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# MASTURBATION AND PHYSIOLOGICAL ROMANCE IN *TELENY*

Benjamin Bagocius

The pornographic novella *Teleny: Or, The Reverse of the Medal. A Physiological Romance* (1893), whose authors are controversially reputed to be Oscar Wilde and a group of his London friends, invokes the dangers—and, as I will explain, the promises—of masturbation as a practice that unsexes the male body.<sup>1</sup> In the novella’s opening pages, Frenchman Camille des Grieux watches and listens to Hungarian René Teleny, the pianist who will become his lover, performing a charity concert at Queen’s Hall in London. Enraptured by the “composition, the execution,” and the “player himself,” des Grieux suddenly notices changes in his own body: his lips turn “parched,” he “gasp[s] for breath,” and the rhythms of “a heavy hand” in time “with the song” begin to “move up and down, slowly at first, then fast and faster” “upon my lap.”<sup>2</sup> The “heavy hand” becomes the sexual agent as the man, des Grieux, dissolves into a panoply of physiological sensations. This scene launches a sexuality oscillating between both receptive and active physiologies of touch, rhythm, and the body’s predispositions to move, but—almost unimaginably—detached from biological sex.

This article explains the ways in which *Teleny* aestheticizes Victorian medical, evolutionary, and technological descriptions of the male body as an uncertain, protean form to narrate a sexuality in which biological sex recedes as its operating principle. The shared metaphors among these sciences for the body’s active capacity to fall into inactivity and achieve altered form drive *Teleny*’s reorganization of male sexual physiology along features of inactivity rather than sexual difference. I call this reorganization physio-sexuality to identify the body’s non-genital sexual responses that include the respiratory, circulatory, and kinesthetic capacities to act, breathe, throb, pulse, and move in rhythm with its own or other bodies, to touch, kiss, rub, see, suck, probe, harden, and soften as primary features of the sexual. I link physio-sexuality to fears expressed in

medical accounts that masturbation leads to inactive youths and the ruinous mutation of manhood into unspeakable perversions, the homosexual love (and behavior) that dare not speak its name prime among them. But I also link physio-sexuality to two less paranoid approaches to male physiology—one biological, the other technological—in the nineteenth century: Charles Darwin’s account of evolution, which narrates inactivity and unstable bodies as constitutive of male physiology; and Etienne Jules Marey’s and Eadweard Muybridge’s chronophotography, images that display the body as fluid parts rather than fixed wholes. *Teleny* adopts and reworks these lexicons to introduce rich reorganizations of the body and its intimacies.

*Teleny*’s reimagining of bodies as sexually active but unsexed seems unthinkable in current critical receptions of the novella. Critics have overwhelmingly taken for granted the sex and characters in *Teleny* as homosexual. They either regard the novella as a thematically bold and aesthetically beautiful affirmation of late Victorian homosexuality or, conversely, as a tired reproduction of bourgeois-privileged homosexuality. Whether critics believe *Teleny* explodes or preserves gender and sexuality norms, their accounts take *Teleny* for granted as a gay or homosexual novella, or they describe *Teleny* as depicting a sexuality emerging as homosexual, given that homosexuality was beginning to be but was not yet a legible identity for some communities in early 1890s Britain. Ed Cohen, for instance, celebrates *Teleny* as an affirmation of homosexuality in its “textual depictions of male same-sex experience.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Diane Mason in her study of Victorian “masturbation and same-sex desire” calls *Teleny* “the classic erotic novel of homosexual love.”<sup>4</sup> Pamela Thurschwell’s work on Victorian occultism and telepathy brings attention to *Teleny*’s “phantasmatic homosexual male sexuality based on narcissism and non-differentiation” among men.<sup>5</sup> Cohen’s, Mason’s, and Thurschwell’s readings illuminate *Teleny* as negotiating a range of discourses, but they constrain both the protagonists and the sex they have with one another to same-sex desire or homosexuality. Their studies thus constrain to a model of gender and sexual identity the more vast range of Victorian sexualities that *Teleny* narrates.

Although I do not reach the same conclusions as these critics, I draw from Cohen’s and Mason’s work on late Victorian masturbation and medical fears that it effeminized youths, relinquishing them of the seminal fuel necessary to maximize their development into capable manhood. Masturbation effeminized them—or to use the term at the time, inverted them along lines of sexual difference—making their bodies susceptible to perversions such as homosexuality. But *Teleny*, in my view, does not

confirm a tendency toward homosexuality as much as strip homosexuality of its condition of possibility: sexual difference. *Teleny* pushes medical fears of masturbation to a surprising consequence. If to masturbate is to make manhood disappear, then masturbation does not increase the risk of becoming homosexual but speeds up the disappearance of homosexuality's sexed provisos.

The claim that *Teleny* is more physio- than homosexual may seem not only outrageous but disingenuous. Since most scholars consider *Teleny* the first homosexual novella written in English, reading *Teleny* as physio- rather than homosexual might seem to wipe out the hard-won founding moment of homosexual literary expression, not to mention the hard-won endeavors of scholars to advocate a homosexual novella worthy of serious critical attention. My reading of *Teleny* does not so much deny its homosexual elements as bring attention to its experimental renderings of bodies that include but do not settle for homosexuality. At the turn of the century, homosexual expression—whether as textual or experiential—was in a deep sense experimental, since it had few institutionalized models to serve as templates for the forms and contents a homosexual narrative or body should assume in order to be recognized as such. The bravado with which *Teleny* narrates the openings to skin pores as much as to penises or, say, the energy with which *Teleny* evades sexed pronouns in favor of unsexed actions of pulsing, rubbing, and sucking, document Victorian sexuality as an experiment rather than self-evident.

But can't much Victorian pornography be said to undo the concept of man—and homosexuality—in its detailed descriptions of an array of sexual actions and bodies? Perhaps. But what distinguishes *Teleny* is the extent to which the protagonists Teleny and des Grieux are subject to being "branded" by others in the novella as homosexual. They thus move through the novella under the constant threat of "imprisonment" "in the name of the law," laid out by the Labouchere Amendment of 1885, which made sexual contact between men illegal.<sup>6</sup> *Teleny's* physio-sexuality is therefore not merely a "pornotopian" fantasy of politically unaware hedonism, as Steven Marcus has considered pornography, but a political exigency.<sup>7</sup> Physio-sexuality in *Teleny* decriminalizes homosexual acts and frees the so-called perpetrators by dissolving the concept of homosexuality, the grounds for criminality. Unsexed beings—bodies organized around non-genital physiologies—having sex with one another could not be imprisoned; according to the language of the Amendment, only "male persons" could be.<sup>8</sup> *Teleny* therefore offers masturbation as a way to erase sex as sexuality's privileged term, which is then leveraged to thrust criminality onto individuals (men who enjoy sex with men) who may

not organize their own sexuality that way. Of course, an unsexed, masturbating des Grieux would still be subject to arrest if caught with his pants down at *Teleny's* concert. But the text, as I will show, is surprisingly ambivalent about whether des Grieux imagines or actually masturbates. The text's preoccupation instead lies in wielding metaphors of masturbation to launch sex's withdrawal as the organizing feature of sexual bodies.

In the political stakes attending *Teleny's* conceptual dissolution of homosexual men, the novella's physio-sexuality circumvents what Michel Foucault has outlined as the Victorian tendency to match sexual practices to psychic identities. In reorienting sexual emphasis around action and behavior, the authentic interiority associated with identitarian sexuality encounters a stall. I am not claiming that *Teleny* is disinterested in interiority; Cohen and Mason, for instance, have examined the significance in *Teleny* of love and pain. What I amplify, however, are the ways in which *Teleny's* vocabulary narrates a world of sexual—not psychological—actors. Sexual participants become sexual agents through vocabularies of behavioral change rather than of categorical identities.

