Sex and Mythology: Some Implications

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SEX AND MYTHOLOGY:
SOME IMPLICATIONS

Vern L. Bullough

Biological reproduction is a universal among all species, and in all the higher species this is achieved through some form of sexual activity between males and females. Since it is so universal and because attitudes toward sexuality have differed so radically from one civilizational group to another, a study of these attitudes helps throw light on the way in which specific cultural attitudes are adopted and promulgated in a civilizational context.

In my Sexual Variance in Society and History1 I traced many of the standardized norms of Western civilization to the mythological assumptions of the Greeks. Extending the study to other civilizations, I was impressed with how the mythological construct served as a "model of consciousness" for explaining and defining attitudes toward a particular human behavior, set the psychological limits of such behavior, and stipulated the situations under which such behavior was permissible.2 What was most surprising is that once the myth was accepted in a particular civilization, the basic assumptions usually survived in spite of new scientific thought. In this sense the myth did not fit into the model of the positive ethnologists such as Edward Taylor who looked upon myth as a mode of explanatory thought designed to be superseded by scientific thought. Instead it followed the pattern put forth by Bronislaw Malinowski who looked upon myths as a means of pragmatically solving critical problems affecting the welfare or destiny of a society.3 Once the mythological solution was accepted by a society, the basic answers embedded in the mythology remained even though the myth itself was replaced by more "scientific" information. Only rarely was there an undermining of the basic suppositions set forth in the long forgotten mythology, and when this readjustment did take place it often proved extremely traumatic to the peoples involved. Such a reassessment is now taking place in our own civilization in terms of basic assumptions about sexuality and so the study of mythology and sexuality not only has meaning in terms of civilizational analysis but in understanding some of the basic anxieties about sexuality present in our own civilization today.

This paper will examine the mythological assumptions of Western
culture about sex, and then compare and contrast these with two other
civilizational groups, namely those whose mythology can be traced to
Taoism and those whose mythology is found in Hinduism. Other myth-
ological traditions will be referred to but not analyzed. In general, West-
eran civilization, at least since Roman times, has been regarded as essen-
tially Christian. Traditionally Christianity has been looked upon as what
might be called a sex negative culture, one in which sexual activity has
been regarded with suspicion if not hostility.

Though Christianity is traditionally regarded as having its foundation
in Jewish scriptures, the major source of Christian hostility to sex comes
not from the Jewish scriptures (which are fairly tolerant about sexuality)
but rather the belief system of the Greeks and Romans which can be
 traced back to assumptions made in the earliest Greek myths. In this
respect Christianity, in the words of Morton Enslin, did not make the
world ascetic but the "world in which Christianity found itself strove to
make Christianity ascetic."5

The source of this asceticism can be traced to assumptions in Greek
myths which divided the world into two opposing forces, the spiritual
on the one hand and the material on the other. This belief structure led to
the idea that man had two natures, the higher and the lower, or the soul
and the body. This in turn led to a dualism that held man was undergo-
ing punishment by being incarcerated in a human body. Man’s purpose
in life was to achieve salvation, to allow the soul to escape the domina-
tion of the flesh. Sex was bad because sexual activity represented the
dominance of the bodily needs over the spiritual and the continued im-
prisonment of the future soul.

Since both the ancient Persians and the ancient Greeks had similar
concepts it is quite possible that the original source of these ideas was
common to the Indo European peoples from which they sprang. It is
difficult, if not impossible, however, to trace the idea much further back
than the Orpheus legend in Greek mythology. In the beginning, accord-
ing to Orphic mythology, there had been only night. This condition
lasted until eventually a silver egg containing Eros formed in the divine
and began to grow until it burst. The broken egg separated into two
elements, Heaven (Uranos) and Earth (Ge). The heaven (Male) and the
earth (Female) copulated, giving birth to Cronos and other Titans.
Kronos in turn became the father of Rhea, Demeter, Hades, Poseidon,
and Zeus among others. The children of Kronos proved unhappy with
their father and rebelled against him. His end came when Zeus swal-
lowed him thereby encompassing all creation. Zeus then proceeded to
create another world, the present world, over which he put Dionysus,
his son by Persephone. Before Dionysus could assume his domination, he was killed, cooked, and eaten by the surviving Titans in revenge for the death of Kronos. When Zeus discovered what had happened he wrought havoc by burning the Titans to death with his thunderbolts. Out of the smoking remains of the Titans Athena somehow managed to rescue the heart of Dionysus which she presented to Zeus who ate it. From this act of cannibalism Zeus was able to carry in his sperm a new Dionysus although this time his mother was Semele instead of Persephone. Zeus then turned to the ashes of the Titans and fashioned man. By this act his new creation man contained something of the divine, derived from the remnants of Dionysus, and something of the material, coming from the Titans. The divine was the soul, the material body, and the body in effect became a material prison for the divine soul. The purpose of life was to release the soul so it could seek the divine; release and immortality could only come through purity in life as prescribed in the secret rituals of the Orphic religion.

