

Eric Wagenhals
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Book Review 1

A Critical Review of
The Technology of Orgasm¹

1. Rachel P. Maines, *The Technology of Orgasm, "Hysteria," the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 1-123.

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines the word orgasm as an “...explosive... height of sexual arousal...” pertaining to both sexes, and no doubt most readers of this review would agree with such a definition. However – has it always been that way? In her book “The Technology of Orgasm, “Hysteria,” the Vibrator, and Women’s Sexual Satisfaction,” Rachel P. Maines brings into discussion the history of the technology behind the female orgasm and through this discussion brings light to the notion of an ongoing issue in society of an androcentric model of sexuality.

The first chapter opens with a definition of the androcentric model - the idea that penile-vaginal intercourse is “the only real thing” and should be capable of sexually satisfying (producing an orgasm for) both the man and woman involved. Ms. Maines continues the argument by discussing the development of female sexuality over the years into pathology – the creation of the disease “Hysteria.” Naturally, doctors enter the discussion with a concern of pandemic proportions: with three quarters of the female population affected by “Hysteria,” doctors had to come up with a treatment. So they did: massage of the clitoris and the recommendation of marriage. Since so many people were affected by the chronic disorder (that doctors were not thrilled about treating), a necessity for technology suddenly surfaced, and along with it a huge economic driving force (According to the book, physicians’ income aggregately equaled about half the nation’s operating budget at the time). From this ultimately came the invention of the modern sexual vibrator. Throughout the entire work, Maines continues to come back to the androcentric model of sexuality, leading the reader to believe that this is her thesis. She doesn’t fully develop this idea until the last chapter when she states that it is surprising “...that we have been willing to sacrifice so much to it [the androcentric model].”

Rachel Maines brings a lot to her work on orgasm history, but let’s start with some background in her personal slants and biases: It is a very safe thing to say that Rachel Maines is a very angry feminist – because she says so about herself in the preface. This personal slant and bias most likely contributed to the quality and objectivity of her research, because it may have provided her with a polar-opposite (from the norm) understanding of the information that history has provided her. For example, her

tendency to view historical data in a possibly violent feminist manner (directly opposite that of history's often male-dominated stance) has given her the opportunity to see outside the box, what we've all been missing before: the notion that our sexuality is governed not by a gender-neutral framework but rather by an androcentric model. This is important because without such a viewpoint, the significance of the history of female orgasm would be an irrelevant point much less the discussion of the technological development surrounding it.

Building on the notion that her personal slants and biases helped develop the work, Maines' background also adds credibility to the work. Throughout her life, Maines has undertaken precarious adventures simply because she likes them, and in her own words "Nobody's doing it!"(Preface, Page 1) Such a pioneering attitude helped fuel her research to *scour* libraries for all possible information related to the subject. Having so many outside sources helps minimize if not completely eradicate emotional feminist comments throughout the piece. This is important because having such comments in the work could have destroyed it by making it more a feminist complaint about society than a factual account of history. Through a plethora of outside sources, her credibility as a writer is significantly increased and makes obvious the notion that she has researched the topic for decades.

The most important evidence Ms. Maines uses to support her thesis is the array of illustrations and pictures. This is true based on two ideas: the notion that the visuals offer better understanding in an otherwise confusing jumble of jargon and non-contemporary English language, and the notion that the visuals provide a place for the reader's mind to wander and develop its own ideas on the topic.

When describing such disconcerting and possibly painful sexual toys such as the subfumigation devices, it is difficult for many people to understand what the author is talking about. In fact, the word subfumigation isn't even in many contemporary dictionaries of our time!² To resolve issues such as these, the author provides the reader with visual aids to increase understanding of the material. Since visual aids are so

powerful in communicating any given topic, it follows that such devices are the most important evidence the author offers.

Besides helping people understand the often complex vocabulary, visual aids serve the auxiliary purpose of allowing the reader to come to their own conclusions regarding the topics. For those topics that the reader is more likely to understand such as the Sears and Roebuck catalog page selling a home vibrator, the author still provides superb visual aids so that reading can stop and the visual can be studied for a few moments. When the reader stops like this to look at the visual, the information is more apt to sink in, allowing the reader to question certain aspects of the visual. In the example of the Sears catalog page, one may question the juxtaposition between the obviousness of the sexual uses of the product and the obvious intent to hide and repress that sexual element. This is extremely notable and most likely beneficial in the author's development of the androcentric model of sexuality, because the reader begins to ask the same questions as the author of the historical data: Does female sexuality matter? [Of course it does, but why does history continually support the opposite?]

Despite the very helpful use of visual aids, the author does not make very good use of other more standard evidence in the text. This argument is solidified by the author's own statement begging readers to bear with her "... for what will of necessity be a confusing journey through the definition of hysteria." (Page 22) Being the topic that it is, the author should have tried a little harder to put her evidence into some sort of structure to provide better communication through meaning or connectedness between ideas. The evidence is currently laid out (especially in chapter 2) as if it is simply thrown at the reader, with no particular order or meaning to the evidence. This is significant because it has the potential to severely hinder communication with users of the text, leaving the reader with only two options: trudge through the book painfully and confusingly, or simply put it down and stop reading out of frustration.

In spite of the poor usage of evidence (especially but of course not limited to chapter two), the author *does* make a very convincing argument! Many readers may find this notion to be true due to the extremely well written first and last chapters that serve as bookends (so to speak) to help the reader better understand (and be convinced by) the material in the middle of the book. In the last chapter for example, many readers, especially non-feminists, may find the argument convincing because the author does not force her own beliefs on the reader. Instead of presenting the book material as a persuasive document, the book material is presented as a more informative historical document written in a non-standard way (the juxtaposition between feminist vs. standard take on history). The author even refutes her own opinion in the last chapter with the statement “...whether we should continue to do so is a question for individuals, not historians to decide.” This is *very significant* because readers who would otherwise be taken aback by a hardcore feminist view on history may be subdued by this kind of statement of neutrality. [So non-feminists may be better convinced because the argument is not *attacking* them and forcing them to believe it.]

Compared to other reading materials in the topic of technological history, *The Technology of Orgasm* seems to provide a much more neutral approach to its persuasive arguments. Rather than exclaiming a problem and suggesting a solution, such as Wendell Berry’s approach in *In The Presence of Fear*, Rachel Maines provides evidence and allows the reader to deduce by themselves the persuasive argument – and then provides absolutely no explicit written evidence of her own opinion. This is different than other studies of technological history and it is noteworthy because the objectivity makes the work potentially more persuasive (and informative) for hostile audiences (readers who do not already agree with the author).

Although the book covers a very liberal topic in our society, it is appropriate for all audiences with an educated background due to its careful word choice and subtle informative/persuasive methods. Liberals and conservatives alike may find the book to be enlightening in the study of technology. The book seems to have an underlying message in agreement with Kranzberg’s Second Law³: Invention is the mother of

necessity. [Without making female sexuality a disorder, would vibrators have ever *needed* to be developed?] Therefore, I enjoyed reading Maines' book and recommend it for anyone studying technology.

Notes / Works Cited:

1. Rachel P. Maines, *The Technology of Orgasm, "Hysteria," the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 1-123.
2. The word "subfumigation" does not appear in spelling checkers such as those provided in Microsoft's Office suite, does not appear in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary located at <http://www.m-w.com>, and does not appear in Dictionary.com's dictionary located at <http://www.dictionary.com>.
3. Melvin Kranzberg, "Technology and History: 'Kranzberg's Laws.'" *Technology and Culture* 27 (1986): 544-560.