

THE REAL CONSEQUENCES OF IMAGINARY SEX ACTS

BRETT LUNCEFORD

The urge to classify and define seems to be an innate human quality. People define cuts of meat not only by the animal from which it came, but also by the specific part of the animal, defining it by particular qualities and giving it a specific name, such as NY strip steak, top round, or filet mignon. Some of these names are derived from the part of the animal itself, such as flank steak, while others, such as NY strip, seem to be purely a human invention. This taxonomical urge is applied to most everything in the human universe, as we define and classify things, acts, and individuals according to specific qualities. As such, it should come as little surprise that people have applied this behavior to sexual acts as well.

In such works as the *Kama Sutra*, *Perfumed Garden*, *Ananga Ranga*, and countless modern sex manuals, one can learn of such positions as Nāgara-ūttāna-bandha,¹ which the *Koka Shastra* calls nāgaraka (town manner)² and the Western world calls the missionary position. The *Kama Sutra* describes oral sex techniques such as "Sucking the Mango"³ and "The Crow,"⁴ which is commonly referred to as "the 69 position." Alan Richter provides an almost exhaustive description of sexual language, with slang for many varieties of sexual intercourse.⁵ There are, of course, countless varieties of sexual acts. What I am interested in for the purposes of this essay is not the names of sexual acts commonly considered to provide pleasure, but rather the positions that seemingly no one would actually engage in. I write of those apocryphal sexual positions that are so disgusting, degrading, dangerous, or even deadly that they seem to

Brett Lunceford is a rhetorical scholar whose research focuses on new technologies, social movements, and protest. His current projects examine the rhetoric of the body as it relates to gender, sexuality, media, and protest, with a specific emphasis on how we make sense of the world symbolically. Dr. Lunceford is a member of the Board of Directors of the Media Ecology Association.

exist in name only. My contention is that such imagined acts serve a normative function, providing limits on not only sexuality but also on the kinds of individuals worthy of such acts.

Throughout this essay, I will argue that the language itself matters. Kenneth Burke explains that particular words can filter our perception, calling this phenomenon "terministic screens": "Pick some particular nomenclature, some one terministic screen.... That you may proceed to track down the kinds of observations implicit in the terminology you have chosen, whether your choice of terms was deliberate or spontaneous."⁶ This can be seen in the taboos on particular words—vagina is acceptable, while cunt is considered almost universally offensive. Virginia Braun and Celia Kitzinger suggest that the terms used to describe and define female genitalia "would thus be expected to encode ideas about women's bodies, women's place in the world, and women's place in sex."⁷ Language is rarely neutral.

How one describes acts such as sexual intercourse can portray the participants in different ways. To "score" denotes competitiveness, "getting in someone's pants" portrays the act as a kind of strategic endeavor, "bumping uglies" denigrates the genitalia of both individuals, and "making love" overshadows the sexual component in favor of the emotional. Linguistically, there are many terms that are gender neutral—most notably the ubiquitous "fuck." As Richter explains, fuck, "in its primary sexual sense, is intersexual and does not pay too much regard to the active/passive distinction. To indicate sexual intercourse one can say 'she fucked him' without any contradiction or linguistic unease, and even without necessarily implying activity/passivity; 'she poked him,' though, sounds quite ridiculous."⁸ In short, the language that we use to describe sexual acts matters because it can shape the way we view the act.

S. I. Hayakawa notes that "all verbal expressions of feeling make use to some extent of the affective connotations of words."⁹ In this essay, I am interested not in the ability to offend, but the ability to amuse. The sex acts that I will discuss are certainly offensive and often taboo, but these rhetorical creations are meant to be *funny*. As such, my aim is to explore how these acts are portrayed and what they tell us, in turn, about the role of sexuality in society.

Some Descriptions of More Common Apocryphal Sex Acts

Sexuality has long been a staple of urban legends. Folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand has documented countless cautionary tales of sexual acts that are told as if they happened to an actual person in the area.¹⁰ However, where Brunvand may be more family friendly, Mariamne Whatley and Elissa

Henken delve into the more explicit side of sexual urban legends (including variations of the famous "peanut butter" story that I heard twenty years ago in high school) to illustrate the real world consequences of this misinformation.¹¹ Brunvand notes that these tales often happened to a "friend of a friend," because they are invariably twice removed from the one who relates the story.¹²

With the advent of the Internet, these stories spread even faster and some are created without the veneer of the friend of a friend account. There are countless definitions for sexual acts, which are often found on sites such as Urban Dictionary, many likely made up solely for that site. However, there are some that seem to be more common than others. Like most folklore, these acts often have some individual attached to them (as the perpetrator or victim), but not always. To illustrate, here is a dirty dozen that can be heard in the wild:

- **Angry Dolphin:** This act is named for the sound that the woman is likely to emit when one engages in vaginal sexual intercourse and then proceeds to attempt anal intercourse without notifying the woman in advance.
- **Blumpkin:** This act refers to receiving oral sex while defecating.
- **Bucking Bronco:** This act involves insulting the woman with whom you are having sex (e.g., "your sister is much better in bed than you are") and then trying to hold on while she tries to buck you off.
- **Chili Dog:** This act involves placing one's penis between the woman's breasts after defecating between them.
- **Cleveland Steamer:** The act of defecating on the partner's chest after sex. This is generally done as a way to break up with one's partner.
- **Dirty Sanchez:** In this act, the man engages in anal sex and then spreads feces across the woman's upper lip, which then resembles a mustache.
- **Donkey Punch:** This act involves performing sexual intercourse from behind and, at the moment of climax, punching the woman in the back of the head. The reasoning is that the woman is supposed to involuntarily clench her muscles resulting in a more pleasurable orgasm for the male.
- **Fish Eye:** This act involves performing sexual intercourse from behind and, when she turns around after the male pulls out, ejaculating in her eye.
- **Hindenburg:** Perhaps the most obviously fake act here, this involves having sex with a large woman on a balcony, pouring alcohol on her back,

lighting it on fire, and pushing her over the edge while yelling, "Oh the humanity!" Although this is obviously fiction, I have included this act simply because it provides insight into what is considered amusing.