*Teleny's* vocabulary of intense physicality invites us to enter a materialist Victorian sexuality overlooked by critical preoccupations with sexological and psychoanalytic lexicons. Victorian discourses of volatile physicality, resisting what George Levine has named “the inward turn” toward psychologizing, can be traced from writers as disparate as Charles Darwin to Friedrich Nietzsche and Oscar Wilde.<sup>9</sup> This genealogy extends to what Margot Norris calls the twentieth-century “biocentric” art of D. H. Lawrence and Franz Kafka.<sup>10</sup> Whether or not Wilde had a hand in authoring *Teleny* may never be conclusively known. But what is certain is that those who participated in *Teleny's* appearance were Wilde's friends and confidantes. As such, they may have shared with Wilde what queer literary scholar Steven Bruhm has called Wilde's aversion to the depth model of sexuality that was beginning to turn sexuality inward, assigning it an identity. Such aversion may have led Wilde and his friends to self-fashion alternative models for sexuality that explored the volatility of physio-sexuality—what we might call surface sexuality—based on bodily actions rather than psychic depths. For Bruhm, Wilde's work “exploits the superficial; it focuses on the surface of the self that Wilde's aphorisms and epigrams are famous for asserting.”<sup>11</sup> Bruhm draws from Wilde's distinctions between “style” and “sincerity” to illustrate this point: “In all unimportant matters,” Wilde writes, “style, not sincerity, is the essential. In all important matters, style, not sincerity, is the essential.’ Or, ‘Only the shallow know themselves.’”<sup>12</sup> Wilde locates knowledge, sexual or otherwise, not in hidden depths but on surfaces.

In drawing out a physio- rather than a homosexual orientation in *Teleny*, I take my reading cues from Wilde to read superficially but no less politically. Physio-sexual bodies in *Teleny* confound psycho-sexological models of sexuality that would tie the body's sexual behaviors to identities. *Teleny*'s subtitle, "A Physiological Romance," invokes the sexual through romance, but refuses to affiliate the fields of romantic eros with a legible interiority. The novella's romance occurs among protean physiologies, not firm identities. Physio-sexuality and its disappearing homosexuals narrate an agency for so-called sexual deviants that medicine and the law deny them: anonymous masturbation becomes a tool with which sexual criminals make sexed bodies disappear, and with them, the grounds for homophobic criminalization. What appears in place of homosexual males are physio-sexual bodies who evade policing and pursue queer delights.

### Victorian Masturbation and the Disappearing Man

Before turning our attention to the ways in which *Teleny* narrates the process of manhood disappearing, we must enter the medical and scientific discursive fields with which *Teleny* negotiates its sexual metaphors. The masturbating scene at Queen's Hall appears in the first few pages of *Teleny* and reflects the Victorian medico-cultural fear that masturbation indicates unspeakable sexual pathologies to come. One of these pathologies was, famously, homosexuality. Physician J. Spratling asserts that masturbation goes "hand in hand with its boon companion, sodomy, . . . entangling its victims more hopelessly with each passing night."<sup>13</sup> *Teleny* seems to confirm this medical worry when we recall that des Grieux's "hand" moved "up and down in rhythm with the song," linking masturbation to homosexual fantasy. Later, too, in one of des Grieux's and Teleny's sexual encounters, des Grieux relates that "as my hands wandered over [Teleny's] head, neck, shoulders, arms, I could not feel him at all; in fact, it seemed to me as if I were touching my own body. . . . His swollen throbbing veins seemed my own fluttering pulses."<sup>14</sup> The masturbating "hand" appears here again as the sexual agent in what might easily be called a homosexual encounter. The hands that may have been des Grieux's in the concert hall are this time wandering over Teleny's body. The body des Grieux's hand gropes, though, is not quite Teleny's; instead des Grieux feels "as if I were touching my own body." As in some medical accounts, homosexual erotics in this scene seem inextricable from masturbation.

Yet *Teleny*'s physio-sexuality draws from ambiguous medical discourses about masturbation that were not as certain as some physicians

just what the sexuality was that they scrutinized. Physicians corralled non-procreative sexual practices under interchangeable headings of “perversion,” “vice,” or “sodomy.” These terms never underwent medico-cultural definitional consensus and could mean a variety of things: sexual inversion, gender inversion, individual and group masturbation, anal sex, and homosexuality, to name just a few. Fin-de-siècle psychologist Norman Conolly’s account of masturbation conflates it with a variety of perversions, which include but are not reducible to homosexuality. In “Sexual Perversion” (1892), he states, “For the purposes of the physician it seems sufficient to look upon” sexual perversions, identified as non-procreative sex, chief among them, but not solely, homosexuality, “as varieties of masturbation.”<sup>15</sup> Masturbation for Bernarr Macfadden, pioneer in exercise science, was a threat for its capacity to “tempt” a youth “to become a devotee” of unspecified “perversion.”<sup>16</sup> For infamous sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, “nothing is so prone to contaminate . . . the source of all noble and ideal sentiments, which arise of themselves from a normally developing sexual instinct, as the practice of masturbation in early years.”<sup>17</sup> General sexual contamination, rather than contamination of a specifically homosexual kind, results from masturbation.

Despite the ambiguity about which perversions masturbation would elaborate, there was a consensus that this vice effeminized youths and threatened virile masculinity. Unanimous was the worry that masturbation rid a youth of the semen necessary to fuel his development into manhood. Following Swiss physician Samuel Tissot’s lead, who in 1758 published *L’Onanisme, ou Dissertation physique sur les maladies produites par la masturbation* (the first sustained medical examination of masturbation, regularly reprinted in Britain through 1905), physicians agreed that semen retention was necessary for healthy blood circulation, steady nerves, and developing musculature regarded as essential characteristics for siring robust children, who would in turn grow to populate and control the British Empire. As critics such as Cohen, Mason, and Ellen Bayuk Rosenman have shown, to expend semen at the wrong times (masturbation and homosexual encounters, for instance) was wastefully to remove strength from the body. Excessive discharge stalled male action, making him prone to feminine inactivity and weakness. The male that would willfully participate in this anti-social act that stunted his seminal powers to husband (to sexually satisfy his wife) and father (to produce robust children for his class and its imperial project) was sick and in need of medico-cultural intervention. Such intervention required identification of the masturbating subject. Cohen, Mason, and Bayuk Rosenman have demonstrated that the masturbating body could be read symptomatically: languidness indicated wasteful emission of semen and led to an inability

to be active in work or school; pallor indicated unhealthy blood circulation resulting from lowered semen retention; nervousness indicated overstimulation through excessive orgasm that weakened the young man's abilities to maintain an erection during coitus with a potential wife; and propensities to seclusion were tied to a preference for engaging in the so-called vice over socializing, particularly with women (potential wives and mothers).

These visible symptoms were curiously perceived in negative terms. The masturbator's body was identifiable through what Cohen calls manhood's "negation."<sup>18</sup> The masturbating youth, Cohen shows, is perceived by what his body is not or cannot do. But as I read it, anti-masturbatory tracts also signify productive action: what the masturbator actively *can* do is generate new bodily forms, if only because what he can do, be, and become remain unnarrated and open for articulation. To put the matter more precisely, what the masturbator seems unable to do—mature into a heteropatriarchal man—is an action. By virtue of his inactivity the masturbator actively ushers forth as yet unimagined embodiments.

