

The (Lack of) Pleasures of Girlhood: The Masturbating Queer Girl in Young Adult Literature

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Abstract

Who experiences pleasure? How does this reflect or reinforce societal views on sexuality? These are the questions I explore in this article, using masturbation in queer young adult literature as my case study. I argue that societal discomfort with masturbation, female sexuality in general, and lesbian sexuality in particular combine to make queer female solitary sex an invisible and possibly taboo subject in young adult literature. Since literature can reflect society and show readers possibilities for their lives and futures, it is especially concerning that while young males – both heterosexual and queer – are depicted in English-language young adult novels as enjoying a whole range of sexual practices, including onanism, there are few explicit portrayals of young queer females exploring and appreciating their own bodies and their sexual responses. I argue that this lack does young queer women a disservice, teaching them shame and secrecy rather than healthy and confident sexuality.

Keywords: *females, LGBTQ literature, masturbation, sexuality, young adult literature*

Who experiences pleasure? Who deserves to? How does this reflect or reinforce societal views on sexuality? And why does this matter? These are the questions I set out to explore in this article, using masturbation in queer/LGBTQ¹¹⁹ young adult literature as my case study. Here, I argue that societal discomfort with masturbation, female sexuality, and lesbian sexuality in particular combine to make queer female solitary sex an invisible and possibly taboo subject in English-language young adult literature. The lack of queer female masturbation in literature then reinforces the societal ideas about female sexuality, and especially queer female sexuality. In other words, I would suggest there is a negative feedback loop here.

Literature, especially that dedicated to younger readers, matters and must be investigated in part due to the messages it proffers readers about their lives and selves, both current and future. If young women are shown through literature that their sexual habits, proclivities, or identities are unsatisfying or shameful, then they will perhaps learn to believe

¹¹⁹ There is not enough space to discuss my usage of the term “queer”, so I will just note that I find it a helpful umbrella term that covers lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, genderqueer, polyamorous, asexual, kinky, intersex, and other aspects of sexual identity, gender, and practice other than heterosexual and cisgender. It is a term that many find challenging and even upsetting, which I acknowledge even while I prefer to (re)claim it as a strong and beneficial word. I also at times use LGBTQ in this article, mainly for the sake of variety.



that (see, for instance, Nagoski 2015: 158-61 on the moral, media-based, and medical messages in current society about women and sex and their effects on females). No one is born believing that their body or taking pleasure in it is something to be ashamed of; children and young people are taught this by adults, including through media, and it is not an easy task to learn to counteract such beliefs (see Nagoski 2015: 160 and 327, among others). I would suggest that society as a whole, and literature in particular, owes young people more. We should encourage all young people to accept their bodies and to take pleasure in them, and we should particularly be concerned about the way girls feel about their bodies, especially given recent increases to depression, self-harm, eating disorders, and other such issues among young females. I do not mean that everyone should be forced to masturbate, if they do not want to; rather, I am suggesting that we should support all children and young adults to accept and appreciate their bodies as those bodies are, and that this may include taking sexual pleasure from their bodies.

As shown elsewhere (Epstein 2013a and 2013b), female sexuality and male sexuality are depicted differently when it comes to sexual interactions with one or more other people. Male characters in literature have abundant sexual experiences of varying types, while in the few cases I have found in my research where females have experiences at all, those interactions are depicted as clumsy, shy, and awkward, and/or they are scarcely described and simply fade to black (in other words, the reader is told that the characters start kissing or touching, and then the scene ends). Much of this, I have argued in previous research, is based on societal views of female sexuality versus that of males, and also on a continuing discomfort with the very idea that women can and do experience strong sexual feelings and satisfying sexual encounters. This difference between views of male sexuality and female sexuality is heightened when it comes to queer people; gay men are seen as hypersexual and unable to be monogamous, while gay women are depicted as suffering from lesbian “bed death”, the idea that two women in a relationship may be sexual together initially but then will inevitably lose interest and desire (see Epstein 2013a for more on this). In this article, I look specifically to solitary sex – masturbation – in order to see if the situation is similar. My hypothesis was that masturbation would appear less frequently than partnered or group sex in my corpus for the obvious reason that society is less accepting of and comfortable with it as compared to partnered sex. Furthermore, I was also curious to know whether queer female characters would be shown as having a stronger or weaker sex drive; on the one hand, queer females are often seen as masculine and butch, which would imply a societal belief in a more dominant sexuality, while on the other hand, queer female sexuality is frequently viewed as being solely or primarily for the male gaze (see Mulvey 1975) and for male pleasure (some claim that female same-sex sexual behavior turns men on). Research shows that women in same-sex relationships have more satisfying sex lives, if satisfaction can be measured by orgasms (see Frederick et al. 2018), but what about young queer women engaging in solo sex, as depicted in literature?

