Redefining Sexual Excess as a Medical Disorder: Fin-de-siècle Representations of Hysteria and Spermatorrhoea

Every historical period invents its own illnesses, medical disorders whose etiology and nosology reflect specific cultural concerns regarding the body and its practices. The spermatorrhoea panic of the mid-to-late 1800s, like the much better known epidemic of female hysteria of the same period, is exemplary of the way diseases can be imagined into existence as a means by which to treat, in both senses, historically specific anxieties. Spermatorrhoea was identified as a form of sexual dysfunction characterized by the ‘excessive’ discharge of sperm, usually involuntary, through nocturnal emissions, premature ejaculation, compulsive masturbation or other forms of sexual activity, a condition seen to produce a whole series of wider debilitating bodily effects: testicles were said to shrink, semen to seep into the urine, while the patient experienced languor, depression and impotence.¹ Although hysteria has a much longer history than spermatorrhoea, which emerged in the 1840s and disappeared definitively at the fin-de-siècle, it did have a specifically nineteenth-century incarnation that in many ways parallels that of the spermatorrhoea panic. To begin with, both were understood as disorders of the reproductive system. Hysteria, as is well known, has its etymological origins in the Greek _hystera_, or womb, and was traditionally thought to be a disease produced by a ‘wandering womb’, by the propensity for female fertility to lead women, quite literally, astray. The sexualization of hysterical symptoms in the nineteenth century – or, to be more precise, the recognition of a cluster of non-normative female gestural and behavioural practices _as_ hysteria – both draws on and reimagines

this historical understanding of the female body. Part of a group of
sexual diseases invented and carefully categorized from the mid-to-
late 1800s, spermatorrhoea and hysteria represent two key forms of
gendered sexual excess that reveal a great deal about changing norms
of male and female bodies and behaviour towards the fin-de-siècle. In
this respect, both spermatorrhoea and hysteria are best understood
within the context of the health and sanitation reform movements of
the nineteenth century: that is to say, they are both products of the
same social imaginary that saw public and commercial forms of sex,
poverty and indigence, poor hygiene and degeneracy as posing similar
kinds of danger to a civilized social order. Spermatorrhoea and hys-
teria provide cautionary narratives that demonstrate how imper-
ceptibly, but dangerously, pleasure and fertility could be transformed
into pain and debilitating disease. In this essay, I will examine how the
range of nineteenth-century discourses and institutions that enabled
(or even required) the invention of spermatorrhoea and hysteria reflect
contemporaneous changes in the wider interpretive frameworks
through which the body was institutionally managed and made
culturally meaningful. In particular, I am interested in the ways in
which the creation of such disorders is symptomatic of the invention
of a much more enduring nineteenth-century category, one that trans-
formed the way bodies and their practices were represented and
understood – that of sexuality.

The emergence of sexuality as an interpretative grid for both
reading and regulating bodies is the focus of Foucault’s Histoire de la
sexualité I: La Volonté de savoir, which argues, famously, that the
Victorian period was characterized not by the repression of a pre-
existing sexuality but by its invention through a proliferation of
discursive formations and institutional structures for identifying,
categorizing and regulating bodily practices, which served to ‘sol-
lify’ a range of bodily practices into stable subjectivities which were
then categorized and controlled. Sexuality, in this account, is not a
stable entity or concept, but a domain of knowledge, cultivation, and
discipline. This essay will not reprise Foucault’s well-known dis-
cussion of the nineteenth-century sexualization of the body in La Volonté

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2 See Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison (Paris: Gallimard, 1975) and Histoire