



# Gender, Body & Sexuality

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# Coming into Being

## *Desire, Pleasure, and the Necessity of Female Orgasm for Conception in Late Antiquity*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper underlines changes in ancient medical idea, where female sexual pleasure is a prerequisite for conception, locating its roots in pre-Christian medical sources and its reception by Christian writers. The necessity of female orgasm for procreation has its origin in the Hippocratic corpus and is taken up by Galen. On this model, the female genitalia are conceived of as an inverted phallus and the culmination of sexual desire leads to an ejaculation of sperm, as in males. A competing Aristotelean model places the entire agency of conception within the male domain, implanting their pluripotent seed in the empty field of the womb, requiring no active female participation. Orgasm is contingent upon desire, which in the popular Platonic rubric is caused by physical needs. According to Porphyry's *Ad Gaurum*, female experience during conception is important for reasons of ideoplasty. Christian writers generally sought to minimize the problematic nature of pleasure altogether, and drew upon the Aristotelian view of conception requiring no female sperm, thus no orgasm. This was partly predicated to the theological issue of the incarnation, where female orgasm and semen proved problematic for the role of Mary as theotokos. With these philosophical and theological debates in mind, this paper will seek to document this shift through the medical works of Galen, Porphyry, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and Jerome. Conclusively, what seems to occur is a shift in concern from the physiological details of conception to the theological and philosophical problem of desire.

**T**his paper aims to track what happens to the ancient medical idea that female sexual pleasure is a prerequisite for conception by locating its roots in pre-Christian medical sources and following its reception and reformulation by Christian writers. The necessity of female orgasm for procreation has its origin in the Hippocratic corpus and is taken up by Galen, an influential medical writer of the second century. On this model, female genitalia are conceived of as an inverted phallus and the

culmination of sexual desire leads to an ejaculation of sperm. A competing Aristotelean model places the entire agency of conception within the male domain, implanting their pluripotent seed in the empty womb, requiring no female contribution. Orgasm is contingent upon desire, which in the Platonic rubric is caused by physical needs which can only be temporarily sated, thus creating a distracting and problematic cycle. Christian writers generally sought to minimize pleasure altogether, as it overpowers the will. Some also did so in the context of grappling with the theological issue of the incarnation, where female orgasm and semen proved problematic in arguments for the role of Mary as theotokos (“god-bearer”). What seems to occur is a shift in concern from the physiological details of conception to the theological and philosophical problem of desire which results in the negation of the role of female orgasm and pleasure in conception.

### *FEMALE PLEASURE IN THE MEDICAL LITERATURE*

In late antiquity the prevailing medical knowledge was derived from the Hippocratic corpus which may posit a one-sex model where one’s vital heat would determine sex.<sup>1</sup> Sex organs were conceived of as analogous, and responded similarly to intercourse.<sup>2</sup> In order for conception to occur it would be imperative for a Greco-Roman male to focus on his female partner’s pleasure first, as the Hippocratic corpus argued the male achieving orgasm would result in the loss of female desire.<sup>3</sup> Put bluntly by the Hippocratic writer, “as if someone were to pour fresh, cold water into water that is boiling: the water stops boiling” (Hippocrates, *Generation* 4.13-14), implying that the whole process of desire and subsequent conception is linked to the vital heat inherent in and aroused by the two parties. In the second century, Galen, a doctor and philosopher who left a significant corpus of treatises on disease and treatment, tended to align with the Hippocratic corpus, and advocated a similar one-sex model as well as the necessity of female orgasm for procreation.<sup>4</sup>

The Aristotelean model of the body presented a different concept of parental contribution. Aristotle argues in *On the Generation of Animals* that females offered no seminal contribution and so no active part in conception.<sup>5</sup> Vaginal discharge during sex, what was called catamenia, was not the female seed but instead a weaker liquid which had a negative impact upon conception by washing away the man’s semen (with fair-haired, feminine women producing much more of this fluid).<sup>6</sup> A one-sex model still prevails, as Aristotle writes, “The woman is as it were an impotent male, for it is through a certain incapacity that the female is female, being inca-

pable of concocting the nutriment in its last stage into semen” (Aristotle, GA 728a.17-20). Aristotle provided a model which negates the necessary female contribution to the act of conception, while reiterating commonly held views on sex difference.