While it is true that literature for children and young adults has developed in significant ways in the past few decades and that certain topics that were once considered “remarkable”, as John Rowe Townsend puts it (Townsend 1990: 276), no longer are, it appears that some taboos still remain. Joel Taxel writes, “This ‘new realism’ [i.e. starting in the 1960s] contributed to the erasure of longstanding taboos as authors broke dramatically from the conventions of previous generations by exploring themes that previously were deemed unacceptable (e.g., drugs, alcoholism, sex, and violence).” (2002: 146) Although it is now

commonplace to find young adult novels about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or otherwise queer characters (LGBTQ) (see Epstein 2013b for more on this), I would contend that there are some taboos remaining, including queer female sexuality and especially in regard to solitary pleasures.

In short, in this article, I offer a brief history of masturbation, noting in particular that there has been little research on either children's masturbation or queer masturbation, not to speak of the combination of the two, then explore a number of English-language young adult novels in order to show the absence of queer female solitary sexual pleasure. I suggest that this absence reflects and reinforces current societal views in English-speaking countries.

A Brief History of Masturbation

Before analyzing the literary texts, it is worth providing a short overview of the history of masturbation in Western society, especially in regard both to children and to queer people, in order to have a foundation for understanding the impact of this on the writing of literature about and for LGBTQ young adults.

Masturbation has, at various times, been considered to be anti-Christian (and therefore anti-Western society), anti-social, and/or otherwise dangerous and threatening. Laqueur notes:

Three things made solitary sex unnatural. First, it was motivated not by a real object of desire but by a phantasm; masturbation threatened to overwhelm the most protean and potentially creative of the mind's faculties – the imagination – and drive it over a cliff. Second, while all other sex was social, masturbation was private, or, when it was not done along, it was social in all the wrong way: wicked servants taught it to children; wicked older boys taught it to innocent younger ones; girls and boys in schools taught it to each other away from adult supervision. Sex was naturally done with someone solitary sex was not. And third, unlike other appetites, the urge to masturbate could be neither sated nor moderated. Done alone, drive only by the mind's own creations, it was a primal, irremediable, and seductively, even addictively, easy transgression. Every man, woman, and child suddenly seemed to have access to the boundless excesses of gratification that had once been the privilege of Roman emperors. (2003: 210)

In short, onanism has traditionally been seen as unacceptable in our society, and perhaps it could be said that avoiding it altogether or learning to stop doing it is viewed as being part of the process of becoming socialized as an adult. Besides that, there are also other issues related to masturbation. For instance, Bennett and Rosario discuss how masturbation was seen as particularly problematic for men, since it could waste semen, which was, according to Christian church views, intended solely for the production of children (1995: 3-4); this led me to the potential hypothesis that male characters in literature would be less likely to be described as engaging in onanism, although this is not borne out by my corpus, as discussed below.

In regard to young people, Stengers and Van Neck state how parents were told to use ideas such as pride and self-respect as ways of enforcing the idea that masturbation was wrong, and also that it was suggested they tell children that “a certain part of their body is the seat of virility” and thus should not be disturbed or touched (2001: 161). Obviously, “the seat of

virility” is the penis; female masturbation was often scarcely mentioned in material on the subject, perhaps because girls and women were viewed as less naturally sexual in any case. But though the focus may have been on males, particularly adult ones, this does not mean that masturbation was allowed or encouraged for children and young adults.

