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Doctor Faustus Impotent? Fantasizing the Male Body in the *Historia von D. Johann Fausten*

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The notion of masculine sexual potency relies on the fiction of the penis as phallus. It is, however, the penis that perpetually challenges the phallus as privileged signifier of masculinity. This article discusses how the *Historia von D. Johann Fausten*—one of the most popular fictions of masculine potency in early modern Germany—represents a cultural fantasy about the penis as phallus. It shows that the transformation of the male body into the masculine body requires the transformation of the penis into the phallus as well as the construction of non-phallic ‘others’—both male and female. (BM)

Impotence: *Lack of self restraint; violent passion* (OED vol. 7, 734)

Narratives of male sexual potency do not simply reflect gender stereotypes; rather, they actively participate in the cultural construction of masculinities and masculine bodies. By so doing they permit insight into the mechanisms of identification and disavowal by which gender is constituted (Butler 3). The construct of masculine potency thus presupposes the disavowal of impotence.

Viagra, despite current publicity, is certainly not the first treatment for impotence promising “to return afflicted men to proud full function,” as John Leeland put it in a November 1997 issue of *Newsweek* (64). In the sixteenth century, Doctor Johann Faustus turns to the devil in order to pursue a life of continual potency, having “any woman in the whole city brought to him at his command; the which he practised and persevered in a long time” (DL 11; H 29).¹ To those men suffering from impotence who did not want to seek the help of the devil, Johann Wittich, an early modern physician and author of medical self-help books, recommends the following cure:

[T]ake a sparrow brain, an orchid root (*Sterndelkrautwurz*), florum palmæ, incense, 1 ounce (*2 loz*) each. Make pills out of these ingredients, and hand them to the impotent male—but not more than 6 or 7, because otherwise the wife will die under him (*sonsten wird das Weib vnter dem Manne vmbkommen*) (437).

Note how this prescription for the impotent penis easily turns into a fiction about the phallic power of an extraordinary erection that finds its ultimate goal in the extermination of the female. This short passage, indeed, is an example for the immediate transformation of the penis into the phallus. As a signifier of masculinity, of power, strength, and control, the phallus depends on the invisibility and negation of the penis. In fact, as Judith Butler has argued, for the phallus to function as privileged signifier “the penis becomes the privileged referent to be negated” (84). Butler notes that “[t]o have the penis is to have that which the phallus is not, but which, precisely by virtue of this not being, constitutes the occasion for the phallus to signify (in this sense, the phallus requires and reproduces the diminution of the penis in order to signify—almost a kind of master-slave dialectic between them)” (263, note 30).

The dependency of the phallus upon the weakness of the penis might be denied by displacing this weakness and powerlessness onto the other. For the physician Wittich this other clearly is the wife who, in contrast to her husband, seems utterly without control. She seems to be no more than the helpless victim of her husband’s phallic sexuality. While he *has* the phallus, she *is* the phallus for him. The concept of the phallus as privileged signifier of masculinity therefore not only presupposes the invisibility of the penis, but brings about the naturalization of the phallus as well. Since, however, the phallus is predicated upon the penis, it is perpetually haunted by the latter’s impotence. The question, then, is what becomes of masculinity if the penis is disclosed? The problem with answering this question is, of course, that the penis usually remains invisible. Anatomy books, however, allow one of those rare glances at the penis.

In Adrian Spiegel’s *De humani corporis fabrica libri decem*, published in 1627, one of Giulio Casserio’s plates (figure 1) features the muscular anatomy of the penis *in situ* rather than as isolated and abstract anatomical illustration. It shows a young male surrendering his partly anatomized penis to the unrestrained and penetrating gaze of the spectator/anatomist. The semi-recumbent position of the male with his legs wide open, his head and eyes averted, and the inviting gesture of his right hand signal sexual availability, passivity, even helplessness. His