Whether or not females contribute a necessary component to conception may have had significant ramifications on their treatment during sex in a system which generally delegitimized the autonomy of women, but highly valued offspring. The Hippocratic/Galenic model offered the instruction that a woman’s needs must be attended to for procreation, and while Aristotle may have argued that blondes enjoy sex more, he seemed to have no concern for whether they enjoyed it at all, as it was neither here nor there for conception.

### *PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE ON DESIRE AND PLEASURE*

Christian ideas on sexuality were informed not only by the medical ideas, but philosophical ones as well. Platonism presented several different ways of considering the effect of pleasure in sex and conception, with Plato demonstrating desire’s ability of overpower the will, and Porphyry’s assertion that the will can impose itself upon the material nature, particularly during conception. The issue of desire and its satiation was important for Plato, who was concerned with the constant state of physical need as described in his ontological myth in the *Timaeus*. Those parts of the body that suffer most from desire, those bound in the abdomen such as the intestine and the genitals, are placed far away from the higher, rational organs so as not to distract with their constant clamor (Plato, *Timaeus* 70a-73a).<sup>7</sup> The cycle of craving does not serve to fulfill desire, rather exacerbates it, with satisfaction proving only temporary and fleeting. For Plato, sexual appetite proved a distraction from the pursuit of knowledge, as the enjoyment of sex will never fully satisfy the craving. It is desire’s irrational nature that interferes with the rational control of the will.

Porphyry, the third century Neo-Platonist, discusses ideoplasty which became of particular concern in late antiquity. He argued that the rational soul or will was able to affect changes in the material nature of the physical world, and so the thoughts of the mother at the moment of conception influenced the physical form and character of the child.<sup>8</sup> Within this model, men wishing for a healthy, beautiful baby had to ensure a pleasurable experience and environment for their mates. This was a moment of significant vulnerability, as the woman’s rational control was compromised as it surrendered to desire. Orgasm was not necessary for conception within this

model, but due to the metaphysical nature of Porphyry's argument, ideoplasty could easily be grafted upon either the Hippocratic or Aristotelean models, something we find Galen grappling with in the final pages of his *On the Construction of Embryos* (Galen 200-1).

### *CHRISTIAN AMENDMENTS*

The early Christian writers drew upon the medical and philosophical models discussed above, yet always favored their theological assertions when there were contradictions, particularly over sexuality. The Pauline corpus offered injunctions that Christians could marry and have sex, but argued that the superior choice was to abstain altogether. Early Christian writers sought to justify these counter-cultural claims utilizing medical models and Platonic philosophy. One of the earliest, Ignatius of Antioch, echoes the assertions of 1 Corinthians 7 in his epistle *To the Philadelphians*:

Wives, be ye subject to your husbands in the fear of God; and ye virgins, to Christ in purity, not counting marriage an abomination, but desiring that which is better, not for the reproach of wedlock, but for the sake of meditating on the law. [...] Not that I blame the other blessed [saints] because they entered into the married state. [...] They entered into these marriages not for the sake of appetite, but out of regard for the propagation of mankind (Ignatius 81).

Athenagoras of Athens held a similar view, promoting sexuality solely for the means of procreation:

Having the hope of eternal life, we despise the things of this life, even to the pleasures of the soul, each of us reckoning her his wife whom he has married according to the laws laid down by us, and that only for the purpose of having children. For as the husbandman throwing the seed into the ground awaits the harvest, not sowing more upon it, so to us the procreation of children is the measure of our indulgence in appetite (Athenagoras 146).

Clement of Alexandria, a voice advocating that Christians live with decorum and moderation 'in the world but not of the world' of their Greco-Roman peers, never condemned marriage as he saw it as necessary for procreation and an appropriate lot for some believers. Clement's issue was the surrendering of reason to the will "of the flesh." In his *Paedagogus*, Clement argues that all irrational causes are sinful, "Everything that is contrary to right reason is sin. Accordingly, therefore, the philosophers think fit to define the most generic passions thus: lust, as desire disobedient to reason;



fear, as weakness disobedient to reason; pleasure, as an elation of the spirit disobedient to reason” (Clement, *Paedagogus* 1.13). The problem is one of control, as with Plato’s problem of desire which will not submit its unremitting urges to the bounds of reason.

