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978-1-107-00491-7 - The Sex of Men in Premodern Europe: A Cultural History

Patricia Simons

Excerpt

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Introduction

When Elena Cumano's maid first purchased wax figurines to aid Elena in wooing back her husband, something vital was missing. In 1588, the Inquisitors at Venice heard that the maid had been sent out one morning to a respected votive maker, whose revision to his usual statuette was satisfactory because it was returned with "a virile member and testicles."¹ Nothing less would do, because the efficacy of love magic was at stake. The wax specialist overcame the deficiency by adding beans, which formed two testicles placed either side of another *fava*.² Notably, full manhood had to be signified, and through a complete set of genitals supplied by a hill of beans that amounted to something.

The morphology of the phallus, which can be defined as a culturally weighted sign of masculine power, is based on the male genitals (usually in a significantly exaggerated way), and it has come to be regarded in modern dictionaries and popular culture as the symbol of the penis alone, or the erect penis, or simply to be an alternative word for that organ. However, the premodern phallus encompassed the male genitals *in toto*, and for people like Elena and the votive maker testicular signifiers necessarily accompanied the penis. In the words of Michel Foucault, when summarizing medical theory of the first and second centuries but presenting a view that I will show long ruled, and in a broad range of languages and materials, "the male is preeminent because he is the spermatic animal *par excellence*."³ Citing the authority of a renowned physiologist, the provincial French physician Jacques Duval opined in 1612 that "man is entirely semen."⁴ I argue that the best model for early modern masculine anatomy and

¹ Guido Ruggiero, *Binding passions: tales of magic, marriage, and power at the end of the Renaissance* (Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 71.

² The smooth, round bean (*fava*) was a commonplace in the obscene lexicon: Valter Boggione and Giovanni Casalegno, *Dizionario storico del lessico erotico italiano* (Milan: Longanesi, 1996), pp. 295–96. It also produced wind that was linked with pneumatic ejaculation.

³ Michel Foucault, *The history of sexuality*, 3 vols., trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981–86), vol. III, p. 112.

⁴ Jacques Duval, *Des hermaphrodites* (Rouen: David Geuffroy, 1612), "Advertissement au lecteur": "*homo totus semen est*."

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patriarchal action was projection, from protruding beans to external genitalia and ejaculation, from medical theory into the world of public exploits and commercial aggression.

This book is about the neglected realm of semenotics, a neologism I have coined to suggest that in premodern Europe there was substantial meaning (or semiotic valence) to three non-penile factors: semen, testicles and what was considered the concomitant matter of innately masculine “heat.” The word’s tongue-in-cheek reference to semiotics tries to evoke the humor of various jokes and images made about the adult male body from ancient Greece to the mid-seventeenth century. With some attention to classical and medieval precedents, I concentrate on the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Italy, but with examples drawn from England, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain. In large part, the communality is due to broad-reaching ideological institutions like the Church and medical learning, but also to the circulation of oral traditions and the movement of people, books and other objects between linguistic groups through such conduits as warfare, trade, adventure and education. Also key was a distinctive rise in translations and the spread of literature, knowledge and images through print technology.

Although it can be said that “bodies are local,” as Mary Fissell has stated, there are other ways in which those bodies are inflected by and impact upon broader material cultures.⁵ Regional differences – the German interest in the scatological, for example, or the Italian fascination with anal copulation – are not the focus here because I am elucidating wide-ranging cultural patterns. So too religious differences do not feature because, overall, Catholic, Protestant and Jewish systems shared standard medical models (inherited from the ancient Greeks) and hence certain cultural metaphors. One emphasis here is the degree of continuity, revival or adaptation from antiquity, evident not only at the elite Latinate level during the Renaissance but also in “popular” or vernacular forms such as ribald word play and creatures on secular badges (figs. 10–13). Of course, not all vernaculars generated exactly the same jokes and images, but the overlap is striking, whether in the phallic form inherited from antiquity or numerous verbal and pictorial references in different regions to semen as coin, for example, or soup and sauce, from ancient Greece to seventeenth-century Holland. Artifacts like illustrated anatomical books, bollock knives and phallic drinking vessels (figs. 23, 30–32, 44) were used in more than one linguistic region, and codpieces (figs. 16–18) were an international fashion.