This mythological explanation about the dual nature of man might well have died when Orphism was superseded by more sophisticated cults except that the dualism it taught was incorporated in new forms into the writings of Pythagoras, Plato, and eventually into Christianity. The sixth century Pythagoras maintained the essential teachings of the myth but clothed it with more sophisticated styling. For Pythagoras the universe was divisible into two opposing principles, one of which he described as Unlimited Breath, the other as Limited. Limited and Unlimited are opposites; this opposition could also be expressed in such pairs as light and darkness, odd and even, one and many, right and left, male and female, et al. Limit, light, odd, male, are right and good, while unlimited, darkness, even, female, are evil and wrong, or at least one set is superior and the other is inferior. The soul, the higher principle, was imprisoned in the mortal body which was governed by evil passions. Men were not to be slaves of their bodies but were to strive to improve and save their soul by escaping the domination of the flesh. Sexual consummation was the prime pandering to man’s indwelling passions and his indwelling furies. Everything relating to sex had to be repudiated. Although it is not clear that Pythagoras himself advocated total abstinence some of his followers did, and one of them, the fifth century B.C. Empedocles, denounced all forms of sexual intercourse.

The most influential transmitter of this dualistic concept of Pythagoras was Plato (427-347 B.C.) who, while rejecting much of the cultic aspects of Pythagorean thought, elevated the philosophical ideas with such precision and clarity that they still dominate western thinking.
Plato taught that the moral law was fixed and immutable, that our fate depended upon our actions during this life, and that each of us had the power to rise above his Titanic nature. Plato postulated two universal principles, Ideas and Matter, which he equated with the intelligible and sensible world. Following the lead of the Orphics Plato taught that the soul, an immaterial agent, was superior in nature to the body, and was hindered by the body in its performance of the higher psychic functions of life.

As far as sex was concerned Plato conceived of love also in dualistic terms, dividing it into the sacred and profane, the former occupied with the mind and character of the beloved, the latter with the body. It was only through the higher love, the nonphysical, that true happiness could be found. He compared the types of love to a charioteer driving two winged steeds, one of which (true love) was a thoroughbred, gentle and eager to bear its driver upwards into the presence of the ideal, the other (physical love) vicious and refractory, forever bolting in pursuit of physical satisfaction. The discipline of love lay in training the unruly steed to run in harmony with its thoroughbred mate. If the charioteer was successful in his training the team would bear the lover and beloved away from the world of senses to the visions of absolute loveliness that alone made them truly lovely and loveable in each other’s eyes. Love, in essence, implied the mutual attainment of self mastery that cured the disease of physical craving. Copulation lowered a man to the frenzied passions characteristic of beasts, and for this reason Plato relegated sexual desire to the lowest element of the psyche.

This tradition of denigrating sex remained a strong force in the Greek intellectual world and can be found in the teachings of Democritus, Epicurus, Diogenes, Zeno, Musonius Rufus, that is in most of the Greek philosophical schools. As far as Christianity was concerned the most important transmitters of this sex negativism were the neo-Pythagoreans and neo-Platonists who were centered in Alexandria, Egypt. Extremely influential was an Alexandrian Jew, Philo, born in the last quarter of the first century B.C. Though Philo accepted the Jewish concept of a divine commandment to procreate and replenish the earth, he retained the Graeco-Roman philosophic hostility to sex and held that sexual intercourse could only be justified when there was a possibility of legitimate offspring. Like Plato, he thought of sex in dualistic terms. The highest nature of man was asexual, in imitation of God, and it was only the irrational part of the soul which contained the categories of male and female and existed in the realm of the sexual. He equated the original sin of Adam and Eve with sexual desires, and held
that such pleasure was the "beginnings of wrongs and violation of the law." 

The most dominant of the neo-Platonists was Plotinus who lived and worked in the third century A.D. For him immortality was not a personal thing, but rather a merger with the universal spirit. The path to redemption was long and gradual and might take aeons of reincarnations to traverse but in the end the soul would be united with the divine in an indescribable ecstasy. The key to human virtue lay in detachment from worldly (i.e. evil) goods, an indifference which could put an individual out of reach of the caresses and stings of material life. Once having attained this "apathy" from the material, the soul was free to turn its attention upon the intelligible world, to identify with the path towards Divine Reason and on which truth lies. By implication it was necessary to be indifferent to sex. The importance of this indifference was emphasized by Porphyry, the pupil of Plotinus, who, in editing the writings of his teacher, added to them. In the process he condemned any kind of pleasure as sinful including sexual intercourse under any condition.

When Christianity appeared upon the scene it drew heavily from the Greek philosophical thinking, particularly from neo-Phythagoreanism and neo-Platonism, reincorporating the assumptions of Greek mythology in new forms. So also did the rivals of Christianity, particularly Gnosticism, and since Christianity was competing with Gnosticism and other redemptive cults it exercised influence on and was influenced by its rivals. In fact it has been hypothesized that within any particular Christian community, the degree of sexual repression among the Christians was dependent upon the practices of its leading rivals. At times it seems that Christian communities tried to gain status if not adherents by outdoing their pagan rivals at ascetic practices.