- **Houdini:** There are two competing versions of this act. One is identical to the **Fish Eye**. The one I will focus on involves having sex from behind while positioned in front of a window, pulling out, and having an accomplice take over without her knowledge. The individual then goes outside so the woman can see him while the new partner continues having sex with her.
- **Rusty Trombone:** In this act, the woman performs analingus from behind while masturbating the man.
- **Strawberry Shortcake:** In this act, the man ejaculates on the woman's face and then punches her in the nose to cause a nosebleed. The result is supposed to resemble the white and red of the aforementioned dessert.

These acts seem to fall into three separate, but intertwined categories: scatological acts, humiliating acts, and violent acts. For the purposes of this essay, I will consider one from each category: The Donkey Punch, the Cleveland Steamer, and the Houdini.

Violent Acts: Donkey Punch

For some radical feminists, sex *is* violence. Andrea Dworkin claims "pornography reveals that male sexual pleasure is inextricably tied to victimizing, hurting, exploiting; that sexual fun and sexual passion in the privacy of the male imagination are inseparable from the brutality of male history."¹³ She later argues that "erotic pleasure for men is derived from and predicated on the savage destruction of women."¹⁴ However, her view is generally considered to be at the extreme fringes of feminist thought.¹⁵

Some have incorporated physical pain into their sexual practice, as in the case of the bondage/domination/sadism/masochism (BDSM) community. Indeed, Staci Newmahr explains that "transgressions of the boundary between eroticism and violence are fundamental in SM play."¹⁶ However, in such cases, the ground rules are clearly defined and negotiated between the partners. As Gloria Brame and colleagues explain, "Inflicting damage, even accidentally, is viewed with repugnance in D&S circles. Trust is the key component of all heavy play: The submissive trusts that the dominant knows how to use the equipment, knows when to stop, and does not cause undesirable pain."¹⁷ The acts that we are interested in here go well beyond rough sex or consensual BDSM play and into the realm of assault at the

very least and murder at worst. Some of these telegraph this sentiment simply through terminology. Donkey punch, for example, suggests that one will strike the partner in the act. We will consider this act in detail.

The donkey punch is, perhaps, the most famous of all apocryphal sex acts. This act was used to describe shady accounting maneuvers used by Enron before their bankruptcy.¹⁸ Evidence that it has made its way into popular culture was further solidified on an episode of "Jeopardy": "Alex Trebek asked the quiz question, 'A blow to the back of the neck is the punch named for this animal.' A contestant quickly answered: 'What is a donkey?'"¹⁹ The correct answer was "rabbit," but one could easily argue that the contestant was actually correct as well. The video went viral. The effectiveness of the donkey punch was debunked by sex advice columnist Dan Savage who cited medical professionals explaining that there was no connection between sudden blunt force trauma to the back of the head and muscle constriction; there is, however, a connection between a punch to the back of the head and potential vertebral fracture, paralysis, and death.²⁰ Indeed this more realistic outcome was the subject of a movie called, appropriately enough, *Donkey Punch*. In the film, a kinky sex act goes awry when one of the characters performs a donkey punch and kills his partner.²¹

Despite the dangers of this act, the donkey punch has made its way into the world of pornography. According to adult video actress Gia Paloma's biographical sketch, "In 2004 she had the somewhat dubious honor of being the first known recipient of a previously-urban-legend sex act known as a Donkey Punch in a commercial production when Alex Sanders punched her in the back of the head in 'Guttermouths 30.'" ²² Note that she was the "first" to receive a donkey punch. There is now a pornographic film entitled *Donkey Punch*.²³ Yet even some in the porn industry think that donkey punching crosses the line. Ron Jeremy, arguably one of the best-known pornographic actors states, "I can defend anal, I would even defend a bukkake. I'll defend double anal. Defending blowing myself, that's a tough one, but I'll be damned if I could defend *Donkey Punch* or *Pink Eye*. Who the fuck in porn is alright to shoot that stuff, either, you know?" ²⁴ Another adult film producer echoes these sentiments: "There are aspects of the adult business I don't really like. Me personally, I like women, so I don't like to see women get donkey punched. Or women getting pissed on or getting beaten. I'm not into seeing how many cocks you can stuff in a girl's ass. In our movies, we make fun of all these things." ²⁵

Although *Donkey Punch* (the pornographic version) producer Grip Johnson states that the film "is not meant to encourage violence toward women nor be

imitated by the viewer at home," the portrayal may actually have this effect.²⁶ I am not making the "third person effect" claim often used by those who wish to censor material because of the effects it may have on some particular group, whether this be children or people of a particular disposition.²⁷ Rather, I am more concerned at the fact that such films as *Donkey Punch* portray the act as one that is actually *possible*. By placing it in the realm of fantasy, the potential pleasure is reinforced while the potential for injury is disregarded.

When considering the linguistic construction of donkey punch, there are two factors to consider. First, there is the obvious element of the punch. Punching is rarely regarded as sexual, and even in the case of sexual assault, Jack Crane explains that "Studies have shown that most victims of sexual assault will have no general injuries or only injuries that may be categorized as trivial."²⁸ However, Ackerman and colleagues found that 25% of their sample reported being hit during sexual assault, but they do not explain when this took place.²⁹ Another study by White and colleagues examined both sexual violence and physical violence, or dual perpetration, which they define as "the commission of both sexual and physical aggression by the same person, although not necessarily on the same occasion nor directed toward the same target."³⁰ In their findings, they admit that "there is no way of knowing for dual perpetrators if the sexual and physical aggression occurred in the same or different relationships."³¹ It seems that punching someone *during* sexual intercourse seems rare, even among pathological individuals.

