

INTRODUCTION

SCHOLARS HAVE ONLY RECENTLY DISCOVERED that the human body itself has a history. Not only has it been perceived, interpreted, and represented differently in different epochs, but it has also been lived differently, brought into being within widely dissimilar material cultures, subjected to various technologies and means of control, and incorporated into different rhythms of production and consumption, pleasure and pain. The eight articles in this volume support, supplement, and explore the significance of these insights. They belong to a new historical endeavor that derives partly from the crossing of historical with anthropological investigations, partly from social historians' deepening interest in culture, partly from the thematization of the body in modern philosophy (especially phenomenology), and partly from the emphasis on gender, sexuality, and women's history that large numbers of feminist scholars have brought to all disciplines.

Michel Foucault, of course, did much to deepen the significance and widen the appeal of historical considerations of the body, but he was only the most visible of a large number of investigators in many disciplines who have lately pointed to the centrality of the body, and particularly of sexuality, in the social discourses and practices of the nineteenth century. Building on such studies, the articles in this book both show how representations and routines of the body were transformed during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and explain how those transformations were linked to the emergence of modern social organizations. They provide multiple perspectives on the new discourse of the body that dominated the nineteenth century, a discourse that not only attributed a new set of social, political, and cultural meanings to bodies but also placed them at the very center of social, political, and cultural signification.

The nineteenth century's expansion and elaboration of the discourse of the body are difficult to reconcile with our twentieth-century stereotypes of Victorian culture. We often imagine that the previous century was a time when the body had no place in public discussion and sexuality was considered a dirty secret. The essays in this volume do not seek any simplistic overturning of such clichés. Rather, they describe in detail how the Victorians managed to win for themselves the reputation of the most sexually, and indeed physically, repressive society in history precisely by bringing the body ever more fully into discourse.

In "Orgasm, Generation, and the Politics of Reproductive Biology," the first essay, Thomas Laqueur articulates several of the volume's recurrent themes. He

argues that the late eighteenth century witnessed a revolutionary reinterpretation of sexual difference. Put briefly, the model of hierarchical difference, based on a set of homologies between male and female reproductive systems (which mirrored the sexes' places in the great chain of being), gave way to a model of complementary difference, which stressed the binary oppositions between the two physiologies. The hierarchical model that held sway from ancient times until the eighteenth century, Laqueur demonstrates, interpreted the female body as merely an inferior and inverted version of the male body, all of the woman's reproductive organs simply underdeveloped homologues of male organs. The theory of homologues allowed a strict hierarchical ordering of the sexes, for it claimed that women had no truly unique parts, only lesser ones. Such a view assumed, moreover, that female orgasm, just like male orgasm, was necessary for generation and that orgasm derived from pleasurable stimulation. Laqueur traces the breakdown of this hierarchical model—which stressed the generative importance of female sexual pleasure—and its replacement by a reproductive biology stressing the opposition of male and female bodies, the woman's automatic reproductive cycle, and her lack of sexual feeling.

Laqueur demonstrates that the new model of sexual incommensurability could not have been simply the result of advances in scientific knowledge. He goes on to show that the reinterpretation of women's reproductive biology solved ideological problems inherent in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social and political practices. As he interlaces the political and medical debates about gender, Laqueur emphasizes that the binary model of sexual difference served no one social ideology exclusively. Rather, it allowed the emergence of the full spectrum of nineteenth-century social thought, from reactionary reassertions of "natural" hierarchies to feminist advocacy of cooperative society. Thus, he concludes, the revision of female sexuality and reproductive biology was fundamental to modern social and political discourse.

Nevertheless, as Laqueur points out, that revision was itself full of contradictions, one of which emerges frequently as a topic in this collection. Women's reproductive biology, now conceived as a system opposite to men's, is increasingly seen as the key to women's nature. That is, the essence of Woman becomes ever more elaborately sexually embodied. At the same time, however, women are increasingly conceptualized as people without strong sexual feelings. The new opposition of male and female turns into an opposition of desire and nondesire. Whereas it was thought normal for women to be ruled in all of their mental states by activities of their reproductive organs, it was also thought abnormal for them to have pleasurable sexual sensations. Hence, the old clichés about the Victorian woman derive from only one half of the discourse. She was conceptually disembodied, but only to the extent that she was biologized; she was denied sexual feeling, but only to the extent that she was often imagined as wholly sexually determined.