Central to Gnostic speculation was the dualistic conception of the world so much a part of the Greek thought. Man's purpose on earth was to seek redemption through the secret knowledge or gnosis which the Gnostics claimed had been revealed to them alone. Spirits were imprisoned in fleshy bodies, and the key to salvation was to free their spirits from their bodily bondage which could be done by abstaining from sex and adopting an ascetic life. In spite of Christian denunciations of the Gnostics, they exercised great influence upon Christian belief, through such people as Justin Martyr. It was Justin Martyr who described in approving terms a Christian youth who asked surgeons to emasculate him as a protection for bodily purity. He also pointed with pride to those Christians who renounced marriage in order to live in perfect conti-
Justin Martyr’s disciple, Tatian, taught that marriage was corruption and prohibited sexual intercourse, intoxicants, and meats to his Christian followers. With the decline of Gnosticism, it would seem that Christianity should have been able to go through a reassessment of its position and tone down some of its extreme anti-sexuality. That this did not occur was due mainly to the influence of St. Augustine who in responding to a new threat to Christianity, Manicheanism, institutionalized the fear of sex, derived from Greek mythology, into western culture. Manicheanism was based upon the teachings of the prophet Mani (216-277 A.D.) who lived and was crucified in southern Babylonia. He incorporated into his religious beliefs the teachings of the Gnostics, the Christians, the Persian dualistic Zoroastrianism, as well as Greek philosophical ideas as exemplified in the writing of the neo-Pythagoreans and neo-Platonists. Without going into detail about the teachings of the Manicheans, suffice it to say that procreation to the Manicheans was an act of evil since it kept the light imprisoned within the material man. In fact the main purpose of life on earth was to release the light imprisoned in the material body. This could be done in part by eating only bread, vegetables or fruit containing seeds since the liquid was more deeply imprisoned if one ate meat or animal products. The release of light was also deeply affected or impeded by sexual actions because the semen of man contained light. The true Manichean adherents were the Adepts, those who had been able to tame their sexual drives, to refrain from eating flesh, and who had avoided covetousness. Those who believed in the teachings of Mani but were not yet able to become Adepts were regarded as Auditors, men and women of good will who could not yet contain themselves but were trying to do so. In the meantime they supported the Adepts. The rest of mankind were classed as the sensual members of society, totally lost in their wickedness in as much as they had rejected the gospel of Mani.

St. Augustine was an adherent of the Manichean faith for some eleven years but never reached the Adept stage, in large part because of his inability to refrain from sexual intercourse. He remained an Auditor, living with a mistress, and feeling uncomfortable about his inability to control his lustful desires. His prayer each day was for God to give him strength to overcome his sex drives but then he always added, “not yet.” Eventually through family pressure he renounced his mistress, and consented to marriage, but at this juncture he went through a personal crisis which resulted in his conversion to Christianity. He still carried over many of his Manichean ideas about sex with him to Chris-
tianity and in the process incorporated the assumptions of sex negativ-
ism derived from Greek mythology into Christianity. St. Augustine
wrote:
I know nothing which brings the manly mind down from the heights more
than a woman’s caresses and that joining of bodies without which one cannot
have a wife.  

With such attitudes Augustine had difficulty in accepting any kind of sex
in spite of the Jewish tradition to the contrary. He finally accepted sex-
ual intercourse only if it could be justified in terms of procreation.  

Celibacy was the highest good and intercourse was only an animal lust;
in marriage, however, and only in marriage was intercourse justified
because of the need for procreation. It was through procreation that an
evil act became good. If we constructed a scale of the possibilities of
sexual activities from the widest possible latitude to absolute prohibi-
tion, Christianity, at least officially, would approach an absolute prohibi-
tion. Celibacy according to Augustine was preferred, and intercourse
in marriage was tolerated but only for procreation.  

If the preceding description of the sources of Western hostility to sex
is accurate, it would seem that early mythological explanations had a
significant influence upon our sexual attitudes even though Christianity
rejected the myth itself.

There were other models of sexuality for Christianity to draw upon
but the Orphic explanation must have been deeply embedded in the
psyche of many individuals and served a strong societal need since it
was the one which became dominant. Judaism, on the other hand, never
quite adopted this explanation, although it for a time was very strong in
Judaism as evidenced by the Dead Sea Scrolls. Islam, which rose and
spread into Christian areas, discarded the Christian model of sexuality,
turning to a more Jewish model. Though Islamic attitudes are not the
subject of this paper, the fact that they are so different from Christianity
emphasizes the underlying psychological and sociological factors which
must be considered in explaining adoption of various models. Ulti-
mately the prophet Muhammed, the formulator of Islamic attitudes,
broke the Augustinian pattern. He has been quoted as saying:

Coition is one of the causes of the preservation of health. Let him among you
who is in a condition for having sufficient copulation marry; marriage gives
moderation . . . and more obligatorily turns one from incest and adultery.  

Just how different the Muslims were is evident in their story of creation
where according to the Koran Allah created man from dust, earth, drops
of semen, and congealed blood.  

