

Female Onanism: Condemned Pleasures, Medical Probes, and Late-Victorian Pornography

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Abstract

The more Victorian physicians deepened their research into female sexuality, the more a culture of lust infected the hypocritical façade of a nation strictly attached to social norms of order, formality, and bigotry. Lascivious sexual desire and carnal appetite – here embodied in female masturbation – were taboos that had to be forcibly silenced. Yet, late-Victorian pornography mocked medical discourses on female onanism, as well as Victorian fears related to female sexuality, and revealed ‘unspeakable’ secret domestic settings marred by ‘dangerous’ practices, scandalous carnality and deviant desires. Furthermore, contemptuous of literary censorship and strict Victorian morality, the plenteous erotic literature, represented here by William Lazenby’s pornographic magazine *The Pearl*, not only dared to taunt physicians’ concerns about female ‘self-pollution’ circulating at that time, but also found a great inspiration in the huge domestic success of some innovative medical tools – specifically patented to assuage women’s nerves – being produced in those years: electric vibrators. Those ‘engines’ rapidly invaded pornographic literature of the late nineteenth century and became central to a great number of erotic stories, titillating fables and poems, as clearly demonstrated by the contents of *The Pearl*.

Keywords: sexuality, masturbation, women, pornography, medicine, contagion, vibrator

The research that underpins this article’s focus on medical discussions of women’s onanism emerged from my investigations both into the Victorians’ treatment of female hysteria and into late-Victorian pornographic literature, here represented by William Lazenby’s *The Pearl* (1879–1880). This essay aims to consider not only the way in which female masturbatory practices – in the spotlight during the Victorian age – were depicted and discussed by some (often anonymous) authors writing and

publishing erotic material, but also how the invention of electric vibrators in the late nineteenth century redefined Victorian female solitary sex practices, as demonstrated by several short stories and poems in *The Pearl*. After considering the scope of some medical theories of the nineteenth century that criticised female onanism, labelling it an unforgivable affront to men and a horrific manifestation of disrespect for Victorian morality, I will focus on Lazenby's *The Pearl* in order to demonstrate how pornographic literature was inspired by the invention of those new medical electric tools: vibrators. *The Pearl* provides the reader with a great number of examples of women who, free from male control, find sexual solace and carnal gratification with the help of their domestic engine.

As underlined by Freud, taboos are 'ancient prohibitions [...]'. These prohibitions concerned actions for which there existed a strong desire' (52). The uncanny and uncontrollable force of every single taboo lies in its halo of attractiveness: taboos and curiosity are thus strongly linked together. It is not by chance that the more Victorian physicians deepened their research into (mainly female) sexuality and discussed masturbation as both a taboo and a serious illness, the more Victorians' curiosity about these topics was aroused. Counting on large numbers of readers, the thriving Victorian pornographic industry found progressively more amusement in the very act of mocking Victorian taboos around sexuality and onanism, whose consequences on health, according to innumerable Victorian physicians, could be very serious.

Medical men had been warning people about the moral, physical, and mental dangers of the private search for pleasure since the very beginning of the eighteenth century when a shocking pamphlet distributed in London, *Onania; or, The Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution* (published around 1712–1716), raised the alarm among readers about the menace of onanism, also known under the name of self-pollution, solitary vice or self-abuse. As Thomas W. Laqueur reports, carnivalesque hucksters busy selling *Onania* attracted curious customers with a breath-taking announcement: 'Strange effects of that Practice in Women hardly ever till now taken notice of' (28). *Onania*, later attributed to the British surgeon John Marten (1670–1737), spread the panic and initiated a great interest in the issue; not by chance, it had been Marten himself who had coined the term 'masturbation', which had soon

been included among the venereal infections that Marten had meticulously listed in his medical treatise published in 1708 (Laqueur 29). Women and their sexuality were in the spotlight, and multiple pseudo-medical treatises on the topic would be rapidly published.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, like science fiction, detective and fantasy literature, erotic material straddled the line between art and life. Unconventional writers, pornographic texts, and curious Victorian readers formed a titillating triangle, and, as in a carnivalesque subversion of social rules, pornographic photographs and narrations fostered innumerable prohibited interests and desires that, according to many Victorian physicians, should have been stifled rather than encouraged. Unsurprisingly, women were generally perceived as the tangible embodiment of obscenity and scandal par excellence: in fact, several Victorians began to debate the impact of obscene sexual material, often accusing women of moral transgressions.