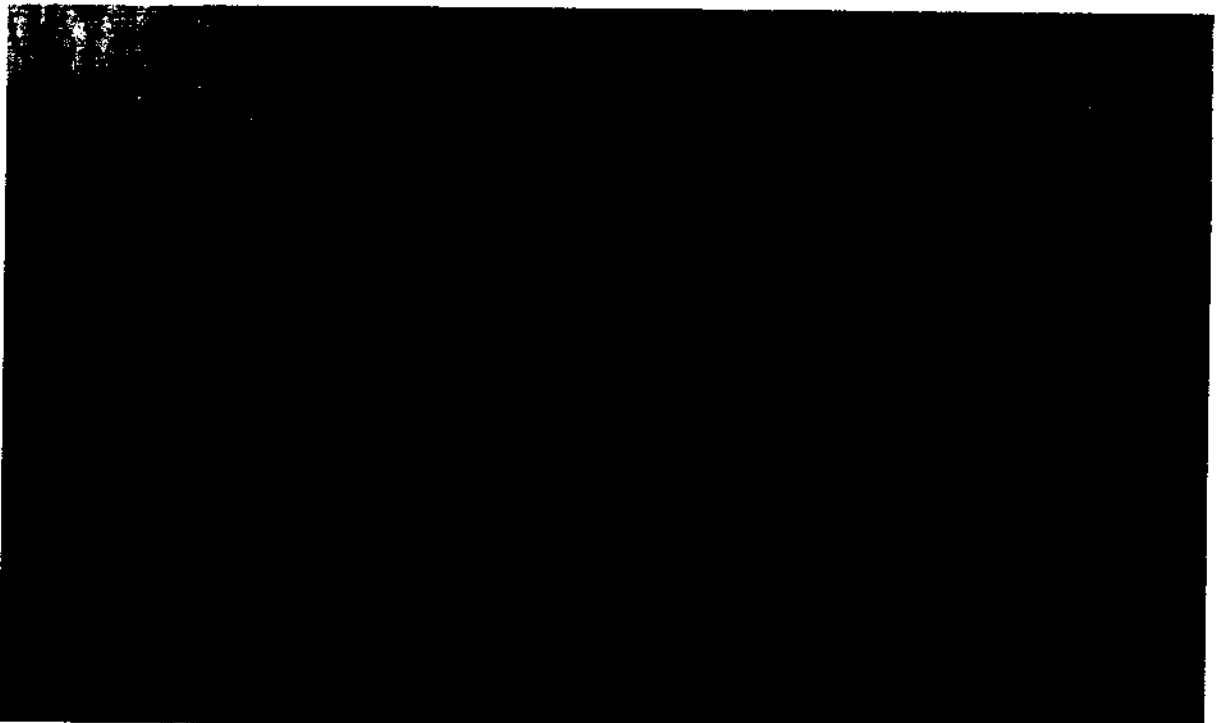


Figure 1. Penis and anus *in situ* from Adrian Spiegel and Giulio Casserio, *De humani corporis fabrica libri decem*, Venice 1627. (Courtesy Zweigbibliothek Wissenschaftsgeschichte, Humboldt University Berlin.)

position, as Sander Gilman has noted, echoes representations of *female* sexuality and eroticism (126) so very popular not only in early modern anatomy books—as Gilman suggests—but even more so in art. Casserio's engraving employs an iconography that in Renaissance erotic images, as Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat has shown, was almost entirely reserved for the representation of women (393–401). Within the heterosexual “economy of the gaze” that identified looking with masculinity and being looked at with femininity (Simons 50), Casserio's plate, which requests the masculine gaze, ties the display of the penis to effeminization. Furthermore, the invisibility of scrotum and testes suggests a complete lack of semen and enhances the male's effeminization even more. His penis as well as his position do not flaunt phallic strength and control. Rather than having the phallus, this male *is* the phallus, while at the same time his desire for the phallus is displayed by the phallic tree he clings to. The illustration resists conventional gender stereotypes. While the figure from an anatomical point of view undoubtedly is a man, he is represented in a feminizing fashion. The illustration denies the seemingly “natural” congruence between gender performance and anatomy, between sex and gender, as it were. The phallus appears as a structure detached from any particular body, and the supposedly masculine penis is represented as feminine. The pose of the penis in the shape of a question mark seems to express exactly this insecurity and ambivalence about its gender identity. In its representation of the relation between penis and phallus the illustration demonstrates, in the words of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, that “sometimes masculinity has nothing to do with men” (12).

Johann Wittich seems to be well aware of the embarrassing difference between penis and phallus, for it is exactly the avoidance of this embarrassment for which his drug is designed:

This [medication] must not be deliberately misused, but was designed as a device for those husbands who find themselves weak in sexual matters; so that the wife, if she finds her husband to be weak, does not leave him for another man. Indeed, the medication shall be used to prevent this great mishap. It shall help the male to prove himself a man towards his wife (*darnit der Mann besetze bey seinem Weibe*) (437).

The argument betrays male gender anxieties concerning the consequences of impotence. A wife whose husband could not fulfill his conjugal duty because of impotence or infertility could legally divorce him. Impotence, therefore, was a frightening condition for the male who, as Vern L. Bullough put it, “was defined in terms of sexual performance,

measured rather simply as his ability to get an erection” (43). Wittich's warning of the drug's power to transform the penis into a phallic weapon, therefore, seems not so much motivated by his care for women's lives but by the humiliating consequences impotence entails for the man. While Wittich's version of the penis focuses on the phallic strength of the male body, Casserio invites a reading from the perspective of the male body's “vulnerabilities rather than the dense armor of its power—from the ‘point of view’ of the mutable, plural penis rather than the majestic, unitary phallus” (Bordo 697). Such a point of view does not presuppose that “everything pertaining to men can be classified as masculinity, and everything that can be said about masculinity pertains in the first place to men” (Sedgwick 12). Rather, it focuses on the performative construction of masculinity regardless of the anatomy of the body. Such a point of view, moreover, is concerned with the abject, with this “zone of uninhabitability” (Butler 3) where bodies that do not matter are forced to dwell. As Julia Kristeva notes, abjection is provoked by the subject's recognition of the impossibility of stable identities; it strives to secure precarious boundaries and differences “[a]s if the fundamental opposition were between I and Other, or in more archaic fashion, between Inside and Outside” (7). In this sense, the impotent penis belongs to the realm of the abject. While the boundary between I and other is maintained by creating impotent others, the boundary between Inside and Outside requires the construction of an enemy that imposes impotence onto the male from the outside.

The difference between penis and phallus allows a reading of the *Historia von D. Johann Fausten* from the point of view of impotence. The text both recognizes and rejects threatening frailties of the male body, especially the penis; it thereby establishes what Julia Kristeva calls “a defensive position, one that implies a refusal but also a sublimating elaboration” (7). From this perspective, the *Historia*'s specific “performance” within contemporary gender discourses becomes accessible. After discussing the defensive construction of Faustus's potency, which construes impotence as a characteristic of the other, I shall show in what way the *Historia* represents a fantasy about the nature of masculinity.

Although the literature on the *Historia* is extensive, a gender-sensitive reading of Faustus's body has not been undertaken. So far, the representation of his masculinity has only been discussed in the context of early modern discourses of science, marriage, and melancholy (Marie E. Müller; Williams). Barbara Becker-Cantarino's thought-provoking thesis that the *Historia* was “a fictional representation of gender anxiety, of apprehensions of the male subject” (32), however, prompts questions