With a belief in the existence of semen in Allah, it would seem inevitable that Islam would have a different
attitude toward intercourse. As the Koran states:
Your woman are a tilth (field) for you (to cultivate) so go to your tilth as ye will, and send (good deeds) before you for your souls, and fear Allah, and know that ye will (one day) meet Him. Give glad tidings to believers (O Muhammed). Even in Islam, however, the Orphic explanation had influence but instead of becoming the dominant voice in Islam as it did in western Christianity, it surfaced primarily among the Sufis, and left the main body of Islam comparatively untouched.

The western attitudes toward sex as expressed by St. Augustine, however, are not simply a matter of dualism. Dualism can lead to rather different interpretations but once the conflict motif was set in the Orphic mythology western thought returns again and again to this conflict. Taoism had as much influence on Chinese thought about sexuality as Orphism had on the West. Instead of visualizing a conflict between the spiritual and the material, Taoism held to the inherent unity of opposing forces. Man was a microcosmos functioning the same way as the macrocosmos with the sexual union of the male and female symbolizing a repetition of the interaction of heaven and earth. The I Ching, the oldest of the Chinese classics, stated:

There is an intermingling of the genial influence of heaven and earth, and transformation in its various forms abundantly proceeds. There is an intercommunication of seeds between male and female, and transformation in its living types proceeds. As in western thought heaven was regarded as masculine while the earth was feminine but the simile was carried further. Clouds came to be looked upon as the vaginal secretions or the lining of the womb necessary for allowing the heavenly sperm, the rain, into the earth womb, and it was from the union of these two forces that all life derived.

Various words were used by the Chinese to describe these dual cosmic forces but by the sixth century B.C. the terms yin and yang had come to dominate. Yang was heaven, yin was earth, yang was the sun, yin was the moon, yang was male, yin was female. The two forces came together by intercourse, the universal principle of life. In the I Ching, the hexagram symbolizing sexual union was a combination of the triagram k’an (water, clouds, or woman) on top and the triagram li (fire, light or man) on the bottom.
The hexagram indicated that everything was in its proper place with the strong lines in the strong places, and the weak lines in the weak places, emphasizing the combination of perfect harmony of man and woman complementing and completing each other.\textsuperscript{32}

In effect, sexual union of man and woman was like the intermingling of heaven and earth and was essential to achieve harmony as well as a happy and healthy sex life. The operation of these two opposing forces produced all universal phenomena, and determined human conduct. Though male and female were dominated by different essences, within each sex there was both yin and yang. Still the yin essence was most important in woman and the yang in men. The body’s surface was yang, the interior yin; yang was the back part, yin the front. Yin was in the liver, heart, spleen, lungs, and kidneys, while yang was in the gall bladder, stomach, large intestines, small intestine, and the “warmer,” a term difficult to define but which has been interpreted by some modern scholars to refer to the lymphatic system.\textsuperscript{33}

At birth an individual was filled with the principle of primordial yang and yin, although the yang content was comparable to the sun at its winter solstice. As the body matured the yang increased until it reached a peak as the sun did at the summer solstice, after which it began to wane. The yin essence on the other hand would continue to increase even after the yang began to decline unless positive steps were taken and death was caused by the imbalance of yin and yang. The key to the retention of yang was by using special techniques in intercourse. These techniques were called “the method of nourishing the life by means of the Yin and Yang” (yin yang yang seng chih tao). The basic aim was to conserve as much of the seminal essence (ching) and the divine element (shen) by causing the ching to return (huan ching). Thus sexual intercourse was not frowned upon as in the West, but accepted wholeheartedly as absolutely essential to man’s well-being.

During intercourse it was essential that the male bring his female partner to orgasm in order that he would receive yin essence from her. When a man felt his orgasm coming, he closes his eyes and concentrates his thoughts, he presses his tongue against the roof of his mouth, bends his back and stretches his neck. He opens his nostrils wide and squares his shoulders, closes his mouth and sucks in his breath. Then (he will not ejaculate and) the semen will ascend inwards on its own account. A man can completely regulate his ejaculations. When having intercourse with women he should only emit semen two or three times in ten.\textsuperscript{34}

The more yin essence the male received from the female without giving out his precious male substance the greater his strength would grow.
Thus the mystical practices taught by Taoism involved what we know as *coitus reservatus*, keeping the penis in the female vagina but avoiding orgasm by becoming quiescent as the orgasm approaches. For those unable to do this, although apparently the technique can be learned, the Taoists taught another method of preserving the male semen, the *huan ching pu nao*, literally making the *ching* or semen return to nourish the brain. At the moment of ejaculation pressure was exerted on the urethra between the scrotum and the rectum, thus diverting the seminal secretion into the bladder where it would later be voided with the excreted urine. The Taoists, however, did not understand modern physiology. Instead they believed that by this method, accompanied by positive thinking, the seminal essence could be made to ascend and rejuvenate or revivify the upper parts of the body.\(^5\)

To explain the secrets of intercourse there were a number of manuals collectively called the *fang chung*, literally “inside the bedchamber” or *fang-chung-shu*, the “art of the bedchamber.” An early explanatory note dating from the Han dynasty states