The following few lines by Henry Maudsley (1835–1918), a well-known Victorian psychiatrist of the period, enumerate some of the signs that in his view were sufficient to confirm the existence of insanity.

Whence come the savage snarl, the destructive disposition, the obscene language, the wild howl, the offensive habits, displayed by some of the insane? [...]. I should take up a long time if I were to enumerate the various brute-like characteristics that are at times witnessed among the insane [...]; and, in the degeneration of insanity [...] there are exhibited marks denoting the elementary instincts of its composition. (Maudsley 51)

What seems intriguing here is Maudsley's lexical selection and recombination: 'obscene language' and 'offensive habits' might refer exactly to the 'sinful' pleasures and vices I intend to analyse here. It seems evident that both expressions employed by Maudsley could be related to carnal appetite and moral dirtiness. Furthermore, it is no surprise that sexual appetite and onanism were commonly associated with mental instability, and the more sexuality was regarded as an illness encompassed

within the sphere of insanity, the more people perceived it as possibly contagious: what the Swiss psychiatrist Auguste Forel would call ‘insanity by contagion’ (350). In fact, since in the Victorian age insanity was thought of as a pathology that could be transmitted from one subject to another, particularly from mothers to children, the very fact of labelling onanism a form of insanity made innumerable Victorians think of masturbation as, much like syphilis, a contagious disorder. In other words, the dangerous vice of onanism was considered transmissible from sinner to sinner-to-be by means of imitation. In addition, both in women and men, masturbation was often depicted by several Victorian physicians as one of the principal causes of degeneration, consumption, and deterioration of both body and mind: the self-stimulation of pleasure, like orgasms in general, was not conceived of as a positive investment of energy. Medically speaking, both were considered a waste of one’s faculties.

Comparing the seventeenth to the nineteenth century in his *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Michel Foucault explains the very clear divergence between the two centuries in terms of their acceptance of free sexuality. In fact, the seventeenth century and the Victorian age seem to sit at opposite points of the same scale. According to the French philosopher, while in the seventeenth century people expressed their sexuality freely, Victorians attempted to limit any possible public contact with and debate on sexuality (Foucault 3). People accused of suffering from perverted and insatiable sexualities were marginalised and confined within asylums that became the perfect places to study such inexplicable abominations. According to strict Victorian moral codes, any reference to sexuality that was not closely related to the ultimate purpose of procreation had to be repressed. It is not by chance that, when considering Victorians and their moral values, one immediately and rightly thinks of the Victorian attachment to familial order and to the preservation of canonical principles, founded on patriarchy and on the obvious – for the period in question – female submission to male power. The family was the institution par excellence, and the rigid behaviour it implied had to be preserved rigorously. However, although procreation – the main female duty at that time – was at the core of Victorian ideology for a peaceful and joyful familial life (founded on the holy sacrament of marriage,

the cornerstone of Victorian society), sexuality remained under the gloomy shadow of an inflexible morality, which stood in opposition to discussions about sex and carnal bliss.

However, in spite of, or due to, such social reluctance to speak about sexual issues, sexuality began to be probed and amply discussed in and beyond hospitals, medical laboratories, and asylums. It was medicine, as well as pornographic literature, which challenged the façade of discretion and ventured into the prohibited, damned, and entangled jungle of Victorian sexuality. Both medical treatises and prohibited erotic literature widely investigated the field of sexuality and dared to explore those unmentionable and unforgivable pleasures that Victorians ostensibly did not want – or pretended not to want – to discuss and see. Transforming sexuality into an object of study revolutionised an entire social apparatus founded on the very strong conviction that sexuality was debatable only in terms of procreation, the inescapable holy mission for any Victorian woman who could enjoy the privilege of being considered respectable. Victorian women, an army of unforgivable sinners and monsters of carnality, were expected to sacrifice their own sexuality and carnal instincts entirely and solely for the sake of procreation. Yet, even though procreation has physiological connections with sexuality, pleasure – according to Victorian ideology – was not meant to be part of the process. Justification for an enormous number of non-consensual intercourse, the medieval idea that women biologically had to reach orgasmic pleasure in order to get pregnant (Lees 40) was far away from the conception the Victorians had about female sexual pleasure. Victorian women had to be deprived of carnal desire because of its alleged power to make people deviate from commonly accepted behaviour. The Victorians believed that carnality and sexual appetite did not accord with the obedient, innocent, and kind angel in the house.