In the following cultural and scientific tracts, we see representations of the masturbator's inactivity as worrisome: negation actively launches alternative embodiments. "The wretched victim," Victorian headmaster Edward Thring laments, "either sinks down to a lower level and lives on, or often finds an early grave, killed by his own foul passions."<sup>19</sup> Here, the masturbator "lives on" in a "lower level"; the life he continues there, however, is not articulated but left to the imagination. Swiss physician Tissot uses devolutionary metaphors, invoking the animal: Tissot's masturbator approaches negativity; masturbation "incapacitates [him] for taking any stand in society," a state which "reduces man below the level of the brute."<sup>20</sup> But what that state is—and the life he continues there—is not articulated and becomes anyone's guess—or invention. Victorian physician J. L. Milton builds upon Tissot's warnings of devolution to draw up a list of colorful symptoms that also oscillate between inactivity and action: "the afflicted should fall . . . into a state of extreme wasting; . . . his skin acquires a yellowish leaden hue; . . . his eyes become encircled with a blue ring; and . . . he winds up by falling into a state of brutish stupidity and locomotor ataxy."<sup>21</sup> The masturbator in Milton's view acquires colors like an exotic animal that actively "falls" into an inactive state of "locomotor ataxy" and "brutish stupidity." We read what the masturbator cannot do, but what the masturbator *can* do is to let himself be made into a "nothing" that remains open to elaboration. Far from passive, masturbation is active: not only does it make manhood disappear but in doing so masturbation activates as yet unformulated embodiments.

## Darwin's Inactive Males

Among physicians, worry seems the pervasive response to masturbation, for this lamentable vice begets inactive rather than robust male bodies. But other Victorian scientific discourses regard male inactivity and its physiologically transformative powers as normal—not worrisome—sexual features. Unlike physicians, Darwin in *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871), for instance, posits inactivity not as disease but as constitutive of male sexual physiology. Aestheticist writers—the authors of *Teleny* included—were not only familiar with Darwin's work, but inspired by it. Levine explains “how easily the aesthetes assimilated Darwin” to adopt new literary representations for “the play of consciousness.” Aesthetes' adoption of Darwinian lexicons and themes for sexuality was overt, since “Darwinian ideas and aesthetic writing, Swinburne as well as Oscar Wilde and Pater, appeared in the same journals.”<sup>22</sup> But my study comes to Darwin from a different angle than Levine's. I show the ways in which aesthetic writers not only assimilate Darwinian vocabularies to aestheticize the elasticity of consciousness but also the play of sexual physiology.

For Darwin, male sexual physiology derives from millennia of the male body's inactivity. For example, “males possess rudiments of a uterus with the adjacent passage, in their vesiculae prostaticae,” which is the opening of the penis through which ejaculate exits the body.<sup>23</sup> The vesiculae prostatica is as much a feature of inactive, male uteral functioning as it is of active seminal emission. Male nipples, too, mark inactivity as male physiology: “Now if we suppose,” Darwin writes, “that during a former prolonged period male mammals aided the females in nursing their offspring, and that afterwards from some cause (as from the production of a smaller number of young) the males ceased to give this aid, disuse of the organs during maturity would lead to their becoming inactive.” This state of inactivity has led “the mammary glands and nipples, as they exist in male mammals” to become not “rudimentary” as much as they are “not fully developed, and not functionally active.”<sup>24</sup> Males' ceasing to carry and breast-feed their young has contributed to the formation of male physiologies exhibited today. Inactivity and the not-yet-fully-developed are manifest within the ordinary male sexual body.

The inactive relationship between man and child-rearing might be read as naturalizing man's exoneration from childcare responsibilities. But Darwin writes inactivity into the most manly physiological feature: musculature. The male body's “size, strength and courage,” for instance, are passive “ornaments” and “charms” susceptible to the gaze and aesthetic preferences of agential female observers.<sup>25</sup> Corporeal strength and

vigor mean nothing “independently of the choice of the [females]” to select the males most aesthetically pleasing to them. Manly bravado becomes a display rendering the male body susceptible to the gaze and selection of females. This susceptibility is a form of inactive embodiment, as the male waits and becomes subject to the “choice” of the females, who “may not always select the strongest or best armed,” and instead might choose others whose “various ornaments or other attractions” compel them.<sup>26</sup> By narrating “various ornaments” and “attractions” as a matter of individual perception, Darwin finds the explanatory principles of the male sexual body not a unanimous given but subject to a perceiver’s idiosyncrasy.

As *Teleny* would later aestheticize, manly physiologies for Darwin also render males susceptible to the desiring gaze of other males. That is, males—like females—stand on the sidelines and do a lot of watching. Males who are not selected by females are “expelled and wander about,” but not before they have an opportunity to watch those males who are selected by females. In many species, Darwin writes, males and females “congregate; and successive males display their gorgeous plumage and perform strange antics before the females, which standing by as spectators,” along with the other males who have already or are about to perform, “at last choose the most attractive partner.”<sup>27</sup> This spectacle enables not only female-on-male gazing, but also male-on-male gazing. The story of the males who are not chosen by females and who are thus “expelled and wander about” is not narrated. Like physicians and other cultural commentators, Darwin leaves a significant part of the story of male sexuality open to the imagination and elaboration. Because species tend to “congregate,” as Darwin writes, it is easy to make the logical leap that the “expelled” males may meet up with other expelled males who find each other “the most attractive partner[s].” Some of the males who are not chosen by females (or other males) might be compelled to modify and change their behavior and features so that they, in the future, will “at last” be “successful in finding a partner” in either a male or a female.<sup>28</sup> In Darwinian evolution, the mature male sexual body is never finalized; its inactivity constitutes features of male sexual physiology, whose future developments await expression. *Teleny* continues the story where Darwin leaves off.

### Male Bodies in Motion: The Chronophotography of Marey and Muybridge

Physiologists and anatomists toward the end of the century were also swept up with a fascination for protean male bodies and turned to technology to help them detail its endlessly changeable forms. Physiologists

like Etienne-Jules Marey and photographers like Eadweard Muybridge, for instance, share with Victorian physicians and scientists an obsession with documenting details of male anatomy and applied technological means to discover the ways in which it moved. Both Marey and Muybridge employed chronophotography, the discipline of photographically capturing what Sara Danius calls a “moving body at equal temporal intervals” displayed on either “a single plate”<sup>29</sup> or, as Judith Brown describes, “laid out in sequences with black bars separating each” frame.<sup>30</sup> Chronophotography arrests the body’s motion into discrete images arranged into sequences for careful visual examination. Like Darwin, Marey and Muybridge’s interests lie not in a depth model of bodies but in their anatomical surfaces. The mechanics of chronophotography enabled otherwise imperceptible details of musculature, form, shape, and their interrelation to appear, details that evaded the mechanics of the human eye. For Marey, the importance of chronophotography lay in its ability to “discover objective truths” about the male body’s anatomies in motion, given the limited perceptual mechanics of the eyes.<sup>31</sup> The most famous of these images is Muybridge’s *Racing Study* (1887) (see Figure I). This set of images displays a horse suspended in the air mid-stride, exposing a new “objective truth” about the horse’s body: it levitates while galloping.

Muybridge, like Marey, did not limit his physiological inquiries to horses, but sought discoveries in human male bodies, too. Both men photographed nude male bodies in motion, as in Marey’s *La marche* and *La course rapide* (1893) and Muybridge’s *Wrestling* (1884–87) (see Figures 2 and 3). As Brown notes, these images “create a sequence” of nude male bodies “that cannot be read outside the realm of desire.”<sup>32</sup> In detailing these bodies in erotic combative and acrobatic embraces, the photographs’ content overlaps with *Teleny*’s. Similarly to Darwin’s detailing of the inactive male body, Marey’s and Muybridge’s images of either single nude males or males in athletics of touch paradoxically document male inactivity, freezing bodies into still images.