⁵ Mary Fissell, *Vernacular bodies: the politics of reproduction in early modern England* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 248. One example that requires more than “local” knowledge: the ballad of 1633 discussed on p. 217 is actually a variant on the theme of Shooting at Father’s Corpse, which circulated through Europe in story and image from the twelfth century. The variations evident in the lyrics and image are “local” while larger issues like fidelity and inheritance amongst men are premodern.

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Differing ideas co-existed, mingled and held on. Scholars often characterize their object of study as new, yet such claims sometimes betray a lack of understanding regarding historical precedents. The long premodern focus on semen waned and the age of sperm began over the course of the second half of the seventeenth century with the rise of new anatomical research and the aid of the microscope. At the end of the sixteenth century, resistance was mounted against the notion that male and female reproductive systems were anatomical inversions of each other (what has been called since 1990 the one-sex model). Notably, these two intellectual changes occurred many decades apart, and there seems little point in selecting either as the key signal of the modern era to come. Instead, I suggest, it is more fruitful to concentrate on the premodern endurance of a semen-centered and humoral way of conceiving of sexed bodies, and the ways in which those ideas produced non-modern notions of masculinity and of sexual action and pleasure.

Even so, the ongoing existence of particular traditions and images does not indicate an unchanging, ahistorical understanding of human bodies. Whereas Foucault focused on medico-legal theories and practices, my study of the history of masculinity includes not only that field but also turns to vernacular, material and cultural history, to lived metaphor and what I will call “social iconography.” This is about the mutual feedback loop and reinforcement between imagery and its context, in which the imaginative construction of metaphors and signs to convey meaning is informed by social and ideological assumptions, everyday activities, familiar objects and corporeal experiences more than by elite knowledge and textual sources alone.⁶ Sexual metaphors were often grounded in an understanding of the adult male body’s fluids, heat and projective more than penetrative capacity. It was best to marry, argued Martin Luther in 1522, because “if it does not pour into flesh, it will pour into your shirt,” choosing a verb that applied only to fluids.⁷

In 1990 Thomas Laqueur claimed that “it is probably not possible to write a history of man’s body and its pleasures because the historical record was created in a cultural tradition where no such history was necessary.”⁸ Indeed, it is the case that, always with great expenditure, patriarchal systems strive to maintain the perfect male body as the stable term against which female bodies are

⁶ According to Guido Ruggiero, “Introduction,” the essays in Sara Matthews-Grieco (ed.), *Erotic cultures of Renaissance Italy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010) also show the omnipresence of erotic culture and the intertwining of licit and illicit. This book reached me too late for anything more than cursory use.

⁷ Gerard Strauss, *Luther’s house of learning* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 103: “fleusset es nicht ynn das fleisch, sso flusset es ynns hembt” (but my translation). The verb is *fliessen*, to flow, pour, gush.

⁸ Thomas Laqueur, *Making sex: body and gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 22.

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measured. However, much of the anxiety discerned in current interpretations of the history of masculinity only comes to the fore due to the ongoing assumption that phallic stability is the ideal state and that anything less proves male vulnerability. The phallus is posited as universal, fixed and always-already hegemonic, whereas I point to ways in which it can be historicized and redefined. If it were to be thought of as less central to everyone's desire and more historically contingent, the phallus could not undergird patriarchal domination or the logocentric privileging of a certain construction of masculinity.

A plethora of sophisticated studies have emerged recently on the history and character of masculinity, but I believe it is time to return to men's physical bodies and consider them as performers of power more than vessels of anxiety, situated in a particular rather than universal set of discourses that engaged anatomy, physiology, metaphors, festivities, jokes and images in a very material way. Since Laqueur's claim was made, histories of the penis, of circumcision, castration and impotence have been written, and authors have chiefly considered male bodies when studying masturbation.⁹ Over the last several decades, scholars have studied the premodern system of humoral medicine and bodily fluids like blood and milk, but semen remains little investigated.¹⁰ The few studies that have begun to acknowledge the importance of semen and testicles have not grasped the broader historical context and full ramifications.¹¹ I argue that the central tenets of the semen-centric system illuminate the sex of premodern men in two senses, morphological and performative, one could say, for the principles were central to both the understanding of male genitals and sexed

⁹ For example, David Gollaher, *Circumcision* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Gary Taylor, *Castration: an abbreviated history of western manhood* (New York: Routledge, 2000); David Friedman, *A mind of its own: a cultural history of the penis* (New York: The Free Press, 2001); Thomas Laqueur, *Solitary sex: a cultural history of masturbation* (New York: Zone, 2003); Leonard Glick, *Marked in your flesh: circumcision from ancient Judea to modern America* (Oxford University Press, 2005). For impotence, see Ch. 2 below.

