



## Series: “Sex: A Modern History”

Sexual Pleasure (7 October 2021)

Perversion (11 November 2021)

Pornography (6 January 2022)

Sex Work (17 February 2022)

Monogamy (17 March 2022)

Abstinence (12 May 2022)



# Sexual Pleasure

Joanna Bourke, Gresham Professor of Rhetoric & Professor of History at Birkbeck

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and at [shame.bbk.ac.uk](http://shame.bbk.ac.uk)



What is “Sexual  
Pleasure”?

No stable  
meaning

Mutable

Multivalent

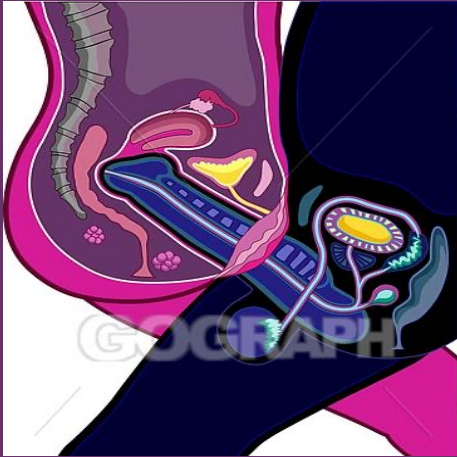
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## Pre-Social Model



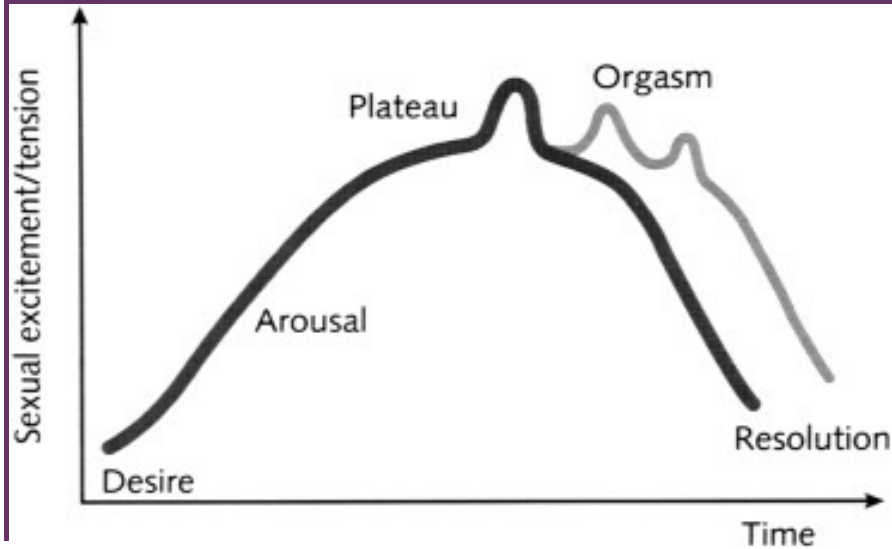
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## Pre-Social Model: ("human sexual response cycle")



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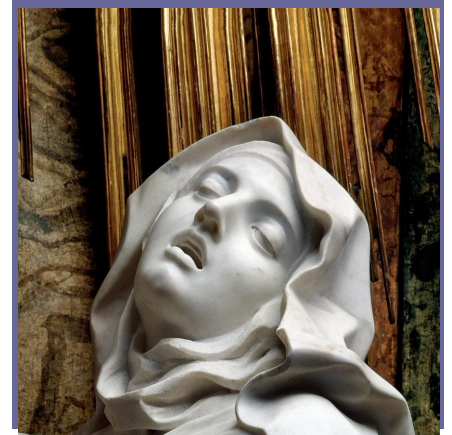
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## Supra-Social Model



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What is “Sexual  
Pleasure”?

