
I was honoured to be invited to be a discussant of Anne’s book. Anne and I go back a long way, to 1995 when we shared a platform for a BAP conference "A Century of Sex". She has generously included a part of my presentation in Chapter 5 when discussing her contribution on bisexuality and camp behaviour.

Though a slim volume, it is packed with new information and ideas which challenge in the light of new biological information past theoretical understandings of female sexuality. Anne’s wide and deep experience illustrated using her psychoanalytic cases both from private practice and the Portman give it a unique perspective. It is a brave and upfront book and it is difficult to do it justice completely.

As I read Anne’s book I reflected on my past experiences as a psychosexual doctor carrying out genital examinations and running psychosexual workshops. Participants at such workshops were invited to give colloquial and often rude words to sex organs e.g. penis: cock, root, for the vagina: fanny, pussy, cunt and then the clitoris. This usually produced an embarrassed silence until someone said “The little man in the boat”. An American film made in the 1970s showed a woman with a drink problem having a breakdown. Referring to her sex life she talked of her clit saying “I can’t pronounce it and he (her husband) can’t find it. We were made for each other.” The 1970s also saw the publication of Becoming orgasmic, encouraging women to find their clitoris and self-pleasure. There was a feminist saying of the time ‘A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle’!

In the psychosexual clinic where genital examinations were of crucial importance in enabling fears, fantasies and anxieties to be expressed, women rarely referred to their clitoris. About one of her cases, Anne said she was unusual in that she did talk about her clitoris. Women’s main concern was with the vagina and its size, complaint was of something wrong ‘down there’ or ‘down below’ and inside. I would ask women how many openings they had down below. The answer often was one through which everything came - urine, menstrual blood, babies and faeces - a veritable cloaca that Anne refers to; no wonder it was viewed as dirty, smelly and messy.

If women and their bodies are a mystery to men, they are often a mystery to themselves. There was an inhibition against touching themselves, the prohibition from mother usually ‘don’t fiddle with yourself’ ‘don’t touch yourself’, adjuncts against masturbation. When I did sex education in schools headteachers would invariably ask me to talk about masturbation for the boys but never for the girls. Of course, girls would discover pleasurable feelings down below when riding a bicycle or horse or sliding down the
bannisters, but they were never discussed publicly. I wonder whether there is a difference nowadays with information on the internet.

Reading Anne’s book made me go back to my own Gray’s Anatomy. I qualified earlier than Anne and mine was the 31st edition 1954. On page 1490 it described the clitoris as an erectile structure homologous with the penis. It does say that the glans clitoridis is highly sensitive!!

I also looked at my copy of Masters and Johnson. There is a whole chapter on the clitoris and its response during the sexual cycle and on the vexed question of the clitoral versus the vaginal orgasm. They found that there is one orgasm and this is a muscular rhythmic response of the lower third of the vagina which is the most sensitive part and described as a throbbing sensation. One could cut the upper two thirds of the vagina and that would not be felt. What is important is the perception of the bodily and psychic feelings of the orgasm - its intensity and duration that can vary from woman to woman and in the same woman at different times depending on the level of arousal. They also found that women could be multi-orgasmic. Which sex gets the most pleasure?

In Greek mythology the blind seer, Tiresias, who having killed two snakes copulating, was turned into a woman by the goddess Hera. Tiresias became a priestess and, again faced with two snakes copulating, injured them and was turned back into a male. He was asked by Zeus who got the most sexual pleasure. Hera, Zeus's wife had diplomatically said it was the man. Tiresias replied the woman, giving the game away whereupon Hera blinded him but Zeus, who could not undo the damage, gave Tiresias the art of prophecy - insight and we know his role in the story of Oedipus.

Freud as Anne states thought that there were two kinds of orgasm - clitoral immature and vaginal mature. However, he also thought the stimulation of the clitoris is analogous to the kindling used to light a fire. There is an external reality in that when girls masturbate it’s usually rubbing around the clitoris rather than pushing something into the vagina and so the vagina is an unknown space unlike the penis a visible and familiar organ. The manner of stimulation varies enormously including a ‘no hands’ approach, possibly because of the parental injunction not to touch down there and to keep their hands-on top of the bedclothes. Interestingly, Doris Lessing in her novel The Golden Notebook seems to agree with Freud writing about the clitoral and the vaginal orgasms as separate.

A dilemma for women is sharing how they masturbate with their partners. It appears shame-based. I recall an angry partner of a woman I was examining saying “She doesn't have an orgasm. I don't think she's got one of those. I can't find it”. The woman was silent. Obviously, there was a relationship difficulty as well as a personal and sexual one.

