

IMPOTENCE

A CULTURAL HISTORY



ANGUS McLAREN

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Why impotence? My first books were devoted to studying how men and women in past generations attempted to control their fertility. This study is in some ways a new departure. It is true that in looking at early modern discussions of reproduction I frequently came across instructions on how individuals—concerned by some sexual infirmity—could seek to enflame their lusts and assure their fecundity. I was surprised by the number of references to aphrodisiacs made in medical books and herbal texts, but tended to skip over many of the reports, preoccupied as I was by my search for evidence of contraceptive practices. Some of these readings nevertheless lodged themselves in the far reaches of my brain and eventually I began to wonder if they did not warrant more systematic examination. We risk being left with a distorted view of the past if we have only accounts of how partners tried to limit their fertility and none of how they sought to increase it, and only histories of women's bodies but none of men's. Such musings led me to go back more carefully over a number of the sources I originally perused decades ago. In this roundabout way the research was launched that resulted in this study.

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the many friends and colleagues who assisted me in this undertaking. I first have to thank Brian Dippie for subjecting the manuscript—like so many earlier ones—to a careful and insightful reading. I only wish I had the space to respond to his many challenging ripostes. Special thanks goes to Michael Finn for putting me up in Toronto and generously sharing with me his research notes on the French decadents. Countless students and colleagues provided me with encouragement and assistance, but I particularly value the intellectual support

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INTRODUCTION

Who today hasn't heard of Viagra? The little blue pill has garnered billions for the Pfizer corporation and made male impotence—now reconfigured as erectile dysfunction—a topic of public discussion. What most participants in the current debate ignore is that impotence has a history. Have men always suffered from impotence or the fear of it? Strictly speaking they have not, given that the *Oxford English Dictionary* states that the word “impotence” to denote an absence of sexual power only came into common usage in the seventeenth century. Nevertheless in preceding centuries men lamented their loss of “courage,” lack of desire, and debilitated loins. And more important than the changes in vocabulary were the changes over time in the ways in which male sexual incapacity was culturally conceptualized and the social meanings it was given. The purported causes of impotence (the term we will resort to for simplicity's sake) varied and so did its impact. In Mesopotamian texts from the seventh century BCE, historians have found references to men consuming roots and plants to restore their potency. They also recited protective spells to counter sorcerers' attacks on their virility.

Get excited! Get excited! Get an erection!
Get excited like a stag! Get an erection lik[e a wild bull]!
Let a lio[n] get an erection along with you!¹

Centuries later the inquisitors of sixteenth-century Venice reported that by tying three knots in a rope while repeating a spell, a jilted lover could sexually incapacitate the man who had abandoned her. In nineteenth-century England quacks claimed that the main cause of impotence was masturbation. “As in man, so in woman, this pernicious habit takes away the *inclination* for

those pleasures with which the multiplication of the species is connected, sometimes it destroys the actual *power* of effectual communion.”² Today urologists and pharmaceutical corporations blame erectile dysfunctions on poor blood circulation.

In some senses the history of male incapacity appears to have come full circle. Historians tell us that until the twentieth century the public commonly assumed that sex, marriage, and procreation were inextricably linked and so impotence was long discussed in the context of a man’s ability to marry and have children—not in the context of merely being able to have sex. In early modern Europe when patriarchal power depended upon a man producing heirs, the public openly discussed the problems posed by impotence. Doctors, wise women, and priests prescribed a variety of herbal and magical remedies. Family fortunes and dynastic stability demanded successful coition. Charles II’s lack of success in siring an heir led to the Hapsburgs’ loss of Spain. On the one hand rumors about Louis XVI’s initial failure to consummate his marriage fed the public unrest that ultimately resulted in the French Revolution; on the other hand the fledgling American republic was strengthened by George Washington’s inability to found a dynasty. Impotence could be both a metaphor for, and an actual cause of, failures of the body politic. In the nineteenth century the concern for family privacy and male sensitivities led the respectable to avoid such topics. These decades of discretion were anomalous. In the early twentieth century psychoanalysts attributed rising rates of impotence to Oedipal desires, endocrinologists blamed an insufficiency of “male” hormones, and novelists targeted henpecked males’ fear of cocksure feminists. By the 1990s guaranteed medical cures were heralded and impotence was once again front-page news. But the sellers of Viagra, Levitra, and Cialis did not suggest that their purpose was to overcome problems of infertility. In a small-family culture male potency was no longer proven by siring children, but by being an accomplished sexual partner.