Yet the arrested activity—or the photographic medium rendering their bodies inactive—does not override the astonishing bodily unwieldiness these images present. As in the accounts of physicians and Darwin, the male bodies in the photographs oscillate between action and inaction, signaling fluidity. Although the images of men are frozen in time and space, the plates nonetheless characterize male bodies as protean. That is to say, while a man’s body is arrested in one frame, the next frame shows his body altered and adjusted, a different thigh muscle twitching, a bicep

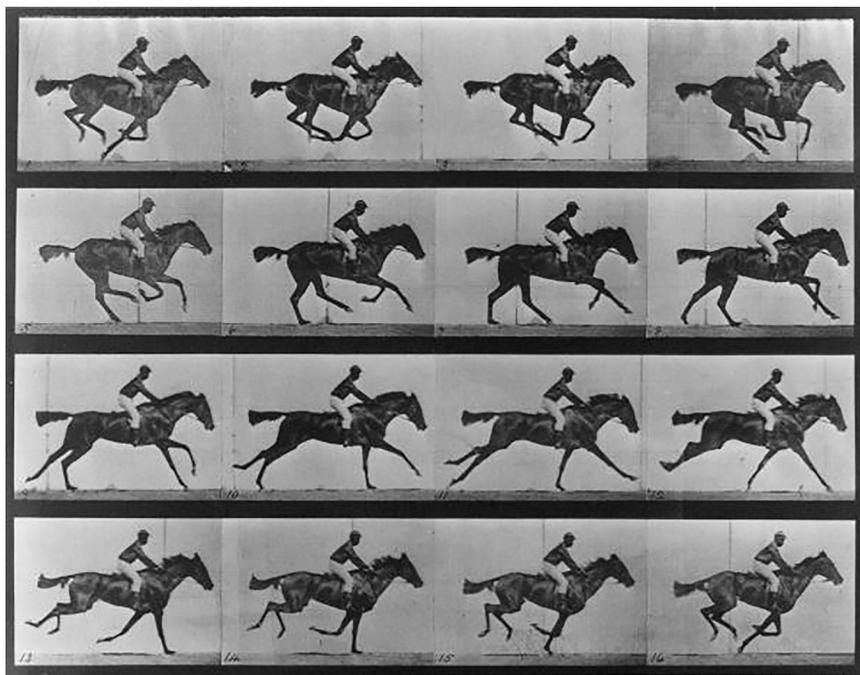


Figure 1. Racing Study, photo series by Eadweard Muybridge. This series of action studies of a horse galloping established that horses do, at one point in this pace, have all four feet off the ground as proven by Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904), English-born American photographer and inventor. Original Artwork: From “Animal Locomotion,” vol. 9, 1887. (Getty Images).

extending, the left foot mid-air, now the right foot in the next frame. The defining feature of maleness—the penis—comes into and out of view. In some frames, the penis appears. In others, it does not. The sexed body appears and then disappears as the viewer’s eyes move across the sequence of male bodies in motion.

These images document sexed bodies coming into and out of view; genitals are not consistently the main feature of bodies. What *does* predominate in each frame, however, are non-genital moving parts: swinging thighs, lifted knees, padding feet, and pulsing hands. Each frame, whether showing a penis or not, is given equal amount of space, as if to say that each unsexed rendition of the male body and his erotic encounters—whether an entanglement of knees, elbows, heads, or arms—is just as important as the images of sexed (genital) bodies. In the midst of male-on-male action, the images insert sexed parts into a larger schema of physiological movement and change. The male body is as much protean as it

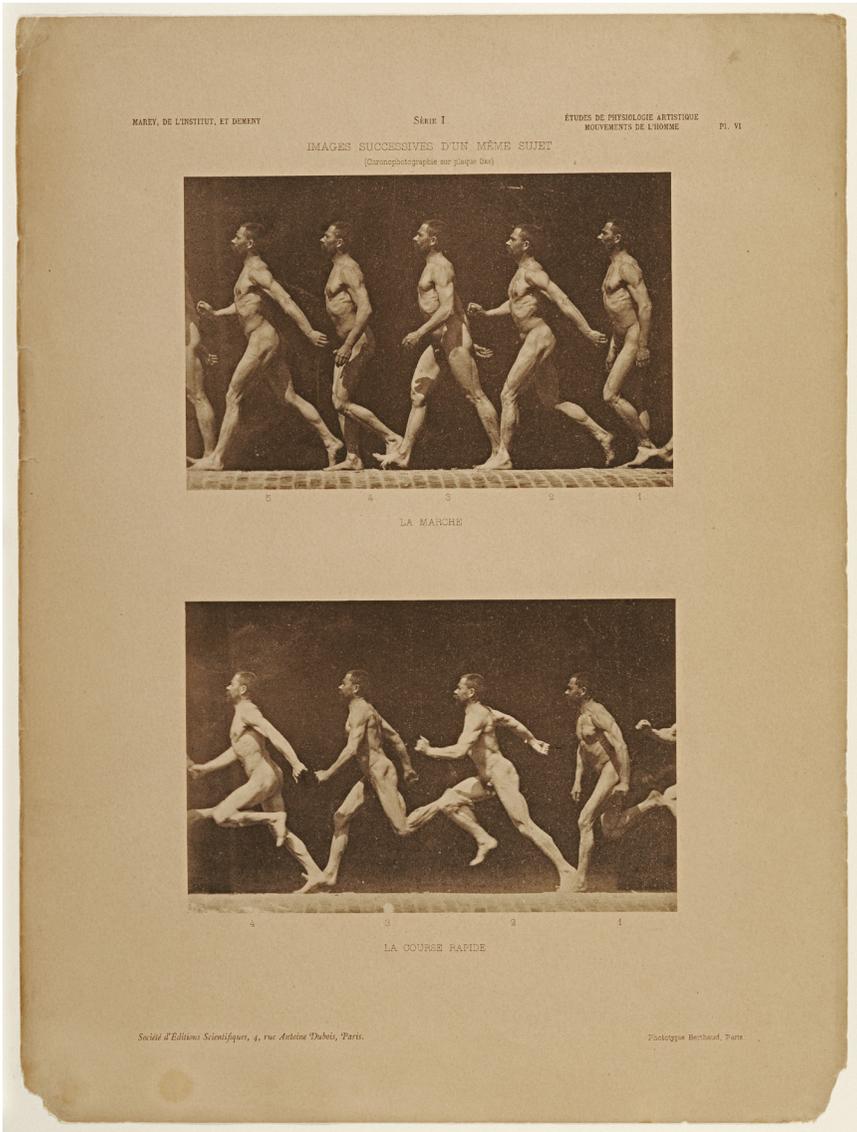


Figure 2. *La marche and La course rapide* (1893), by Étienne-Jules Marey. *La Marche / La Course Rapide*, negative, circa 1890, photo by Étienne Jules Marey (French, 1830–1904), collotype printed 1893 by Michel Berthaud. (Image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program).

is sexed; neither its sexed nor unsexed features, so the images suggest, can claim predominance over the other.