The donkey part of the equation calls to mind another degrading sexual act—the donkey show. Brenda Love states that "Mexican border towns were once famous for their donkey shows. A prostitute would allow a donkey to penetrate her vagina while on stage and a red ribbon was then placed on the penis marking the length she was able to take in. Other prostitutes would then take their turn to see if they could break the record."³² Steven Bender notes that "imbedded in U.S. pop culture, the so-called donkey show is increasingly rare in border town Mexico despite its hype in television shows such as *The O.C.* and *House* and comedic films such as 1983's *Losin' It*."³³ But donkey shows have infiltrated popular culture, with a restaurant named the "Donkey Den" which, after some protest by local residents, "is removing all references to Tijuana because it conjured images of 'donkey shows'"; the restaurant featured such offerings as "Ho-Made Fries" and the "Donkey Punch Burger."³⁴ An art exhibit likewise focuses on the human cost of the sex trade with a portion of the exhibit titled "The Donkey's Show" featuring interviews with those who have witnessed the spectacle.³⁵

The donkey punch is not so much about sex, but power. As Jordan Tate observes, "The donkey punch originated in the late twentieth century sometime after the sexual revolution, when the empowerment of women was threatening the place of men in contemporary society."³⁶ Tate explains that "the primary 'reward' for the initiator of the donkey punch is the tensing of the vaginal (or anal) muscles immediately prior to ejaculation, which serves to intensify the orgasm of the male. The secondary reward of the donkey punch is the creation, or reinforcement, of the ideal power structure or solidifying existing gender roles."³⁷ The act is not a "woman punch," or even a "bitch punch." By casting the entity being punched as a donkey—an animal of low social status, a beast of burden—the man is able to more effectively dehumanize her. One need not consider oneself equal to such a creature and the donkey punch violently reminds the woman of her expected place in the hierarchy. She is there to be used, his pleasure is what matters, and she is little more than an animal to him.

There is also the possibility that the use of "donkey" may denote the puncher rather than the punchee. Even in this case, the male comes out somewhat positively, when considering common phrases like "hung like a donkey" or "hung like a horse." Such a sentiment can be found even in the Bible, as illustrated in the book of Ezekiel: "There she lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses."³⁸ Moreover, if the man is equated with the donkey, it makes the connection to the donkey show even more humiliating. The beast of burden now takes a more active role and claims its own pleasure at the expense of the woman.

Scatological Acts: The Cleveland Steamer

Richter observes that "One of the most general features of taboo is the existence of a boundary across which certain actions are not sanctioned by social custom."³⁹ Few things are so universally taboo as the introduction of feces into environments not already set aside for bodily waste. Indeed, Paul Rozin and April Fallon argue that "disgust for the putrid feces of humans or mammalian carnivores is virtually universal" and that feces "probably arouse the most intense disgust reaction."⁴⁰ There is a time and place for eliminating one's bodily wastes, which are enshrined in laws against such things as public urination. One may defecate in a toilet, but not in public. Perhaps the only acceptable exception to defecation in a toilet is found in the wilderness, and even then there are strict protocols concerning the management of bodily waste. One must not simply leave his or her excrement in

the woods, but must bury it. Such prohibitions have a long history. The Biblical book of Deuteronomy provides the following instructions: "Thou shalt have a place also without the camp, whither thou shalt go forth abroad: And thou shalt have a paddle upon thy weapon; and it shall be, when thou wilt ease thyself abroad, thou shalt dig therewith, and shalt turn back and cover that which cometh from thee."⁴¹ Other cultures have likewise placed severe limitations on defecation. Still, Dominique Laporte observes that "civilization's primitive interest in excremental functions did not turn automatically into an appetite for cleanliness, order, and beauty. Otherwise, the nineteenth century's hygienic ideal would have irreversibly developed into an obsequious, meticulous, and parsimonious anality, of which our present civilization is hardly an example."⁴²

Excrement is an essential part of embodiment as we do not efficiently convert food to energy; there is some waste left over, which is then expelled by the body. Allison Muri describes how some cybernetic theorists have considered ways to avoid this waste, which results at times with a kind of moral imperative. For these authors, Muri explains, "the elevation of human spirit thus depends on ridding the subject of its most mundane physical needs to breathe, eat, sweat, evacuate. Stop shitting and you will be one step closer to spiritual enlightenment (or heaven)."⁴³ But, it is not only the imperative to avoid defecating, but rather to control one's bodily functions at all costs. We can see such cultural norms in describing people who "totally lost their shit" or "can't keep their shit together."⁴⁴ Martin Weinberg and Colin Williams observe that "even temporary fecal mishaps can be threatening to the self because such situations also involve a breach of body boundaries that is conducive to another strong emotion: disgust."⁴⁵ To lose control of one's bowels can be a humiliating experience, especially if such an event takes place in public. One is seen as disgusting, uncivilized, and undesirable.

Disgust is a powerful emotion, and can be connected both to things or entities that cause disgust (e.g., excrement, vomit, cockroaches) and moral transgressions; even children describe certain immoral acts as disgusting.⁴⁶ Paul Rozin and colleagues note that "A striking feature of disgusting substances is that they can render a perfectly good food inedible by brief contact, even if there is no detectable trace of the offensive item."⁴⁷ Indeed, they offered fudge to participants and then offered the option between two pieces of the same fudge with one shaped as a disc and the other shaped like dog feces; the participants found the dog-feces-shaped fudge much less appealing, even though they were identical in composition.⁴⁸ There is, then, some kind

of social agreement on what should count as disgusting. In some areas, insects are an essential part of the diet, as are cats and dogs. Westerners would find a meal of mealworms and rice to be rather disgusting, despite the relative flavorlessness of mealworms. The main exception to the social construction of disgust seems to be the case of human excrement.

