "The urge got a great hold on me until finally I was unable to hold myself in."⁷³ One man claimed that he had been "elected [*sic*]" to it.⁷⁴ In some cases ignorance was pleaded: "[I] was denied such knowledge as a boy, abused myself, was never warned"; "I did not know the dangers of it and became, I suppose, fascinated."⁷⁵ Some claimed that their eyes had finally been opened by sex education literature: "Somehow I got hold at the age of nineteen of a book called 'What a Young Man Ought to Know.' Having read it, and with a violent assertion of will-power, I overcame the vice of masturbation, and have kept free from it ever since."⁷⁶

Men described the feelings and symptoms they experienced as a result (so they believed) of the practice. For some it was a matter of its effects on the "nerves": "This has given me a great feeling of nervousness, shame and remorse." One correspondent wrote, "When I was about twenty-two I had a nervous breakdown and the doctor who attended me said case was taken just in time and the I was on that verge of *Petit Mal* . . . It was not until I read that book that I realised what harm I had been doing to my health through self-abuse." Another noted, "Nervous system all to pieces."⁷⁷

Others believed it had had deleterious effects upon the organ itself, either by restricting its growth ("My penis is far too small. . . . This I realise . . . is due to abuse")⁷⁸ or precisely the opposite, as with "too frequent erection,' a certain 'flabbiness' and possible 'overenlargement' of the male organ" attributed to "youthful indulgence in solitude."⁷⁹ Varicocele (a cluster of varicose veins on one testicle) widely was supposed to be another effect.⁸⁰ One working-class man believed that "eventually nature's desire and masturbation turned me insane in my opinion," the traditional penalty.⁸¹ A young railway clerk produced a compendium of symptoms reading like a quack pamphlet's warnings on the subject: "As a result I am very pale and awfully depressed, I cannot interest myself in anything, I am unfit for my work, sometimes I feel so depressed that I wish I was dead. I am perfectly certain that my present condition is due to my awful folly as described above. . . . My chief ailments are: increasing headaches, aching eyes, and I have a throbbing in my body that seems to make my whole being give a little automatic jump, the jump keeping exact time with my

⁷²CMAC, PP/MCS/A.176 MM, A.183 WN, A.107 GHG, A.232 CT, A.239 CW.

⁷³CMAC, PP/MCS/A.132 HPH.

⁷⁴CMAC, PP/MCS/A.126 JGH.

⁷⁵CMAC, PP/MCS/A.194 TCP, A.176 MM; see also A.252 AEW, A.222 PDS, A.222 JHS, A.123 HPH, A.117 CH.

⁷⁶CMAC, PP/MCS/A.32 JJB.

⁷⁷CMAC, PP/MCS/A.126 JGH, A.107 CHG, A.64 GWC.

⁷⁸CMAC, PP/MCS/A.222 JHS.

⁷⁹CMAC, PP/MCS/A.208 AWR.

⁸⁰CMAC, PP/MCS/A.194 TCP, A.89 F.

⁸¹CMAC, PP/MCS/A.65 C.

pulse and veins, the throbbing is greatly pronounced near the temple and ears."⁸² Another man was so convinced of the deleterious effects of the habit that he attributed all his troubles at the age of twenty-nine to self-abuse carried on twelve years previously, for a period of five months and then abandoned.⁸³ Masturbation was also blamed for eczema between the legs and a dripping after urination.⁸⁴ Others, while noticing no particular adverse effects, were concerned that it might have disastrous repercussions on their abilities when they married or even affect any children they might father.⁸⁵ Some wondered if sexual problems they experienced during marriage could have been caused by it.⁸⁶

Heroic remedies for this ailment (as it was perceived) were demanded: "Would you advise me to be circumcised? . . . If you advise circumcision could I do it myself as I don't wish to approach a doctor on the subject as I am thoroughly ashamed of myself."⁸⁷ "Now will you tell me if vasectomy will cure my loss of semen, for I confess that even yet I get at intervals the terrible craving to indulge in this sin, and sometimes have nocturnal losses."⁸⁸ The belief that vasectomy was a cure for "sexual weakness" is also found among enquiries received by the Eugenics Society about this operation.⁸⁹