¹⁰ Studies of the modern representation of sperm include Emily Martin, "The egg and the sperm: how science constructed a romance based on stereotypical male-female roles," *Signs* 16 (1991), 485-501; Lisa Jean Moore, *Sperm counts* (New York University Press, 2007). On blood and milk see Peggy McCracken, *The curse of Eve, the wound of the hero: blood, gender and medieval literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Rebecca Zorach, *Blood, milk, ink, gold: abundance and excess in the French Renaissance* (University of Chicago Press, 2005); Bettina Bildhauer, *Medieval blood* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful blood: theology and practice in late medieval northern Germany and beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

¹¹ See Gianna Pomata, "Vollkommen oder verdorben? Der männliche Samen im frühneuzeitlichen Europa," *L'Homme* 6 (1995), 59-85; Taylor, *Castration*; Rebecca Ann Bach, "Tennis balls: Henry V and testicular masculinity, or, according to the OED, Shakespeare doesn't have any balls," *Renaissance Drama* 30 (2001), 3-23; Sarah Toulalan, *Imagining sex: pornography and bodies in seventeenth-century England* (Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 72-77; Cathy McClive, "Masculinity on trial: penises, hermaphrodites and the uncertain male body in early modern France," *History Workshop Journal* 68 (2009), 45-68.

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identity, and to acts of sex. Rather than focus on objects of desire, my study considers the imagining and enacting of physical desire more broadly.

I sketch out a synoptic framework, integrating metaphor and medicine, erotic imagery and practice, representation and experience in order to show that male and female bodies were ontologically distinct and unequal in both medical theory and political reality. Yet they were also interconnected categories according to premodern schemes of medical thought and cultural representation. Often overlooked material like carnival songs, drinking vessels, diaries and obscene badges is placed alongside mainstream anatomical illustration and high-end paintings such as Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (fig. 33), where the goddess is wafted to shore by foamy waves which, I will show, signal the myth's focus on parthenogenesis by semen.

The importance of semenotics

The inseminating fluid that Aristotle defined for European medicine as “vital spirit,” comprised of fluid and “air” (*pneuma*), was fundamental to premodern notions of masculinity. Considered essential for virility and sexual pleasure (male and female) as well as reproduction, in some ways semen played the role now granted to the hormone testosterone, regarded as the marker of libido, vigor and strength. But the testicles where semen was thought to be either produced or stored were also essential. Medical authors well into the seventeenth and even eighteenth centuries echoed the belief that the testicles “witness strength and man-hood.”¹² Virility was located in the semen-producing testicles rather than the penis. The latter was a delivery system (figs. 29–31), “principally ordained that it might cast seed into the bottom of the Womb” as Johann Vesling's popular textbook of anatomy summarized standard opinion in 1641. The state of naturally more “heated” male bodies was a third crucial element, for it led to the exterior situation of male genitals, the extrusion of male hair like beards and the proper concoction then expulsion of semen.

Hence, the Catholic Church scrutinized three criteria when considering charges of male impotence: erection (caused by semen and its spirit), penetration (important for the uterine placement of seed) and ejaculation (caused by the build up of heated semen).¹³ Significantly, the capacity to father children was not a factor, and the same principles informed the opinion of most civil

¹² Johann Vesling, *Syntagma anatomicum*, 2nd edn. (Padua: Pauli Frambotti, 1651), p. 62; Johann Vesling, *The anatomy of the body of man: wherein is exactly described every part thereof, in the same manner as it is commonly shewed in publick anatomies*, trans. Nicholas Culpeper (London: Peter Cole, 1653), p. 23, hereafter quoted from p. 25 (p. 64 in the Latin edn.).

¹³ Joseph Bajada, *Sexual impotence: the contribution of Paolo Zacchia (1584–1659)* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1988), pp. 15, 20. The exact weighting of these three factors was much debated.