Challenging an insistent hypocrisy, data and news coming from British asylums revealed the secret domestic vices of Victorians and made them public. Several thinkers and physicians formulated their own hypotheses and began inspecting female bodies in order to try to understand the possible origin of that alleged animalistic sexual desire which, as several Victorian physicians thought, affected a high percentage of women and men, who were considered lured into temptation by perverted women.

As Lyn Pykett points out in her discussion of Victorian womanhood,

the system of the proper feminine may be represented by the following set of polarities (the list is by no means exhaustive): the domestic ideal, or angel in the house; the madonna; the keeper of the domestic temple; asexuality; passionlessness; innocence; self-abnegation; commitment to duty; self-sacrifice; the lack of a legal identity; dependence; slave; victim. (16)

In light of all of the above, in order to maintain a sort of control over the fragile gender, the unquestioned and authoritative knowledge of Victorian physicians and alienists strove to keep women in their position of submission to men's desires. Women's masturbatory practices became the very symbol of women's liberation from male authority: women could satisfy their sexual appetite with no need of male penetration and, at the time in question, that represented an unbearable reality. In fact, as underlined by Bram Dijkstra, the widespread idea among Victorian men was that any 'woman needed to be guided by the male' (65).

While on one level Victorian women were depicted as silent and obedient household nuns, on another level, they were widely perceived as instigators of carnality and obscene desire (Shorter 12). Despite the fact that Galenic medicine had encouraged the touch of genitals as an efficient means of healing women's nerves, in the Victorian age this so-called 'self-abuse' (Gregory 35) rapidly became one the main reasons for punishment and seclusion in psychiatric hospitals, as pointed out by Samuel Gregory (1813–72), founder of the New England Female Medical College. In 1857, Gregory suggested that 'masturbation does more than any other cause, perhaps than all other causes combined, to people our lunatic asylums' (11). In Victorian asylums, psychiatric investigations into the human psyche supported the idea that women, since they were categorised by many Victorian physicians as inferior creatures and as more likely than men to suffer from insanity, had to be severely confined, and their sexual instincts had to be carefully controlled in order to limit possible contagions.

Elizabeth Blackwell (1821–1910), the first Anglo-American female physician who in 1849

graduated in Medicine in the United States of America, not only recognised the danger represented by female onanism (Laqueur 49), but also harshly condemned all those men who, while enjoying nights (and days) with prostitutes, criticised women who, in the privacy of their dwellings, found their own pleasure in masturbatory activities. In order to stop such sexist accusations, Blackwell bravely dared to state that sexual instincts were exactly the same in men and women (Laqueur 66). She pointed the finger at the defenders of the *Contagious Diseases Acts* (enacted in 1864, 1866, and 1869) who tried to keep the spread of syphilis and gonorrhoea under control and might effectively here be interpreted as the tangible manifestations of a phallogocentric society struggling against contagion. Blackwell criticised the widespread belief that men really needed those services provided by prostitutes, whereas women could totally deprive themselves of sex (Laqueur 66). Trying to establish a balance between men and women, Blackwell stressed that masturbation was extremely dangerous for both genders, having the very same powerful effect on both men and women. Furthermore, according to Blackwell, onanism could not only foster sexual instincts, but also jeopardise self-control, defined by Laqueur as the basis for a society that could be proud of its degree of civilisation (66).