In “Skeletons in the Closet: The First Illustrations of the Female Skeleton in Eighteenth-Century Anatomy,” Londa Schiebinger, like Laqueur, finds that before the eighteenth century there was little interest in portraying the female body as in any essential way different from that of the male. Normally, the male skeleton was thought to represent the general form of the body’s foundation. Indeed, no one had bothered to publish an illustration of a female skeleton, explicitly labeled as such, until 1733.

In the eighteenth century, however, as part of a much broader cultural mandate to illustrate the fundamental differences between the sexes, French and German anatomists produced what they took to be canonical versions of the female frame, of the “groundplan” of women’s bodies. As a result, by the early nineteenth century the bones of the body had taken on distinct auras of masculinity and femininity. Schiebinger demonstrates that despite the claims made for their “exactitude” by contemporaries, these anatomists’ representations were in fact “laden with cultural values”—not because they are inaccurate but rather because they, like all anatomical illustration, reflect an anatomist’s ideal of the structure being depicted, whether it be an eye, an internal organ, or a skeleton. The “ideal” woman’s skeleton was thus constructed with as wide a pelvis as could be found, narrow neck, small rib cage, and relatively tiny skull. Cultural ideals thus masqueraded as the facts of nature.

While Laqueur argues that a biology of difference is politically ambivalent, Schiebinger emphasizes this biology’s oppressive mode. The female skeleton was shown to be in some ways like that of the child, and women were therefore proven to be relatively “childlike.” In general, scientists welcomed nature as the basis for social inequality and, according to Schiebinger, constructed through their research a view of it detrimental to women. Because of the smallness of their skulls and the special adaptation of their pelvises for childbearing, women were, in the depths of their bones, regarded as unsuitable for intellectual labor (especially for science) and were thus unable to gain access to the dominant discourse of their subjugation.

Schiebinger argues here neither against science in general nor for the proposition that there are no differences between men and women. Rather, she, like the other contributors to this volume, maintains that the language of naturalistic description does not exist in a cultural vacuum but is itself deeply embedded in the culture from which it comes.

Catherine Gallagher’s essay, “The Body Versus the Social Body in the Works of Thomas Malthus and Henry Mayhew,” is concerned less specifically with the sexuality of the female body than are most of the essays in this volume; at the same time, it provides the most comprehensive framework in which to understand how women’s bodies came to represent *the* body, both individual and social, during the nineteenth century. In the first place, she argues, the body is both absolutely central *and* absolutely problematic in nineteenth-century social and

economic discourse. She shows that the vindication of the power of the body in Thomas Malthus's *Essay on Population*, one of the founding texts of political economy, renders it at once the source of value and the source of misery. In Gallagher's account, Malthus destroys the old homology between a healthy body and a healthy social order by showing that it is precisely in its most vigorous and strongest forms that the body is most problematic. Untranscendable and by its nature unreformable, the body is no longer available for its accustomed metaphorical roles.

Instead, it becomes the arena in which society's anxieties about decay, about corruption, and, most importantly, about the nature of economic life itself are expressed. The costermongers described by Mayhew are both healthy in their bodies and dangerous in their mobility; they are outside the social body as they seem to circulate parasitically through the economy, but they are also central to that economy's workings as they distribute its products.