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lawyers.¹⁴ Beyond marriage, Christianity through Christ's body established a male ideal that was only potentially generative. Divinity incarnate and necessarily male, his sex was commonly visualized by way of a babe's naked genitals, as Leo Steinberg pointed out in his classic study on the "sexuality of Christ."¹⁵ He wisely avoided the term "phallus" on the whole and referred accurately to the penis as a specific organ or more often used terms like genitals, genitalia, privy parts or groin, which encompassed what was considered the full manly apparatus. Rather than sexuality, Steinberg really considered Christ's sex, as a sign of God's advent in human, mortal flesh, and thus the chaste savior's anatomy was not exceptional.

Humoral medicine was central to the understanding of all male bodies. This medical system of explanation and treatment operated for millennia, explored by the ancient Greek Hippocratics during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, then elaborated and synthesized by the renowned second-century CE physician Galen. Bodies were conceived of in terms of humors, that is, certain fluids and their fluxes, the balance of which determined health and temperament. It was believed that humors governed emotions but also that passions could be somewhat controlled, chiefly by managing the "non-naturals" like diet, rest and sexual activity (especially in men whose ideal masculinity centered on rationality and constancy). What modern culture has, until recently, divided into the separate spheres of psychology and physiology were instead interactive elements in a complex *soma*. While semen was not one of the four humors, it was a crucial fluid mainly concocted from the most vital humor, blood; a build up of semen gave rise to sexual desire, and its management was a crucial aspect of men's health.

The humoral system underpinned a Neoplatonic analogy for divine love offered by the Jewish physician Leone Ebreo written around 1501–02.¹⁶ In his *Dialoghi d'amore* the "paternal love of Heaven" was likened to the motions and humoral processes of human reproduction. The feminine body of Earth was vivified and impregnated through the intromission and reception of moisture and heat in the form of dew, rain and sunshine. The paternal, heavenly agency was produced in a process akin to how "semen is produced by the whole body of man." The catalogue of seven organs that together bring semen into being began

¹⁴ Aidan McGrath, *A controversy concerning male impotence* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1988), pp. 22, 36–38, 42–47, 55–56 and passim, addressing canon law since the twelfth century as well as an influential papal brief of 1587. For civil law in Italy, see pp. 58–67. According to most authorities, sterile men and women were allowed to marry.

¹⁵ Leo Steinberg, *The sexuality of Christ in Renaissance art and in modern oblivion*, 2nd edn. (University of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹⁶ Leone Ebreo, *Dialoghi d'amore*, ed. Santino Caramella (Bari: Laterza, 1929), pp. 80–85, *The philosophy of love*, trans. F. Friedeberg-Seeley and Jean Barnes (London: Socino Press, 1937), pp. 89–95. It was first printed in Rome in 1535.

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with the heart and ended with the genitals. It depended “sixthly on the testes, in which the constitution of the semen is perfected and it receives its spermatogenic nature (*natura seminale generativa*); seventh and last on the penis (*virga*) which conveys the semen to the female.” As in anatomical conceptions of the human body, the celestial penis is less important than the testicles. The male body covered and surrounded (*copre e circonda*) the receptive woman, and the delivery system of the penis infused or afforded (*influisce and porge*) rather than penetrated. While Leone’s analogy virtually literalized Lacanian phallogocentrism when it likened the penis to the tongue or speech (*lingua*), the model of sexual intercourse did not. His allegory was Hippo-Galenic: “the testes of Heaven are Venus, which plays a great part in providing a good and perfect humor to ensure fertility . . . The male member of heaven is Mercury, sometimes advancing, sometimes retreating, now actually causing the rains, now impeding them.” The mercurial penis was a figure of repetitive action, moving back and forth (*diretto and retrogrado*), and its chief purpose was to bring or cease the rains (*le pioggie*, which are the flow of both male and female seed).¹⁷

The most outrageously entertaining championing of the testicles came from the pen of the monk turned physician and satirist François Rabelais, who published the four parts of his popular *Gargantua and Pantagruel* between 1532 and the mid-1540s. This doctor’s attention to the male body and to the richness of the French vernacular led him to concentrate more on the balls than the penis when following Pantagruel’s contemplation of marriage while obsessing on the likelihood that he would thence be cuckolded.¹⁸ In all, the text “names the penis . . . 45 times, but the testicles . . . 336 times,” as though profligate use of the word mimics a man’s outpouring of seed.¹⁹ So one character “shall preach a new Crusade. God keep my pill-grims safe in my ball-bag!” The book then offers standard medical opinion and cites authorities like Galen when pointing out that “in the testicles, as in a sacred repository, lies the germ which preserves the whole human stock.” As he piles up testicular metaphors and lists of

