



The Technology of Orgasm: "Hysteria," the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction

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From the time of Hippocrates until the 1920s, massaging female patients to orgasm was a staple of medical practice among Western physicians in the treatment of "hysteria," an ailment once considered both common and chronic in women. Doctors loathed this time-consuming procedure and for centuries relied on midwives. Later, they substituted the efficiency of mechanical devices, including the electric vibrator, invented in the 1880s. In *The Technology of Orgasm*, Rachel Maines offers readers a stimulating, surprising, and often humorous account of hysteria and its treatment throughout the ages, focusing on the development, use, and fall into disrepute of the vibrator as a legitimate medical device.

The Technology of Orgasm: "Hysteria," the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction Details

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From Reader Review The Technology of Orgasm: "Hysteria," the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction for online ebook

Vlad Golovach says

I got this book to read the history of vibrator (I'm a great fan of history of techne). But this book is so much more! Basically it's about surprisingly effective efforts of both medicos and lay persons to ignore just one relatively simple (and very easy to prove) fact - that women are not necessarily happy with just a penetration. All to keep the useless notion that dick makes a man. Even more alarming (for women of goode olde times) and funny (for me, male from a present) is the long and convincing plot of manually performed vulvar massage which apparently did not ring any bell in the doctors minds.

How come THOUSANDS accomplished, smart, educated and intelligent men were able to put "two in a pink and one in a stink" without realising that patient is having an orgasm - well, it's beyond my powers to comprehend. Except maybe the very same men haven't even seen female orgasm once?

lola says

WERE YOU AWARE: That hysteria means "womb disease?" That "Susan B Anthony is said to have regarded male behavior at sports events as evidence that men were too emotional to be allowed to vote?" Or perhaps that "What is really remarkable about Western history in this context is that the medical norm of penetration to male orgasm as the ultimate sexual thrill for both men and women has survived an indefinite number of individual and collective observations suggesting that for most women this pattern is simply not the case?"

WERE YOU AWARE? With The Technology of Orgasm, you will be.

Celine says

Put in simple terms, *The Technology of Orgasm* is a history of the vibrator. More specifically, it shows how the vibrator was developed to fulfill a medical need: the treatment of "hysterical" women.

Nowadays hysteria is seen as a historical dump-category of any kind of deviant behaviour in women that was not appreciated by Western society. Women were either too frigid or nymphomaniacs, they were too nervous and anxious or too forward. Maines's book is an important entry in the history of sexuality, showing how medical opinion, societal values, and women's bodies intersected in the very lucrative treatment of hysterical women by bringing them to orgasm.

Although the (plentiful) evidence Maines brings to the table is generally from doctors's perspectives, there is a feminist backbone to her study. She distances herself from her sources when they define healthy female sexuality as intercourse which involves a vaginal orgasm. This is actually quite rare (it depends on how the question is posed, but the amount of women that achieve a vaginal orgasm reliably is probably only around 10-20%). It was nice to see how she let the ample historical source material speak for itself, while ideologically deconstructing myths of what women's bodies *should* work like.

The Technology of Orgasm is really interesting, and for an academic book, very readable. A casual reader might find the retreading of previous arguments a bit tedious, but Maines's style is accessible and there are plenty of juicy tidbits of information. While it is beyond the scope of her work, it has made me think about how Victorians are always conceived as prudish, yet many women in the end of the 1800s went to their doctors to come - or visited spas which had plenty of dedicated apparatuses that aimed water beams at sensitive bits. Neither of these would be acceptable in contemporary society, once again showing that how a society sees itself does not necessarily translate across the ages.

One of my favourite facts from the book is that Freud also tried manual massage of lady bits to treat some of his hysterics, but apparently was no good at it.

Jessica says

I'm not going to lie, sex is a topic that greatly interests me.

This was an incredibly fascinating book about female orgasms. I liked it a lot. I'm so glad someone wrote a book about this topic.

Ana Rînceanu says

I like how well-researched this book is. Two hundred years of medical attitudes towards women's body and sexuality are smartly explained so even the lay person like me could understand.

Fred says

I really like the idea of the microhistory genre, where someone grasps that there is a history of *everything* and seeks to tell that tale. I know it's been a trend for a few years, but since this book was published in 1999 and Maines's research goes way back to the 80s, I consider her an early adopter, if not a pioneer. I liked her description of poring through ads in 100 year old periodicals, because I do the same thing.

The book is a history of hysteria, which no one quite knew what that was, vibrators and orgasms, all interesting. She spent a lot of time reiterating the fact that penises don't actually usually produce orgasms by penetration which was a little hard to take but harder to argue with. Not her original argument, but not one I was accustomed to in the halls of literature I usually frequent.