Gallagher shows why the body was imagined to be both the source of value in the productive process and a sign of the sterility of exchange (as in the mechanical movement of Mayhew's costermongers or in Malthus's "fatted beast of circulation"). Hence, the Victorians came to take "mere biological being" as the object of obsessive representations full of loathing. Sexuality, in her account, is shown to be problematic not because of some supposed Victorian prudery but because the reproducing body in Malthusian social thought is a Janus-faced sign that stands for fecundity, health, pleasure, and productivity and simultaneously for misery, starvation, and sterile exchange. She thus sets the stage for understanding a whole range of problematic Victorian images of the body—the literal absorption of the factory child's body into a machine while she is in the process of producing something of value, the prostitute's association with usury and other forms of pure exchange—the vast cluster of images that swirl around bodies valuable, because weak and productive, and dangerous, because strong and capable only of exchange.

Mary Poovey's essay, "Scenes of an Indelicate Character": the Medical 'Treatment' of Victorian Women," also concerns the nineteenth-century preoccupation with reproduction and shows the connection between that preoccupation and the theme of our first two articles: the biological construction of femininity. Analyzing the midcentury English debate over the use of chloroform in childbirth, Poovey shows that doctors on both sides of the controversy (those for and those against the use of chloroform) sought to enhance or protect the prestige of their profession by equating the "nature of Woman" with her reproductive function. Poovey interweaves the various determinants of this construction. She shows, for example, that the singling out of the uterus not only as the most important female organ but also as the most important organ of the "Race" ("the uterus is to the Race what the heart is to the Individual," as one doctor put it) had as much to do with obstetricians' anxiety about their status inside the medical

profession as with the need to elevate the value of women's reproductive organs as a prelude to making reproduction the essence and telos of Woman. She reads in this debate the process by which the nature of Woman becomes Nature itself, but a Nature peculiarly demanding of interpretive medical authority and intervention. Chloroform represented, paradoxically, both an instance of that interventionist authority and a challenge to it, for Poovey's research reveals that attempts to anesthetize women during childbirth, to make them unconscious of their sensations, threatened to uncover a sensational unconscious. Women were reported to have become flirtatious, improper, even obscene in their words and gestures, and such behavior was unreconcilable with nineteenth-century ideas of maternity.

Once again we note the close but contradictory relationship between the obsessive biologization of femininity, centered on the reproductive function, and the denial that women normally experience sexual pleasure. The contradictions inherent in interpreting women as essentially sexual beings who lack sexual sensations are displayed in the chloroform debate. Poovey concludes that in their very attempts turn the female into a passive and mute object of interpretation and control, obstetricians created a disturbingly "indeterminate" body, as likely to reflect the interpreter's projected anxieties as his conscious beliefs. The insensible woman refused to make sense and thus defied the mastery that called her into being.

D. A. Miller's "*Cage aux folles: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White**" also takes up the themes of gender construction, sensation, and interpretation. Like Poovey, Miller is interested in the relationship between femininity read as and through a somatic state (the Woman as neuropathic body) and the anxieties of the male who reads her in this way. For Miller, however, the creation of gender in bodies is a circuitous process that establishes masculine/feminine, subject/object dichotomies only by deeply, in the very somatic responses of the reader, unsettling them. Thus his analysis of Wilkie Collins's sensation novel, *The Woman in White*, occasions a compelling and startling account of how anxiety about the unboundedness, the elusiveness, of Woman becomes not (as in Poovey's article) a defiance of mastery but a strategy for enforcing self-regulating gender distinctions in both women and men. This article complicates the implicit assumption of the other essays—that the construction of femininity is an imposition of male power on women—by detailing the elaborate procedures of power that create the properly masculine subject.

Miller shows that the nervousness that is both the result and cause of reading the sensation novel stems in particular from a fear of "catching" femininity, from being "touched" or invaded by the neuropathic body of the Woman. To become nervous in or through the sensation novel is to become feminine inside; hence, the state of nervousness coincides, if one is a man, with the nineteenth century's classic definition of the homosexual: a woman's soul trapped in a man's body. It follows that the homosexual is already a confined (trapped) subjectivity: the

homosexual is by definition his own jailor and is, therefore, already enacting, through his very essence, society's homophobic urge to incarcerate him.