¹⁷ For rain, see Eric Partridge, *Shakespeare’s bawdy*, 3rd edn. (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 171; Boggione and Casalegno, *Dizionario*, pp. 357, 502; Ch. 7 below. Jean Toscan, *Le carnaval du langage: le lexique érotique des poètes de l’équivoque de Burchiello à Marino* (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1981), p. 1733 and passim (*pioggia, piova*), reads it as menses, which was often conflated with female seed and hence could refer to sexual pleasure rather than only menstruation (see Ch. 6 below). A homoerotic text of c. 1630 likened the distasteful “concorso de’ semi” of heterosexual intercourse to a stormy, troublesome downpour (“d’intempestiva importuna pioggia”): Antonio Rocco, *L’Alcibiade fanciullo a scola* (Rome: Salerno, 1988), p. 66.

¹⁸ The following is drawn from François Rabelais, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Mireille Huchon and François Moreau (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), pp. 217–22, 371–76, 432–43, 448–55; François Rabelais, *The histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. J.M. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), pp. 172–74, 305–10, 360–68, 373–79.

¹⁹ Taylor, *Castration*, p. 50.

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adjectives (from “stumpy” to “tumbling,” “musty” to “unloaded”), Rabelais occasionally alludes specifically to the liquid output of testicles, which are likened to “the pot of milk” or called “milky” ball-bags.²⁰ The text delights in logocentric virility centered on praising fecund male seed and balls, without waxing about fatherhood or domesticity. In this case, and many others, virility consisted of much more than the capacity to become a parent; prolific erection, copulation and ejaculation was the chief aim, numerous children an incidental sign of vigor and manliness.

So vital were testicles that it was believed that a ceremony of inspection was devised for a newly elected pope. To prove his masculinity, it was claimed, a specially designed seat facilitated the ritual performed by a young deacon, “the touching of the testicles” as it was called.²¹ In the words of the Florentine merchant Giovanni Rucellai, probably echoing those heard from a guide when he visited Rome in the Jubilee year of 1450, a hole in the seat enabled someone “to determine if [the Pope] was male or female.”²² Even when reporting that Pope Julius II’s coronation in 1503 did not involve such a tactile investigation, the Venetian ambassador Antonio Giustiniani still imparted knowledge of a “ceremony, vulgarly said to be that of putting a hand underneath” to find “evidence of the virility of popes.”²³ Whether it was true or not, the idea of the ritual was eagerly relayed. In gossip and pasquinade, chronicle and guidebook, the notion that papal genitals were subjected to ritual inspection, and that testicles were the essential element, circulated from at least the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries.

Sex and projective virility

Modern assumptions about sex and genitals primarily insist on a model of male penetrative action by an erect penis. Yet, evidence from premodern culture demonstrates more variety in sexual practice and theory. The shape, parts, history and function of the phallus are complex and variable, so much so that the concept may not always prove a useful tool of historical analysis, or not without fundamentally reconceiving its components. The commonplace notion

²⁰ Rabelais, *Gargantua*, pp. 309, 360, 363. See also Gordon Williams, *A dictionary of sexual language and imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart literature* (London: Athlone, 1994), pp. 885–86; Boggione and Casalegno, *Dizionario*, p. 354; Gordon Williams, *A glossary of Shakespeare’s sexual language* (London: Athlone, 1997), p. 207.

²¹ Peter Stanford, *The legend of Pope Joan* (New York: Berkley Books, 2000), p. 33, Bernardino Coreo’s *Patria historia* of 1503, regarding the coronation of Alexander VI in 1492.

²² *Giovanni Rucellai ed il suo zibaldone*, vol. I, ed. Alessandro Perosa (London: Warburg Institute, 1960), p. 71.