As for hysteria, physicians for centuries apparently subscribed to the "she just needs to get laid" approach, for they would literally prescribe marriage or, barring that, manual stimulation to orgasm (which, amusingly, they decided was to be called the "hysterical paroxysm").

Sometimes this was the task of a midwife, sometimes a physician - never was a girl or woman instructed to take matters into their own hand. After all, one of the leading causes of hysteria was masturbation itself. Duh. So everyone pretended the cure was not masturbation, and then everything made sense. Thanks to the Industrial Revolution, they invented vibrators and every kind of electronic stimulator imaginable. To save time and money at the doctor's office.

One thing which interested me was her revelation that Abraham Zacuto, mostly known to my kind as the author of a learned Renaissance-era Hebrew history called *Sefer Yuhasin*, actually came down on the side of the debate that manually produced orgasms on the part of physicians for hysterical women was ethically sketchy. Yet, into the 20th century, women suffering a vague or no illness could go to their doctor and be vibrated to hysterical paroxysm. I don't know if they offered cigarettes or cuddling afterwards.

Jim says

Well now! I don't know why I started to read this particular book. Maybe I thought it would give insight into the "why" of the female orgasm, but recent readings of other publications have given me to understand that scientists still don't have the "why", since female orgasm is not required for conception. The writer, a feminist, would probably attribute some lurid motive to my reading the book, so let's just write it down to morbid curiosity.

I was surprised to learn that doctors regularly profited by inducing orgasm in female patients who were diagnosed with "hysteria", a term used for the sexually unfulfilled. It was apparently a distasteful task for the doc, manually getting their patients off presumably while reading the sports pages. I couldn't believe my eyes: maybe there was some potential in my "*I'm Not a Gynaecologist, But I'll Take A Look*" T-shirt after all. I started to understand the logic one day while sitting in the waiting room at the clinic and casting my eyes over the ladies waiting there...I began to understand why the doc might want to pass the chore off to a midwife.

Enter the vibrator! Doctors could now treat hysteria mechanically much faster than the old manual method. According to Maines, many of the hysterical ladies were known for having recurring symptoms, thereby requiring repeat treatments. The vibrator was a godsend, and presumably would enable a midwife or relatively unskilled technician to treat the hysteria and leave the doc with both hands free to peruse the newspaper. When homes became equipped with electricity, the portable vibrator followed quickly and was available to the lady of the house before the electric vacuum and electric iron!

Maines goes extensively into the development of the vibrator, much more extensively than actually required to keep within my short male attention span. She is serious about her work, and her research is exhaustive. I have never seen such prolific and detailed notes and references in a book this short. She has been generous with her illustrations depicting vibrators that had more in common with jackhammers than with the sleek sex aids advertised today. She had me starting to think that there was an undertone of disdain for men running throughout the book, but on page 117 she gives evidence of being able to see the other side of the coin:

"Western men are expected to be born knowing how to satisfy women in much the same way that women are assumed to be born knowing how to cook. Men have in the past even been held responsible for women's sexuality; Frank Caprio told young husbands in 1952 that "the sexual awakening of the wife [was their] responsibility."

So Ms Maines gets it: the female body is a mystery to men, at least initially. If partners were to get together and discuss what works openly and without embarrassment there might be a lot less hysteria in the world.

One point that she touches on, (lightly, so as to stay on topic) is the paradoxical double standard applied to those who were in the business of producing orgasms. The doctor could do it and maintain the respect of his profession, but let a sex trade worker produce an orgasm and the cops are raiding the joint! Interesting that in

modern times the trend is toward decriminalizing the sex trade but doctors are going to jail for diddling patients.

To summarize, it's an informative read, I would call it an eye-opener but not a page-turner, very nicely illustrated and very, very serious. I don't know how she resisted inserting a little levity on a subject that practically begged for it, according to my infantile man mind.

Justin Cormack says

One of those alas so rare tweeter-woofer crossover moments of academic writing (must get another copy of In Search of Respect actually).

Rachel Maines, by accident starting looking at the adverts in the old magazines and catalogues and accidentally discovered the early history of the electric motor, when motors and appliances were still not integrated due to costs, and the vibrator was born. That in turn leads into a fascinating story of medical history - the story of hysteria, a condition that has a long history and an equally quick disappearance in the 1950s. The vibrator was born in its heyday as a mechanical device to relieve junior doctors of the burden of the prescription manual orgasm.

If this sounds, well, a trifle implausible, then read this book.

C says

An absolutely fascinating book. Combined with other books I've read recently on the state of obstetrics and childbirth in the United States, Maines' book really sheds some light on how attitudes towards women's bodies become attitudes towards women as a group, and how those are then institutionalized, as in medicine.

hypothermya says

I wish I could give this book a star for each aspect of it that delighted me. Unfortunately, this site caps me out at five stars, much less the 10 or so stars that this book deserves.