Justin Martyr held a much dimmer view of sexual desire, arguing that it was the domain of lawless lust.<sup>9</sup> A text attributed in antiquity to Justin uses the model of Jesus in the discourse *On the Resurrection* as a platform for an attack on sexuality:

And we see men also keeping themselves virgins, some from the first, and some from a certain time; so that by their means, marriage, made lawless through lust, is destroyed. [...] And when He [Jesus] had been born, and had submitted to the other conditions of the flesh,--I mean food, drink, and clothing,--this one condition only of discharging the sexual function He did not submit to; for, regarding the desires of the flesh, He accepted some as necessary, while others, which were unnecessary, He did not submit to. For if the flesh were deprived of food, drink, and clothing, it would be destroyed; but being deprived of lawless desire, it suffers no harm (Justin, *On the Resurrection* 3, 295).

While the authorship of this specific passage is under debate (it has also been attributed to Athenagoras or Hippolytus of Rome, both rough contemporaries of Justin), a survey of Justin Martyr’s other works shows his issue with sexuality contains echoes of Clement, yet also goes a step further to delineate those desires that are necessary for the sustaining of life, truncating the rest as sinful. This becomes an attack against the large body of sexually active Christians and a distinctly counter-cultural stance with regard to wider Greco-Roman society in which these Christian communities were embedded. It is not surprising that his student Tatian is credited with founding the Encratite movement, who were considered anathema for their severe asceticism and militant celibacy.

The later centuries of late antiquity saw a shift away from these highly divisive entreaties as the Church gradually codified its teachings into a more unified orthodoxy. Arguments were still ongoing as to whether marriage and subsequently sex were acceptable, necessary but not to be enjoyed, or whether sex was outright sinfulness. Jerome faced harsh criticism for a perceived anti-marriage/sex stance in his treatise *Adversus Jovinianum*, so much so that he felt it necessary to produce an apology for his work in a

letter to Pammachius. Jerome's concern is that arguments promoting virginity above marriage were misconstrued as being derogatory toward the institution of marriage, but he retorts:

“It is better to be a virgin than a married woman;” in this case I have preferred what is good to what is still better. But suppose I go a step further and say, “It is better to marry than to commit fornication;” in that case I have preferred, not a better thing to a good thing, but a good thing to a bad one (Jerome, *To Pammachius* 17, 76).

His reasons for espousing the superiority of a virgin life may have been influenced by social and monetary pressures, as he was in a financial and dubious domestic relationship with several wealthy virgins. Jerome was also influenced by Origen's views on the perfectibility of the Christian, attaining a type of angelic existence on earth through the abstention from denigrating factors, in particular sexuality.

Augustine's views on sexuality are difficult to unravel due to the carefully crafted nature of his *Confessions* where he both engages in a sort of wistful remembrance, and laments his past sexual escapades. Virginity and sexuality are nuanced, offering the praise of marriage but with a caveat that the resultant procreation passes on original sin.<sup>10</sup> In *De Genesi ad litteram* he asserts that if mankind had not fallen they would have fulfilled the mandate to populate the earth, with the act of sex not absent from paradise, but subsumed under the will. When Adam and Eve disregarded God's command, their wills were shattered and with it the conscious control over sexual appetites.<sup>11</sup> Both parties would have had conscious and willful control over their emissions, and thus the act is not subject to the sinful lawlessness of unmanaged desire. Sexuality was not specifically the problem, but desires did not bind themselves to the will or reason, leading to Augustine's largest concern: the degradation of society through the exertion of the corrupted will in human relationships. Since human will was now corrupt, Augustine thought it best to avoid those things that overpowered willful control. Sexual pleasure, and by extension orgasm, fell victim to its ability to overcome the rationality of the individuals involved and place the delicate harmony of human relationships into peril.

### *THE INCARNATION*

The virgin birth of Jesus was of particular concern to Christian writers in late antiquity. Arguments raged about the nature of God's incarnation in the person of Jesus, which naturally had implications for his parentage.