Stengers and Van Neck also note how masturbation was viewed by many as medically dangerous for children, so prevention was required; suggestions for prevention include sports, swimming, and other vigorous activities that would wear out and distract young people (2001: 9-10); diet (2001: 11); and even inventions and tools (2001: 12-13, 71), often tortuous ones. They add that the language used to refer to masturbation – terms such as “bad habit”, “vice”, and “sin” – along with talk of cures (2001: 162-3) and even threats, such as parents threatening to cut off boys’ penises and hands (2001: 147), also served as preventative measures. In extreme cases, parents resorted to surgical interventions: “what stand out are the operations and instruments that were inflicted upon the young. A surgical operation was the supreme weapon against inveterate masturbation, in the case of girls as well as of boys. To the modern sensibility, it often appears – incorrectly – as if the surgeons approached the topic with certain sadism.” (2001: 110) In short, one should teach children that this “seemingly innocent entertainment was, in fact, both deadly and profoundly demoralizing.” (Laqueur 2003: 233) This attitude could be one of the reasons why masturbation was scarcely seen in literature for young readers until quite recently.

Then things changed in the West. In the past century or so, Freud’s view of sexuality, particularly childhood sexuality, has had an impact. Freud thought masturbation “was the foundational form of sexual expression, perfectly natural and appropriate at an early stage of development” (Laqueur, 2003: 71), and yet he also felt it was “necessary to give up in the process of becoming a properly functioning adult. It was the site of the great struggles through which sexuality was channeled by civilization; and conversely, failure to manage it became the prototype for all other sorts of failure.” (ibid.) In other words, masturbation was acceptable for young people and perhaps viewed as a necessary practice stage (cf. Brenot 1997: 46), but it was also considered to be problematic. To continue to masturbate despite growing older – although there seems to have been no clear consensus on the exact appropriate age for giving up masturbation, adolescence in general is the approximate time period – would have been seen as evidence that the masturbator lacked control, was not reproductive in the acceptable way (i.e. heterosexually, with the outcome being children), and was uncivilized. As Laqueur sums it up, “Adolescence, in particular, became the crux, a fraught time between “natural” infantile autoeroticism and its sad holdover into maturity, the period when masturbation went from being a sign of “budding sexuality” full of promise to being an indication that its practitioner was unable to have a proper love object and, more generally, to make peace with the demands of society. One’s relation to masturbation tracked precisely one’s willingness to go with the flow of the civilizing process.” (2003: 73-4) In short, masturbating beyond adolescence was wrong and implied a problem with the immature onanist.

Although this modern view holds that masturbation is a natural stage for children (Laqueur 2003: 73) and despite the fact that masturbation is obviously a sensible way to prevent unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, clearly many are still uncomfortable with the concept. Jill Lepore writes about how “[i]n 1994, [US] Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders was asked, at an AIDS forum, whether it might not be a good idea to discuss

masturbation with children. ‘I think that it is something that’s part of human sexuality and it’s part of something that perhaps should be taught,’ Elders said. ‘But we’ve not even taught our children the very basics.’ Elders was forced to resign.” (2010: 92-3) For even suggesting that masturbation was natural and could be part of sex education, Elders lost her job. And yet, Moore and Rosenthal, among others, discuss how wide-spread masturbation is among young people. They write that “[m]asturbation is the most common source of orgasm in teenagers of both sexes and the source of a boy’s first ejaculation in two out of three cases” (2006: 15) and they say that “young girls begin to masturbate at an earlier age than boys (on average about age 12 compared with age 14) but fewer girls than boys admit to this practice” (2006: 16). All this is to say that even if some adults believe masturbation to be inappropriate, shameful, or wrong, it is nonetheless a common practice.

Perhaps the issue is that we see masturbation as a stage, but not one that should be spoken much about in polite company, and that it we consider it a stage that must be moved through swiftly and in a certain way. As Stengers and Van Neck sum it up, “In the case of youth – children and adolescents – it is of course admitted that masturbation is normal. Yet, once the adolescent stage is over, normality in the eyes of many, undoubtedly in the eyes of most, can mean only one thing: heterosexuality. Masturbation, on this level, has not managed to join the ranks of normal sexual pleasures that are recognized as such.” (2001: 174) Young people apparently need to learn that they can get joy from sex, but only a brief sort of education, followed by regret and shame, from masturbation (Stengers and Van Neck 2001: 71); I would question whether this is the message that both male and female young people receive from society or through literature.

