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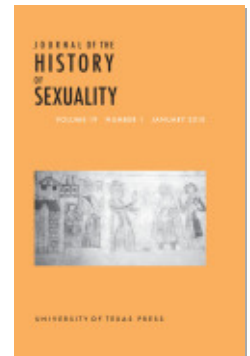
*The Origin of the World: Science and Fiction of the Vagina*  
(review)

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his evidence. Although it is in many ways a specialist work in which the technical details that underpin his argument are laid out in full, the larger arguments d'Avray makes are of great significance for our understanding of the development of Western sexuality.

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*The Origin of the World: Science and Fiction of the Vagina.* By JELTO DRENTH. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. Pp. 300. \$29.95 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper).

In what is an admittedly vast approach to a subject, Jelto Drenth attempts to cover historical and contemporary medical and social perspectives on female anatomy and sexuality as well as representations in literature and popular venues such as television and movies. His material ranges from famous works of contemporary fiction and the work of icons such as Freud to obscure films and medical texts. Although the title of the text suggests that the work focuses on the vagina, Drenth takes as his subject everything from the clitoris to the uterus to menstruation; although he notes in his own work that there is a tendency not to speak about female anatomy or physiology with any specificity (“down there” as a popular euphemism, for example), Drenth seems unwittingly to replicate this trend in his own choice of title. For some, this breadth will undoubtedly be the appeal of the book, but I found this approach led to a work that provides interesting facts from time to time but offers no real thoroughgoing argument or analysis. Drenth writes that the book has turned into a “rich miscellany of bizarre facts” (9), and this is both an honest and accurate depiction of the text’s structure and methodology. Perhaps what is most problematic about such an acknowledgment and approach is that, at times, Drenth’s desire to discuss all things related to female physiology leads to incomplete accounts, oversimplified assertions, and inaccurate information.

Chapters 1 and 2 offer an introduction of sorts, with chapter 1 focused on the author discussing his own social location as a man writing a text about female anatomy and physiology and in particular his profession as a sexologist. Drenth notes a certain tension, and although he momentarily pauses to ponder what investment a man might have in writing on the subject, he doesn’t offer the thorough explication of his social positioning that some feminist scholars might expect. Instead, he muses on his own experiences as a teenage boy and the ongoing tropes of mystery and power that many men attribute to female sexuality, tropes that Drenth argues are present in narratives as varied as nursery rhymes to classic scientific texts of the Middle Ages.

In chapter 2 Drenth further explores the theme of female sexuality as sometimes incomprehensible and sometimes powerful with his discussion of the nomenclature (or lack of nomenclature) for female anatomy. Drenth asserts that the politics of naming and silences often exist in a cycle of misogyny and the fracturing of women's bodies, and as proof that such practices occur across time and space he cites African ceremonies, witch hunts, and the use of female anatomy as insults that imply weakness. He also notes that in spite of the vast expanse of such trends, feminists such as Germaine Greer and Betty Dodson have attempted to resist the notion that female anatomy is dirty or insulting by reclaiming "cunt power" and using weapons as simple as a hand mirror to fight the battle against ignorance of women's genital and reproductive anatomy.

Continuing this theme, Drenth uses chapter 3 as an opportunity to provide readers with a thorough explanation of the basic anatomy of the female urogenital and reproductive organs. Along the way he discusses in utero development of humans and notes that the embryological development of males and females is quite similar, with the genital buds for the penis and the clitoris being one and the same, a fact that is surely troublesome to those who imagine women and men to be entirely different creatures. Not content to discuss only human development, Drenth takes a brief detour to consider the anatomy of hyenas. In particular, he's interested in female hyenas being born with external organs very similar to those of males. Drenth's point here is well taken: males and females are not so different from one another anatomically, and this difference is even less pronounced in species such as the hyena. However, when he discusses the "masculinized" behavior of the cubs, he suggests that the masculinization of the bodies of the hyena fetuses while in utero leads to a particular sort of behavior. I realize, of course, that there is a vibrant debate about masculinizing hormones and theories such as "brain sex" (the theory that such hormones do, in fact, affect the brains of children with intersex conditions, for example, and not just their bodies), but Drenth presents this as an unproblematic and straightforward assertion, when in reality such discussions about masculinization and behavior are far more complicated.

Toward the end of chapter 3 Drenth positions himself as the next Betty Dodson when he spends six pages explaining to his female readers how to use a hand mirror to explore their own anatomy. He respectfully pays homage to the feminist trend of the hand mirror beside the exam table and perhaps wishes to replicate this political strategy with his own writing. While the descriptions and tactics he suggests are both accurate and perhaps useful to female readers who have not explored their own bodies, the section seems an odd venture into a how-to manual in the midst of an analytical text. He concludes the chapter by asserting that where anatomy and sexuality are concerned that knowledge is empowering, and I doubt many people would argue with this assertion; some might, however, wonder whether or not

his goals are best met by including such a section in a book that does not position itself as an advice manual.