Although Blackwell had stressed very fiercely that onanism had the same negative effects in women as in men, Victorian physicians remained far more concerned by female masturbation than by the male practices of self-pollution. Already in the late eighteenth century, in *Onanism* (1781), Samuel Auguste David Tissot (1728–97) had warned European medical men that Britain was terrifyingly full of horribly scandalous and disgraceful cases of vicious people. The Swiss physician had remarked that, in his opinion, women were more likely than men to become victims of masturbatory disorders (Tissot 41). Already respected and well-known before the publication of *Onanism*, Tissot had been one among the most credited, highly esteemed and famous physicians of the eighteenth century (Laqueur 40). It had been Tissot who turned ‘masturbation’ into a discussable issue and into a real Western mania: a sin, a crime, a moral disorder, and a dangerous corporeal pathology. As suggested by Laqueur, ‘this vice’s solitariness and secrecy went beyond the merely

antisocial or morally reprehensible; the act was outside the pale of not just this or that but any possible moral order' (222). Along with Tissot, Nicholas Francis Cooke (1829–85), in his troubling – for the standards of the time – *Satan in Society* (1871), also dealt with female onanism as one of the greatest sins in Victorian society, and he warmly invited still 'innocent' young women to avoid all those of their gender who looked for private self-stimulated carnal pleasure (Cooke 69). Furthermore, women who practised the self-abuse were thought unable to control their feelings and nerves and, as a consequence, from Cooke's point of view, could not only grow increasingly termagant, but, more problematically, they might also become a real danger to society (Cooke 112).

Metaphorically speaking, that female genitalia became the passage through which Victorian men could reach a secret world was not only very interesting from a scientific point of view, but also infinitely problematic. It is not by chance that, in the figurative art and literature of the second half of the nineteenth century, women were often associated with dangerous mythological creatures, such as Medusas or violent mermaids. References to the danger represented by the improper woman can be found everywhere in Victorian culture, and it is no coincidence that the myth of fallen womanhood turned into a real Victorian anxiety: as suggested by Nina Auerbach in *Woman and the Demon*, 'the fallen woman becomes the abased figurehead of a fallen society' (157). The extreme sexualisation of the female body made numbers of Victorians think of women as nymphomaniac monsters, always eagerly looking for sexual gratification and carnal bliss. In *First Lines of the Practice of Physic* (1784), William Cullen (1710–90), a British pioneer in eighteenth-century discourses on nervousness and hysteria, had stressed that hysteric disease was more common in women affected by so-called nymphomania, which directly influenced the onset of a disease recognised as *Hysteria Libidinosa* (98). Along with Cullen, the British physician Thomas Laycock (1812–76) underlined that 'it may be remarked that the whole nervous system is excited by the sexual stimulus, [...] it is obvious in women, especially in cases of nymphomania [...]' (74–5). Thus, it is no surprise that, in some cases, Victorian women were so scared of their own genitalia that looking after the hygiene of their own 'untouchable areas' became considered a sinful activity by women themselves (Oneill 296). The result was that,

obeying the instructions of physicians to the letter, large numbers of Victorian women abandoned their practices of personal hygiene: rampant diseases and unstoppable contagions were right around the corner.

Furthermore, the enormous growth in the number of ‘public’ women in the Victorian age called into question the idea of the natural purity of the feminine: ‘variously public and impure women serve as unsettling reminders of an aggressive female sexuality that the dominant culture sought to disavow and suppress’ (Anderson 13). Prostitutes became iconic examples of the female gender, and any other woman, both unmarried and married, could run the risk of becoming a fallen woman. If prostitutes had lost their virginity outside of marriage, any ‘vicious’ unmarried woman – according to many Victorian physicians – could not only lacerate the material and physical evidence of her sexual pureness, but also endanger irremediably her future ability to carry and bear children serenely (Mason 32). On the other hand, Victorian wives were asked in 1848 by the French author Auguste Debay (1802–90) to delight their husbands by faking orgasms if necessary (Maines 117). The thought of masturbation was not available to them: female solitary sex in marriage was conceived of as a betrayal due to the fact that the orgasms of a Victorian wife were thought of as the exclusive property of her husband.