Origen presented a Jesus who was both the begotten of God and man, in fact a type of hybrid who had both godlike qualities and yet a soul like any other human that could experience sin.<sup>12</sup> His rather cryptic account provides lee-way on whether or not Jesus was conceived as a human and imbued with this godly soul, or was in fact conceived by God. Origen writes, “the Wisdom of God [...] entered the womb of a woman” (Origen, *De Princ.* 6.2). Origen makes use of the term *theotokos*, literally meaning god-bearer, which severs any tie to the contribution of material to the foetus as the being in the womb is fully God, with Mary operating as merely a container for God’s being.<sup>13</sup> Cyril of Alexandria tries to present a clear distinction of what the incarnation exactly means in his rebuke of Nestorius during the third ecumenical council at Ephesus:

We do not say that the Word from God dwelt as in an ordinary human born of the holy virgin[...] If anyone does not confess that Emmanuel is, in truth, God, and therefore that the holy virgin is *Theotokos* (for she bore in a fleshly manner the Word from God become flesh), let him be anathema (Cyril 203-5).

This important distinction between bearing a “Word made flesh” or having the spirit of God bind itself to a fleshly infant growing in Mary’s womb has ramifications for the type of physiological model of conception available to early Christian writers. Any material contribution of the mother as a necessary element of conception would have negated God’s incarnation in the person of Jesus. Any act of ideoplasty is similarly denied, as to claim Mary had a representational role in the form of Jesus would assume that her will could overwhelm the divine will of God. Therefore, in negating any active participation in the conception of Jesus through the casting of Mary as the *theotokos*, the Christian tradition effectively wiped away any agency whereby women could claim that their experience of sex in conception must be considered, as Mary often became the exemplar for women writ large, particularly in the realm of sexuality and purity.

### *CONCLUDING REMARKS*

The examination of the Christian tradition on sexuality begs the question, “What happened to the concern for female pleasure in procreation?” We have Galen as a late antique source focussing in detail on the physiological necessity of female orgasm for conception — so the idea is clearly not off the table. In Porphyry, we can see a subsuming of the actual medical dialogue into the framework of philosophical discourse with female pleasure not absent, but instead becoming necessary for reasons of ideoplasty. When

arriving at the Christian discourse on sex and conception, we see the issue move even further from the physical and into theological concerns over whether sex as a whole is a sinful act. From the Pauline corpus the promotion of virginity becomes a touchstone in this debate, with arguments ranging from sex as a utilitarian act, necessary but not to be enjoyed, to its outright sinfulness. The Platonic concept that desires are not bound by reason and therefore problematic feature prominently in these discourses, with Augustine asserting that the will itself is not whole but is corrupted by sin and can no longer hold sway over rebellious desire.

Pleasure in sex then became anathema to the teachings of the early church fathers, as their promotion of virginity and the acceptance of married sex as a necessary option for procreation that was better than “fornication” left behind any notion of female pleasure. Debates over the Incarnation truncated any further discussion, with theological concerns denying Mary’s contributions to Jesus’ formation. With admonitions to avoid pleasure in sex, and the lack of any models whereby women might claim their need for pleasure must be met, it would seem Christian discourse in late antiquity effectively did away with any social impetus to ensure female pleasure during sex. In tracing this development, we can see how the physiological issues of ancient medicine came to be completely subsumed by the philosophical and theological debates that were waging in late antiquity.

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## ENDNOTES

1. This was famously argued by Thomas Laqueur in *Making Sex* (see below), but has notably been challenged by Helen King in *Hippocrates Woman* 7-11, cf. “But Laqueur does not represent a further strand found in ancient Greek medical thought. This is the image of the female body underlying the Hippocratic Diseases of Women treatises, where it is assumed that women are not just cold men, but are creatures entirely different from men in the texture of their flesh and in the associated physiological functions” (King 11).
2. Hippocrates, *Peri Gones* 4.1-7, “Now in women, I assert that as their vagina is rubbed and their uterus moved during intercourse, a kind of tickling sensation befalls these parts and gives rise to pleasure and warmth in the rest of their body. And women, too, ejaculate from their body, sometimes into their uterus – the uterus then becomes moist – and sometimes externally, if the uterus gapes open more than it should.”
3. Hipp., PG 4.7-12, “And a woman feels pleasure, once intercourse begins, for the whole time until the man ejaculates in her; if the woman is eager for intercourse, she ejaculates before the man, and from then on she no longer feels as much pleasure, but if she is not eager, her pleasure ends with the man’s.”
4. Galen qtd. in Laqueur, 100, “Think first, please, of the man’s [external genitalia] turned in and extending inward between the rectum and the bladder. If this should happen, the scrotum would necessarily take the place of the uterus with the testes lying outside, next to it on either side [...] women have exactly the same organs as men, but in exactly the wrong places.”
5. Ar., GA 727b.7-12, “And a proof that the female does not emit similar semen to the male, and that the offspring is not formed by a mixture of both, as some say, is that often the female conceives without the sensation of pleasure in intercourse, and if again the pleasure is experienced by her no less than by the male and the two sexes reach their goal together/ yet often no conception takes place unless the liquid of the so-called catamenia is present in a right proportion.”
6. Ar., GA 727b.34-728a.5, “Some think that the female contributes semen in coition because the pleasure she experiences is sometimes similar to that of the male, and also is attended by a liquid discharge. But this discharge is not seminal; it is merely proper to the part concerned in each case, for there is a discharge from the uterus which occurs in some women but not in others. It is found in those who are fair-skinned and of a feminine type generally, but not in those who are dark and of a masculine appearance. The amount of this discharge, when it occurs, is sometimes on a different scale from the emission of semen and far exceeds it.”
7. See also, Sissa, 42, “The alimentary and sexual soul is systematically depicted through the use of metaphors of unending oral ingestion. In the Republic, the kind of life that involves giving in to one’s passions, following one’s inclinations and seeking out sensual pleasures transforms human beings into beasts.