The link between “normal sexual pleasures” and heterosexuality is unsurprising given Freudian ideas of sexuality, but it is interesting that little research has been done on the connections between different types of “deviant sexualit[y/ies]”, as Stengers and Van Neck put it (2001: 92). If masturbation is seen as deviant and so is queerness, and if scholars recognize and analyze connections between sexuality and power and society (cf. Bennett and Rosario, 1995: 2), why is there so little research carried out specifically on queer masturbation? Laqueur’s extensive work mainly refers to heterosexuals and to males, and when he does reference homosexuality, it is to male homosexual contexts, such as bathhouses and wanking clubs (2003: 413). He does, however, comment that “masturbation was seen in the company of homosexuality, but it was at least as often observed with hyper-heterosexuality – for both men and women, boys and girls – as well as with no sexuality at all, a sort of epicene sloth. It was the first step toward sexual excess and sexual degeneracy of all sorts” (2003: 260). This is a dichotomy: masturbation is both excessive and not enough, and perhaps societal views of female sexuality explain why there is little discussion of girls and women masturbating. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s work perhaps can be said to have begun to change some of this, through her suggestion that people who think about and work on masturbation are also interested in lesbian and gay studies and/or feminist studies. She writes:

This makes sense because thinking about autoeroticism is beginning to seem a productive and necessary switch-point in thinking about the relations—historical as well as intrapsychic—between homo- and heteroeroticism: a project that has not seemed engaging or necessary to scholars who do not register the antiheterosexist pressure of

gay and lesbian interrogation. Additionally, it is through gay and lesbian studies that the skills for a project of historicizing any sexuality have developed, along with a tradition of valuing nonprocreative forms of creativity and pleasure; a history of being suspicious of the tendentious functioning of open secrets; and a politically urgent tropism toward the gaily and, if necessary, the defiantly explicit. (1991: 135-6)

In other words, connecting onanism and homosexuality, and queerness more generally, may open up useful avenues for understanding power and sexuality in society. In turn, I would add, increasing the attention paid to the non-norm – both queers and females – could mean beginning to explore female masturbation.

In short, despite the research on masturbation in history generally, there has been little research carried out that focuses on queerness and masturbation, or on children and masturbation, and even less that connects all three topics, especially while analyzing literary texts. In the next section, I do precisely that, with the aim being to understand what literature reveals about the way we understand queer young people’s sexuality today, especially in regard to self-pleasure.

Queer Examples from Literature

Laqueur writes that “masturbation becomes an experience of self-esteem or self-love, a form of personal autarky that allows each of us to form relationships with others without losing ourselves. What the philosophers had regarded as the surest road to ruin has become for some a road to self-realization, the nearest thing we have in our day to the Hellenistic care of the self but now available not only to the leisured gentleman, as it was in antiquity, but to everyone democratically.” (2003: 22-3) With this positive modern view of masturbation and the concept that young people should learn about masturbation (Lepore 2010), one would think that masturbation would be “available...to everyone democratically” (Laqueur 2003: 22-3) in young adult literature. Unfortunately, as the examples below show, this is not the case.

In young adult novels, teenage gay males masturbate, and this is described frankly and openly. For instance, in Perry Moore’s *Hero*, Thom, the main character discusses his rules for looking at porn and masturbating. One rule is “there couldn’t be anyone in the house when I did it. The last thing I needed was to get caught jerking off to an oiled muscle stud.” (2007: 40-1) Though Thom does not want to get caught, which is understandable, he is not ashamed about what he is doing. He is also very clear about what he likes (i.e. “an oiled muscle stud”), which suggests that he accepts his preferences.

