



## Sexology

by Matthew D. Johnson

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Sexology, the study of sex or of the interactions between the sexes among human beings, first emerged as a field of intellectual inquiry in the second half of the nineteenth century, approximately contemporary with the professionalization of the social science disciplines.

The original sexologists were medical professionals with an interest and talent for documenting the social contexts of their cases. They were among the first to identify homosexuality (along with other so-called perversions) as such, to describe it, and to speculate about its prevalence and its etiology. Over the course of its history, sexology has embraced elements from anthropology, sociology, psychology, literature, and the arts, though in recent decades it has moved more strongly toward a preoccupation with the details of human physiology and biochemistry.

Yet sexology's taboo quality has prevented scientists and professionals from becoming its sole adjudicators, let alone the exclusive dispensers of advice, therapy, and treatment for sexual ills. If anything, it is an enterprise that is becoming increasingly heterodox and democratized.

### **Krafft-Ebing: The Quintessential Sexologist**

In some ways, Richard von Krafft-Ebing is the first writer who may be properly called a sexologist. Krafft-Ebing was an early practitioner of the medical specialization coming to be known in the late nineteenth century as psychiatry, itself a derivative of mid-nineteenth century forensic medical inquiries into illegal sexual acts such as rape and sodomy. Unlike his predecessors, however, Krafft-Ebing demonstrated an interest in exhaustively documenting sexual behaviors perceived as unconventional as much for their own sake as for the interests of criminology. His *Psychopathia sexualis*, originally published in 1886, had gone through seventeen editions by 1924, twenty-two years after the death of its author.

Krafft-Ebing's masterwork is characterized by its assemblage of case histories, often penned by patients themselves, organized by the author into a rubric of "perversions." Each new edition was expanded by additional case histories, frequently mailed in by readers of earlier editions, as well as the invention of new categories of "perversion" to contain them. This emphasis on taxonomy spawned a host of terms that originated with Krafft-Ebing and that persist even today, including sadism, masochism, fetishism, and pedophilia.

Significant, too, is Krafft-Ebing's use of the German vernacular in composing what was ostensibly a medical text. Earlier works that had dealt with sexual aberration were frequently written in Latin and destined only for the eyes of traditionally trained medical practitioners. With the increasing professionalization of medicine, as well as the perceived need to speak to forensic specialists and jurists who did not have classical training, Krafft-Ebing chose German (aside from occasional lapses into Latin when recounting morally sensitive acts or anatomical parts) as the language of *Psychopathia sexualis*.

This ensured that Krafft-Ebing's text would be accessible to a far larger audience than he had perhaps

imagined. Given the potentially salacious and otherwise unprintable nature of the material in the book, no doubt this ostensibly scientific text doubled as a kind of clandestine pornography.

Nevertheless, some literate middle-class men encountered the book and saw themselves mirrored in its pages. They sent grateful letters to the doctor, recounting their own stories, often for the first time. To Krafft-Ebing, such correspondences were grist for the mill of his ongoing work, and excerpts from letters were inserted into subsequent editions of the book.

One of his most famous correspondents, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, sent Krafft-Ebing a copy of his manuscript entitled *Venus in Furs*, a *roman à clef* detailing one man's sexual subjugation at the hands of a cruel and unyielding mistress. From this account, the doctor coined the term "masochism" to refer to sexual stimulation derived from physical pain and humiliation. Nor was Sacher-Masoch's the only literary text to be embraced by *Psychopathia sexualis*; from the works of Donatien-Alphonse-François, Marquis de Sade, Krafft-Ebing derived the term "sadism," referring to sexual satisfaction achieved by the infliction of pain on another.

While Krafft-Ebing's textual assemblage is voluminous, the scope of its subject matter and the reach of his analysis are both limited by his editorial approach. Predictably, European bourgeois married life is taken as the norm par excellence against which the enumerated perversions are to be defined, although it must be acknowledged that Krafft-Ebing was rarely simply condemnatory of the perverts whose stories he recounts. The ideal pervert is perpetually imagined as male; women rarely appear in these pages.

Most importantly, there is little effort at a sustained analysis of the varying sexual behaviors, their origins, and their development. The doctor develops a taxonomy of sexual acts and personality types, but does not attempt to theorize or explain them.