In chapter 4 Drenth turns his attention to the sexual function of the genitals and the methods by which sexuality has been measured and cataloged, discussing Masters and Johnson specifically. Here, Drenth also turns his eye toward the feminist criticisms of such models, thoughtfully discussing the ways that feminists have rejected linear models of sexuality and the tendency to try to fit women's sexuality into categories and rubrics based on men's sexuality. He devotes time in this chapter to discussions of desire, excitement, orgasm, and satisfaction, thus using the Masters and Johnson model even though he seems somewhat critical of it.

He asserts some key differences and similarities between women and men in this chapter but pays little attention to the nuances of the debates about whether such differences are physiological, cultural, or some combination thereof. For example, after a discussion of boys' nocturnal emissions he asserts that women have similar physical responses but often don't remember them or need to learn to read them as such. Drenth claims that in his own practice he sometimes saw young women who were concerned about vaginal discharges. Upon physical examination of one such young woman, he failed to discover anything out of the ordinary physiologically and asked her if she might be in love. The young woman responded that she was, and Drenth suggests that this young woman had failed to see her vaginal discharge as a "connection between her feelings and her bodily reactions" (48). Thus, Drenth seems to be positing that women's bodies react profoundly to their emotional states, yet he makes almost no attempt to carefully consider his own analysis of this young woman's situation or the broader implications of such an assertion.

Chapter 5 takes virginity as its subject, and Drenth spends a good deal of this chapter discussing the trickery that abounds in times and places where virginity is prized and/or required for women. He begins by discussing the religious valences of the Virgin Mary and the virgin birth of Jesus and then branches out to discuss contemporary American and Turkish values surrounding virginity. Drenth seems to choose Turkey as a locale for investigation because he wants a contrast to Christianity's views about female virginity, and from there he discusses Turkish operations to restore virginity and how the desire for female virginity, especially before marriage, has often led to elaborate shams in many cultures and eras, shams such as leeches in the vagina and stitching the vaginal walls together.

In chapter 6 Drenth offers an overview of the theories of Sigmund Freud and others that posited that women who preferred clitoral orgasms were incomplete or "masculine" women who had not achieved their full potential; he notes how such theories have contributed to ideas and practices as varied as narrow definitions of sex as penile to vaginal penetration, clitoridectomies as a means either of curbing masturbation or of helping women achieve

full womanhood, and the faking of orgasms. Drenth takes a similar focus in chapter 10 when he writes about physicians' concerns about hysteria and the resulting procedures to "cure" women, procedures that ranged from abdominal irrigation to hysterectomies. Drenth's eleventh chapter focuses on the vibrator, and here he writes about some of the medical uses for the device, particularly those that focused on the idea of healing women by providing them with sexual release.

In chapter 7 Drenth delves into reproduction and offers an explanation of how oral birth control pills work and how a woman might perform a simple test of her own mucous to determine whether or not she is ovulating (a section that employs similar techniques to the hand mirror section earlier in the text) as well as an overview of several historical theories that defined women's bodies as only an incubator for male seed. Here Drenth also discusses the male investment in paternity and how that investment led to creations such as the chastity belt as a means of controlling women's sexuality and reproduction. Drenth discusses women's sexual problems in chapter 8, noting how the idea that penetration of the vagina by the penis is the ultimate expression of "normal" sexuality can be problematic for women who do not enjoy penetration for a variety of reasons that may range from the emotional to the physical.

Discussing what may be one of the most controversial subjects in the book, Drenth centers chapter 9 around the practice of female excision from sunna to infibulation and from the United States to Africa. He notes that it is "difficult to remain neutral about a ritual that so evidently does violence to a woman's physical and psychological well-being" (187), yet he seems to remain quite neutral as he details the damaging effects of ceremonies and procedures such as infibulation and testimony from women who report still experiencing sexual pleasure and even orgasm after the procedures.