A disease, according to Michael Solomon, “is a social construct and, as such, is dependent on a complex codification of patterns, images, and forms that are produced within the conventions of an interpretive community. To become diseased is less a process of being ill than one of putting our ills—or having our ills put for us—into categories, fables, fictions, and myths that offer explanations for suffering, strategies for coping, and hopes for cure.”³ Although in this study impotence is regarded as a problem rather than as a disease, a similar perspective has been adopted. The goal is to locate impotence in the context of changing social expectations and cultural givens. In providing a constructionist history of impotence,

we trace Western discourses and theories to understand the cultural forces that structured representations of masculine sexual inadequacy. The result is something akin to what Foucault would term a genealogy of a specific modern issue. Beginning with the premise that language always mediates the material world, we have paid special attention to the sexual vocabulary of each age. The ways in which the body was described obviously affected the ways in which the body was actually experienced. In other words impotence in an age that believed in witchcraft was quite different from impotence in an age that believed in science. Such comparisons help reveal why different cultures took their particular approaches in conceptualizing and dealing with such a problem. What at first glance might seem a bizarre view of the body's workings can—when placed in its cultural context—reveal itself as a rational and understandable reflection of the society's values. The notion of impotence can accordingly serve as a heuristic device in rethinking the history of Western sexuality, particularly in posing the question of how this category related to the masculine ideal.

To write a history of impotence entails a survey of changing models of masculinity.⁴ Though every era has employed discourses to represent and control sexuality, certain ages clearly manifested a heightened anxiety about the issue of male sexual dysfunction. But what did one mean by the term “impotence”? When reproduction was highly prized it was often confused or equated with sterility or barrenness. Even in modern times it has had a variety of meanings—failure to achieve an erection, failure to penetrate, and either failure to ejaculate or ejaculating prematurely. Such failures might be chronic or intermittent; they could have physical or psychological causes. They could arrive with old age.

Why such a concern for the erection? It was obviously essential when the purpose of sex was propagation, but modern sex surveys revealed that much if not most of the male's sexual pleasure came from means other than penetration. Nevertheless it was taken as a given in Western culture that sex was synonymous with intercourse, a man penetrating his partner. The implication of such a belief is that a man feared impotence, not so much because it might deprive him of pleasure, but because it would prevent him from providing proof that he could perform as a male should. Potency was long linked to maturity. The close association of sexual virility with youth is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Whom were men's erections for? Where does the issue of women's pleasure figure in the discussion? It is important not to conflate cultural representations with practices. If one is to believe today's pharmaceutical advertisements, men's desire to overcome sexual dysfunctions is driven by their

concern for their partners. Asking whether or not this is true today or ever was in the past highlights the fact that sexual practices can have a range of meanings. For many men intercourse became reified and was made synonymous with “sex” because it represented social dominance.

We have been talking about men, but this study focuses on notions of manhood in Western cultures. Yet even within these narrow confines it is impossible to ignore the ways in which discussions of sexual dysfunctions by whites played a role in their construction of ideas about race and ethnicity. Such discussions created the racial “other” partly by attributing to non-white men either an animal-like, primitive potency or an exhausted lack of virility. Historians have begun to track the role played by such beliefs in the process of racialization.⁵

What societies make of male sexual problems is naturally of great interest to the historian of gender. The way in which impotence was treated and discussed always affected both men and women. No better example could be given than the writers of *Playboy* and *Penthouse* heralding the arrival of Viagra as somehow freeing men from feminist oppression. Despite such assertions, the history of impotence is perhaps even more about power relations among men. Who traditionally decided what was normal and healthy masculinity? Men. Who set the standards? Men. Who communicated them? Men. Though there has never been a universal, biologically determined standard of male potency, when discussing impotence men in every culture made clear what they felt most threatened male potency, what they recognized as the signs of the loss of masculinity, and how “remasculinization” could be attempted. Gender identity, in short, was something that they believed could be both threatened and protected.