The Art of the Bedchamber constitutes the climax of human emotions, it encompasses the Supreme Way (Tao). Therefore the Saint Kings of antiquity regulated man’s outer pleasures in order to restrain his inner passions and made detailed rules for sexual intercourse. An old record says: “The ancients created sexual pleasure thereby to regulate all human affairs.” If one regulates his sexual pleasure he will feel at peace and attain a high age. If, on the other hand, one abandons himself to its pleasure disregarding the rules set forth in the above mentioned treatises one will fall ill and harm one’s very life.\(^6\)

Tung-hsüan, an early sex expert, added:

Of all things that make man prosper none can be compared to sexual intercourse. It is modeled after Heaven and takes its pattern by Earth, it regulates Yin and rules Yang. Those who understand its significance can nurture their nature and prolong their years; those who miss its true meaning will harm themselves and die before their time.\(^7\)

Unlike in the West, sex was regarded in a positive fashion. The art of love not only brought pleasure to the participants but it served as an act of piety since heaven itself made love, overlying the earth, as the male lay upon the female, warming her with his heat, and making her fruitful with his fluid.

The male element gets the female one and is converted; the female element gets the male one and is moved. The female element and the male element must operate in mutuality. Therefore, if the male (penis) feels, firm and strong, and the female (vagina) moves, open and extended, two life forces exchange emissions and flowing liquids penetrate mutuality.\(^8\)

The Taoist tradition was only one of many traditions in China, and as
Confucianism and later Buddhism grew more powerful, the Taoist sexual explanation became a secret known only to adepts. In spite of this, it became a major factor in influencing Chinese sex practices. This article is not the place to further explore Chinese sexual practices but rather only to indicate how Chinese mythological dualism differed from Western, and how sex attitudes differed from the West.

There was also a dualism within Hinduism and the sexual union of the male and female symbolized the dichotomy that existed in the absolute between Siva, the male, and Sakti, the female, or between Krishna and his beloved Radha. In its mystical meaning the female pudenda (yoni) was the sacred field in which the seed of all creatures was planted and nourished. It was the emblem of the ultimate, the keeper of the great mysteries. Symbolically the sexual parts of the female were compared to the sacrificial ceremonies, specifically the hips and haunches to the sacrificial grounds, the pudenda to the altar, pubic hair to the grass, and sexual intercourse itself represented a high form of worship. Such descriptions are repeated in various form in the *Upanishads*, the basic philosophic texts upon which all orthodox schools of Hinduism are based:

Woman, verily, O Gautama, is the sacrificial fire; of this the sexual organ is the fuel, what invites is the smoke, the vulva is the flame, what is done inside is the coals, the pleasures the sparks. In this fire the gods offer (the libation of) semen; from this offering arises the foetus.39

Sexual symbolism also appears throughout early Hindu literature to express other religious and philosophical ideas:

He who dwells in the semen, is other than the semen, whom the semen does not know, whose body the semen is, who controls the semen from within, that is your self, the inner controller, the immortal. He is never seen but is the seer, he is never heard but is the hearer. He is never perceived, but is the perceiver. He is never thought but is the thinker. There is no other seer but he, there is no other hearer but he, there is no other perceiver but he, there is no other thinker but he. He is your self, the inner controller, the immortal.40

The Great Brahman is a womb for me, in which I cast the seed. From that, O descendant of Bharata! is the birth of all things. Of the bodies, O Son of Kunti! which are born from all wombs, the (main womb) is the great Brahman, and I (am) the father, the giver of the seed. Goodness, passion, darkness, these qualities form from nature.41

Inevitably with this kind of symbolism so widespread the sexual act was regarded as a kind of psycho-spiritual communion. The rich deep fulfillment of love between a man and a woman was a condition of happiness so natural, so simple, yet so real, that it was the best of all earthly conditions. Sex in its transcendent and esoteric side revealed to man the
hidden truth of the universe. It thus became possible to obtain redemption \( (mukti) \) through \( bhukti \) (pleasure). Copulation itself, if practiced the right way, brought about supernatural powers \( (siddhi) \), but to achieve this it was necessary to transcend the carnal state of sexual activity, in effect to remove passion. When this state had been achieved sexual union represented the microcosm of the macrocosm of divine creation, and the sex act was a rite for spiritual enlightenment.

The first step in attaining this enlightenment was for the man to conceive of himself as the male deity, then by \( nyasa \) (worship) he transfigured his partner until she became the \( sakti \) or his divine female counterpart and the consecrated field for his operation. The pair then united, physically, mentally, and spiritually. It was in this aspect of sex that Hindu cultism is most active, with each esoteric cult stipulating different ways of preparing for this mystical union.