Additionally, besides acceptance of the mere fact of male masturbation, there are frequent mentions of tissues when young queer men masturbate. For example, in *Naomi and Ely’s No Kiss List* by Rachel Cohn and David Levithan, there is a scene with Ely masturbating. This is summarized as follows: “Mono-hand maneuver...Discard Kleenex under bed.” (2008: 29) Similarly, In Robin Reardon’s *Thinking Straight*, Tyler regularly masturbates. Several times he does so while pretending to be praying. For example:

I grabbed a handful of tissues from the box on my desk...I knelt there, facing the corner like some naughty kid doing time-out, thinking of Will.

I closed my eyes. I must have looked very penitent with my brown going into knots as I imagined running my fingers down the side of his naked body, seeing the wicked grin on his face that turned slowly into something else, his mouth and eyes half-open as my hand explored other parts of him. With my other hand, the one not touching Will, I undid my belt—only not just in my imagination. I stopped and listened carefully, then undid the button. Oh so slowly I pushed the zipper down, tooth by anxious tooth, until I was touching both of us—me and Will, at least in my mind—one hand for each.

My ears strained for anything like a quiet footfall, a voice in the distance, the creak of a door. Nothing. I bent my head. And I pulled.

Fortunately, I'd gotten very good at keeping quiet doing this at home. It's true my breathing was a little—well, raspy. But other than that, the only thing I heard was in my mind, when Will came, that rich “ah” sound he makes at the very end. And a little grunt of my own. I gritted my teeth and clamped my lips shut so I would be as silent as possible.

I got the tissues into position just in time. (2008: 55-6)

These descriptions are quite blunt and accepting: “jerking off”, “[m]ono-hand maneuver”, and “pulled”. The men know what to do, are describing in open terms doing it, and they clean up the evidence with tissues. The young men in these novels, and other LGBTQ YA works in my corpus, often have active sex lives with other young men while also enjoying autoeroticism. Masturbation, here, is not a stage but rather part of a lively, varied sex life. Sex on their own is not depicted as a stage before sex with a partner or as an embarrassment; rather, it is just part of their sex life.

On the other hand, the situation is quite different for young females in these works. In my large corpus of LGBTQ young adult novels (Epstein 2013b), there were very few examples of sex between two young women, and almost no descriptions of gay teenage females masturbating.¹²⁰ One of the rare masturbation scenes is one that might not actually be onanism at all. In *Gravity* by Leanne Lieberman, there is a mention of the main character, Ellie, putting a pillow between her legs (2008: 180), but there are no details beyond that and it would be easy for a reader to misinterpret the scene; it takes an educated or experienced reader to guess that Ellie is enjoying the feel of the pillow rather than using it for, say, the comfort of her legs or back while in bed.

And that is it. That is the single example I found in all the LGBTQ YA books I looked at that featured something that could be considered to be female masturbation. As noted, I found plenty of examples of male masturbation, and many sex scenes, although significantly more for males than for females, with more openly depicted actions.

This clear lack leads to a number of questions. Do people believe that teenage girls do not masturbate? Do people believe that lesbians/bisexual females do not masturbate? Do readers not want to read about it or at least do publishers believe that readers do not want to or

¹²⁰ Interestingly, when Julie Burchill's *Sugar Rush* was adapted into a TV show, the first scene showed Kim masturbating with an electric toothbrush; this was not in the original YA book. See Juffer for more on vibrators and why the “insistence on the naturalness of female sexuality” created a resistance to such implements, which may impact on their portrayal in literature (1998: 83-4). Perhaps female sexuality is more acceptable, even desired, in TV shows as a way of attracting viewers, but this subject is beyond the scope for this article.

should not read about it? Masturbation is considered by some to be important to women's liberation. As Laqueur notes, "masturbation was embraced first by the women's movement and then by various parts of the male gay movement as a practice in the service of freedom, autonomy, and rebellion against the status quo... Sex with oneself came to stand for autonomy, even autarky. It was not reprehensible or frightening but liberating, benign, and attractive." (2003: 75, and see Murphy 2004 for more on the women's movement and the importance of women seeing and understanding their genitals.) One would thus think that contemporary texts that show young women liberating themselves from "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich 1980) would thus consider including masturbation, in part also as a way of breaking away from the shame girls and women have traditionally been taught to feel about their bodies and their sexuality. And yet, Brenot comments, "Female masturbatory love, solitary or Sapphic, has recently found its literary expression with more difficulty than the male confession, partly because of a certain reticence on the part of publishers." (1997: 61) Why, then, are publishers more "reticent" about females? I will return to this point below.