Do not reside in  
bodies nor  
transcend  
political or social  
worlds

Fluid, emerging  
in complex  
interactions  
between bodies  
& minds

Michel Foucault

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**1920s-1930s:**

Husbands, not wives

Mutual sexual gratification

Husbands require physiological  
knowledge of female anatomy

“45 degree angle downwards”

“Sleeping beauty” notion

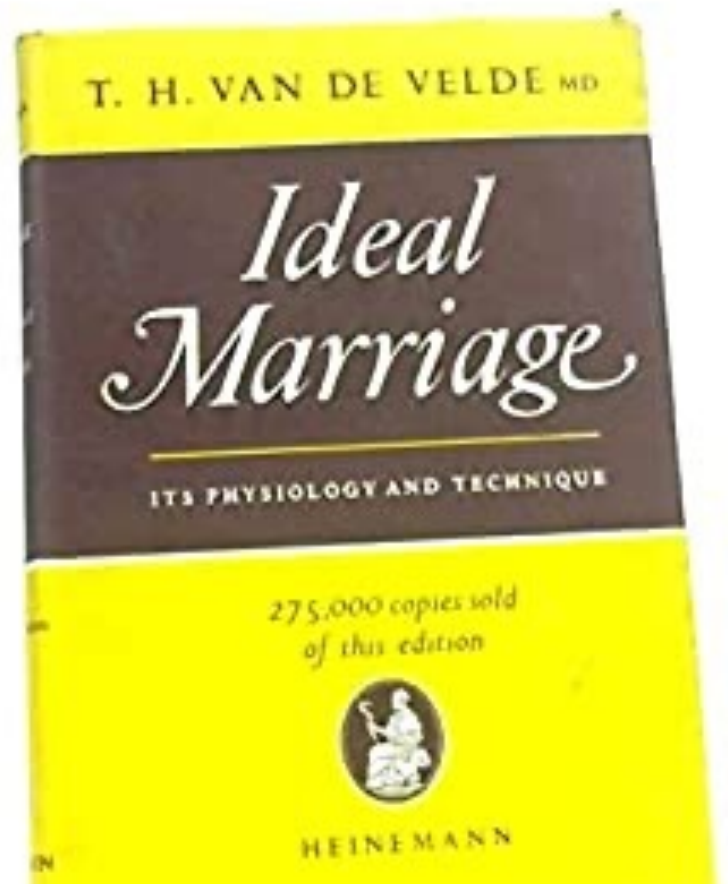


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1914-18 war

Birth control

Poor male  
technique

Marriage at risk

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1940s-1950s:

Wives, not husbands

Responsibility of wives

Husbands as sensitive gender

Antipathy towards female sex body



# Sexual Pleasure

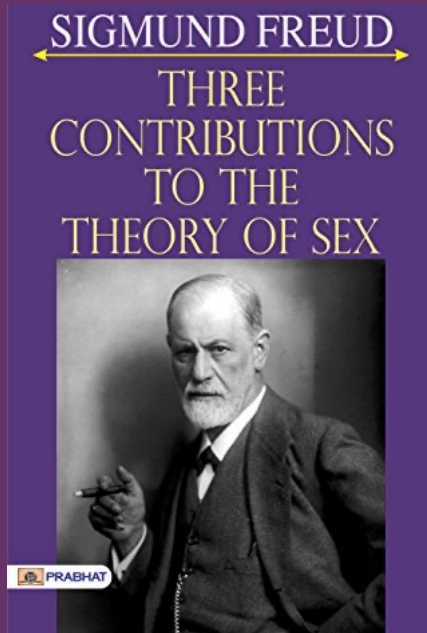
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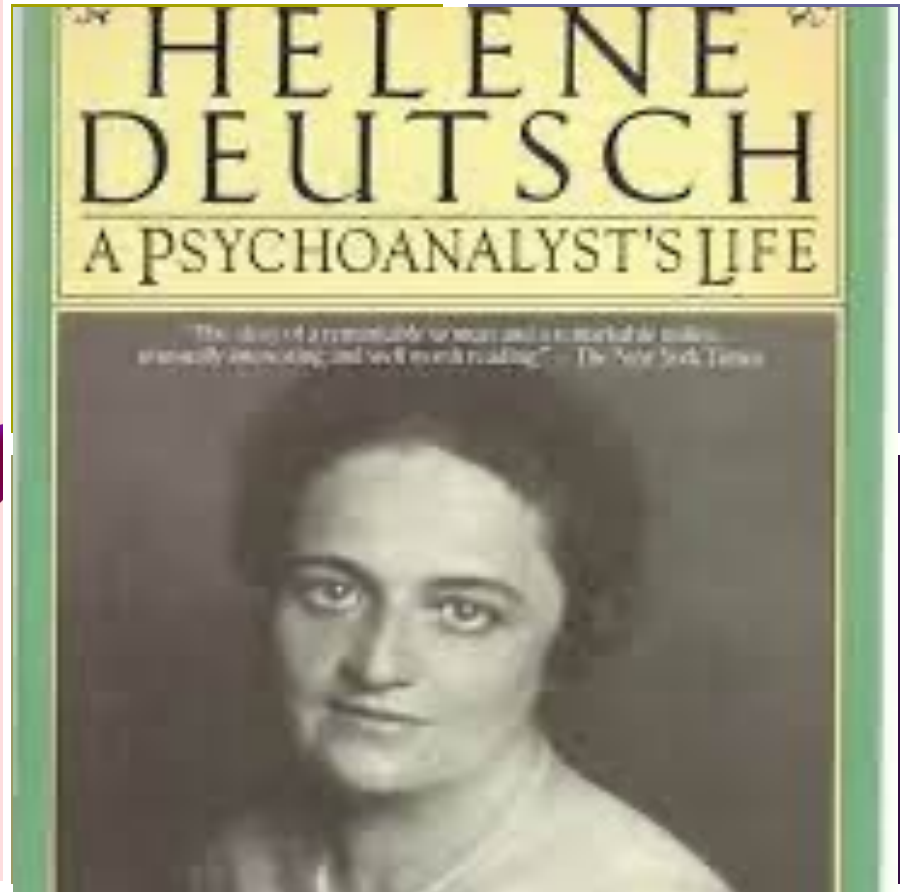
## Freud and “vaginal orgasm”



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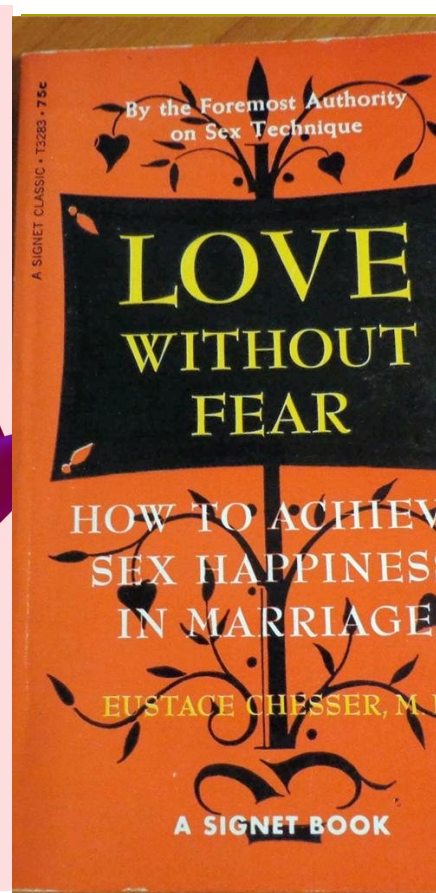
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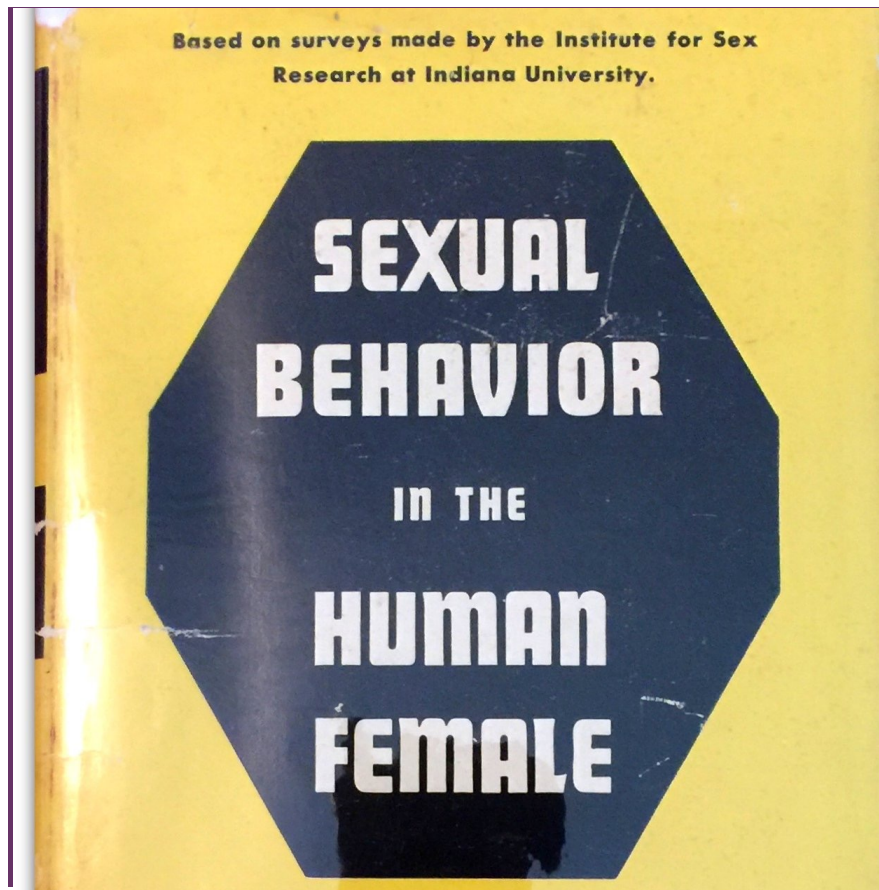