Women’s sexuality, Freud’s dark continent, has been agonised over, bedevilled and at times demeaned by analytic theorising mainly by men. As Michael Rustin states in the Foreword, the aim of Anne’s book is to put right a century or more of psychoanalytic misunderstanding of the female body and therefore of the female psyche. Anne questions rightly why it has taken so long for biology to be openly addressed by psychoanalytic theory. She makes a plea for psychoanalysis to take an interest in and not to reject new biological evidence. The biological evidence is powerful. The clitoris is far from being a miniature version of the penis. It goes deep inside the body and incorporates the musculature surrounding the vagina. Its glans is covered with more nerve endings (around 8000) than that of the penis, hence its extreme sensitivity. I have a caveat about the diagram on page 15 which is not easily understood. Anne
doesn’t refer to the G spot just behind the urethra in the vaginal wall, but the extent of the clitoris might explain this.

The psychoanalyst William Gillespie in 1975, challenged Freud’s theory of arousal in women centred only at first on the clitoris since the clitoris remains the centre of arousal whether that is via vaginal stimulation or not.

Ron Britton also challenged Freud in Sex, Death and the Superego, suggesting that Freud was mistaken about the castration or masculinity complex in women. He thought it was Freud’s two analyses of his daughter Anna that led him to conclude that this was a problem for women in general. It seems to me that there is the difficult issue of universals versus individual idiosyncrasies. Some women appear to have a masculinity complex, the ‘phallic woman’ with the feminine denigrated. I think there was an example of this in the clinical material number four. I was intrigued by the married professional woman with grown-up children who talked about her clitoris. Anne says she demonstrated an insatiable emptiness and, when faced with abandonment, shifts to a more phallic position where natural feminine spaces within her cease to feel accommodating and creative but instead feels empty and needy.

In 1927 Jung wrote about “Woman in Europe” (Collected Works 10 para 242) “woman is in the process of breaking with the purely sexual pattern of unconsciousness and passivity...she no longer hides behind the mask of Mrs so-and-so with the obliging intention of having all her wishes fulfilled by the man” and further on, para 269, “she gives expression to one of the cultural tendencies of our time the urge to live a complete life, a longing for meaning and fulfilment”. He also notes (para 253) “contraception is a fact of enormous importance to woman because it does away with the constant fear of pregnancy”. He goes on to write, para 275 “the woman of today is faced with a tremendous cultural task - perhaps it will be the dawn of a new era.” But as Anne writes on page 31 “in each era new theories are presented but they tend to be received with a passionately inflamed controversy and then they disappear. Decades later they re-emerge”. I am reminded that all through the 19th century and 20th century there was often talk of ‘the new woman’ in literature and common parlance. “Shall we never have done with the New Woman complained ‘The Times’ in 1894. What tiresome creatures they are wanting to practice medicine, enjoy sex without fear of disease or pregnancy”.

Anne has produced an informative grid system of the psychoanalytic theories of female sexuality from 1897-2001. She notes the classic views of Freud, Klein and Jones and the women who first challenged Freud - like Horney and Deutsch. Jones drew on the Kleinian notion of early knowledge of the vagina and the womb and the prominence of motherhood. Jones in 1933 refers to the innate primary femininity, developed by a more recent female theorist Nancy Kulish in 2000 as a ‘primary sense of feminaleness’. Incidentally, Karl Figlio, writing in the International Journal of Psychoanalysis in 2010 noted that castration is a misnomer since it refers to the removal of the testicles and not the penis. Feminine genital anxiety is referred to by several female authors from Karen Horney in 1924, Jacobson in 1937 and Dorsey in 1996. This seems to me a normal reaction - the damage to an interior space, of being ripped and torn and fears of rape and all the fantasies attached to that, especially seen in women unable to consummate their sexual relationship. Many years ago, a Balint group examining the presentation of non-consummation described three types in the book Virgin Wives - the Sleeping Beauty, Brunhilde and the Queen Bee. The Sleeping Beauty wanted to be awakened sexually by her knight confident in his sexuality, the Brunhilde type valued her clitoris and was able to have an orgasm but prevented penetration. Is this an example of a masculine complex? And the Queen Bee pregnant all by herself,
disowning the male. With genital examination these women were encouraged to examine themselves to explore the vagina and to voice their anxieties - but some were terrified to do so.

Anne’s case history on page 42 of a woman who was resolved to live without sex while tantalising her male friends illustrates I think aspects of Brunhilde. She was confused and dissociated about her sexuality, as well she might be with an uncle who abused her and a neglectful, possibly promiscuous mother. I was amused by Anne’s pointed remark of enactment ‘that’s what they all say’ when her patient said that she couldn’t be pregnant as she never got near enough to a man to get pregnant. I was reminded of the oft told remark frequently heard in family planning clinics ‘I don’t know how it happened. I just fell pregnant!’ Anne’s patient had referred to deceiving her mother and that she had got into trouble. Anne rightly surmised this as a euphemism for getting pregnant. Anne did not let her denial go, saying she thought the patient wanted to abort an idea that seemed to be created between them. This led to a productive shift in the analysis.