Hindu mythology taught that the literature of love and sex was of divine origin based upon the collection of all knowledge that had been compiled in some 100,000 chapters by Prajāpati, the supreme god, creator of heaven and earth. The earliest extant treatise we have is the \( Kāmasūtra \) of Vātsyāya which dates from the fifth century A.D. According to tradition Vātsyāya was an ascetic celibate who wrote his masterpiece based on those of the seven sages without the benefit of any personal experience. It is more or less an encyclopedic survey of the ways of women written to enable men to get the maximum pleasure out of sexual activities. Its chapters cover most aspects and techniques of human courtship and mating, and the book formed the basis for most of the later Hindu writing on the subject. The treatise was so widely read and Vātsyāya’s authority so widely recognized that he came to be considered a \( Rishi \) (inspired sage) by the Hindus and the \( Kāmasūtra \) itself to be the condensation of the revelation of the gods about the sex acts.\footnote{Comparative Civilizations Review, Vol. 6 [1981], No. 6, Art. 4}

Following the \( Kāmasūtra \), a number of other erotic manuals were compiled, a half dozen or so of which have survived. Next to the \( Kāmasūtra \) the treatise which is best known to western readers is the \( Ananga Ranga \), or the \( Theater of the Love God \) compiled in the fifteenth century by Kalyanamalla. With the Gods setting the pattern both by their explicit instructions to mankind and by their sexual adventures, sensuality and sexuality could be given much freer reign in India than it could in the West. Sex had several purposes, not the least of which was procreation, since all good Hindus were supposed to have sons. Sex, however, was also for pleasure, for power, and for magical purposes. In the various sex manuals little attention is given to sex for procreation while considerable attention is given to the other aspects of sexual intercourse, most particularly sex for pleasure.\footnote{Comparative Civilizations Review, Vol. 6 [1981], No. 6, Art. 4} Pleasure, however, is defined from
a male point of view: women primarily are regarded as voluptuous creatures who are fair game for the more predatory male.

The Hindus regarded the semen or bindu the quintessence of all manifested thing. The Upanishads stated:

The earth, verily, is the essence of all these beings; of earth (the essence is) water; of water (the essence is) plants; of plants (the essence is) flowers; of flowers (the essence is) fruits; of fruits (the essence is) the man; of man (the essence is) semen. "

Semen existed throughout the body in subtle form but only under the influence of the procreative will could it be withdrawn and concentrated in gross form in the sex organs. Hinduism taught that every man and every woman contained within himself or herself both male and female principles. A man was a male only because of the excess of the principles of masculinity while a woman had an excess of femininity. This maleness and femaleness remained in conflict within the individual and could only be harmonized for very brief periods during sexual intercourse when the couple realized the Absolute. Then the Absolute was only reached because each had lost consciousness of his or her own sex and found the other. According to esoteric Hindu belief the Supreme Being is one complete sex, possessing both the male and the female principle, and thus intercourse enabled one to overcome the dualism of nature. In sum while Hinduism also had some of the same dualistic elements as Christianity, it utilized sex to overcome them.

It was not so much dualism per se in the West which led to hostility to sex, but the western interpretation of this dualism which appeared in the earliest mythology. Obviously this mythological explanation must have been important in resolving a critical problem in western culture; once the solution to this problem had been set it was incorporated into the new age of science and philosophy which replaced it. These seemed true of the other cultures as well. Once a "fear" of sex had been established in the West, interpreters tended to seize ideas and attitudes which fitted into its sex negative culture, and though the intellectual justification of the culture changed, it retained the same sex negative attitudes. People in the West continued to engage in sexual intercourse, but they probably suffered more guilt in doing so than any of the other cultural groupings.

Dualism Today

One of the more fascinating aspects of mythology is the survival and adaptation of the basic concepts in different settings, even so-called
scientific ones. The Augustinian interpretation of the Orphic mytholo-
gical dualism was first supplemented and then supplanted by a new scien-
tific interpretation which can be summarized briefly.

Until the eighteenth century, the medical community looked upon sex
in rather dispassionate terms, more or less clinically describing what
was regarded as the physiological aspects of sexuality. As the eight-
teenth century enlightenment undermined some of the religious as-
sumptions about society in general, science, primarily in the form of
medicine, was looked up to as a way of providing a new basis for sexual
morality. Both physicians and lay persons seized upon existing scien-
tific data to give new force to the old Christian viewpoint.

The foundation for this effort may be seen as early as Herman
Boerhaave who in his *Institutiones medicae* (1728) gave a moral tone to
the simple observation about the effects of orgasm on the male, arguing
that a "rash expenditure of semen brings on a lassitude, a feebleness, a
weakening of motion, fits, wasting, dryness, fevers, aching of the cere-
bral membranes, obscuring of the senses and above all the eyes, a decay
of the spinal chord, a fatuity, and other like evils." Another founda-
tion stone for the new medical attitude toward sex was the medical
philosophy known as brunonianism developed by John Brown in his
*Elements of Medicine*. Brown held that all bodily states were explained
either by excitability or lack of excitability. Too little stimulation and
too much stimulation led to two different kinds of disease: those arising
from excessive excitement and those from deficient excitement. Mutual
contact of the sexes as it took place in kissing or fondling gave an
impetuosity to the nerves which intercourse itself could relieve, provid-
ing it was not engaged into too frequently. Frequent intercourse, how-
ever, released too much energy, and excessive loss of semen was some-
thing to be avoided.