These few examples are representative of LGBTQ young adult novels; that is to say, the queer males masturbate, and engage in other sexual activities, and the queer females tend not to. The next question is whether this is the same in YA works that feature non-LGBTQ young people. This point of comparison will help clarify if the issue here is with women's sexuality in general, or queer females' sexuality specifically.

Straight Pleasure

It is not just queer males who get to enjoy themselves in young adult literature; straight young men do too. Melvin Burgess is a popular YA author who regularly includes supposedly (or, at least, until recently) taboo topics, such as drugs and sex, in his works. Burgess's controversial *Doing It* (2003) is about three teenage boys and their first sexual experiences. Masturbation appears frequently in the book (2003: 106, 157, 215, 256, etc.), along with other sexual activities. In the book, the penis is nicknamed "Mr. Knobby" and he is practically a fully-fledged additional character. This is one example of Mr. Knobby enjoying masturbation: "I have reason to believe that Mr. Knobby is going to be very good at sex. You see, he *likes* it so much. Whenever there's a spare minute, there he is, asking for a hand. And since he's my best friend I'm always only too happy to oblige. In the bath, in bed. In front of the computer screen. I live in terror of the computer going wrong and someone sending it in to be fixed." (2003: 215-16) Again, as with Thom in one of the earlier examples, Jonathon here shows no compunction about his masturbatory habits, though he does worry about being discovered, perhaps through the pornographic material on his computer. Jonathon also calls himself "Mr. Knobby's personal trainer and physiotherapist" and says, "I'm giving him plenty of massage and exercise – not so much as to wear him out, of course – just enough to keep him on form, so to speak." (2003: 256) This is humorous and accepting of male sexuality; the penis has to be exercised, and it enjoys being exercised.

This can be compared to another of Melvin Burgess's works, *Lady: My Life as a Bitch*, where the female protagonist, Sandra, enjoys sex with males, especially once she has been turned into a dog. Unfortunately, despite her sex-positive ways, she refers to masturbation simply as "having a diddle" (2001: 52). The single reference to masturbation in *Lady* is when

Sandra says, of another dog who she worries might have been a human before, “Imagine, if he’d been a person all along. The things he’d seen me do in the privacy of my own room! You know what I mean – having a diddle down there. It made me blush from my nose to my tail. Oh really!” (ibid.) Sandra is embarrassed about masturbation and does not even use any sort of term for her genitals (like Mr. Knobby for the penis), whereas the boys in *Doing It* gleefully and regularly masturbate and do not show the same sort of shame, even though Jonathon does admit to being worried about someone inspecting the contents of his computer. Sandra does not suggest that her vulva or clitoris need to be exercised, nor does she feel that a love for masturbation implies pleasure in her body and sexual pleasure more generally.

Although these are just two examples by the same author, they are typical of the male-female divide in young adult literature and arguably in society, and I do not have the space here to offer many more examples of straight depictions.¹²¹ Interestingly, *Lady* has a parental advisory regarding explicit content on the cover, while *Doing It* does not, despite them both being about sexual feelings and experiences. Similarly, when I studied copies from the Norwich, England, library, which is the busiest library in the UK (Norfolk County Council website n.d.: n.p.), *Lady* also had a library stamp inside the book, which states: “This book is recommended for older teenagers.” (2001: n.p., emphasis original), while *Doing It* had no such stamp. Both books contain a variety of sex scenes, although, as already made clear, *Doing It* has much more masturbation, and yet just the novel with a female character seems to be considered explicit and only appropriate for “older teenagers”, although I should acknowledge that some reviewers were very critical of the sexual content in *Doing It*. Anne Fine, for instance, claimed that if they are exposed to that novel, “[y]oung girls will be begging their parents to send them to single sex schools. Reading this will put many off dating for years.” (2003: n.p.) In other words, Fine is concerned about girls reading about boys’ sexual thoughts and experiences, and not about boys doing so; this again seems to emphasize our culture’s protective stance towards girls’ sexuality.