One or two of Stopes's readers did venture to voice a certain skepticism about the alleged horrendous effects of self-abuse: "I know it should be discouraged but all boys do it and nothing ever happens"; "I feel sure [it] is not so harmful as generally thought but is obviously unpleasant and undesirable."⁹⁰ Some considered it a "lesser evil" than fornication: "I was told and I believed, that the only possible alternative to this was to go with prostitutes, and that this alternative was more degrading than the other."⁹¹

The commonsense approach that regulated self-relief could be a permissible expedient—morally and even hygienically preferable to fornication—was advocated by the clergymen among Stopes's correspondents rather than by doctors, presumably on grounds of comparative morality. One, conceding that "it cannot be discussed in public prints," suggested that if

⁸²CMAC, PP/MCS/A.189 WN.

⁸³CMAC, PP/MCS/A.128 JSH.

⁸⁴CMAC, PP/MCS/A.228 AGS, A.232 EB.

⁸⁵CMAC, PP/MCS/A.239 CW, A.220 WS, A.63 C, A.80 SGE; similar anxieties are also to be found in A.252 AEW, A.222 PDS, A.183 JM, A.120 OLH, A.107 CHG, A.43 PAB.

⁸⁶Both impotence and premature ejaculation were attributed to this cause: CMAC, PP/MCS/A.185 AGM, A.89 F, A.37 WB, A.64 GWC, A.88 FWF, A.157 ML, A.109 EG.

⁸⁷CMAC, PP/MCS/A.239 CW; see also A.132 LACH (Royal Air Force).

⁸⁸CMAC, PP/MCS/A.220 WS.

⁸⁹Eugenics Society Archives, CMAC, SA/EUG/D.210-12, "Voluntary Sterilisation: Enquiries."

⁹⁰CMAC, PP/MCS/A.248 Sgt. HTW (in India), A.42 Lt. Col. WWB.

⁹¹CMAC, PP/MCS/A.109 Major GCGG, A.200 JP.

masturbation "is only availed of for relief and self-regulation (like the bowels, as an eminent London medical man once said to me) say once a week or in ten days, I not only see no sin or fault in this but an act of self-denial, of escape, and probably of unselfishness towards another. It is certainly better than either seducing a girl, or availing of prostitutes."⁹² Stopes was inclined to agree with the clergyman's point of view. Such an attitude contrasts, however, with the tales of those men who were so horrified by their practice of self-abuse that they sought fornication as a cure, an expedient that did not necessarily work: it might even exacerbate the problem. "Before I was married I used to have unions three and four times a night, two or three times a week with different girls in the hope of curing myself but it was of no use."⁹³

Obviously, masturbation was surrounded for many men by guilt and fear, which extended to cover emissions that were not produced voluntarily. The use of the term "pollutions" to describe these emissions would seem to have embodied the emotions they raised. So adverse were the feelings about these phenomena that even the sexual sensations aroused by contact with an intended wife sometimes were perceived as frightening as well as sinful. One young man was so horrified by the emissions he experienced while embracing his fiancée, he informed Stopes, that he had returned to the front during the First World War almost hoping that he would not return.⁹⁴

Profound worries over the use of contraception seem to have been bound up with these anxieties. The most commonly used method at that time was coitus interruptus, often known as "onanism" (and correctly so: it is a misnomer when applied to masturbation).⁹⁵ The practice of birth control in general sometimes was condemned as "conjugal onanism"; thus, the shrinking men felt ("as from sodomy," one remarked) perhaps was not surprising.⁹⁶ The stigma around masturbation also caused considerable inhibition in conjugal lovemaking. Even when men had come to recognize the role of clitoral stimulation in female arousal and satisfaction, they were inclined to question whether this might be "too indecent to the nicely minded woman" or "savour of perversion or prove harmful."⁹⁷ How men themselves felt about being handled and stimulated is a subject about

⁹²"An Old Priest," quoted in *Dear Dr. Stopes: Sex in the 1920s*, ed. Ruth Hall (London, 1978), p. 65.