Dana Birksted-Breen in The Gender Conundrum argues for an understanding of femininity that encompasses unconscious representation of lack, that is, an empty space and an unconscious representation of its concentric aspects - the contradiction itself structuring the feminine unconscious. I was reminded about the empty space by women who get pregnant repeatedly to fill that empty space.

Anne refers to contemporary psychoanalytic writers bringing Freud’s classical statement into the foreground of our consciousness. From the standard edition, 18. Freud says “Biology is truly a land of unlimited possibilities and we cannot guess what answers it will return in a dozen years to the questions we put to it. They may be of a kind that will blow away the whole artificial structure of hypotheses”. Indeed, I suppose we might question how the theories have evolved from the pathological to normal development. How do children make sense of their bodies, genitals, excretory organs and what goes on inside themselves and their parents.? What is the palimpsest of internal images that gets lost and buried in the unconscious that are unique to that person only to be retrieved by analytic understanding?

Dana Birksted-Breen introduced in 1996 the concept of penis-as-link. This differs both from the penis-in-reality and from the symbolic phallus. Birksted-Breen says that it structures function, enhancing mental space and thinking. A lack of internalisation leads to a compulsive search for the phallus. I was reminded of Rosemary Gordon, Jungian analyst, writing about the penis as a bridge between a man and a woman, between the masculine and feminine, the familiar and unfamiliar, in her book also titled Bridges. She states that the sexual organs are rich in symbolic meaning and significance: the penis as an organ of fertilisation, creative but also an organ that ruptures and penetrates but the penis also relates two separate and unlike persons. As we know there can be fantasies about a hidden penis within the woman (Melanie Klein posited that the little girl imagines her mother with father’s penis inside) but also of a vagina dentata that will bite the penis, a male fantasy.

I was intrigued by Anne’s reference to Gilet Atlas in her book The Enigma of Desire 2016, contrasting masculine and feminine relating, pragmatic versus enigmatic, and linking this to their sexual organs. There are those who today might argue with the terms, masculine and feminine with the exploration nowadays of gender fluidity. Anne was exploring some of these issues in her paper at the BAP conference on Freud’s concept of bisexuality. There is a possible parallel with Jung’s psychic concepts of anima and animus, the contra sexual archetypes - the masculine in the woman and the
feminine in the man. Freud noted SE 7 1915 “It is important to understand clearly that masculine and feminine whose meaning seems so unambiguous to ordinary people are amongst the most confused that occur in science”. I was also intrigued by Anne stating that the Portman saw fewer homosexual men presenting in a feminised way nowadays. Is this a possible consequence of the change in social and legal attitudes to homosexuality?

Anne does not baulk in writing about female aggression and the form it takes in contrast to male aggression. I recall Estella Weldon telling me about the outrage she faced from certain feminist groups on the publication of her book Mother, Madonna, Whore in 1988 when no one could believe that mothers could injure their children. Anne refers to female genital mutilation. I have examined several women who have had this from the removal of the glans to the extreme removal of the clitoral body and labia minora. The consequences are tragic both physically and mentally. Those with more limited mutilation have told me that they can experience orgasms. I can only think of the male terror of female sexuality and their wish to curtail or control it and sadly of the women who collude because of their own mutilation. However, I have also met women who have had FGM who defy their culture and refuse to allow their daughters to have these operations.

Perhaps we have come full circle, or perhaps a spiral, for the dilemmas facing female sexuality - becoming sexual, enjoying sex which sits uneasily with becoming a mother which Anne calls the fundamental aim and this being somehow unrelated to sexuality - hence the attacks on good effective contraception that separates sex for pleasure and sex to make babies. I don’t think that men think about fatherhood when having sex, the way women think of possible motherhood. I read recently that Gandhi thought that sex was only for making babies and that women should resist men at other times!! And of course, our parents only had sex to have us! Mothers can’t be sexual. Anne gives moving case histories of women uncomfortable with motherhood and how she worked with them.

Anne in her final chapter discusses welcome recent developments in analytic literature especially among female American analysts for example, Nancy Kulish, Nancy Chodorow and in Britain Rosine Perelberg and Joan Raphael-Leff.

Anne’s book ends with one of the most enduring and moving of Greek myths, that of Demeter the Earth mother and her daughter Persephone, the Kore who was taken from her. Demeter though fruitful does not appear to be sexual while Persephone is seduced into sex by Pluto the god of the underworld, the dark sexual space. Anne praises her own mother and sees her book as an offering ‘back to earth’. I think she has given us a marvellous offering especially for young would-be analysts - opening up more space for us to use and think about which I hope does not get lost under the ground, only to be rediscovered in decades ahead.