The third major builder of the new sexual ethic was a Swiss physi-
cian, Simon Tissot, who published a monograph on masturbation in
1758. Tissot believed that physical bodies suffered a continual waste
and that unless the losses were replaced, death would follow. Normally
much of the wastage was restored through nutrition, but even with an
adequate diet the body could waste away through diarrhea, loss of
blood, and most importantly for our purposes, through seminal emis-

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human race would die out, but the male had to carefully husband his semen, making absolutely certain that any loss went toward the purpose of procreation. Frequent intercourse was dangerous, but most dangerous was that loss of semen not aimed toward procreation. Though Tissot used the term "masturbation" to describe such activity, masturbation for him included all sexual activities not leading to procreation. Inevitably continued loss of semen would lead to (a) cloudiness of ideas even to the point of madness, (b) decay of bodily powers eventually resulting in coughs, fevers, and consumption (i.e. tuberculosis), (c) acute pain in the head, rheumatic pains, and aching numbness, (d) pimplies on the face, suppurring blisters upon the nose, breast, and thighs as well as painful itching, (e) eventual weakness of the power of generation as indicated by impotence, premature ejaculation, gonorrhea, priapism, and tumors in the bladder, and (f) disorders of the intestines, constipation, hemorrhoids, and so forth.

Females who engaged in non procreative sex were affected in much the same way as males, but in addition would be subject to hysterical fits, incurable jaundice, violent cramps in the stomach, pains in the nose, ulceration of the cervix, and to the uterine tremors that deprived them of decency and reason, lowered them to the level of the most lascivious brutes, and caused them to love women more than men.47 In short we have a new kind of dualism in which sex not for procreation is bad.

Obviously not all medical writers agreed with Tissot, but Tissot's ideas were seized upon by significant segments of the medical and lay community, and his ideas were used to give a new impetus to the need for celibacy. Since I have written upon this subject elsewhere in some detail48 I here only want to summarize. One of the areas where the medical ideas become significant was in the woman's movement of the last half of the nineteenth century. The nucleus of this can be illustrated by quoting the writings of Mrs. Elizabeth Osgood Goodrich Willard. Ms. Willard compared regular sexual activity to a man piling up bricks and then throwing them down, or to a man beating the wind with his fist. "A sexual orgasm," she wrote, "is much more debilitating to the system than a whole day's work."

It is this constant abuse of the sexual organs, producing constant failures and the most loathsome diseases; it is this ridiculous farce of a strong man putting forth all the nervous energy of his system, til he is perfectly prostrated by the effort, without one worthy motive, purpose or end; it is this which has so disgraced the act of impregnation. When human beings are generated under such conditions, it is no wonder they go through life as criminals, without a
single good purpose of deed, and where all sense of shame is not lost, hanging their heads as if ashamed of their existence.

She then added

We must stop this waste through the sexual organs, if we would have health and strength of body. Just as sure as that the excessive abuse of the sexual organs destroy their power and use, producing inflammation, disease and corruption, just so sure is it that a less amount of abuse in the same relative proportion, injures the parental function of the organs, and impairs the health and strength of the whole system. Abnormal action is abuse.  

Further popularizing the dangers of sex were such "scientific" writers as Sylvester Graham, the inventor of Graham flour and J. H. Kellogg, the inventor of corn flakes and the founder of the Battle Creek Sanitarium. Kellogg aimed his guns at the masturbator who, he wrote, could be easily identified by his or her general debility, consumption-like symptoms, premature and defective development, sudden changes in disposition, lassitude, sleeplessness, failure of mental capacity, fickleness, untrustworthiness, and a hundred other symptoms. The culmination was perhaps reached in the English physician William Acton (1871) who taught that the emission of semen imposed such a great drain on the nervous system that the only way a male could avoid damage was to engage in sex infrequently and then without prolonging the sex act. Acton went so far as to claim that males were enabled to do this because females had been made by God to be indifferent to sex. It was this female indifference which prevented the male's vital sexual energy from being overly expended. Only out of fear that their husband would desert them for courtesans or prostitutes did most women waive their own inclinations and submit to their husband's ardent embraces. Women's reluctance forced their husbands to perform the necessary biological duty of reproduction in as expeditious a way as possible, thus avoiding severe damage to the nervous system.

But why, if sexual activity was so harmful, had not generations of individuals become insane? How had mankind managed to survive? Those concerned with the new "scientific findings" about sex had an answer to that question, namely that the growing complexities of "modern civilization" and the higher evolutionary development of humanity posed special problems. One of the popularizers of this idea was the physician George M. Beard (1884) who argued that "modern" civilization had put such increased stress upon mankind that larger and larger numbers of people were suffering from nervous exhaustion. Such exhaustion, he held, was particularly great among the educated brainy workers in society who represented a higher stage on the evolutionary
scale than the less advanced social classes; and thus as man advanced it became more and more necessary to save his own nervous energy.\textsuperscript{53}