As Danius explains, Marey's and Muybridge's images circulated widely and inspired artists and writers across the turn of the century to rethink vision and innovate forms for painting, narrating, and sculpting the sense

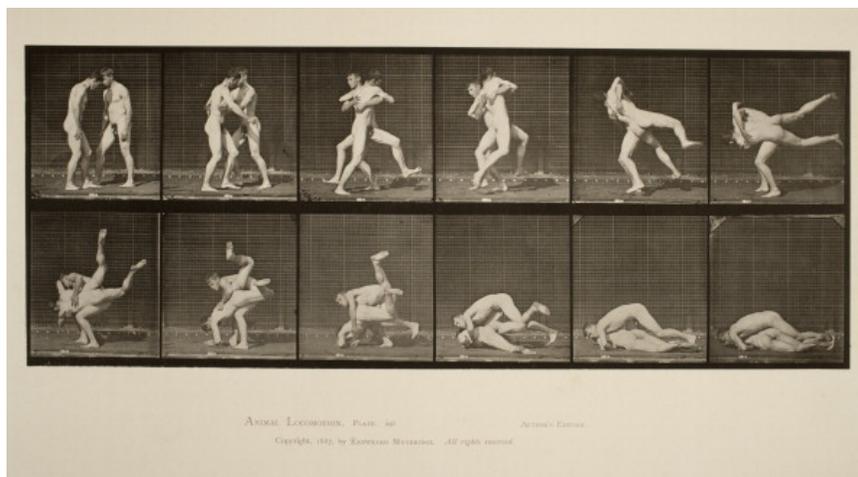


Figure 3. Wrestling (1884–87), photo series by Eadweard Muybridge. Wrestling in Graeco-Roman style, between 1884 and 1887. (George Eastman House/Getty Images).

of perception. “Marey’s influence on the visual” and literary “arts should not be underestimated,” Danius points out, for “the impact of Marey’s work” on the arts was “probably greater than that of any scientific enterprise since the discovery of perspective in the Renaissance.”<sup>33</sup> Not only did philosopher of art Paul Souriau in his treatise *The Aesthetics of Movement* (1889) call artists “to turn to the work of Muybridge and Marey for inspiration,” but Marey himself recognized the extent to which artists turned to his physiological photographs for inspiration. He published an artist’s book, *Etudes de physiologie artistique faites au moyen de la chronophotographie* (1893), announcing as art pieces his photographs of nude bodies in motion.<sup>34</sup>

Danius elaborates the ways in which literary artists, most notably Marcel Proust, and their formal innovations for narrating perception “owe their deepest impulses to machines of vision” like those of Marey and Muybridge.<sup>35</sup> But she leaves unspecified the ways in which “machines of vision” innovated ways to reimagine sexual physiologies of the kinds *Teleny* takes up. The link between French arts and representations of sexual bodies is explicit in *Teleny*. After all, des Grieux, *Teleny*’s protagonist, is French; he enjoys conversation about the arts with other characters, including his mother, Madame des Grieux, who is an arts patron; and des Grieux meets Teleny for the first time at an arts event. Indeed, *Teleny*’s erotics of a man performing art (music) in a community populated by other men as spectators renders *Teleny*’s opening masturbatory scene both Darwinian (men congregate to watch the erotic antics of one another)

and Mareyan and Muybridgean (the bodies are pieced out into an array of changing actions, not penises).

While Darwin gives us a scientific version of protean bodies, and Marey and Muybridge offer photographic versions, *Teleny* shows what bodies in motion look like in literature. *Teleny* thus contributes a literary version to Marey's project to "discover objective truths" about the body. "When our senses appear to give us deceptive appearances," Marey explains, his photographic apparatus is "like new senses of an astonishing precision."<sup>36</sup> The writers of *Teleny* turn to different apparatuses—writing and language—to find in sexual bodies an "astonishing precision" of details. They thus uncover through literary form the "deceptive appearance" of biological sex as the governing feature of sexual bodies. In so doing, the authors of *Teleny* join Victorian physicians, Darwin, Marey, and Muybridge in asking a question that extends from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century: what unexpected features of unceasingly changing male bodies have yet to appear and await expression? Protean male physiology is a common cultural preoccupation that *Teleny* applies to uncommon literary ends.

### Masturbation in *Teleny*: A Sexual but Unsexed Hand

In a novella fascinated more by the sexual body's moving parts than by sexual or gender identity, what better way to open the narrative than with a fast-moving, masturbating hand? As I noted earlier, the relationship between des Grieux and Teleny unfolds from a masturbating scene that would horrify Victorian physicians. As des Grieux sits in the concert hall listening to Teleny perform, he becomes aware of changes in his physiology:

My lips were parched. I gasped for breath; my joints were stiff, my veins were swollen, yet I sat still, like all the crowd around me. But suddenly a heavy hand seemed to be laid upon my lap, something was bent and clasped and grasped, which made me faint with lust. The hand was moved up and down, slowly at first, then fast and faster it went in rhythm with the song. My brain began to reel as throughout every vein a burning lava coursed, and then, some drops even gushed out—I panted—

All at once the pianist finished his piece with a crash amidst the thundering applause of the whole theatre.<sup>37</sup>

This scene seems to combine a male homosexual and a masturbatory encounter. It is unclear to whom this seemingly disembodied hand belongs: Is it des Grieux's own or is it an imaginary figuration of Teleny's hand? Given the gap in articulating this hand's agent, we might even say it could be the hand of another man or woman sitting beside des Grieux at the concert. Despite the ambiguity of what kind of sexuality is occurring here (masturbation? homosexuality? heterosexuality? all of these?) the scene at first glance suggests that masturbatory erotics—as physicians feared—are linked to homosexual stimulants, since a man is getting off on watching and listening to a man perform.

But des Grieux is not so much practicing a homosexuality (or even a heterosexuality) as he is erasing a gender identity that would attach his body to a sexual identity. This passage narrates a sexual body in motion of the kind Marey's and Muybridge's images present. *Teleny* articulates here a shift in the operating principle of male sexuality from sex to movement. The sexual in this scene is active but not sexed: a "hand" rather than a sexed body or part takes precedence as the sexual agent. We might say that this hand belongs to a male or a female. But the text makes no indication that attaching this hand to a sexed body is important. This sexual hand is "a" or "the" hand rather than "his" or even "my" hand. In fact, the sexual is organized around what the unsexed hand can do, its capacity to move, bend, clasp, and grasp. Des Grieux, the man as agent, disappears on the level of grammar, too: the "hand" takes center stage as the grammatical subject of the sentence. The man (or even the woman) whom we would expect to move the hand has increasingly no place in the scene.

The sexual action leads to inaction, as the scene narrates the process of manhood becoming smaller and overcome, wiped out by the unsexed force of orgasm. To be sure, the scene begins through metaphors of solidly male subjectivity, as readers would expect, indicated by des Grieux's territorial pronouns like "I" and "my." But the subject as male recedes under the force of the hand to an unsexed "brain," then further recedes to unsexed "veins" through which unsexed blood like "lava coursed," and finally to fluidity, "some drops." While "lava" and "some drops" indicate ejaculation, this ejaculation is not so much sexed male as it is fluid motion. By mentioning "lava" and "some drops," but not the penis-like volcano from which such liquids would be expected to burst in a representation privileging a homosexual encounter, the authors, like the chronophotographers, render fluid, not sexed, subjects.

By the end of the scene, what might be understood as des Grieux's feeble attempt to reclaim male subjectivity ("I panted") fails as his subjectivity disappears, indicated by the dash trailing off into nothingness

on the page. A roomful of hands' "thundering applause" accompanies this nothingness, as if the audience in this outrageously public erotic event lauds des Grieux's disappearing manhood into fluid physiologies in the same way that they laud Teleny's beautiful music. At the end of the first sexual scene in the novella, two things are worthy of exultation: the disappearing man and music. The applause not only signals the end of Teleny's performance but also the end of manhood and the welcoming of bodies in motion that the novella elaborates. Des Grieux's disappearing manhood through masturbation as indicated by the rhythm of the language ("moved up and down, slowly at first, then fast and faster . . . in rhythm with the song") is of course meant to titillate the masturbating reader. But the language is also a rhythmic music, given the authors' aesthetic language that beautifies masturbation. Masturbation's inauguration of man's disappearance is not a cause for alarm, as physicians would have it. Instead, masturbating manhood away is an aesthetic achievement (much like Marey's and Muybridge's images), a beautiful accomplishment worthy of lauding.