⁹³CMAC, PP/MCS/A.33 WWDB (in New Zealand).

⁹⁴CMAC, PP/MCS/A.65 C; see also A.145 BJ, A.118 SNCH, A.54 HC, A.132 HDH, A.138 LRI, A.165 HGL, A.92 F, A.230 LT, A.157 WAL, A. 240 JW.

⁹⁵See Genesis 38:9 for the origins of the word; for its use at this period to denote coitus interruptus (in the context of the expression of anxieties over the prevalence of the practice), see Arthur Cooper in *British Medical Journal*, 1914, no. 1:478.

⁹⁶CMAC, PP/MCS/A.15 A.

⁹⁷CMAC, PP/MCS/A.156 THL, A.56 BC.

which Stopes's correspondents on the whole were silent. Very occasionally, a man seeking further information about Stopes's comment on the woman "playing an active part" might mention something such as "she never 'handles' me and I never receive those kisses and caresses that I am anxious to bestow."⁹⁸ One can readily imagine that this was a subject shrouded in a complex of taboos. The very possibility that male arousal might not be automatic but require a certain degree of stimulation by his partner was almost never mentioned by writers of marriage advice manuals.⁹⁹

On the evidence of the Stopes correspondence, therefore, it would appear that the horror of masturbation so often associated with the Victorians was exceptionally persistent. It prevailed throughout a period during which well-meaning writers of sexual advice—who, unlike the quacks, had no investment in fostering anxiety on the subject—were producing books that over and over reiterated the message that masturbation did not necessarily have the appalling results attributed to it. The underlying ambiguities in such writers' messages, and the continuing circulation of the older ideas, seem to have combined with the existing negative potential of masturbation to continue to generate enormous fears. Correspondents writing to Stopes during World War II were just as concerned as those who had written during the last months of World War I.

In spite of the half century elapsed since Ellis's *Auto-Erotism* and twenty years of a new orthodoxy on masturbation purporting to dispel Victorian fears and horrors, in 1946 Cyril Bibby could cite the following examples of questions asked by boys of thirteen to fifteen: "Does self-abuse make you lose blood? . . . lose strength? lose weight?" "Does masturbation cause insanity [or] . . . consumption, venereal disease, paralysis, pimples, etc.?" "If you do it, will you be able to marry?"¹⁰⁰ Nearly fifty years later, sex educators of the 1980s found boys believing that masturbation could cause impotence.¹⁰¹ Anxieties about the possible effects of masturbation appear to have persisted with a life of their own, distinct from what respectable and reputable sources of authority were saying.

The evidence suggests that even while messages about masturbation and its dangers apparently were becoming more benign, the practice itself caused men profound anxiety. They were readily threatened by any hint that it might have deleterious effects and that a short moment of solitary pleasure might bring about dire repercussions. The act was and still is surrounded by a burden of derogatory associations ("wanker" continues to be

⁹⁸CMAC, PP/MCS/A.220 JLS, A.88 F.

⁹⁹One of the few who did was Dr. Isabel E. Hutton, in *The Hygiene of Marriage*, 4th ed. (London, 1933), pp. 65–66.

¹⁰⁰Bibby (n. 57 above), p. 157.

¹⁰¹Carol Lee, *The Ostrich Position: Sex Schooling and Mystification* (London, 1983), p. 80.

an insult). During the period under discussion, sex was perceived as an area of danger generally. In the works cited above, men's sexual drives and sexual organs typically were depicted as both hard to control (only, if at all, by major efforts of will) and ultimately fragile, readily damaged by a moment's carelessness. So loaded was the subject with negative connotations that any reassurances seem to have been far less audible than the slightest hint of potential harm.