Laqueur notes that “for girls the process [of masturbation] was especially treacherous, because their early rehearsals were for the wrong show. In becoming adult, they had to give up not only masturbation but also the kind of orgasm procured by their infantile efforts. Giving it up meant, in this account, giving up clitoral for vaginal sexuality, fantasies of active masculinity for the reality of passive femininity.” (2003: 72) Perhaps, then, writers and publishers are reluctant to show female masturbation, because they worry that it encourages young women to do something that is ultimately unproductive or, rather, anti-reproductive.¹²² Laqueur writes, “Shame had to be mobilized to make young people, especially girls, behave chastely and modestly.” (2003: 231) This can be extended in particular to queer females, who are not likely to be reproductive with males, and who therefore should be doubly shamed, and

¹²¹ Some people consider Caitlin Moran’s novel *How to Build a Girl*, with its frank descriptions of straight teenage sex and masturbation, to be a young adult novel, but it is not categorised as such by most libraries or bookstores, as far as I can tell.

¹²² In fact, research shows that the uterine contractions caused by a woman orgasming can help move the sperm upwards, so the female orgasm could be said to be essential to reproduction. Furthermore, the clitoral nerves are larger than previously assumed, and a clitoral orgasm is not easily separated from a vaginal one. In other words, the idea that a clitoral orgasm is lesser than a vaginal one is incorrect, and the concept of clitoral sexuality being immature is simply inaccurate.

who perhaps are to be encouraged to be heterosexual instead of queer. If this is the case, then readers of young adult novels certainly could be said to be getting the idea that masturbation is shameful for girls. So, the question remains: why is shame being “mobilized” in literary fiction?

Girls Don’t Do It?

There are multiple potential reasons why female masturbation is distinctly absent from YA literature. One might be the widespread belief that women simply are not as sexual as men are; this is of course cultural and not scientific. This may also relate to the historical belief, stemming from Freud, that there are “two types of female sexuality: one mature, adult, satisfied and vaginal; the other infantile, fixed on auto-eroticism and clitoral.” (Brenot, 1997: 46) Being told, and subsequently believing, that autoeroticism is “infantile” may make women less likely to talk about masturbation or even to allow themselves to do it. Furthermore, if society believes this is a correct understanding of women’s sexuality, then authors and publishers would potentially be reluctant to feature masturbation in young adult literature, for fear of encouraging young females to masturbate and to have an “infantile” and thus “wrong” sexuality.

Another issue is the erroneous idea that women do not in fact masturbate because of their anatomy; as Margolis puts it, “The concealed position of the vagina and clitoris is in stark contrast to the more obvious and convenient placement of the penis. A clitoris can be aroused without its owner, if she is not attuned to its moods, knowing it; it is less easy to ignore an erection. Men are, as a result, the more likely to masturbate and become aware of the possibilities of sexual pleasure.” (2004: 27) This seems rather ridiculous, as it suggests that women are not aware of their bodies, or that hormones or thoughts do not lead them to think in sexual ways, or indeed that females do not experience clitoral erections.¹²³ Also, the fact that females in same-sex relationships are more sexually satisfied than females in opposite-sex relationships (Frederick et al. 2018) implies that women are in fact very “attuned” to the female body and know how to give it pleasure; here, masturbation would be an incredibly useful tool for learning how to find and give satisfaction.

Despite a) the way masturbation has been viewed as a challenge to society and an act of “individual liberation” since the 1920s in different social circles (Laqueur 2003: 361), and b) the progress brought about by the women’s movement and the feminist promotion of masturbation as a form of “self-knowledge, self-discovery, and spiritual well-being” (Laqueur 2003: 78) and as a way of training women’s bodies to respond to touch (Laqueur 2003: 399, 403), masturbation, it appears, is still seen in rather limited and limiting way, particularly for women, and perhaps especially in young adult novels that feature queer young women. One could argue that for some women, especially queer ones, masturbation could offer freedom from male-focused sexuality, and yet as evidenced by the concept of training, it is nonetheless often seen “as the means to a healthy heterosexual life” (Laqueur 2003: 492), and not simply as means to a healthy sexual life, hetero or not.