However, even if onanism was, as largely demonstrated, a criticised practice in the Victorian period, surprisingly enough, it was not condemned by every physician of that era. Victorian physicians were seemingly divided into two different groups: those who harshly condemned female masturbation and those who tried to look for its possible benefits. In fact, while several physicians abundantly criticised female onanism, others – mindful of the numerous notions about female sexuality and about the benefits of vaginal massages rooted in Galenic medicine – found in vaginal titillation the mighty elixir to assuage women’s nerves. According to some Victorian physicians, hysteria was an illness that could be treated and cured with the help of orgasmic stimulation performed by physicians themselves. Yet, as Therese Oneill stresses, ‘those doctors just had no idea *how* women orgasmed’ (262, original emphasis). Despite Victorian physicians’ alleged ignorance in the field of

female sexuality, we cannot be certain whether some doctors – with the help and support of any kind of sexual tool – devoted part of their daily activity to help Victorian women find solace. According to the cultural historian Fern Riddell, Victorian physicians never spent time masturbating Victorian women using manual or technical devices (par. 11).

In effect, the religious precepts and inflexible morality of the Victorian period suggested that orgasms could be achieved only for procreative purposes. Given that Victorians believed orgasms to be so sacred that they should not be squandered, why, one might ask, was it the case that ‘by the middle of the nineteenth century, devices of all sorts had joined the potions and pills of the anti-masturbation marketplace’ (Laqueur 46). In opposition to Riddell’s idea that Victorian physicians never touched female genitalia to induce pleasure, Laqueur maintains that ‘as late as the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was a boom in devices designed to relieve medical men and their assistants from the tedium of massaging the genitals of hysterical and sexually unsatisfied women’ (95). In addition, as underlined by Maines, ‘when the vibrator emerged as an electromechanical medical instrument at the end of the nineteenth century, it evolved from previous massage technologies in response to demand from physicians for more rapid and efficient physical therapies, particularly for hysteria’ (3). Rapidity was an essential issue for physicians whose profitability mainly depended on the number of women they managed to treat daily. Sex was literally electrified by technology, so much so that electric tools soon turned into essential instruments for several physicians who induced orgasms in women: ‘the difference between ten minutes and an hour to complete treatment would have been significant’ (Maines 67).

Between 1869 and 1872, George Taylor, an American physician, patented a steam-powered instrument called the ‘Manipulator’, which vibrated, massaged, and supposedly alleviated female pains and disorders by stimulating the pelvic area. Some years after, in the late 1880s, the British physician Joseph Mortimer Granville (1833–1900) designed the first electromechanical vibrator which revolutionised the way in which Victorian physicians approached hysteria, mostly within asylums. Nevertheless, in 1883, in *Nerve-Vibration and Excitation as Agents in The Treatment of*

Functional Disorder and Organic Disease, Doctor Granville manifested some doubts about the benefits of vibration in the treatment of hysteria and disorders of sexual orgasm (126). In fact, the vibrator patented by Granville had initially served another primary mission: it had been devised with the specific aim to cure pain in male muscles (Maines 15). Yet, the fame of the alleged curative effects of electric vibrators on women's nerves grew progressively: at the beginning of the twentieth century, the innumerable benefits of vibration and vibrators (whatever their domestic and private use had been or would be) were widely marketed in several periodicals, magazines, and journals, as demonstrated by a huge number of advertisements that appeared, for instance, in *Modern Women*, *Woman's Home Companion* or *Modern Priscilla* (Maines 19).

Therefore, despite a great deal of medical literature that instilled concerns about the dangers of masturbation into fathers, mothers, children, priests, nuns, unmarried women, and men, Victorian popular culture took possession of such medical inventions and advances in the field of sexuality. Perfectly aware of the danger of their position, a great number of authors mocked the concerns of several physicians regarding sexuality and onanism, and ran the risk of fostering the publication of stories, fables, and poems describing transgressive intercourses, orgies, bondage, and masturbatory fantasies. If prostitution represented a connection between the Victorian underworld and the most respectable layers of society, as underlined by Kellow Chesney (363), pornography also surely played a significant role in ruining families and minds. As stressed by Frank Mort in *Dangerous Sexualities*, prostitution and pornography 'were the disruptive reverse images of nineteenth-century public culture' (xii). Pornographic material – only apparently rejected, refused, criticised and disdained by several Victorians – percolated within Victorian domesticity and penetrated the daily life of many not-so-prudish Victorians. Pornography, a very well-known and widespread class of literature from the eighteenth century, represented the 'purest form of the power of literature to arouse the imagination' (Laqueur 339). As Steven Marcus remarks, pornography exists because it violates in fantasy what has actually been silenced and tabooed (245):

for every warning against masturbation issued by the official voice of culture, another work of pornography was published; for every cautionary statement against the harmful effects of sexual excess uttered by medical men, pornography represented copulation *in excelsis*, endless orgies, infinite daisy chains of inexhaustibility; for every assertion about the delicacy and frigidity of respectable women made by the official culture, pornography represented legions of maenads, universes of palpitating females [...]. (283)