Admittedly, his contemporaries, including Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Magnus Hirschfeld, and Havelock Ellis, do little more than he in this regard. Not until Sigmund Freud does the sexological enterprise attempt to justify its taxonomy through speculation on the origins of the apparently "natural" sexual categories which it has devised. Freud's etiological theories have been discounted as largely spurious, however, and such speculations are discounted by contemporary sexology, which continues to be dominated by a descriptive as opposed to an explanatory mode.

This is not, however, to deny the importance of the descriptions in and of themselves, which tell us a tremendous amount about perceptions of sexual behavior and identity, as well as public sexual culture, in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe.

### **Sexology Today**

Sexology remains a para-professional field that continues to have significant interactions with and influences upon popular perceptions of human sexuality. Its bilateral mission has been one of evangelization and amelioration. Nineteenth-century authors such as Krafft-Ebing and Hirschfeld pled for tolerance and understanding of behaviors such as homosexuality, which they believed were not socially harmful and which were in any case constitutional. They and others worked tirelessly to reform the German penal code to exonerate homosexuals from incurring a punishment for following an instinctual behavior pattern.

While contemporary sexology is to some extent still focused on social reform (such as improving sex education), its primary object, following Freud, has been changing individual lives: enlightening its audience to the positive qualities and myriad possibilities inherent in sex, and providing people with advice or therapy, with the implicit guiding belief that an improved sex life means an improved existence generally.

According to Paul Robinson, such a program, with its "democratic" emphasis on individual sexual satisfaction

(especially extolling the benefits of masturbation, the social scourge of earlier generations), is indicative of the bourgeoisification and even Americanization of sexual practices. William Masters's and Virginia Johnson's widely embraced findings on women's particular need for autoeroticism, as well as the sexual satisfactions believed to inhere in married life, Robinson argues, indicate a privatization of the sexual sphere, a solo retreat into the home, vibrator in hand.

Pharmacological, surgical, and technological developments such as synthetic hormone therapy, medications such as Viagra that induce sexual excitement, vasectomies, tubal ligations, and prophylactics to prevent unwanted pregnancy, even the popularization of pornography and the increasing availability of sex toys, are arguably transforming sexual expression into an individual-oriented, consumption-driven enterprise, mediated by authorities such as physicians, pharmacists, and psychotherapists.

Yet contemporary media discourses would appear to dispute the notion that sex is becoming more and more an individual matter. Suburban housewives may or may not find sexual solace in their bedrooms, but in any case it is very likely the increasing number of public forums dispensing sex advice that put Hitachi Magic Wands into their nightstand drawers in the first place.

Sex advice columns, increasingly found in magazines, free weekly newspapers, and on the internet, as well as sex manuals, are a popular (and hence often discounted) mode of sexological inquiry, continually expanding both professional and lay knowledge of sexual arcana and introducing the uninitiated to new practices and communities of practitioners. As columnists are quick to point out to their readership, there are non-professional resources and organizations catering to all manner of "perversions," from sadomasochism to "swinging" (partner-swapping) to devotees of large men and women and amputees, among countless others.

Moreover, as in Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia sexualis*, sex advice columns are populated by an assortment of anonymous "perverts" who are able to publicly name their fantasies, detail their problems, and air their grievances. Answers to their inquiries, as likely (if not likelier) to be penned by a layperson as a professional sexologist, are ultimately less significant socially than the simple act of public correspondence. Both writers and readers are often assured that they are not alone in their proclivities, and are urged to act in their own behalf to address their problems, notably through seeking out others with common complaints or interests.

Sex advisers also pose an interesting challenge to a political orthodoxy in the United States that decries open discussion and expression of sexuality as obscene, even unpatriotic. In the face of mounting restrictions on access to pornography and sex education in this country, sex manuals and advice columns remain an open channel of information as well as entertainment, at least partly legitimized by their pedagogical role.

Some columnists, such as Dan Savage, have stumped for political issues such as same-sex marriage and the repeal of sodomy laws. Savage has even used his column to poke fun at his readers' most formidable political foes, for example transforming the surname of conservative U.S. Senator Rick Santorum into a new item in an expanding sexual lexicon. In small ways, then, contemporary sex advisers urge social reform just as did their nineteenth-century antecedents.

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