### One Small Thing: The Penis

In a novella committed to detailing sex in its physiological variations, the penis—the most constitutive feature of maleness—comes into play. But *Teleny* brings in the penis to narrate unstable embodiment and protean physio-sexuality, not a static homosexuality. As des Grieux's attraction to Teleny grows after the masturbatory scene, des Grieux describes this attraction in part as Teleny's sexed body, his "heavenly figure, so full of youth, life, and manhood";<sup>38</sup> des Grieux studies the pianist as a "lonely male finding at last a mate," but ultimately his desire for Teleny extends beyond a sexed body, for "still his intense eagerness was more than that; it was also a soul issuing forth to meet another soul. It was a longing of the senses, and a mad intoxication of the brain."<sup>39</sup> Teleny's maleness, resonating and interesting, is neither the most resonating nor interesting feature of Teleny for des Grieux. For why else would des Grieux state Teleny's maleness only to *move on* to characterize Teleny's desire as a force of physiology rather than sexual difference, as "intense eagerness" that "issues forth," a "longing of the senses," and "intoxication of the brain"? One might argue that Teleny's maleness is a precondition for des Grieux's interest in him. But des Grieux finds mere maleness unsatisfying. Maleness disappears in des Grieux's next clause; Teleny re-emerges as an unsexed "soul." This soul-on-soul attraction does not transcend the

lived, sexual body but is corporealized into senses that long and into a brain intoxicated.

Des Grieux does not just desire Teleny through a physio-sexual lens. He also engages in sex with him that way. In an early sexual encounter between des Grieux and Teleny, they enjoy physio-sexuality to the extent that the penis becomes *one among many* changing and shifting features of the sexual body:

As we kissed each other with ever-increasing greed, my fingers were feeling his curly hair, or paddling the soft skin of his neck. Our legs being clasped together, his phallus, in strong erection, was rubbing against mine no less stiff and stark. We were, however, always shifting our position, so as to get every part of our bodies in as close a contact as possible; and thus feeling, clasping, hugging, kissing, and biting each other, we must have looked, on that bridge amidst the thickening fog, like two damned souls suffering eternal torment.<sup>40</sup>

This scene might easily be read as homosexual. But to read it as such gives more heft to the “phallus” than the text does. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offers a queer reading method of “besideness” to reimagine the sexual.<sup>41</sup> For Sedgwick, “beside” offers a subtle heuristic with which to rethink dualistic taxonomies like male and female or homosexual and heterosexual, which obscure other sexual features. “*Beside* permits a spacious agnosticism about . . . linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking,” Sedgwick explains, for the term *beside* “comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, “beside” invites us to read other physical orientations to sexual activity than just sexed bodies.

The passage from *Teleny* inserts phallic elements of sexuality beside rather than above other physical features, including the unsexed body parts of lips (associated with kissing), hair, skin, neck, and legs. In so doing, this scene formalizes into language the photographic, protean male body in Marey’s and Muybridge’s images. The actions of “kissing,” “feeling,” “paddling,” “rubbing,” “clasping,” and “shifting” are just as important to the sexual body in this scene as a penis. I have excerpted this scene as part of a larger paragraph; in the original paragraph, the “phallus” appears in the middle, suggesting its central role in the sexual. But as soon as the phallus appears in the central role, it gives way as the object

of centrality, as the emphasis on “shifting positions” replaces the phallus, and the sexual disperses to “every part of our bodies” desiring “contact,” not merely penis on penis, or sexed body on sexed body. In this way, the penis is positioned as *beside* rather than above other sexual embodiments that come before and after it. By the end of the scene, the “thickening fog” obscures the sexual contours of the male bodies into “souls” that are nonetheless observable: des Grieux notes how strange physio-sexuality “must’ve looked” to passersby, reminiscent of the role group observation plays in Darwinian erotics. Through physio-sexuality, soul-on-soul sex—rather than man-on-man sex—appears and releases the two lovers from identity constraints into a broad range of moving parts. What the body *can do*, *how it can act*—feel, clasp, hug, kiss, bite, and move faster or slower in rhythm with another form, constantly shifting positions among lips, hair, skin, necks, legs—make gender identity disappear as the directing feature of sexuality. The penis is not important for its starring role. It is important only to the extent that it shares with other physiologies like “fluttering pulses” and “throbbing veins” the capacity to act, move, and intensify physical sensations with one’s own and other bodies.

### Women and the Destabilization of Manhood

The physiology-on-physiology sex that des Grieux and Teleny enjoy casts the penis as physiologically similar to other body parts in its capacity to be sexually beside, not sexually above. Among physicians, securing a stable manhood means guarding the penis from misuse. The penis, physicians warn, becomes dysfunctional when used for non-procreative purposes, as in masturbation and homosexuality. This disuse threatens to effeminize the penis, making male embodiment more woman-like. Many physicians and health and wellness experts believed that the penis becomes weaker and weaker after masturbatory and homosexual abuse, and would eventually become impotent, noted for that which it cannot become (hard) and cannot do (penetrate and impregnate). As turn-of-the-century health commentator Bernarr Macfadden states, a youth given to masturbation has a “physique which is either incapable of, or can only indifferently perform the sacred duties of a husband”; that is, penetrate a woman, fertilize her eggs, and sire children.<sup>43</sup>

*Teleny’s* unsexing of the penis implies a loss of differentiation between the male and female body: their bodies become more—not less—similar in their mutual capacities to do more—and less—than penetrate and fertilize. Dismantling boundaries of sexual difference was a primary worry

of physicians and was related to the idea of contagion. Masturbation's contagion, its propensity to connect bodies in unpredictable, uncontrollable ways, was a defining worry of physicians: contagion threatened physical autonomy and self-containment, primary features of bourgeois manhood. Thomas Laqueur's colossal cultural study of masturbation, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (2003), promotes masturbation as a private affair of a single individual. Yet Mason takes issue with Laqueur's title, arguing that masturbation may have been (and still might be) considered a vice, but the extent of its solitariness is debatable. In fact, Mason explains that masturbation was considered relational: one youth in "the allegedly vice-ridden public school" seeing another youth masturbate would lead to his own desire to practice the vice—perhaps even with his peers.<sup>44</sup> Masturbation, far from solitary, often became an opportunity for new intimacies. We see realizations of masturbation's community-building influence in *Teleny's* opening masturbatory scene, where the audience participates in des Grieux's masturbation by applauding it. We also see this in the manifestation of the novella itself as it forged a community, even if its members never met one another, of masturbating readers.

The capacity for one youth to see himself in and identify with a masturbating other showed his physical boundaries becoming unsealed and his body becoming porous, characteristics culturally coded as feminine and weak. As medico-cultural accounts feared, masturbation threatened the security of sexual difference and made males susceptible to identify with (or even as) the feminine and therefore with or as women. Unsettling essential sexual differences, as we have seen, horrified many physicians. But we have also seen other scientific approaches to sexual differences. Darwinian terminology for male physiology offers male and female physiological leakage as normal: the vesiculae prostatica is an underdeveloped uterus. Male nipples are underdeveloped breasts. *Teleny* tends toward a Darwinian approach to physiology and unsettles sexual difference by recognizing overlooked affinities between male and female bodies.