Despite the universal element of disgust associated with excrement, there can be mitigating factors. For example, mothers do not find the soiled diapers of their own babies as disgusting as those of other babies.⁴⁹ Relationship can mitigate disgust even without blood relation, as in the case of careworkers who find the excreta of certain clients less repulsive because they are liked more by the caregiver.⁵⁰ As E. Van Dongen explains, "ideas about excrement are formed within social relationships of care."⁵¹ Julia Twigg echoes this sentiment: "Carework is about dealing with human waste: shit, pee, vomit, sputum; and as such involves managing dirt and disgust."⁵² More to the point of romantic relationships, Rozin and Fallon note that "normally disgusting substances or objects that are associated with admired or beloved persons cease to be disgusting and may become pleasant. Body substances including saliva and vaginal secretions or semen can achieve positive value among lovers, and some parents do not find their young children's body products disgusting."⁵³ Excrement itself holds an odd place in the pantheon of disgust in that "feces and urine in one's own body, either by their nature or through a process of adaptation, do not elicit a disgust response. As soon as they leave the body, however, they become disgusting (although in American culture, at least, they are less disgusting than someone else's body substances)."⁵⁴ There are few things generated by our own bodies that we find intrinsically disgusting. One may have the same response to saliva once it leaves the body, but not when it is coming from a lover. Few want to deal with either their own excrement or that of their lover.

Excrement is universally taboo, and perhaps it is this taboo that provides a humorous charge to the Cleveland Steamer. After all, humor seems to work from a sense of incongruity. One does not expect a sexual story to involve defecation, so the listener is, understandably, shocked. Weinberg and Williams describe instances where the sense of disgust can be marshaled as a form of humor: "Though breaches of the fecal habitus can be downplayed through normalization and neutralization ... such breaches are celebrated in some instances. These occur among young persons in same sex settings—for example, pissing contests, lighting farts, and farting contests among young men. Attention to a breach of body boundaries often also is sought to embarrass the offender and provide amusement to others. Or it can signify solidarity based

on flouting authority or middle-class adult norms of propriety.”⁵⁵ One can see scatological humor in slapstick comedies where fart jokes reign supreme; there are also Web sites that poke fun at individuals who have gotten so drunk that they have urinated in their pants. We are able to find humor in those who lose control of their bodily functions.

But excrement is all about power in both linguistic and material terms. David Inglis argues that “faecal rhetoric is an important mode of expressing and reproducing symbolic and material relations of group inferiority and superiority.”⁵⁶ One can leverage the disgust concerning excrement, turning this emotion into power over those who must confront bodily waste. For example, prison inmates in New Hampshire were throwing feces, urine, and other bodily fluids at prison workers until a court ruled such conduct assault. The inmates then turned to simply “throwing feces and urine on the jail floor for corrections staff to remove.”⁵⁷ When in prison, however, one may have little to lose, especially in a maximum-security prison environment. In her study of prison life, Lorna Rhodes quotes one mental health worker who states that custody staff “can handle yelling and insult, but not feces throwing. It is dangerous and also the worst, most repulsive thing inmates do.”⁵⁸ Rhodes explains that “from this phenomenological perspective on the danger the panopticon represents to the prisoner’s sense of bodily integrity, shit-throwing makes a certain sense. It affirms the body of the prisoner as his own, and claims it as a territory to be appropriated in the only way possible, to be mined for weapons, as it were.”⁵⁹ Thus, even as we consider the *Cleveland Steamer* as humorous, one must not lose sight of the power relationship at work. Excrement is power.

The power in question in the case of the *Cleveland Steamer* is that of erotic power. Sex and excrement are rarely thought of at the same time, but there are some instances in which this scenario may occur. Mazur, Clopper, and Lele report on the case of a woman who experienced fecal incontinence during orgasm. The couple involved reported that “intercourse and behaviors leading up to it were hindered, interrupted, and at times completely stopped. She voiced reluctance at the thought of intercourse and said that she seldom initiated it.”⁶⁰ This is understandable, as fear of unwelcome feces would squelch desire in most individuals. Yet for some there is a kind of eroticism in excrement. Martin Weinberg and colleagues, for example, visited “scat” clubs where people indulge in feces play,⁶¹ and one can easily find Web sites that illustrate such behavior. Van Dongen explains, “Body wastes have a paradoxical nature—they can attract and repel, because they violate the norms of decorum and modesty.”⁶² Such acts have a long history in the

study of sexology; one such case is described by Krafft-Ebing in his work *Psychopathia Sexualis*: "A Russian prince, who was very decrepit, was accustomed to have his mistress turn her back to him and defecate on his breast; this being the only way in which he could excite the remnant of *libido*."⁶³ Here we have, perhaps, the first documented case of a Cleveland Steamer.

But perhaps excrement and sexuality are not as far apart as one may think. Freud argues that "excremental things are all too intimately and inseparably bound up with sexual things; the position of the genital organs—*inter urinas et faeces*—remains the decisive and unchangeable factor. One might say, modifying a well-known saying of the great Napoleon's, 'Anatomy is destiny.'"⁶⁴ Freud posited a hierarchy of sexual phases, with infantile sexuality centering on the anal region. According to Freud, excrement can be seen in infantile sexuality as "his first 'gift'; by producing them he can express his active compliance with his environment and, by withholding them, his disobedience."⁶⁵ Drawing on this idea, Joshua Gunn writes, "Presumably, successful progress through the genital stage displaces anality and engenders a more empathetic position via the Other (*viz.*, the possibility of love). Evidence of anal erotism in adulthood, however, is hallmark of an inability to understand the Other as anything but an object of exchange—a commodity, in today's world. Consequently, in late capitalism treating others like shit is no longer the exception, but the norm."⁶⁶ And this is exactly the case for the Cleveland Steamer—degradation of the individual as an object. One simply does not shit on another individual; one shits into a toilet, or perhaps a diaper if one lacks control of his or her defecation, but not on a person. One does not even defecate onto an animal. To defecate on another individual shows an extreme disregard for their humanity. We consider excrement to be worthless, as demonstrated in such sayings as "that isn't worth shit."