Here, the traditional medical historian might protest that a history of impotence shows that no matter what earlier quacks might claim, men unable to attain an erection had no hope of cure until the emergence of modern biochemistry. Yet the story is obviously more complicated than that. The cultural historian—while not denying the improvements in treatment—would argue that the history of impotence demonstrates how every age has culturally framed the discussion of male incapacity.⁶ Fiascoes in the bedroom have been attributed at one time or another to witchcraft, masturbation, homosexual desires, shell shock, sexual excesses, feminism, and the unconscious. The arrival of new explanations did not necessarily displace older ones. Even in a scientific age some would still attribute failures to irrational forces. As made clear in songs, plays, novels, and movies, Western culture has simultaneously regarded impotence as life’s greatest tragedy and life’s greatest joke.

The debates over Viagra have brought home to the public that the pursuit of normative sexuality has both its benefits and its costs. A history of impotence not only allows us to locate these discussions in their cultural context; it provides a compelling way in which to understand male power and the configurations of male desire. What precipitated ideas of masculine vulnerability? How was male anxiety assuaged? What sorts of women were regarded as posing a threat to virility? In seeking to answer these questions we are led to see how cultures constructed their particular notions of sexuality's pleasures and dangers, its private and public functions. Every age turned male sexual dysfunctions to its own purposes; every culture created, combated, and in some fashion cured the forms of impotence it found most alarming.

What do we learn in investigating the history of impotence? Most importantly we discover that male sexuality does have a history. Countless studies have tracked the ways in which women's sexuality was "constructed" or repressed or policed. We have, for example, histories of hysteria, pregnancy, orgasms, and breasts. In contrast, next to nothing has been said about how normative standards of male performance were established. "It is noteworthy," a legal scholar recently observed, "that an expanding and exciting feminist literature which discusses images of the female body as leaky, volatile, and permeable has provoked far less comment on the implicitly or explicitly contrasted construction of the male body as bounded, stable, and non-permeable."⁷ But was the male body assumed to be stable? Most histories of sexuality seem to take that position. In his pathbreaking study *Making Sex: The Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (1990) Thomas Laqueur all but ignored men. "It is probably not possible to write a history of man's body and its pleasures," he asserts, "because the historical record was created in a cultural tradition where no such history was necessary."⁸ Yet the study of impotence reveals that a vast and changing cast of characters were interested in men's sexual capacities. Their private problems were implicated in the discussion of a range of important public issues including marriage, divorce, reproduction, illness, and aging. Such discussions naturally reflected societies' changing views of men's bodies and appropriate masculine behavior, but they were also entangled in preoccupations with sex, race, gender, age, and class. Though some recent studies give the impression that until the twentieth century impotence was almost unknown, an investigation of what earlier cultures regarded as the causes and cures of male dysfunctions reveals that male potency was rarely taken as a given; each culture sought in its own fashion to nurture and protect it. Only by understanding the responses made to impotence in the past can we fully

appreciate (and perhaps anticipate) the ways in which it will be dealt with in the future.

We begin in chapter 1 by surveying Greek and Roman discussions of sexuality. This was a world in which penetration proved manhood; it mattered little whether the penetrated was a woman or a boy. Given the importance of potency to reputation, doctors provided recipes for restoratives yet at the same time ribald writers produced comic accounts of men who failed the crucial test. Unlike the Romans, Christians could neither laud potency nor regard impotency as a joke. Yet, if the gloomy Augustinian view of the purposes of marriage placed a new stress on celibacy and “inner masculinity,” Christians could not ignore the problem posed “when desire refused service.” Chapter 2 follows the long line of celibate church doctors who made themselves experts on erection, penetration, and emission. When the power of the church declined, as in Restoration England, wits once again made impotence a laughing matter. Chapter 3 demonstrates how jokes about sexual humiliations played a vital part in a common male culture of the seventeenth century. Male sexual dysfunctions appeared distinctly different when viewed through an eighteenth-century prism. Chapter 4 shows how quacks and philosophes—in attempting to cure, counter, and explain away male sexual problems—embraced the new notion of men and women inhabiting separate sexual spheres. The nineteenth-century culture that craved privacy found discussions of such disasters distasteful, but given the middle-class fixation on the notion of the active male and the passive female, I argue in chapter 5, the issue of impotence could not be ignored. The writers of middle-class marriage manuals popularized the notion of a “spermatic economy” in which excesses led to a loss of manly vigor and bankruptcy resulted ultimately in impotence. Physicians, chapter 6 demonstrates, showed a new concern for youthful indiscretions, highlighting the dangers of masturbation, spermatorrhoea, prostitution, and venereal disease. Quacks employed the new cheap press both to create anxieties and to sell their nostrums to cure “lost manhood.” As the Victorian model of masculinity that valorized restraint was displaced by a more relaxed ideal, the early twentieth century witnessed a shift from moral to psychological explanations of impotence. Chapter 7 contrasts the writers of marriage manuals who increased pressures on males to perform with Freudians who attributed impotence to Oedipal guilt, and the resulting incapacitating male view of women as either Madonnas or whores. Chapter 8 argues that the rise of endocrinology in the 1920s finally legitimized the scientific study of the male reproductive system and dramatically revealed a twentieth-century hostility to aging. New operations and patent medicines indicated how far