As a constant source of titillation for many Victorians, pornographic literature could count on unquestionable success among curious readers of both the middle- and upper-classes. Yet, as far as the gender of these readers is concerned, it is difficult to say whether the majority were women or men. According to Laqueur, what is certain is that the thriving industry of Victorian pornographic writing saw in women ‘the misguided reader par excellence, the enthralled reader, the prototypical victim of imaginative excess, [...] the perfect onanist’ (340).

Along with other Victorian editors of erotic material, such as Edward Avery (1851–1913), Harry Sidney Nichols (1865–1941), and Charles Carrington (1857–1921), William Lazenby (died c. 1888), the editor of *The Pearl*, was one of the greatest and most successful publishers of pornography in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century. Some of the other magazines that Lazenby edited include, for instance, *The Boudoir* (1883–4), *The Oyster* (1883), and *The Cremorne* (1882). In terms of erotic books, Lazenby published *Randiana, or Excitable Tales* (1884), *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain* (1881), and *The Romance of Lust* (1873–6). In spite of this abundance of material, in order to demonstrate, through the analysis of some pornographic texts, the way in which medical advances and the invention of vibrators revolutionised female solitary sex, I have decided to focus specifically on Lazenby’s *The Pearl*, a short-lived magazine of erotic tales, fables, poems, and parodies. Distributed among Victorian customers through mail order, this magazine boasts eighteen issues (and two Christmas supplements) that were published monthly from July 1879 until December 1880, when *The Pearl* was forced to abandon its transgressive mission due to accusations of obscenity from

British authorities, and due to a severe national censorship that actually never really managed to control the spread of pornographic material among the most curious Victorians.

As regards female masturbation, *The Pearl* frequently and satirically presents female onanists as the undisputed protagonists of several poems and tales. As many of the narratives in *The Pearl* demonstrate, women were often described as viciously inclined to try any possible kind of erotic game. In fact, the magazine presents many lascivious women, protagonists of the *mise en scène*, that experiment with their sexuality not only with the use of improbable objects, but also with animals. The following short fable entitled 'The Lady and the Eel' (issue 8, February 1880) is a very good example. The title already introduces the two protagonists: an eager lady is depicted while looking for sexual pleasure and solace using an defenceless, yet very smart, live eel;

A young lady was frigging herself with a small live eel, when it slipped from her fingers and disappeared in her cunt; making its way into the womb, it entered, and stretching out its head said, 'I am much obliged to you Madam, for finding me so warm and comfortable a residence, I shall make myself quite at home'. This fable teaches how much better it is to use large eels which could not enter. (Lazenby, *The Pearl* 258)

Leaving the quite explicit moral of this fable aside, the female protagonist is castigated for her luxurious game. The small eel eludes the hands of the lady who is thanked by the eel itself for having provided it with a warm and welcoming dwelling. This short passage seems to ironically draw readers' attention to the danger represented by masturbation and to warn them about the consequences of solitary pleasures; however, it would be rather hazardous to support the (improbable) idea that the author was truly suggesting that female readers should restrain their masturbatory instincts.

Focusing now on the impact that the invention of the electric vibrator had on the lives of several Victorians in the late nineteenth century, I argue that pornographic literature can indeed constitute a valid means to provide a clear picture of the way in which Victorians received and welcomed the

invention of those tools. Victorian pornography can suggest how ‘manipulators’ and electromechanical vibrators percolated through Victorian society and moulded their private sexual practices accordingly. As clearly demonstrated by the following texts and poems that I have extracted from *The Pearl*, steam-powered dildoes and vibrating sexual objects became, in several cases, the domestic companions of several Victorian women. Originating in Victorian asylums and medical laboratories, as clearly shown by the following verses, electric vibrators ended up boosting the imagination of several authors writing erotic stories:

She knew that of pleasure they’d never be sick,

And so out of kindness, invented a prick!