Critics such as Christopher Wellings argue that *Teleny* not only fears cross-sexed leakage but is pervasively misogynistic. "Instead of attempting a critique of dominant ways of thinking about gender and sex, the novel reinforces them," Wellings concludes, and "never attempts to break free of these dominant frameworks" that privilege male sexual prerogative at the expense of women's.<sup>45</sup> Wellings interprets the appearance of women in the novella as inconsequential at best and as obstacles to men's sexual freedoms at most. But, I ask, what if the threat to men's relationships comes not only from women but from the ranges of sexual physiologies women manifest—as do men—and their associated pleasures? To

put the matter more precisely, the threat to homosexual relationships is not merely *heterosexual* encounters, but the plethora of *sexual* ones that accompany the appearance of any additional bodies into the narrative environment, regardless of their sexes.

For instance, in a moment of anxiety in which des Grieux fears he will lose Teleny to other lovers, des Grieux expresses to Teleny, “you would love him—or her, and then my life would be blasted for ever.”<sup>46</sup> In Wellings’s sexed reading, women are depicted here as a threat to des Grieux’s and Teleny’s relationship. But in my physio-sexual reading, it is not so much a rival’s female sex that is at issue for des Grieux as is the body’s capacity to be sexual in and with a variety (“him—or her”) of physiologies and forms, as well as the body’s capacity to act with—to “love”—a vast range of physiologies. Through a lens of physio-sexuality, women in *Teleny* are not threats; what might be threatening are increased numbers of physiologies to which all bodies can come into contact and whose many lures make one susceptible.

To read *Teleny* as relentlessly misogynistic misses the ways it launches unexpected relationships with women’s sexuality. *Teleny* instructs us to read physio-sexuality as a way for a man to recognize a woman as sexual agent without necessitating or expecting sex from her. For example, when des Grieux tries to end his frequent attendance at Teleny’s concerts to avoid sexual arousal and temptation, he succumbs one day and follows Teleny home. Des Grieux watches as a Countess goes home with Teleny. From there, des Grieux observes the sexual rendezvous of the pianist and the Countess. In a series of imaginative substitutions, des Grieux fancies that Teleny envisions that des Grieux himself has become the Countess: “he [Teleny] thought, if instead of this lady’s mouth those lips were my [des Grieux’s] lips; and [Teleny’s] phallus at once stiffened and awoke into life. . . . So [Teleny] began by covering her with kisses; then deftly turned her on her belly. . . . He bent her pliant body on her knees, so that she presented a most beautiful sight to his view.”<sup>47</sup> Whose body is Teleny kissing and bending here? Even if Teleny is fantasizing that the Countess’s body is a male one, namely, des Grieux’s body, this fantasy is available not because of irreducible differences between male and female bodies, but because of their bodies’ similar erotic physiologies to be enjoyed: the capacity to be kissed, to be touched, to be turned onto bellies, to bend, to present buttocks to view, to incite delight, to be penetrated, to induce pleasure. Des Grieux can imaginatively substitute himself with the Countess, a woman, because sensual pleasures transcend sexual difference.

Surprisingly, by putting himself in the place of the Countess, des Grieux sees the Countess as a sexual subject in her own right by virtue of

her movements, rhythms, intimacies, and desires that he can relate to and enjoy. The Countess is inundated with pleasure, for “the contraction of all her muscles gripped [Teleny] and sucked him up eagerly, greedily”; “after a short spasmodic convulsion,” she with Teleny “fell senseless side by side, still tightly wedged against one another.”<sup>48</sup> Physio-sexually, des Grieux’s enjoyment of sexual intimacy with a woman is possible neither by having sex with her, nor by objectifying her, but by standing apart, noticing and finding pleasure in her sexual pleasure. *Teleny* thus illustrates how physio-sexuality can open new lines of connection between men’s and women’s sexuality that do not require actual sexual participation with one another.

Sex in *Teleny* is a heuristic through which men can identify with women without necessitating sexual contact. This identification seems consistent with medico-cultural anxieties that masturbation effeminizes men. But *Teleny* explains this fear as groundless: the novella shows that the masturbator has nothing specifically male to lose. Male sexual organs, as we recall from Darwin’s narrations, are already woman-like. *Teleny* corporealizes the penis and its derivatives such as semen in feminine terms. While effeminized penises horrify physicians, *Teleny*’s effeminized penises are agents of pleasure. Instead of an indicator of sexual difference, the penis confounds essential differences between male and female. For instance, semen, which flies freely throughout this novella, is a “milky fluid,”<sup>49</sup> the same milky fluid that fills the Countess’s sexually aroused breasts: “The breasts—as if swollen with milk—stood up, and the nipples erect.”<sup>50</sup> Enlarging, swelling, standing, and stiffening are not prerogatives of the phallic male body, but characterize the female sexual body as well. “Milky” semen is also similar to the sexual emissions of the female body: the Countess’s “thighs were bare, and the thick curly hair that covered her middle parts, as black as jet, was sprinkled over with pearly drops of milky dew.”<sup>51</sup> And when the Countess performs oral sex on Teleny, the narrator compares the penis’s protrusion to that of a woman’s breast: the Countess sucks on Teleny’s penis like “a baby taking her nurse’s breast.”<sup>52</sup> Later, des Grieux’s penis, too, is figured as feminizing his corporeality, for Teleny sucks des Grieux’s penis “like a greedy but gluttoned baby even in its sleep holds firm the nipple of its mother’s breast.”<sup>53</sup> The penis in this scene is inactive in contrast to those who actively suck the penis and “take” and “hold” it “firm.”

One could read moments like these as the masculine (semen, penis) colonizing the feminine (pregnancy, motherhood, sustenance, nurturance), whereby the feminine (milk and protruded breasts and nipples) is represented in and constituted by terms of the masculine. But one could also read these moments as confusing the sexual male body (semen, the

penis, sexually action-oriented) with the sexual female body (milk, breasts, sexual receptivity). The penis and semen, the vagina and breasts, no longer signal sexual differences but mark cross-sexual capacities for action and inaction: to suck and be sucked, to harden and protrude, to soften and recede, and to emit and imbibe milky fluids. As well, feminizing the penis and semen mark the male and female bodies' common capacities to be sites of relational care instead of autonomy. As physio-sexuality propels concepts of "man" further into the distance, culturally coded feminine physiologies of the sexual move to the foreground. By aestheticizing this movement, *Teleny* affirms feminine embodiment not as a disease but as a privileged embodiment of sexual delight, personal fulfilment, and interpersonal bonding. The extent to which a man experiences his body as feminine is the extent to which his body receives and gives sexual experiences as joy.

### Reading Lips

As physio-sexual, men and women in *Teleny* cross sexual difference and forge connection by possessing the same physio-sexual organs and capacities. *Teleny*'s physio-sexuality instructs us to read the sexual in swelling, leaking, opening, closing, squirting, relaxing, penetrating, and receiving. The penis and vagina do this, but they are components of what for *Teleny* is the body's largest and most versatile sexual organ: lips.