a culture would go in egging men on in the desperate pursuit of a particular sign of manliness. Following World War II, marriage counselors and sex therapists declared impotence to be a problem from which not one but two people suffered, and both would have to be treated. Chapter 9 shows that it was hardly a coincidence that in the 1970s reports of a “new impotence” followed the emergence of second-wave feminism and the discovery of the multiorgasmic female. We conclude in chapter 10 by analyzing the furor created by Viagra. Its backers claimed that pharmaceuticals had trumped surgery, psychoanalysis, sex therapy, and feminism. The corporations did make billions, but did the new impotence pills “revolutionize” sexuality?

The medicalization of sexuality has displaced, but not entirely banished older beliefs in the noxious influence of sin, guilt, bad habits, and even evil spells. A layer of biomedical reasoning has in effect been added to the earlier stock of arguments used to explain sexual dissatisfactions. The gist of this study is that every age has turned impotence to its own purposes, each advancing a model of masculinity that informed men if they were sexual successes, and if not, why not. Nothing is more revealing of a culture’s social and ideological preoccupations than the enormous pains it takes in goading men on in the often painful pursuit of the “normal” and the “natural.”

[1]

THE IMPENETRABLE PENETRATOR

Manhood in Greece and Rome

Ovid's *Amores* and Petronius's *Satyrica* provide the two most famous literary accounts of the ancients' view of impotence. In *Amores* 3.7 the Latin poet amusingly describes his inexplicable inability to perform with a woman he has long lusted after.

Yes, she was beautiful and well turned out,
The girl that I'd so often dreamed about,
Yet I lay with her limp as if I loved not,
A shameful burden on the bed that moved not.
Though both of us were sure of our intent,
Yet could I not cast anchor where I meant.

Following this disastrous encounter the narrator is enraged to find his refractory member suddenly full of vigor.

But notwithstanding, like one dead it lay,
Drooping more than a rose picked yesterday.
Now, when he should not be, he's bolt upright,
And craves his task and seeks to have his fight.
Lie down in shame and see you stir no more!
You've caught me with your promises before.
You've tricked me, got me captured weaponless,
And I've endured great shame and sore distress.¹

Coming across such a familiar scenario it is tempting to assume that men in ancient Greece and Rome regarded impotence in exactly the same way as do men in the twenty-first century. Indeed it would be easy to produce

a history of impotence by simply totting up every reference to what today we might interpret as concerns for erection. The obvious danger of such an approach is that one begins with the assumption that there actually exists such a thing as “impotence” that can be tracked over time. Even in our scientific world different people mean different things in employing the term. Accordingly there is all the more reason to be sensitive to the fact that earlier cultures constructed, explained, and gave special significance in quite different ways from ours to what could in general terms be described as male sexual failures. To make the story even more complicated, it also has to be admitted that we cannot know if such failures actually existed; relying on written sources produced by the literate elite, all we really we know is how such events (or nonevents) were culturally represented.

Some sense of the importance of cultural framing is given by a reading of Petronius’s *Satyrice*. His hero Encolpius tries to bed Circe, but at the crucial moment he too goes limp.