The sensational effects of *The Woman in White* also serve simultaneously to unsettle and reinforce binary gender distinctions, for these effects include hysterical defenses against the significance of feelings. That is, the "sensational" quality of the feelings is their hystericization, which is also the very means of containing them, by rendering them insignificant. Similarly, freeing the Woman in White from an asylum and empowering her to make men nervous is the novel's necessary prelude to and justification for the final reincarceration of her double in the "normalized" sanctuary of the home. This incarceration, Miller explains, operates on men and women alike: "the sequestration of the woman takes for its object not just women, who need to be put away in safe places or asylums, but men as well, who must monitor and master what is fantasized as the 'woman inside' them."

With Laura Engelstein's "Morality and the Wooden Spoon: Russian Doctors View Syphilis, Social Class, and Sexual Behavior, 1890–1905," we return to the relationship between scientific evidence and cultural assumptions about sexuality. Like Mary Poovey, Engelstein is analyzing a debate among doctors, but her protagonists are late-nineteenth-century Russians using the distinction between venereal and congenital syphilis in their battle with the state for some degree of professional autonomy. Engelstein does not claim that there is no difference between the two forms of the disease, or that their clinical signs were, or are, clear to any honest observer. She does argue, though, that political and cultural considerations, rather than some set of clinical indicators, determined which form of the disease was most frequently diagnosed by the Russian physicians. Moreover, she shows that their propensity to favor the nonvenereal diagnosis and their reluctance to extend their professional authority to empower the state (as Western physicians did) by defining sexuality as a medical question reflect, as she puts it, "basic issues separating state and society in the fifteen years preceding the revolution of 1905."

Peasants, Russian doctors believed, were not sexual, and peasant women were the least sexual of all. They worked, bore children, and embodied the virtues of tradition. Prostitution, which was seen as the vector of venereal disease, simply did not—and could not, in the doctors' view—exist in rural Russia except perhaps as a small pocket of social infection in some towns or villages opened to railroads or industry. Syphilis in the countryside thus had to be regarded as the result of unhygienic eating practices, poor sanitation and ventilation around dwellings, and other environmental factors; that is, it had to be nonvenereal.

The moral power of the peasant community seemed to extend to the city, where doctors refused to identify cankers on the mouths of urban artisans, still regarded as members of their villages, as being of sexual origin. Although the doctors ultimately had to admit that peasant women who migrated to the city

were capable of contracting and transmitting venereal disease, Engelstein demonstrates that peasants, even when removed from their original context, were generally regarded as not sexual. The fact that in one study army officers had three times the rate of venereal syphilis as did enlisted men was read as a sign of the common man's preference for marriage and family life—even in the army, the peasant male preferred innocent diversions.

Thus, the relationship between class and moral contagion in Russia was just the reverse of what it was in western Europe. There the lower classes were seen as sewers of contagion, especially venereal, because they had broken the bonds of traditional society. In Russia, venereal disease within the peasantry was regarded as infrequent precisely because the degree of individuation necessary for sexual life was deemed impossible in the village community. Moreover, far from making the common western European assumption that morality and bad sanitation were linked, Russian doctors used the unsanitary conditions of peasant life (signified by the supposed relative frequency of nonvenereal syphilis) to confirm the peasant's peculiar asexuality (as signified by the concomitant relative infrequency of the venereal form).

Engelstein likewise shows that the relationship between the professional authority of doctors and the power of the interventionist state was the reverse of what it was in western Europe. Rather than seizing on syphilis as an occasion to intervene on behalf of the state, doctors used it as an occasion to preach "enlightenment," thus morally neutralizing syphilis and discrediting repressive state measures. They believed that only knowledge, and not government power, would make the peasant give up carriers of disease such as the common wooden spoon. Doctors as professionals thus sought autonomy from the state, although the question of how to accomplish their ends without destroying the traditional framework of rural life was never resolved.

Engelstein thus shows in greater detail than exists anywhere else in the literature how diagnostic categories and understanding of disease are embedded in other discourses. But more to the point of this volume, she shows that a discourse about the sexual body is part of much broader currents in the political and cultural life of a society.