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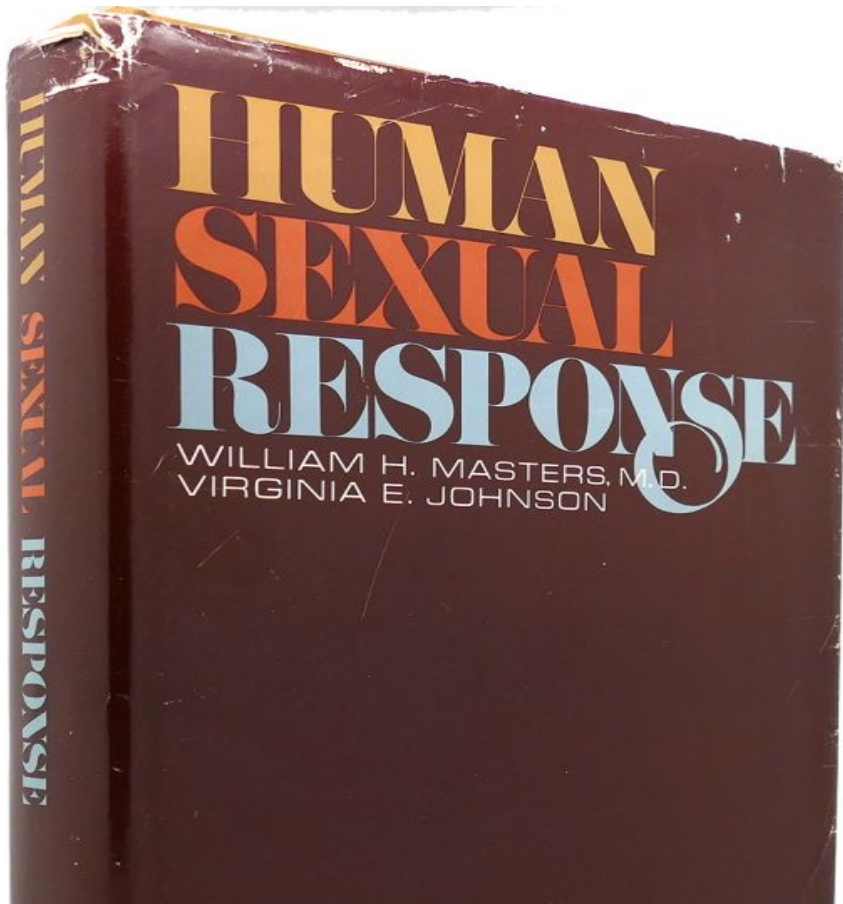