Three times I whip the dreadful weapon out,
And three times softer than a Brussels sprout
I quail, in those dire straits my manhood blunted,
No longer up to what just now I wanted.²

Again, this sounds very familiar to the modern ear. The cultural resonance of impotence is only made clear when Petronius goes on to deal with the possible causes, cures, and import of the problem. Encolpius is humiliated not simply because he is unready for sex, but because he appears less able than a *cinaedus*, a passive homosexual whose status is lower than his. Encolpius’s lack of erection is thus shameful inasmuch as it signals a loss of both masculine and social status. And why does he suffer such a fate? Is it because of his boyfriend whom Circe says he should drop? Is it due to an unhealthy regimen that he seeks to ameliorate by continence, diet, and a restriction on wine? Might he be bewitched? An elderly crone helps him counter the evil eye. In chapter 138 when he is finally cured, it is by a sadistic old priestess who buggers him with a leather dildo smeared with oil, pepper, and nettle seeds.³

In providing a comic account of impotence, Petronius is not attempting to document all the ways in which his contemporaries viewed the problem. Nevertheless a reading of his masterpiece reminds us that to appreciate earlier societies’ understandings of the workings of the body we have to make a conscious effort to avoid assuming that they shared our views and values. Certain acts employed by the Greeks and Romans no doubt either curbed or encouraged potency, but what mattered was not so much the act as the

social construction of meanings given to it and the individual responses to such meanings. How are we to understand the ancients' discussion of impotence? The construction of both the problem and the cure directly related to their notions of sex and gender. To place the issue of impotence in its social setting we begin this chapter with an analysis of the roles assigned to men and women in the ancient world, then turn to Greek and Roman attitudes toward intercourse and procreation; we will examine the many ways in which they sought to control desire, and review how their notions of manhood accommodated biology and behavior.

To be a man in the ancient world a vigorous character was essential. The Romans were positively fixated with an ideal of the self-controlled, aggressive, virile male. They had an extravagant concern for winning recognition through public achievement. According to what has been called the Mediterranean notion of manliness, men had to appear strong and active. A man manifested proper male behavior by expressions of his righteous anger, powerful desires, and personal autonomy. Even humor was seasoned with a strong element of sexual aggression, as opponents in law and politics were commonly abused as soft or effeminate. Hence the poet Catullus threatened to rape or bugger his critics.⁴

Of course, given that almost all the sources available to us were written by men, the portrayal of the aggressive, virile, emotionally cool male was obviously an ideal or cliché rather than a reality. The ancients admitted as much in stressing the importance of performance. One might be born male, but to prove one's manhood one needed to walk and talk in a certain way. Rhetorical skills, for example, played a key role in establishing gender identity. Gender was in effect learnt. "Masculinity in the ancient world was an achieved state," one scholar has noted, "radically underdetermined by anatomical sex."⁵ There were few hard rules.⁶ Though gender norms existed, deviations were accepted. Male reputation and honor were not predetermined; men learned how to manipulate community expectations and the norms of masculinity to their own advantage.

Notions of assertive male behavior were projected onto the genitals. Thus Plato personified the penis as "disobedient and self-willed, like a creature that is deaf to reason, and it attempts to dominate all because of its frenzied lusts." Indeed the assertion that masculinity was for the ancients not simply determined by anatomy sounds counterintuitive, given their acceptance of public male nudity, the attention paid to male genitalia, and the displays of the phallus. Greek nurses molded the baby's body, even using swaddling to shape the scrotum and stretching to elongate the foreskin. To judge by illustrations and statuary, the ideal penis was small, thin, and had a pointed

foreskin. The Greeks believed a dainty penis was not only more attractive but more serviceable in reproduction, since its semen, not having to travel as far, would suffer less heat loss. They represented Satyrs with huge penises as sign of their ugliness. The Romans, however, preferred big penises, or at least that was the case of the emperors when choosing their favorites.⁷

In the ancient world the erect penis was a symbol of maturity and power. The Romans celebrated a boy's first ejaculation. Representations of the penis were found everywhere. Artificial penises were used on the comic stage of Athens until the fourth century BC. A phallic stele of Hermes stood at the doorway of every Greek house and during ritual processions the men carried an enormous phallus through the community. In Roman gardens, instead of a scarecrow, a representation of the god Priapus, complete with erect penis, threatened intruders with rape.⁸