But something more may be happening in the case of the Cleveland Steamer. Curtis Dunkel argues that "sex can be seen as animalistic, reminding us of our animal nature and death."⁶⁷ In his study, Dunkel found that "making thoughts of defecation salient decreased the accessibility of death related thoughts."⁶⁸ Mixing defecation and sex, then, is to reduce the sacredness of sex by bringing in an element of the profane. Thus, one who performs the Cleveland Steamer is not only shitting on the individual in question, but also shitting on death. Moreover, the Cleveland Steamer ritualizes the taboo in such a way that the taboo is regulated. As Georges Bataille argues, "The transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it."⁶⁹ Thus, one flouts the taboo in order to maintain control of the taboo, much as one seizes control of the animality of defecation,

which brings animality back into the sexual act in ways that go far beyond the potential of traditional intercourse practices.

Finally, we should consider the linguistic element of the Cleveland Steamer. Why Cleveland? Why not? A cursory glance at apocryphal sex moves will illustrate that one can christen an unbelievable sexual act by using the construction of "random place" with "somewhat related object." For example, I could make up something about using my hand in an unconventional manner regarding sexuality, and say that I "gave her the ol' Alabama Handshake, if you catch my drift." I made this term up using this formula because I live in Alabama and thought of a handshake as a rather innocuous gesture. However, after writing this down, I did a quick search for the term and found the act defined on Urban Dictionary as "the act of ejaculating in one's hand then proceeding to slap your sexual partner in the face."⁷⁰ As such, there are almost infinite possibilities for creating such terms, limited only by one's creativity and knowledge of geography. The "steamer" portion of the act is explained by some as alluding to the steaming heat of the excrement. Others explain that a true Cleveland Steamer requires the individual to rock back and forth on the excrement with one's buttocks in the manner of a steamroller. However, there is some disagreement on the nature of the act (perhaps those who have successfully executed one are unwilling to reveal their secrets), thus the etymology must remain shrouded in mystery.

What we gain out of the language of the term itself is the legitimacy of naming a particular act. This is a rather popular term, with over 20,000 people voting on the correctness of the main definition of the term on Urban Dictionary. As we observed in the case of Donkey Punch, to name something is to make it possible in the public mind. Of course, any permutation of sexuality is possible, but to consider this as a means of terminating a relationship seems unforgivably callous. This one is different from the other two in that it is relatively gender neutral. One need not be male to perform the act, as, in the words of the famous children's book, everybody poops. Symbolically, the person paradoxically marks his or her territory in the very act of discarding the individual. Defecating on someone is a way to claim the right to do so; they are no longer an individual, but property or, more explicitly, one's object. Like most of these sex acts, the key sentiment is humiliation, as we will discuss in the case of the Houdini.

Humiliating Acts: Houdini

Sexual behavior takes place when people are at their most vulnerable. The individual is generally naked and somehow coupled with another individual.

One generally assumes that the other individual is acting in good faith during the encounter and that the experience will be consensual and mutually enjoyable. Valerie Peterson places the idea of consent as the foundational concept for ethical sexuality; it is not enough to simply enjoy the sex act—both must agree to it.⁷¹ For some, the humiliation during a sexual encounter can provide a significant erotic charge. This can be done safely, provided that the individuals involved set forth mutually agreed upon ground rules and parameters of what one can say and do in the encounter. Brame and colleagues explain that “clear, informed, and verbalized consent is the moral dividing line between brutality and D&S (Dominance & Submission): Partners must voluntarily and knowingly give full consent to D&S activity before it begins.”⁷² The difference in the case of the Houdini is the betrayal of trust in exchange for humor at the expense of the other.

Although this could also be classified under violent acts, as it is an act of rape (and thus a case of sexual violence), the goal seems to be to inflict emotional trauma rather than physical trauma. When the man brings in another man to have sex with the woman, he is not only disregarding her right to consent to intercourse with whom she wishes, but asserting a kind of ownership over her body. He offers that which is not his to offer. However, this is consistent with a long strand of thought in which the woman is considered property rather than a partner in the relationship. Alfred Kinsey and colleagues explain that regulations on extramarital intercourse “have been particularly concerned with the property rights which the male has had in his wife,” explaining that ancient codes of conduct had less to do with morals and more to do with such property rights.⁷³ In their overview of the history of marital rape, Martin, Taft, and Resick observe that “the ‘unities theory,’ along with the eighteenth century concept that rape was a property crime committed against another man, confirmed that marital rape could not exist because a husband could not steal his own property or commit a crime against himself.”⁷⁴ In short, the woman had no agency, as she was the property of the man. The law has changed only recently, with 1978 marking “the first time in the United States a man was prosecuted for raping his current wife.”⁷⁵ As Bensussan notes, “Being married obviously does not give one spouse the right to dispose of the body of the other as he wishes and take no account of their desires or refusals. ‘Conjugal duty’ has become obsolete.”⁷⁶ But this has really only been in the last few decades. As such, perhaps it should come as less of a surprise that the man may see the woman not as an autonomous agent, but as an object with which he may do as he pleases.

The belief that the woman is property may explain marital rape or intimate partner sexual abuse, but it does little to explain why the man may wish to share the woman sexually with another man. In American culture, in particular, sexual infidelity is seen as an act of extreme betrayal, and marked with jealousy and doubt concerning the status of the relationship. Research by Sarah Ainsworth and Jon Maner suggests that "male aggression is tied to intrasexual competition over access to potential mates"; they note that this behavior is limited to men and is directed at other men rather than opposite sex individuals.⁷⁷ As such, one would expect that men would fight off another potential suitor rather than invite him in to have sex with his partner. However, just as there is some evolutionary explanation for male-male aggression, there may be some evolutionary explanation for the Houdini. Dan Savage explains that in writings about swingers, "husbands are described as literally beaming as they wait their turn to mount their wives—their naturally insatiable wives—while their wives have sex with one, two, three or more men."⁷⁸ He chalks this up to the phenomenon of sperm competition. Nicholas Pound found some evidence that men are attuned to cues of sperm competition and explains that "when couples engage in 'partner swapping,' the men apparently experience increased sexual desire for their partner when they know that she has recently had sex with someone else. Some indicate that this increase in desire may be particularly acute when the man actually witnesses his partner having sex with another man."⁷⁹

Still, as the Houdini is described, the goal is not erotic pleasure for the male, but rather humiliation for the female. Rape is, of course, a means of not only sexual violation, but also humiliation. As mentioned previously, some may derive an erotic charge from violation and rape fantasies. The difference between the Houdini and enacting a fantasy is that with fantasy the "woman chooses to give up her position of equality, as well as chooses the man who she wants to give it up to," while in the case of rape, "the rape victim had no choice. The act was forced upon her, rather than being part of a shared fantasy between two consenting adults."⁸⁰ Moreover, Brenda Love observes, "Humiliation is like bondage play in that after the game the partner has to be released. In humiliation this is accomplished by spending time nurturing and reassuring the partner of their value and attributes. This part of the game is essential and not taken lightly."⁸¹ Thus, we can clearly differentiate this form of humiliation from erotic humiliation engaged in by some individuals.