²³ Sergio Bertelli, *The king’s body: sacred rituals of power in medieval and early modern Europe* (1999), trans. R. Burr Litchfield (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), p. 184.

that an arrow is phallic often misses the mark, in that another factor in the weapon's operation, the bow, was also crucial, metaphorically considered a potent delivery system for the ejaculatory, semen-laden arrow. *Eiaculatus*, Latin for "shot out," arose from *iaculum*, a little spear or javelin.²⁴ The taut strings of a bow or musical instrument were likened to the sinews and "nervi" that generated an erection and were vital components of manhood.

The most famous assertion of the penetrative, penile model occurs in psychoanalysis, encapsulated in Sigmund Freud's emphasis on what was later dubbed "vaginal orgasm," as distinct from another over-drawn category "clitoral orgasm."²⁵ Despite the success of feminist argumentation and scientific research in establishing the importance of the clitoris for most women's sexual pleasure, modern Euro-American popular culture is dominated by the notion of "penetration intercourse and the centrality of the thrusting penis," a focus which still informs much scholarship too.²⁶ But a third framework for female pleasure is delineated in premodern discourse, for it was utero-centric. The "vagina" was not a term used of female bodies, and the clitoris was only announced as an anatomical discovery in the mid-sixteenth century.²⁷ The womb was thought to be avid to receive male semen, and female fluids were read as similar to yet lesser than male ejaculate, in both substance and reproductive function. I will show that, rather than typecasting femininity as "passive" in the classic Aristotelian sense, the Hippo-Galenic understanding of uterine agency led to the more nuanced model of receptivity, in which female bodies remained dependent on superior male capacities. A return to such ideas would hardly be progressive since they bolstered patriarchal privilege, but their existence suggests that there are ways to break away from the false vaginal/clitoral binary, which is itself an historically contingent and changeable notion.

The very idea of the phallus and its actions needs to be rethought, here attempted with the aid of historical materials which demystify and denaturalize the word, object and effect that was the phallus. As long as "the phallus"

²⁴ Toscan, *Carnaval*, p. 741; John Scarborough, *Medical terminologies: classical origins* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), p. 212.

²⁵ For Freud's theory that female maturity necessitated a shift from the clitoris, "with its virile character," to the more properly internal and feminine vagina, see "Three essays on the theory of sexuality" (1905), in *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), vol. VII, pp. 220–21, "Female sexuality" (1931), vol. XXI (1961), pp. 225, 228, "Femininity" (1933), vol. XXII (1964), pp. 118, 126–30 passim. Mary Roach, *Bonk: the curious coupling of science and sex* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2008), provides an accessible summary regarding current understanding of the complexity of physical factors that play a role in female orgasms.

²⁶ Peter Lehman, *Running scared: masculinity and the representation of the male body*, new edn. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), p. xi.

²⁷ On the clitoris see Chs. 4 and 6 below. Vagina in the modern sense is first noted for Italian usage in 1775 in Boggione and Casalegno, *Dizionario*, p. 401.

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Figure 1 Francesco “Urbini” (attributed), maiolica dish with a composite “head of dicks,” dated on reverse 1536, diameter 23.2 cm, Oxford, Ashmolean Museum

remains monolithic and undifferentiated, subsuming the entire male genitals under a single penile sign, numerous aspects of pleasure, concepts of manliness and sexual dynamics are not given cognizance. Different areas like the glans and foreskin, or various actions like “juggling with little balls” as the renowned, sometimes obscene writer Pietro Aretino put it in 1534, tend to be neglected, especially in theoretical discourse.²⁸ A penetrative presumption ignores or devalues too many practices, past and present, between people with either the same or different genital configurations.

From ancient Greece to well past the Renaissance, the standard visual signifier of male sex was the ensemble of testicles, penile shaft, foreskin and glans, as seen for example in the labeled *testa de cazzi* painted in Gubbio on a shallow maiolica bowl in 1536 (figs. 1, 8).²⁹ The classical profile reminiscent of a laureated athlete or bather (hair tied up by a green ribbon), is transformed into a satirical composite of genitals that ingeniously shape a face, attracting the very

²⁸ Pietro Aretino, *Ragionamento: dialogo*, ed. Paolo Procaccioli (Milan: Garzanti, 1984), p. 24; Pietro Aretino, *Aretino's “Dialogues,”* trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), p. 25; and another reference to ball play is on pp. 229/175.

²⁹ Timothy Wilson, “Un ‘intricamento’ tra Leonardo ed Arcimboldo,” *CeramicAntica* 15 no. 2 (2005), 10–44.