A stiff-standing, glorious prick!

Voluptuous, rubicund prick!

[...]

When sorrow torments lovely woman, oh dear,

A mighty good fucking will banish despair;

If her belly but aches, why we all know the trick,

There’s nothing can ease it so well as a prick!

A nice luscious prick!

A stiff-standing prick! (Lazenby, *The Pearl* 171)

These few verses from *The Origin of Copulation* (issue 5, November 1879) display a female protagonist that finds solace while enjoying the company of her tool that is described as ‘glorious’, ‘stiff-standing’, ‘rubicund’, and ‘[v]oluptuous’. In my opinion, the reference to the invention of a new ‘prick’, the vibrator, is here very evident. Eulogising the power of the domestic companion, the author of this poem explains how this ‘luscious prick’ can help women banish any possible sorrow and ache.

Another very significant and illuminating example is ‘The New Patent Fucking Machine’ (issue

12, June 1880). Supporting my discussion, this very explicit brief epistolary narrative clearly demonstrates that electric vibrators began to occupy a relevant position in British domesticity:

Dear Mary, I promised to write directly to school I returned. But I think when this letter is finished 'twere better by far it were burned; For a girl has just now returned to us, and bought while in town she has been the last improvement in dildoes – the new patent Fucking Machine. At night when we go to our bedrooms, we go in for a jolly good spree, and first I perform upon Fanny and then she performs upon me. It beats the old 'flatcocks' a long way, you know the old game that I mean, Oh! mustn't a man be galoptious if he beats the new Fucking Machine? It beats fingers by far too – a long way, its shape is just like a tool, the girl who owns it is good-natured, she has fucked, I believe, the whole school; she has it herself much too often, and is getting most awfully lean, and her pussey's [sic] quite tender with using the patent new Fucking Machine. It gives a delightful sensation, your breath comes too quickly to speak, whilst Fanny was doing it for me I bit a piece out of her cheek; and when you feel yourself spending and clasp it your legs between, oh! I should die if it ever got broken, God preserve the new Fucking Machine! A new girl arrived, dearest Mary, and slept during last night with me; when I put the machine in her 'cunny', she said, 'None of that sort for me!' she turned up her nose at our patent, and said we were 'awfully green', to injure ourselves with such habits, and not to have the real Fucking Machine. That the men are all dying to have us, if only we'll give them the chance; she was herself had in the carriage, coming home from the Lord Mayor's dance. Now directly I get home next Xmas, I'll spoon my young cousin Jack Green and I swear he'll be only too ready, to lend me his Fucking Machine. (Lazenby, *The Pearl* 427–8)

The protagonist of the passage not only tells her addressee the most intimate details of her private fantasies and erotic games, but she also enthusiastically celebrates the 'last improvement in dildoes'. More importantly, what caught my attention is the very use of the word 'machine'. In my view, the

selection of this specific noun on the part of the author demonstrates that the dildo in question cannot be a manual one. In fact, in my opinion, the term ‘machine’ can refer only to an electric engine and to a very recently patented one in this case: an electric vibrator.

The use of terms like ‘machine’ and ‘engine’ to define sexual tools can be seen in the following verses extrapolated from *The Old Dildo* (issue 15, September 1880), a long tragicomic poem set in a brothel. The poem narrates the story of a prostitute who, experiencing ecstatic moments with the use of her ‘treasure’ in the middle of the night, goes up in flames due to the friction between her flesh and the ‘engine’ she is using. Even if the title of this poem might make the reader immediately think of an ‘old’ manual dildo, it is once again the use of the term ‘engine’ that calls to mind the invention of electric vibrators. My idea is that defining manual (mainly wooden) dildoes using the word ‘engine’ would have been absolutely meaningless on the part of the author. As suggested before, the term ‘engine’ (or ‘machine’) implies the presence of an electrical mechanism that produces energy to make something work. In other words, although the author calls it an ‘old dildo’, I think that opting for the term ‘engine’ could not have been pure chance:

She flew with her treasure into her room,

(Its size was the handle of a broom);

Oh! what ecstatic moments she passed there,

As she threw up her legs on the back of a chair.