The humiliation aspect is further magnified when we consider the linguistic construction of the term Houdini. Harry Houdini was best known as an escape

artist who was skilled at extricating himself from uncomfortable or even deadly situations. One must consider why one would desire to escape the vagina of his partner. Part of this may be due to the general unease with the vagina; Claude Lévi-Strauss notes that disgust with female genitals can be seen in indigenous populations who equate the smell with decay and rottenness. He notes that "Here again, then, we are dealing with stench and decay which, as has already been established, signify nature, as opposed to culture, but this time expressed in terms of anatomical coding," describing how women are "synonymous with nature."⁸² In short, her vagina may be seen as so repulsive that the man must escape. Indeed, the position requires that he engage in intercourse from the rear such that he need not even see her face. Such an act conjures up other expressions, such as "I wouldn't fuck her with your dick," and "coyote ugly," which refers to chewing off one's arm rather than wake the unattractive woman who is sleeping on it, much as a coyote will gnaw off its leg to escape a trap.

Continuing with the theme of escaping a dangerous situation, one must ask what is so dangerous about the vagina that he must flee and replace himself with a surrogate. Fear of the vagina is quite old, most vividly illustrated in the figure of *vagina dentata*, or the toothed vagina. Kim Marie Vaz writes that "myth and folklore have encrypted the symbol of the *vagina dentata* with the gluttonous sexual hunger of women and of men's terrors of castration," and suggests that "pulling of the 'vaginal teeth'" through practices such as clitoridectomies are meant to render the women more docile.⁸³ One may expect this to be only in primitive societies, but Karen Pliskin explains that vestiges of this sentiment remains even in medical depictions of female genitals: "Like the castration complex, *vagina dentata* myths affirm male fears of sexual intercourse, where the hidden but powerful vagina—whose opening is a metaphoric mouth ready to devour the powerful and visible penis—can render men impotent with its teeth. Even in the Western *medical* world the vagina is a metaphoric mouth with lips, medically signified as the 'labia majora' and 'labia minora.'"⁸⁴ *Vagina dentata* is also a motif that recurs in psychoanalytic literature, art therapy, and popular culture.⁸⁵

Some have eroticized the dangerous vagina. Lenore Manderson's description of live sex shows in Patpong, Thailand, bears extensive examination:

Acts which potentially play with fear of castration manipulate the imagery of vagina as cavity, a museum of pornographic paraphernalia: the acts include the extraction of metres of ribbon, the insertion of ping-pong balls again, the extraction of around three metres of razor blades threaded on a

string, a similar extraction routine with needles, and another with jingle bells. In addition, the bottle opening trick, played out superficially as a display of muscularity, probably explores the same realm of fear/excitement: insertion (of the penis) occurs at the risk of amputation.... The snake trick, the cigarettes, and particularly the razor blades are all also about violence, and the illusion in these is only partial. In the razor blade routine, violence is implicated in the risk of the inserting penis being slashed, the risk of the woman's vagina and vulva being slashed on exertion, but also the risk of the woman being slashed in any case whilst the blades remain internal. If the patron were skeptical, this was disabused: in bar four a variation of this act involved two women who performed it slashing cardboard with the blades after they had been removed. The misogyny of this act is grotesque.⁸⁶

Such shows play on the theme of *vagina dentata* by clearly illustrating that were one to insert his penis into such a woman he would endure certain genital injury. The fact that the vagina is able to hide such peril places the woman in a position of control. She alone knows what her vagina contains. Of course the chances that a woman would have razor blades in her vagina are infinitesimally small, but the point here is that it is *possible*. A product was recently introduced that introduces a barbed condom that the woman wears as an anti-rape device that some noted bears a striking resemblance to *vagina dentata*.⁸⁷ Indeed, the idea of weaponizing the vagina has a long history among inventors of anti-rape technology.⁸⁸ Few vaginas harbor such hazards, but woe to the man who finds one unaware.

But the vagina is seen as dangerous even without teeth. Whatley and Henken relate the myth of the infinite vagina and relate the following joke: "A man is wandering around in a woman's vagina with a flashlight. He runs into another man who says, 'If you'll lend me your flashlight, I can find my keys and we can drive out of here.'"⁸⁹ The vagina is often depicted as mysterious, foreign, and other, even among women. Rachel Gear argues that "the vagina, in particular, is identified as monstrous mainly because it bleeds, and therefore messes up the boundary between inside and outside a woman's body."⁹⁰ The fear of the blood that issues forth from the woman's vagina can be seen in the case of societies described by Jörg Wettlaufer, in which the defloration of the woman was done by another, whether they be low-status slaves who were paid to take the risk or high ranking individuals such as priests who were more likely to withstand the power of the vagina: "Very often this defloration ritual was connected to superstition and fear of hymeneal blood."⁹¹ Yet where there is fear, there can also be reverence. Joanna Frueh contends that "the sacred is special, yet it is also irrational,

because it is mysterious, and mystery scares as well as fascinates human beings. Erotic charge—smell, taste, touch, feel, sound, and orgasm—is part of the vagina's sacredness and 'irrationality.'"⁹² It is reasonable to fear objects and individuals endowed with supernatural powers, and the vagina seems to fit within this category.⁹³

Another facet that is brought to the forefront by calling it the Houdini is the apparent skill demonstrated within the act. There are many other terms that could equally be employed to accurately describe the Houdini, but they would not remove the culpability from the perpetrator in the same way. For example, "accomplice rape" is the most clinical way we could describe this act, but it would not gain currency within the urban legend community because it actually calls the act rape. More along the lines of the linguistic construction of such acts, we could call it "stranger danger," which has at least a rhyme to it, but it still maintains the tone of something sinister and ominous. To call it Houdini is to ignore the rape that is taking place and the fact that it was orchestrated by the individual performing the act.