Those who live such an existence resemble violent and voracious cattle who, as they waste all their time on grazing, gorge themselves, mate with each other and gore each other.”

8. Porph., *Ad Gaur.* 5.4.4-5.5, “There is a consensus that many internalize with the faculties of representation forms coming from the same species, bring forth offspring that are very similar to those forms. Therefore, we place in front of horses, dogs, doves and indeed even in front of a woman, images that realize a beauty of form, since copulating females, by looking at the appearances and receiving them into their memory, bring forth offspring that resemble them.”
9. Justin Martyr, *Discourse to the Greeks* 5, 272, “Come, be taught; become as I am, for I, too, was as ye are. [...] the Word drives the fearful passions of our sensual nature from the very recesses of the soul; first driving forth lust, through which every ill is begotten [...] Lust being once banished, the soul becomes calm and serene.”
10. Augustine, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 1.1, “Our purpose [...] is to distinguish between the evil of carnal concupiscence from which man who is born therefrom contracts original sin, and the good of marriage. For there would have been none of this shame-producing concupiscence, which is impudently praised by impudent men, if man had not previously sinned; while as to marriage, it would still have existed even if no man had sinned, since the procreation of children in the body that belonged to that life would have been effected without that malady which in “the body of this death” cannot be separated from the process of procreation.”
11. See Brown, 402-3.
12. Origen, *De Principiis* 6.3, “For since He is Himself the invisible image of the invisible God, He conveyed invisibly a share in Himself to all His rational creatures, so that each one obtained a part of Him exactly proportioned to the amount of affection with which he regarded Him. But since, agreeably to the faculty of free-will, variety and diversity characterized the individual souls, so that one was attached with a warmer love to the Author of its being, and another with a feebler and weaker regard, that soul (*anima*) regarding which Jesus said, “No one shall take my life (*animam*) from me,” inhering, from the beginning of the creation, and afterwards, inseparably and indissolubly in Him, as being the Wisdom and Word of God, and the Truth and the true Light, and receiving Him wholly, and passing into His light and splendour, was made with Him in a pre-eminent degree one spirit, according to the promise of the apostle to those who ought to imitate it, that “he who is joined in the Lord is one spirit.” This substance of a soul, then, being intermediate between God and the flesh—it being impossible for the nature of God to intermingle with a body without an intermediate instrument—the God-man is born.”
13. This argument which raged between Christian leaders, particularly with so-called ‘Gnostic’ bishops, is nuanced by Luigi Gambero in *Mary and the Fathers of the Church* where he highlights the subtle variation of early Christian writers using Jesus’ birth in or through ‘a woman’. Quoting Origen’s *Commen-*



tary on the Letter to the Romans 3, “In the case of any man, it is appropriate to say that he was born ‘by means of a woman,’ because before he was born of a woman, he took his origin from a man. But Christ, whose flesh did not take its origin from a man’s seed, is rightly said to have been born ‘of a woman’ (Gambero 74-5). Gambero continues, “Instead, the virginal conception happened in a way that Christ’s human nature was free from concupiscence and unbridled passions” (75). This maps on to the Clementine and Platonic view of the superiority of the rational will.