¹²³ See Irigaray (1980) for the seminal – or perhaps I should say clitoral, to remove the male-oriented reference to semen – implication that women’s labia are always touching, always caressing the clitoris, so girls and women would always be aware of their bodies.

If female masturbation solely led to a “healthy heterosexual life”, one might expect to see it fairly regularly in young adult literature, at least in YA novels that feature sex scenes of one kind or another along with heterosexual characters. If literature can be educational and teens turn to novels to learn about sex (see Reynolds 2007: 122, among others) then this is simply just one more aspect of sexual knowledge. But the lack of straight female masturbation perhaps does not bear this out. On the other hand, if it is true, as Laqueur claims, that “masturbation is *the* act through which women signaled their rejection of the normative sexual order” (2003: 372, italics original, and cf. 403), then one might expect to see more masturbation in YA novels that feature non-heterosexual young women. These queer girls and young women, one could argue, are rejecting the “normative sexual order” and masturbation is one way of doing this, perhaps especially since masturbation may focus on the clitoris and not on the vagina, so is not necessarily good “practice” for penis-in-vagina sexual activity, if indeed practice is desired or needed at all. Unfortunately, however, as the examples above have shown, this is not the case either, and masturbation is worryingly absent from YA novels with female LGBTQ characters, even though it is common in YA novels with both straight and queer male characters. Other research should consider the depiction of masturbation in literature for older readers, and also in non-English-language literature.

Bennett and Rosario note that “nineteenth-century critics themselves warned that anti-onanism literature—even the most censorious might prematurely ignite the erotic imagination of innocent children.” (1995: 8-9) Perhaps even now, in the twenty-first century, we are still concerned that literature – whether anti-onanism or, on the contrary, featuring masturbation and perhaps deemed pro-onanism – might “ignite the erotic imagination” of young readers. Of course, as already explored, it is easy to find YA novels with male masturbation, so the conclusion here might be that we are especially worried about “ignit[ing] the erotic imagination” of female readers. In short, young women’s sexuality appears to be too challenging to be written about or described in full detail in young adult novels, whereas young men are allowed a whole range of sexual expression. Girlhood is thus portrayed as being more innocent and less sexual than research reveals to it actually be (as in Moore and Rosenthal), and this depiction in literature may misinform young male readers and, more importantly, negatively impact on the young women reading these works.

Conclusion

In this article, I have given examples from my larger corpus of a number of young adult novels with queer female and male protagonists and compared this to young adult novels with straight female and male characters, in order to understand queer girls’ sexual agency and experiences, as depicted in literature, and how this might reflect the world young queer girls live in today. In short, YA literature does not appear to show female characters masturbating, although both queer and straight male characters regularly do so. This missing sexual action from literature both reflects and strengthens the powerful Western ideas a) that females are not as sexual as males and b) that masturbation is an inappropriate activity for young women. In turn, this is likely to increase any feelings of shame, confusion, or wrongness that young women might feel about their sexuality in general and their masturbatory behavior in particular. Although this is

a problem for all young females, I would suggest that it is especially worrying for young queer females, who already also receive negative messages about their sexuality.¹²⁴

Laqueur notes that “[p]otentially autarkic solitary sexual pleasure touches the inner lives of modern humanity in ways that we still do not understand. It remains poised between self-discovery and self-absorption, desire and excess, privacy and loneliness, innocence and guilt as does no other sexuality in our era” (2003: 420). Young adult literature suggests that society is uncomfortable with queer female sexuality, specifically “autarkic solitary sexual pleasures”, and therefore with queer young women being self-sufficient and confident about their sexualities. It is time for this to change in society at large, and one way of doing so would be to feature masturbating queer girls in young adult literature, and to allow and encourage queer women to find pleasure in their own bodies.

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¹²⁴ This is a limited article, of course, so I can only suggest that other scholars review the situation in other languages, in order to determine whether this is an English-language issue or a more widespread one.

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