In *Teleny*, lips characterize and span both the male and female body: the lips of the mouth, of penile and vaginal openings, as well as of pores of the skin. Lips' innumerable ranges of motion, protrusion, recession, hardness, and softness make them the most versatile sexual organ of the body. Lips mark entryways into both male and female bodies, openings through which pleasure is both given and received. For instance, the lips of the mouth (des Grieux states, "My lips eagerly sought [Teleny's], my tongue was in his mouth") provide a point through which the male body is penetrable by both male and female appendages, such as the tongue, erect penis, and erect clitoris.<sup>54</sup> The oral lips of males are similar to the vaginal lips of women as sites of corporeal penetration and emission of liquid. Des Grieux states that "the longing that I felt to press my mouth on his beautiful mouth and parted lips was so intense that it always made my penis water."<sup>55</sup> The association with parting lips and moisture also characterizes the female body: Teleny's "naughty fingers began to graze the edge of the [Countess's] moist [vaginal] lips. At that touch, however, [the Countess's] strength gave way, the nerves relaxed, and allowed the

tip of a finger to worm its way within the slit—nay, the tiny berry protruded out to welcome it.”<sup>56</sup> The lips of Teleny’s male mouth are not dissimilar to the lips of the Countess’s vagina. Indeed, lips of the mouth and of the vagina are conflated, such as when two prostitutes are engaging in sex, and one of them “placed her head between the *cantiniere*’s legs, lips against lips, and her tongue on the stiff, red, moist, and wagging clitoris.”<sup>57</sup> The penis’s urethra acts as lips as well. As the Countess sucks Teleny’s penis, “she tickled the prepuce with her expert tongue, touched the tiny lips on her palate”; these “tiny lips opened themselves, a sparkling drop of colourless liquid appeared on their edges.”<sup>58</sup> Later des Grieux’s tongue enters Teleny’s penis as it “dart[s] itself between those tiny rosy lips that, bulged out with love, opened and spattered a tiny drop of sparkling dew.”<sup>59</sup> Here the penis is feminized to the extent that it is not only an instrument of penetration but an instrument of reception, comprised of a tiny opening, not dissimilar to the vaginal openings in its capacity to be entered and emit liquid. Even the surface of the skin is covered with lips that receive bodily contact: “We tore off our clothes, and then naked we rolled, the one on the other, like two snakes, trying to feel as much of each other as we could. To me it seemed that all the pores of my skin were tiny mouths that pouted out to kiss him.”<sup>60</sup> Lips recorporealize the body as sexual but unsexed, oriented toward receptivity (of touch, of besideness) just as much as toward penetration (the lengthening or “pouting out” of body parts to touch, another form of besideness). Articulating lips as sexual organs spanning the body makes the entire body a sexual but unsexed organ.

### Conclusion: Polemic Pornography

What does *Teleny* have to teach us about sexuality that otherwise we would not know? Possibly, we can read physio-sexuality and its disappearing man as pervasive features of late Victorian pornography rather than as a particular invention of *Teleny*. But the status of *Teleny* as what Mason has called the first “erotic novel of homosexual love” distinguishes the politics of *Teleny*’s disappearing men from those in other late Victorian pornography. For instance, in the anonymously published and now canonized volume *My Secret Life* (1881), Walter, the promiscuous protagonist, experiments with unsexed embodiment in the bedroom by exploring an array of sexual physiologies and positions with men and women. But his actions do not lead to criminalized identities thrust upon him. While he may be a disappearing man in bed, he “leave[s] the bed a gentleman,”

observes Ellen Bayuk Rosenman.<sup>61</sup> Manhood intact, Walter does not fear criminalization as homosexual or “sodomite” because he does not enjoy a long-term companionship with someone whose body happens to be coded as male. Walter’s experiments in the bedroom neither lend themselves to experiencing unsexed forms of subjectivity in day-to-day living, nor to unknottling sexual behavior from pathology or criminality.

Since Victorian society—and current critics—have organized the sexual bodies of des Grieux and Teleny through notions of sexual difference, the characters’ sexual encounters have specific risks and stakes that Walter’s do not. Des Grieux and Teleny’s encounters are illegal according to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which extended existing legislation policing male sexuality to illegalize all sexual contact among males. This Act cemented into law sexual difference as the defining principle of the sexual body. Although des Grieux stresses that sex with Teleny occasions no “conscience-stricken” behavior from him, for he has no “remorse” for his actions, he is terror-stricken when others begin to “brand” him as an “*enculé*.”<sup>62</sup> His personhood “branded” into a pathologized identity as “sodomite” for the sex he enjoys with Teleny, des Grieux fears that any moment “I almost expected to hear the awful words,—‘In the name of the law I arrest you, sodomite!’” and consequently must endure “imprisonment.”<sup>63</sup> Physio-sexuality in *Teleny* is not merely an aggrandizement of pleasure, as it is in *My Secret Life*, but a political exigency to dissolve the sexed grounds of criminality.

Yet *Teleny* demonstrates that it is not just fears of imprisonment that are at stake in unsettling Victorian sexuality; rather, the stakes are a matter of life and death. Des Grieux is not the only character who fears medico-juridical punishment. At the sex and dinner party that des Grieux and Teleny attend, the Arab general, Spahi, also understands the ways in which the medico-juridical establishment collapses his diverse sexualities into a monolithic one: criminal sodomite. Spahi’s sexual experiences cannot be filed consistently under hetero-, homo-, or even human-centered sexualities. He enjoys sex with a variety of bodies and forms: men, women, food, and bottles, for instance. Sexed bodies are not as important in his experiences of sexuality as the condition of embodiment is. Spahi’s refusal to go to the hospital after a bottle breaks in his anus as he uses it to penetrate himself emerges from his knowledge that juridico-medical institutions have created sexual criminals rather than knowledge on, curiosity about, and space for an array of sexualities: “‘What!’ said [Spahi]; ‘go to the hospital, and expose myself to the sneers of all the nurses and doctors—never!’”<sup>64</sup> Preferring to writhe in pain rather than go to the hospital, Spahi dies that night from his untreated injury.

The radical sexual joys that the disappearing homosexual launches resonate all the stronger when contrasted with such catastrophes. The devastating and abrupt ending—Teleny's suicide for betraying des Grieux by having sex with des Grieux's mother, and des Grieux's estrangement from her—makes the pages and pages of delight stand out all the more colorfully. Indeed, the catastrophic ending urges us not to condemn sexual joys for having caused tragedy but instead to condemn the social structures in which such sexual joy can be associated with catastrophe. What makes *Teleny* unique among other pornographic novels is the explicitly political stakes within which it implicates masturbation as a process of undoing sexed bodies to invite non-identity-centered sexualities as a release from criminality. *Teleny* represents, therefore, not a politically unaware "pornotopia," as Steven Marcus has imagined pornography to be. Instead, *Teleny* awakens its readers to the labor left to be done in decoupling identity from sexuality, and to the disturbing stakes of not doing it.

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## NOTES

1. I use Winston Leyland's edition of *Teleny* (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1984). Readers of *Teleny* might be curious to know two of the main controversies circulating around this novella: 1) the extent to which or whether Wilde contributed to *Teleny*; and 2) the extent to which various published editions of *Teleny* are true to original manuscript versions. For a representative account that attributes much of *Teleny*'s authorship to Wilde, see Winston Leyland, "Introduction" to *Teleny*. For a representative critical account that denies Wilde's role as author, see Rupert Croft-Cooke's *The Unrecorded Life of Oscar Wilde* (London: W. H. Allen, 1972). Other *Teleny* scholarship addresses the complexities of *Teleny*'s controversial publishing history and the related disputes surrounding the authenticity of various editions, since the original manuscript has been lost. For publication and reception history, see John McRae, "The Introduction to the 1986 GMP edition of *Teleny*," *Oscholars.com* and Rivendale Press, *The Oscholars*, 2008. Web. 6 August 2012.
2. *Teleny*, Winston Leyland, ed. (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1984), 26, 27.
3. Ed Cohen, "Writing Gone Wilde: Homoerotic Desire in the Closet of Representation." *PMLA*, 102, no. 5, (1987): 801–813, 803.
4. Diane Mason, *The Secret Vice: Masturbation in Victorian Fiction and Medical Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 75.
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