Most troubling for me about this particular chapter was the incomplete and inaccurate information Drenth offers about the case of individuals with intersex conditions. In recent years many feminists and individuals with intersex conditions have pointed out that while many feminists have expressed deep concern about practices such as clitoridectomies practiced abroad, few of those same feminists have openly protested the similar treatment children with intersex conditions face. Drenth seems aware of this discussion with the title he gives the section in which he discusses the treatment of intersex children: "The Last Stronghold of Clitoridectomy." In spite of this awareness he shows little familiarity with the complexity of conversations about and by people with intersex conditions. For example, he writes: "There are indeed some people who are genetically half man and half woman. In their case a choice must be made, for a child must be registered as either a boy or a girl" (203). In this instance he says he is speaking of "true hermaphrodites," a condition that results in an individual being born with both testicular and ovarian tissue. Drenth's claim, however, that this results in a person who

is *genetically* half man and half woman is inaccurate. Further, it trades on the mythology of the half man/half woman that organizations such as the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA) tried to dislodge in favor of a more rigorous understanding of the range of intersex conditions. Drenth mentions ISNA and is clearly aware of the organization and some of its publications, yet he seems to have paid little critical attention to the work ISNA tried to accomplish or its recommendations. His conclusion that “a choice must be made” is true in the sense that children must be registered as male or female on a birth certificate, but for many years ISNA has insisted that such a choice can be made without surgeries such as clitoridectomies, understanding that a gender assignment can be made without altering the child’s body at such an early age when he or she is at greater risk from such surgeries and cannot participate in the decision-making process.

Further, Drenth seems to confuse people with intersex conditions with individuals who identify as transsexuals. Granted, there are sometimes people with intersex conditions who also identify as transgender or transsexual and sometimes transition due to a gender assignment that was made for them earlier in life. These two categories of people are not, however, synonymous, a detail Drenth seems to overlook when he includes a section where he blurs the members of these two groups in an effort to explain that some people would prefer a society where “some individuals are neither men nor women.” He continues this confusion when he goes on to say: “In prostitution and pornography, too, interest in intersexuals (‘she-males’) is growing” (203). I suspect that the people he is actually talking about here are, in fact, people who identify as trans and are, for example, living life as female yet still possess a penis. There are few intersex individuals who escape surgery and/or hormone treatments and even fewer who would have the sort of anatomy to which he alludes as being a new fetish market for pornographers.

Drenth ends the book with several chapters that contrast the fear and loathing of women with their worship. In chapter 12 he discusses the scent of women, noting that some people seem to rejoice in the smells of the vulva and vagina, while others obsess about ways to sanitize and eliminate what they interpret as unpleasant. In some detail he explains the origin of the variety of scents, writing about pheromones and amines, and he seems to want to normalize women’s scents and move away from the material of hurtful jokes. Perhaps this is why Drenth chooses to end his text by examining the fear and loathing of female physiology in contrast to the possibility of worship.

In chapter 13 Drenth looks at humor based on women’s genitals and their misogynistic undertones alongside myths such as the *vagina dentata*, the fear of and taboos about menstrual blood, and products such as vaginal perfumes. In this chapter perhaps more than any other Drenth addresses the ways in which portrayals of women’s anatomy and physiology in a wide

assortment of texts prove problematic and rooted in misogyny. He ends the book, however, on what he aims to be a positive note and reports on the numerous ways people have paid tribute to female anatomy and physiology. In a discussion that covers the paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe, young women in love baking bread after the dough has been pressed into their vulva, and modern-day piercings of the labia and clitoris, Drenth assures readers that there are places where "the origin of the world" is still valued.

Readers looking for a tour across time and cultures will appreciate this text for its breadth. Those who are interested in deeper discussions of the subjects Drenth covers will likely find the text lacking. Drenth's treatment of his material is often shallow, making the text read much more like an assortment of trivia than a sustained analysis. Taking on such a project is admirable, and it seems that Drenth is sympathetic to feminist politics of embodiment and knowledgeable about female anatomy and physiology; however, I found the book to lack structure and the sort of nuanced discussions I would expect from someone taking on such a project.

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*Geisha, Harlot, Strangler, Star: A Woman, Sex, and Morality in Modern Japan.* By WILLIAM JOHNSTON. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. Pp. 272. \$36.00 (cloth).

When Abe Sada murdered and castrated her lover in May 1936, she unwittingly became a site of fear, anxiety, and curiosity. Various people—psychoanalysts, a well-known feminist activist, a literary critic, neighbors, and one of Abe's lawyers among them—tried to explain why the young maid killed and mutilated Ishida Kichizō, the owner of the restaurant where she was employed. Fame haunts her still, well after her mysterious disappearance in 1970, as speculation and romanticization continue to be thrust upon her by fiction writers, movie makers, and their fascinated audiences.

In *Geisha, Harlot, Strangler, Star* William Johnston separates Abe's lived experience from the myth that has come to surround it. He carefully peels away characterizations of Abe as a crazed and dangerous woman in a meaningful attempt to reveal the deeply human person beneath. Profoundly sympathetic to Abe, Johnston recasts her as an ordinary woman who had to navigate the gender inequalities and restrictive sexual moralities of her time.

More than half of the book is thus dedicated to telling the story of Abe Sada's life before she met Ishida Kichizō. It starts with her birth in 1905 to a relatively wealthy family in the Kanda neighborhood of Tokyo. There was nothing particularly remarkable about her childhood; Johnston points out