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Ideology:  
Feminism

Nancy Friday's  
"My Secret  
Garden" (1973)

Erica Jong's  
"Fear of Flying"  
(1973)

Shere Hite's  
"The Hite  
Report" (1976)

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Feminism

Masturbation &  
fantasy

Autonomy

Patriarchy,  
prejudice,  
power

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Anne Koedt & myth of  
“vaginal orgasm”



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# OUR BODIES, OURSELVES



A BOOK  
BY AND  
FOR  
WOMEN



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"To masturbate you have to know something about your body, and in particular about your clitoris (klit'-o-ris). This is a small round ball of flesh located above the opening of the vagina and it is the center of most sexual stimulation. It functions like the penis in the man. When it's rubbed up and down rhythmically, you get excited. The clitoris is where *all* female orgasms happen, whether by masturbation, intercourse, or fantasy."



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Clitoris an  
extensive organ

Personal is  
political

Educated,  
Middle class, &  
white

Less radical

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A “universal”  
sexed body?

Race & ethnicity

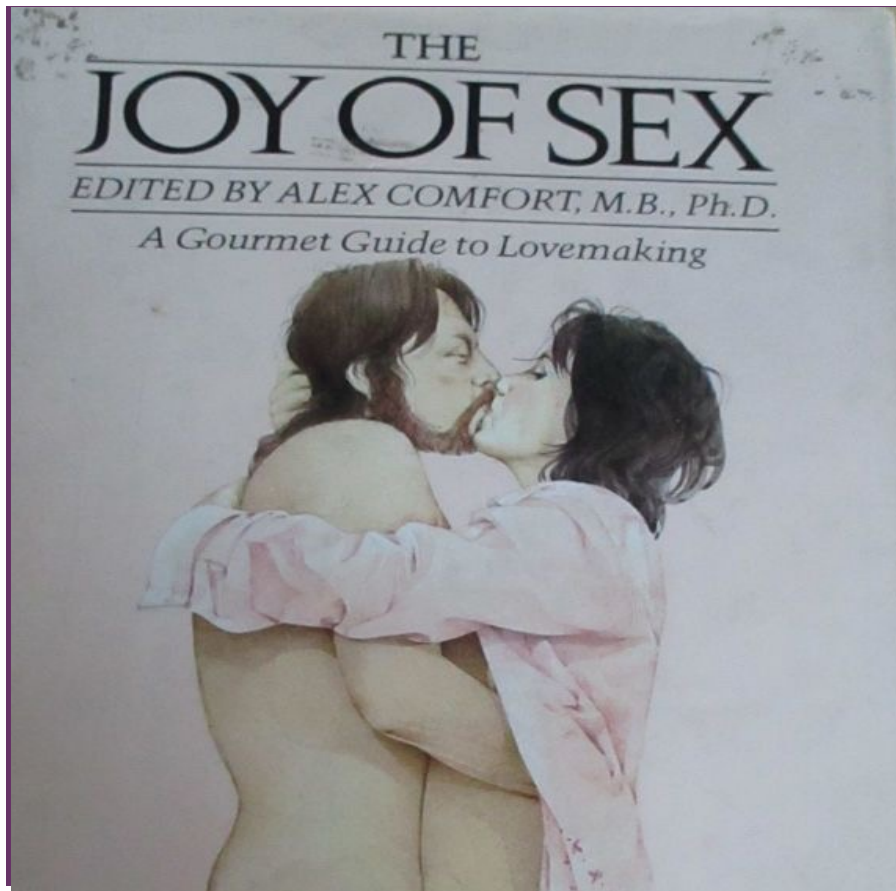
Sexual  
orientation

Age, class,  
disability etc.

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Alex Comfort:  
the vulva is “slightly scary... to children, primitives, and males generally.... It looks like a castrating wound and bleeds regularly, it swallows the penis and regurgitates it limp, it can probably bite, and so on. These biologically programmed anxieties are the origins of most male hangups including homosexuality ."



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Medicalisation



Penile  
penetration =  
“royal road to  
pleasure”

“Faking it”  
(1/4 men & 1/2  
women)

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