Through each vein in her body the fire lurked,

Surely and quickly the engine worked;

[...].

Sad, sad, was her fate, when, instead of a fuck,

With the old Dildoe she had tried her luck;

And when at the short digs she so hard did go,

It caught fire with the friction – the Old Dildoe. (Lazenby, *The Pearl* 525–6).

In addition, in the following short passage from ‘Sub-Umbra, Or Sport Among the She-Noodles’ (issue 2, August 1879), the noun ‘engine’ is associated with the significant adjective ‘electric’. The use of the term ‘electric’ supports what I have been suggesting so far. Erotic literature of the late nineteenth century, embodied here in *The Pearl*, was so significantly influenced by the invention of electric dildoes that even male members are sometimes defined as ‘engines of love’, as demonstrated by the following example:

I could also feel the loving playful bite of her pearly teeth. It was the acme of erotic enjoyment. She came again in another luscious flood of spendings, whilst she eagerly sucked every drop of my sperm as it burst from my excited prick.

We both nearly fainted from the excess of our emotions, and lay quite exhausted for a few moments, till I felt her dear lips again pressing and sucking my engine of love. The effect was electric [...]. (Lazenby, *The Pearl* 38)

The man is here fully objectified: he becomes a machine expected to provide mere carnal pleasure with the use of his ‘engine’. The mechanistic interpretation of the penis alienates the man himself and reduces the significance and importance of his presence while intercourse is taking place. Freed from male control, women could handle the male organ – the ‘engine’ – whenever and wherever they pleased with no effective need of the physical presence of a man.

This last example (issue 11, May 1880), a brief passage from an episode of the erotic novella entitled *Lady Pockingham, Or They All Do It* (serialised for the first time in Lazenby’s *The Pearl*), shows once again how the term ‘engine’ takes on an extra resonance given the effective usability of the electric vibrator in that period:

The desire for a really good fuck had been consuming me for some days, and I could not resist the impulse, however immodest it might seem to him, of putting my hand upon his glorious engine of love, and directing it into love's harbour myself. It was in, I was gorged to repletion, spending, sighing with delight, almost before he could make a move [...]. (Lazenby, *The Pearl* 393)

The impatient woman cannot wait to put her covetous hands on the male 'engine'. The lustful female protagonist is literally dying to handle it and the importance of the male presence is again reduced to a minimum. The man here is just expected to please the excited woman with his 'engine of love'. In other words, the usefulness of the male in this intercourse merely lies in his 'engine', whereas his physical presence is seemingly no longer so necessary.

In conclusion, after discussing some Victorian medical theories dealing with masturbation and female sexuality as emblems of monstrosity and moral dirtiness, I have attempted to contextualise William Lazenby's erotic magazine *The Pearl* and subsequently to demonstrate the impact that medical discourses and technological inventions – electric vibrators – had in the production of erotic literary material that I have taken into consideration so far. As clearly demonstrated by some of the specific lexical choices made by some authors, electric vibrators (invented primarily to assuage women's nerves and to cure female hysteria within asylums) became central to several erotic stories, fables and poems, which described women as subjects that were free from a sexual point of view. The erotic literature analysed here is imbued with lustful women exploiting their electric domestic companion to find solace and private consolation, away from curious eyes and with no need of men. Deeply probing into female sexuality, medicine of the late nineteenth century and the invention of electric vibrators inspired an endless quantity of private sexual practices that several prudish Victorians would have categorised as scandalous and shameful. Shattering any certainty about the clichéd notion of repressed Victorians, *The Pearl* and its readership bring to the surface a Victorian substratum of vice absolutely fascinated by carnal pleasures that were, instead, strongly condemned

by Victorian medicine. Although sexuality had to be kept hidden, unmentioned and in male hands exclusively, *The Pearl* provided its readers with a great number of stories of independent and active women who are portrayed as exploring their own sexuality with the use of those new revolutionary ‘engines’: electric vibrators.

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