The ancients moreover employed an elaborate vocabulary to describe the male genitals. "People will laugh aloud at you," warned an early Greek epigram, "if you venture to sail unequipped, a rower who has lost his oar." In common parlance the erect penis was described as one's equipment, tool, spear, ram, goad, or drill. In its flaccid state it might be called a snake or rope. A woman accordingly cursed her younger rival "may you find a snake in your bed." The Romans believed the sparrow to be lecherous, so in Latin "sparrow" was a synonym for penis. In Catullus 2 and 3 the narrator talks about his girlfriend's sparrow being dead, that is, himself as impotent. In literature the phallus was frequently personified, especially the impotent prick as in Ovid's *Amores* 3.7.⁹

The flaccid penis represented failure since for the virile in the ancient world sex could only mean penetration. A man had either to penetrate or be penetrated. Martial (*Epigram* 3.73) for example accused Gallus of not being able to stand and thereby implied that he was a fellator. The real man was an "impenetrable penetrator." The special resonance this concept held can only be fully appreciated when it is recalled that this was a resolutely inegalitarian society in which elite men always had at their disposal submissive and sexually available male and female slaves. Sexual relationships were embedded in social relationships. Respectable men necessarily took the accusation of being sexually passive as the gravest insult, implying as it did that one was no better than a slave. Male character assassination fed on such innuendos that one was "soft." In the musings of philosophers such as Seneca as well as in popular lampoons, graffiti, and satires appeared the same expressions of distaste for effeminacy.¹⁰

The genitals represented the man. Potency represented power, hence the number of literary references to the penis as a weapon. Loss of potency

meant loss of manhood and defeat. Catullus in one poem refers to a groom whose “short sword hung like a strip of limp beet / between his legs, never / cocked navelwards.” In Petronius’s *Satyrical* the narrator lamented, “I was a ready soldier, but I had no weapons.” The poet Martial wielded the inability to have an erection as amongst the most wounding of charges to hurl at his opponents. He derided one victim (*Epigram* 11.46): “You no longer rise, Mevius, except in your sleep, and your penis begins to piss onto the middle of your feet; your shriveled cock is stirred by your weary fingers and, thus solicited, does not lift its useless head.” In stating that cunts and asses could no longer serve Mevius, Martial implied that mouths were his last resort. And indeed Martial made just such a charge (*Epigram* 11.25) against Linus. “That over-active cock, well known to girls not a few, has ceased to stand for Linus. Tongue, look out!” Finally Martial asserted (*Epigram* 11.61) that Nanneius was so weak that even his tongue was impotent.¹¹

Penetration was central to the ancient world’s notion of healthy male sexuality, but whom might the man penetrate? Historians are largely now in agreement that the concept of sexuality is a discourse—a way of organizing and controlling desires—that only came into being in modern times. Consequently we have to be wary of ahistorically reading back into the ancient world our notion of “sexuality,” in particular the idea that every individual would have a sense of self as being either heterosexual or homosexual. To guard against such presentist thinking, historians of ancient Greece have recently spoken of an age of presexuality, an era in which there was no such thing as “sexual identity.” It has been similarly suggested that Greek homosexuality should be more precisely called pseudohomosexuality or male-to-male intercourse, since few in the ancient world had the concept of a desire for only one sex.¹²

In the Mediterranean world a man who penetrated and dominated either men or women proved his manhood. The man who sought to please or was the passive partner of either man or woman was considered effeminate. Failure to be aroused by either girls or boys concerned the ancients. Martial scoffed (*Epigram* 12.86) at the man who despite having thirty boys and thirty girls could not get his cock to rise. Strato had a laugh at himself in ending a poem with a pun on the name of Hector’s son and the word for failing to make erect (12.11): “Yesterday I had Philostratus for the night, but was incapable, though he (how shall I say it?) made every possible offer. No longer, my friends, count me friend, but throw me off a tower as I have become too much of an Astyanax.” And later (12.216) he complained: “Now you’re upright, damn you, and stiff, when nothing is here. But when there *was* something yesterday, you heaved no breath at all.”¹³

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