This book is exhaustively researched, in a way most other books dealing with the broad subject matter of human sexuality are not. Better, it is superbly organized -- starting out with a clear idea of what topics it is going to cover, and managing to tackle that subject matter in only a scanty 124 pages (with at least another 25 pages citing sources).

But while other historical texts stop at well researched and an expertly organized discussion of their subject matter (if they even get that far), this text keeps running uphill towards academic and narrative excellence. The author intelligently conveys the social and technological history leading to the invention of the vibrator with a concise and, at times, humorous approach. It takes a bit of skill to get me emotionally engaged in a non-fiction book; and this author was skilled and then some.

And even though I found myself being emotionally drawn towards each point she made, I was very reassured by how well-supported many of her points were. Nothing but empirical evidence and the bizarre nature of human history were employed to provoke responses from the audience of this book.

I was even more impressed by the authors ability to identify questions raised by her text, and to easily assess whether they lay within the realm of her ability to answer and the scope of her book. Biological questions, moral questions, and several other realms of inquiry are noted -- but no further attempt to address them is made than noting that they exist and noting what historical evidence implies.

While I could say that I was left unsatisfied on one count, it's not a very fair complaint: I wish there was more. I wish she had tackled other technologies besides the vibrator, or had researched other societies and their treatment of female sexuality. As it is, I am very satisfied with what was written and am deeply happy to own this book.

David says

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In "The Technology of Orgasm", Rachel Maines (PhD. Degree in Applied History and Social Science) lays out her research on "female hysteria", an ancient medical and sociological notion that persisted well into the mid-20th century. In a nutshell, the sexual response of Western/European middle/upper

Pete says

The Technology of Orgasm a great book by *Rachel P. Maines*. Surprisingly, I've had this on my shelf for a very long time. An acquaintance asked me about the subject, and I suggested this book and another one.

The research behind this book is huge with facts gathered together over many years and I have recommended whenever curious questions get asked about this. Obviously, it is focused for the female body in terms that anybody can understand. It's not written for sexual scientists.

Those who have interest will be enlightened. It's old, but still clear.

Laura says

This book is awesome. I'm reading it for thesis work but recommend it to you even if you are not an unabashed and wholesale nerd. My only gripe-- having nothing to do with the content or the author-- is that this book is pigeon-holed on the back cover as "women's studies," which suggests to me that culture and history most relevant to women are still considered outside the "androcentric" mainstream and relegated to the scholarly periphery.

james says

Content-wise this book deserves a 5. But the writing style drastically brings it down. Published in 1999, it reads like an unedited 1980s history textbook. It jumps around and at times has very confusing sentences/paragraphs. The chapters don't seem to build on each other, and rather end up repeating themes/facts that were already covered or implied.

The content itself you're not going to find anywhere else, and the bare boring facts often are fascinating in and of themselves, no matter how drollly Maines states them. This is the first in-depth discussion of hysteria that I've ever read, and it's amazing how doctors can be so blind for millenia.

As a feminist book, I appreciated that it didn't beat you on the head as Maines made her points. Often her points were made in one-sentence humorous sentences sprinkled throughout the book, especially in the introduction. Her points were clear and not overstated. However, as a feminist book I think it omitted another viewpoint. Every time I read how male doctors mis-diagnosed women, I was wondering how many times male doctors mis-diagnosed men as well. The diagnoses seem so obvious in 2013 (and probably 1999 as well), but I think it's premature to blame the androcentric model without evidence of how doctors correctly labeled men in the same time-frames.

I very much appreciated the final chapter, "Revising the Androcentric Model," and wish that it had been fleshed out more. This is where the book stops being a history textbook and becomes more of a discussion and where it raises important questions. ie. "Physicians, unlike prostitutes, did not lose status by providing sexual services, in part because the character of these services was camouflaged by both the disease paradigms constructed around female sexuality and by the comforting belief that only penetration was sexually stimulating to women." She spends exactly one paragraph on that very interesting point.

Finally, this book is huge on differences between men and women's sexuality, and how simple it is for medical professionals to make mistakes through a narrow lens. Maines rights: "...Errors of this kind not only have prevented us from understanding female orgasm as a physiological phenomenon but have diverted us from fully recognizing how individual and idiosyncratic sexual pleasure is for both sexes." As our culture shifts towards feminism, and as we tear down old social constructs on sexuality, let's be careful that when we construct new social concepts that we aren't as naive and careless in how we understand human sexuality. And that when we fly the flag of "equal rights" that we don't forget or minimize the substantive differences between men and women, and between individuals.

Conrad says

Who knew Galen invented the vibrator? There's a lot of nifty material in here on how vibrators were initially advertised, too. Really a great book, if you can get over the initial hump.