Were we to call it rape or to acknowledge in any way that a rape is taking place, it would be quite difficult to find humor in the act, but by sidestepping the true nature of the act, one can see it as farcical and absurd. The mental picture is much like a Bugs Bunny cartoon where the characters enter and leave through different doors in a hallway so many times that it is difficult to keep track until the two are face to face in an unexpected place. The woman thinks that she is having sex with one person and only on seeing her previous partner through the window outside would she, in theory, turn around to find that she had been duped. If this were not sexual, the act would be the stuff of slapstick comedy. This is the power of naming—when the act is linguistically constructed as humorous, the listener must think more about the act. This is not how humor works though. Humor seems to bypass critical thought by providing the release of laughter. One may think about the joke, but not carefully enough to warrant careful examination of the underlying premises.

Why Do We Create These Acts?

Isaac Asimov notes that when men tell off-color jokes, they often feign the need to not do so around women. He suggests that this is partly "because they are victims of the myth of feminine purity, but partly it is because one of the important components of the dirty joke is unabashed male chauvinism. Women are almost always the butts and victims of such jokes, and,

indeed, a male chauvinist joke can be extremely successful even when there is no hint of any element of either sex or scatology."⁹⁴ In many apocryphal sex acts, the woman is the unfortunate recipient of the act (although the Cleveland Steamer is sometimes described as a method for a woman to break up with a man in no uncertain terms). In short, these acts are considered funny because it is socially acceptable to denigrate women in sexual ways.

Some have argued in behalf of profane language. For example, Barbara Holland argues, "Cussing is a great releaser of the tensions, a detumescence, a loosening of the corsets and lightening of the accumulated load, a stimulating explosion in the cylinder head of the spirit."⁹⁵ There seems to be a connection between this release of tensions in profanity and humor. To use profane language is to not only ignore social conventions but to violate them willingly. There may be some kind of liberation granted in such language and this goes beyond simply swearing. Profane language can serve a critical function. For all of its violent sexuality, De Sade's work, for example, was a scathing critique of the church and a profession of sexual libertinage.⁹⁶ His aim was not only to titillate, but also to critique the status quo, especially as it related to religion. Thus, there may be some function that transcends shock value. Stephen Smith observes that humor "can have important social functions for both resistance and control."⁹⁷ As such, Holland's assertion that "hostile epithets aside, bad language is a pure and harmless pleasure, the reckless smashing of a taboo without hurting a fly"⁹⁸ may not be quite as harmless as she would suggest. One must be careful to profane only those things that warrant profaning.

This can work in the other direction as well—one may refuse to profane the act, instead normalizing it. In her discussion of prostitution and human trafficking, Sheila Jeffreys argues, "The use of the ordinary language of commerce in relation to prostitution makes the harm of this practice invisible.... If any progress is to be made in reining in the global industry then language which makes the harm visible must be retained or developed."⁹⁹ A similar strategy seems to be at work in the case of these urban legends. By cloaking these terms in the garb of humor, misogyny and fear of female sexuality can easily be dismissed by critics and believers alike. Those with whom such terms resonate—in other words, those who would actually consider performing any of these acts even in fantasy, if not reality—can easily argue that those who would criticize such language simply cannot take a joke. Humor is meant to be offensive at times, and the incongruity between reality and the humorous element brought before the mind's eye is an essential part of humorous discourse. Critics can dismiss the humor as sophomoric and idiotic, which allows them to ignore the potential power of such language.

Humor, however, is far from inconsequential. First off, it plays an important social function. Michael-Jean Erard argues that "the pressures to 'be funny' are enormous, but the rewards are large as well. Humor is so tied to personal success that people would rather risk appearing stupid than appearing too serious."¹⁰⁰ But humor is often risky, in that there is always the potential to offend. Gary Larson, cartoonist of *The Far Side*, argues that

First of all, the key element in any attempt at humor is conflict. Our brain is suddenly jolted into trying to accept something that is unacceptable. The punch line of a joke is the part that conflicts with the first part, thereby surprising us and throwing our synapses into some kind of fire drill. (I've read all this somewhere—*Mad* magazine, I think.) And the emotional response to this kind of humor can range from laughter to a broken nose. In any humorous vehicle (comedy, cartoons, Pintos, etc.), this conflict, whether subtle or blunt, is mandatory.¹⁰¹

In his discussion of novelties, such as fake vomit and plastic doggie-doo, Erard provides a similar perspective: "Practical joking is designed to disrupt life processes, and in doing so it disrupts the larger social situation, if only temporarily, of which the life process and the joke are part. In this other level, the joke becomes also a comment on the larger social situation, and then part of it too."¹⁰² If humor is found in conflict, the battle of the sexes is perhaps the oldest battleground in human history. These apocryphal sex acts are ways to somehow score points against the other side, with the field tilted significantly toward the male half of the population.

Tony Veale describes some humorous scenarios in which "the punch line is not a crisis of interpretation that forces a retreat, but an opportunity that allows a willing listener to collaboratively engage with the speaker in the creation of humor."¹⁰³ However, I would suggest that this is always the case. Humor functions as enthymeme, with the listener filling in the missing premises. When I was a child on the playground, everyone knew that all Polish people were stupid, all blondes were ditzy, and all Mexicans were lazy. Of course this is not the case, but the joke only works if the listener knew these doxastic truths. But, it has to be somewhat underground. One can hardly make a joke about the fact that the Statue of Liberty is on Ellis Island—the knowledge that the audience is required to draw on must be such that it is not repeatable to everyone, or, as people used to say, in "polite company." As John Meyer explains, "Because surprise, or an unexpected symbolic event, is important for humor to be perceived, the concepts that create the humor must be only mildly familiar to an audience. If the concepts that create the humor are so familiar as to be

already known, or not familiar at all, the audience cannot 'get' a joke because the sudden perception of a new perspective is lost, and humor does not occur."¹⁰⁴ What makes it funny is that we have agreed that certain things are funny—blondes, Polish people, people with no arms and no legs, and the like.