Alain Corbin, in "Commercial Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century France: A System of Images and Regulations," is engaged in the same enterprise but in a very different context. Throughout the nineteenth century, France stood at the very opposite end of the spectrum from Russia in the matter of state control of prostitution. France was the home of state regulation. This difference between Russia and France cannot, as Engelstein's piece makes clear, be explained simply in the terms customarily invoked to explain the differences between England and France on these matters; unlike the English, the Russians had a highly interventionist state and virtually no ideology of *laissez-faire*. But neither is the difference explicable in terms of the "monotonously repeated arguments or

denotative discourses” generally hauled out to justify it. Rather, Corbin argues, the prostitute became an archetype of the sexualized female body, and a “series of images and perceptual schemas” surrounding her came to inspire deep-seated fears and the need for regulation—indeed, the very forms that regulation took.

The prostitute is a body that smells bad; it has rotten blood. Intimately related to this image is her body as the sewer in which the social body excretes its excess—the “seminal drain,” as one nineteenth-century physician put it. She is in this way symbolically linked to death and to corpses, to disease—especially syphilis—and to that other set of potentially dangerous resigned female bodies at the disposal of the bourgeoisie, the bodies of servants.

This particular cultural understanding of the prostitute suggests that she is a necessary danger to society. The connection between sex and sanitation is, however, as it was in Engelstein’s essay, a complex one, for the prostitute is not by her nature unsanitary. Rather, she is “filthy” because she is part of the very apparatus of sanitation. Hence, she must be tolerated for the role she fills, and at the same time she must be carefully controlled, subjected to isolation, surveillance, concealment, and incorporation into a network of medical observation and treatment.

These images and strategies of control were, Corbin shows, historically specific. A new link between prostitution and desire, a new eroticization of prostitution in which the bourgeois male could imagine himself, in having sex with a prostitute, as seducing his neighbor’s wife, involved changing the fantasized class of the prostitute, shifting to bordello-based prostitution with a new set of governing regulations. In short, Corbin describes the making and unmaking during the nineteenth century of particular “female bodies” and of the connection of these bodies to social discourse.

Christine Buci-Glucksmann’s “Catastrophic Utopia: The Feminine as Allegory of the Modern” focuses also on nineteenth-century Parisian prostitution but refracts it through a series of lenses different from Corbin’s. She analyzes Walter Benjamin’s writings on Baudelaire’s reflections about prostitution in order to illustrate how the prostituted body was turned into an allegory of modernity itself. Indeed, the prostitute stands for the very obverse of corporeal immanence—she represents (like the poet himself) the loss of the actual and immediate, the derealization of the body and its petrification into nonvital signification. As allegory of the modern, the prostitute is linked to abstraction; she becomes a pure commodity. As Benjamin indicates, when one buys a prostitute’s time, one buys the pervasiveness of the marketplace itself. But precisely through this abstraction, this allegorizing, which is the essence of prostitution, the prostitute’s body is infused with a new reality. Its very petrification and fragmentation become for the modernist new modes of plenitude. With Buci-Glucksmann’s essay, then, our collection concludes by reflecting on modernism’s links to many of the phenomena the other articles analyze: modes of imaging the connections between

bodies and marketplaces; the simultaneous impulse to equate women with their bodies and render them insensible; the self-defeating attempts of male interpreters to differentiate themselves from Woman, the object of their interpretations.

As this brief excursion into the modernist sensibility suggests, twentieth-century thinkers have not really taken up a position outside the nineteenth century's discourses of the body and sexuality. Women have been reassigned orgasms; syphilis is no longer a pressing social problem. But other diseases have come to occupy the same discursive place. Women's pleasure inside an increasingly commercialized psycho-sexual economy remains a controversial topic, even in feminist circles. Inside and outside feminism, moreover, the impulse to fix the true essence of Woman in a set of characteristics that differentiates her from Man continues. Populations are more than ever seen as entities to control. Many of the details of the discourse outlined here may seem bizarre, outrageous, or even comically absurd, but we cannot deny the continuity between its governing assumptions and our own.