Pulling all of these ideas together was the nineteenth century sex expert Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1894) whose \textit{Psychopathia Sexualis} is still in print and sometimes regarded as the scientific last word by those who should know better. Krafft-Ebing believed that sexuality was the "most important factor in social existence, the strongest incentive to the exertion of strength and acquisition of property, to the foundation of a home, and to the awakening of altruistic feelings, first for a person of the opposite sex, then for the offspring, and in a wider sense for all humanity.\textsuperscript{54}" The problem was for man to restrain his sexual drive, and for this purpose religion, law, education, and morality had been created by civilized man to help bridle his passion. In spite of such help man was always in danger of sinking from the clear height of pure, chaste love into the mire of common sensuality. To retain his morality man had to fight a constant struggle with natural impulses. "Only characters endowed with strong wills are able to completely emancipate themselves from sensuality and share in that pure love from which spring the noblest joys of human life.\textsuperscript{55}" For Krafft-Ebing all non procreative sex was a disease, a pathological condition, and while few escaped all forms of contagion, most could overcome minor cases. In severe cases, however, a permanent pathological condition resulted.

Even today, in spite of the so-called sexual revolution, traditional sexual attitudes are dominant. Though they might not have the force of science behind them, few people in the sex field are willing to ignore thousands of years of traditions. Sex for pleasure is perhaps more acceptable than in the past, but vast numbers of people still suffer guilt feelings about it, and the dualism inherited from Greek mythology is a major force in preserving these feelings to guilt.

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\textbf{NOTES}


4. There were several pioneering studies made in the nineteenth century of these Greek influences upon Christianity although the sexual aspects were not so emphasized. The most influential was Adolf Harnack's Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte, first published in 1886 and translated into English under the title of The History of Dogma by Neil Buchanan (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1895-1903). There was a one volume summary of the work made by Harnack himself and entitled Outlines of the History of Dogma, first published in English in 1893 and since often republished including a 1957 paperback edition by Beacon Press of Boston. Also important was Edwin Hatch, The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity, first delivered as the Hibbert Lectures in 1888. This has also been republished with a new introduction and invaluable bibliography by Frederick C. Grant (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957). Another important work was by Joseph Ward Swain, The Hellenic Origins of Christian Asceticism (New York: privately printed, 1916), a reprint of his Ph.D. thesis at Columbia University. More recently the subject has received attention by Johannes Leipold, Griechische Philosophie und Frühchristliche Askese (Berlin: Akademia Verlag, 1961), and most importantly by Emil Brunner, The Divine Imperative (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947) pp. 364 ff. There are many others.


7. See Jane Harrison, Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion (reprinted New York: Meridian Books, 1955), Chapters IX, X, XI. There has been considerable scholarly research into the Orphic mysteries since Professor Harrison first wrote, but her work serves as a starting point for the source material on Orphism, even when her specific interpretations have been challenged. For a classical reference see Plato, Cratylus, translated by H. N. Fowler (London: William Heinemann, 1953), 400C.


12. Ibid., 250-53.


28. Koran, XXII (The Pilgrimage), 5: XXIII (The Believers), 14. There are various translations of the *Koran* into English, none of them official, since it is forbidden to translate it. I have relied mostly upon the translation of Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall because it was fairly widely distributed (New York: New American Library, 1953), although I have also consulted other versions.

29. Koran, II (The Cow, 223).


32. *I Ching*, LXIII

33. The warmer is difficult to define. The Chinese believed there were three of them and they were in charge of the water ways and gave the necessary life warmth to the kidneys. The first warmer was said to be located in the front part of the body with its opening in the chest; the second started at the center of the chest and reached down toward the abdomen; the third was situated in the abdominal area. Professor Franz Hübottter, *Chinesisch-Tibetische Pharmakologie*
(Ulm, 1957) theorized that the warmer might well be interpreted as the lymphatic system since the main trunk of the lymphatic vessels, the thoracic duct, extends up through the thorax and opens into the left subclavian vein. See Heinrich Wallnöffer and Anne van Rottauscher, Chinese Folk Medicine, translated by Marion Palmedo (New York: Crown Publishers, 1965), pp. 10-12.

34. R. H. Van Gulik, Sexual Life in Ancient China (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1961) pp. 131-32. Van Gulik is the great authority on Chinese sexual practices and without his pioneering work this section could not be written.


37. For a complete translation into English and Latin of the manual attributed to Tung-hsüan see Van Gulik, op. cit., pp. 125-34. The quotation is from Section I, p. 125.

38. This quotation comes from the Ishimpo (The Essence of the Medical Prescriptions), the oldest extant Japanese work on medicine but representing a Chinese tradition. The original compilation was made by Tamba Yasuyori, a Chinese physician living in Japan in the late tenth century. The sexual portions have been translated into English by Akira Ishihara and Howard S. Levy under the Title of The Tao of Sex (Yokohama: Shibundō, 1968), and this is from chapter I, pp. 19-20.


44. Bridhadaranyaka Upanishad, VI, 4.1, op. cit., p. 321.


47. The English translation of his work was entitled *Onanism: or a Treatise Upon the Disorders of Masturbation*, translated A. Hume (London: J. Pridden, 1766).


55. Ibid., p. 5.