Second, humor is an effective way of consolidating and dividing people. Meyer argues that there are four rhetorical functions of humor: identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation.¹⁰⁵ To some extent, all of these functions come into play with these apocryphal sex acts, but the ones that seem most salient in this discussion is the identification/division axis and enforcement. Meyer seems to use identification in much the same way as Kenneth Burke, who argues that "Insofar as their interests are joined, A is *identified* with B. Or he may *identify himself* with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so."¹⁰⁶ Yet Burke also notes that the reverse side of the identification coin is division.¹⁰⁷ One may see the valorization of these acts as an extension of the "girls versus boys" mentality that has played out on schoolyards since time immemorial. We can see such sentiments in imperatives to "put the women in their place" or to "show them who wears the pants." To share in these forms of humor is to acknowledge the common plight of men in the battle against women, and such constructions invite the men to see themselves on the same side of the struggle. When one man performs a donkey punch, he is striking a blow not only to enhance his own orgasm, but also for mankind as a whole. He does not strike the woman alone, but she stands in synecdochally as a representative of all women. In the other function, enforcement, one uses humor to reinforce norms, societal or otherwise. In these acts, we can see a reminder that women are not only second class citizens, but that they should be treated as such from the boardroom to the bedroom. A man can use them for his pleasure and even allow his friends to do so if he wishes. One can literally treat them like shit.

The very fact that it is acceptable for many to joke about rape, violence and potential murder, and defecating on a sexual partner in order to humiliate them, should give us pause as a society. The things that we joke about tend to be those things that most trouble us—fear, sex, death, and the like. Joking about such subjects is a way to gain some kind of control over them, if only in a symbolic manner. Humor also allows us to speak about subjects that are taboo without confronting them directly.¹⁰⁸ The fact that women bear the lion's share of the hatred put forth in such creations should also demonstrate the problems with these imagined (or enacted) acts. Much like jokes that poke fun at undesirable immigrants, religions, and groups,

women remain firmly ensconced in the pantheon of easy targets. One hardly questions the propriety of "dumb blonde" jokes, or those involving women drivers, and other generally accepted constructions of real or imagined gender differences. But, the first step in changing these socially constructed differences is to call attention to them and challenge them.

Burke notes that humans are "separated from his [or her] natural condition by instruments of his [or her] own making," meaning our tools and our language.¹⁰⁹ Humans no longer use sex simply as a means of propagating the species or because we are goaded by physiological urges. Instead, sexuality has become technologized in the sense that language has placed its mark upon it.¹¹⁰ Because we have the ability to think abstractly, we are able to be much more creative than those who lack this ability and several scholars have argued that literacy is the key to this kind of thinking.¹¹¹ Animals are quite unlikely to develop such acts as the Donkey Punch or the Cleveland Steamer because they would lack evolutionary utility. Potentially killing one's mate in the pursuit of a potentially better orgasm would do little to generate offspring. Even among animals that engage in sex for amusement as well as reproduction, such acts would limit that creature's ability to find another mate. But our linguistic imagination, combined with our desire to classify almost everything in our universe, allows us to create things that have no real use—acts that many would not even try on a dare. Ironically, then, it is precisely our evolution as a culture that allows for the creation of such repulsive acts.

Elsewhere I have argued that "just as societal norms are created through language, and action, they can be dismantled through language and action."¹¹² After all, "norms are held in place not by a nebulous system, but by each of us."¹¹³ We must reconsider the use of such terms as Donkey Punch, Cleveland Steamer, and the Houdini not because they are disgusting or because they perpetuate sexual violence, rape, and degradation, but also because we as a society become that which we speak about. More importantly, those things we find humorous provide important insight into our cultural psyche. Only the sickest among us consider such things as child abuse to be humorous. Let it be the same for all forms of sexual violence.

Notes

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4. *Ibid.*, 192.
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8. Richter, *The Language of Sexuality*, 24.
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10. See Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Baby Train and Other Lusty Urban Legends* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993).
11. Mariamne H. Whatley and Elissa R. Henken, *Did You Hear About the Girl Who...? Contemporary Legends, Folklore, and Human Sexuality* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).
12. Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings* (New York: Norton, 1981), 4.
13. Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1979), 69.
14. Andrea Dworkin, "Pornography and Grief," in *Feminism & Pornography*, ed. Drucill Cornell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 41.
15. For critiques of Dworkin's work, see Susie Bright, *Inspired by Andrea Dworkin: Essays on Lust, Aggression, Porn, & the Female Gaze That I Might Not Have Written If Not for Her* (Santa Cruz, CA: Bright Stuff, 2005); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Sex & Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Alan Soble, *Pornography, Sex, and Feminism* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002). Even Ariel Levy, in the forward to the 20th anniversary edition of Dworkin's *Intercourse* describes some critiques of Dworkin and observes, "You don't have to be an asshole—or even a journalist—to take issue with some of what Dworkin said. Fury and drama characterize her rhetorical style, extremism her ideas, and *Intercourse* is perhaps her most radical work." Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 20th Anniversary ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2007), xii.

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17. Gloria G. Brame, William D. Brame, and Jon Jacobs, *Different Loving: An Exploration of the World of Sexual Dominance and Submission* (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 262.
18. Carolyn Said, "Fight to the End for the Little Guy/Small-Town Utility's Lawyers Ferret out Evidence Enron Manipulated Market," *San Francisco Chronicle* June 27, 2004; Christopher Schwarzen, "Tapes of Enron Traders to Get Federal Review," *Seattle Times* June 18, 2004.
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