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# *Sensible Flesh*

On Touch in Early Modern Culture

Edited by Elizabeth D. Harvey

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it were flesh. It is, then, an ideal medium in which to fashion bodies made to be touched. These scientific models served to illustrate anatomical structure when the numbers of cadavers available for dissection was severely limited and when the practical considerations for preserving a corpse dictated haste in dissection. As pedagogical tools, they were made not only to be seen but also to be touched.<sup>42</sup> Most of the bodies are male and flayed, exhibiting, according to the Galenic isomorphic principle, the anatomical features of the generalized human body. Even without skin, even eviscerated, these bodies retain a haunting life. Their glass eyes are open, seeming to evince an impassible range of emotion through their expressive gaze, and their languid, even rapturous poses paradoxically suggest a lingering responsiveness in corpses from whom all traces of consciousness must necessarily be extinguished. Like Ovid's Marsyas, who continues to speak even as his skin is torn from his body, who questions in his anguish why he is being divided from himself ("quid me mihi detrahis?" "Why do you tear me from myself?"),<sup>43</sup> these wax cadavers seem to transpose the tactile sensation that inheres in the cutaneous membrane into a register of emotive "feeling." The female figures, unlike the male bodies, are not flayed, which makes the juxtaposition between the undisturbed ivory surface, beautifully coiffed hair, and jewelry and the dissected torso all the more disturbing. Some of these models contained removable parts, so that the outer layers of the body could be successively peeled away, revealing the human organs and female reproductive system.<sup>44</sup> Inter-iority, as these models demonstrate, is not only seen but also actively handled, thus clearly announcing the complicated, shifting ways in which skin and tactility are implicated in the body's volatile boundary between surface and innerness. This border simultaneously demarcates the edges and limits of the corpse and is the dynamic interface between the cadaver and the anatomist's touching hand.

Chapter 6  
*As Long as a Swan's Neck? The  
 Significance of the "Enlarged" Clitoris for  
 Early Modern Anatomy*  
 Bettina Mathes

Tangible. Syn.: material, touchable, physical, corporeal, graspable, visible.  
 —Webster's New World Thesaurus

In 1660 the French anatomist and author of the much acclaimed *Anatomia Reformata* Thomas Bartholin wrote in his chapter "On the Clitoris": "It is absolutely true and it is not natural and it is monstrous that it grows to the length of a goose's neck."<sup>1</sup> Bartholin's remark refers to a case described by the Swiss anatomist Felix Platter in his 1583 *De corporis humani structura* whose observation soon became a popular topos in the anatomical writing about the clitoris. In 1691 Tobias Peucer, editor and translator of Stephen Bancaert's *Reformirte Anatomie (Reformed Anatomy)*, even claims "Platter testifies to having seen one as long as a swan's neck."<sup>2</sup> Bartholin, Platter, and Peucer are no exceptions among early modern anatomists. In general, seventeenth-century physicians, surgeons, and midwives seem very much preoccupied with the size of the clitoris. While the references to a swan's neck underline the extraordinary size of the clitoris, anatomically this organ was considered a "female penis." As Bartholin observes in the first sentence of his chapter on the clitoris, this organ is "similar to the penis as concerns its position, substance, composition, the production of semen as well as erection."<sup>3</sup> Adrian Spiegel, author of *Fabrica corporis humani libri decem*, published in 1627 reports that an enlarged clitoris "often deceives those inexperienced in anatomy to believe that women have been transformed into men, because what hangs out of their privities looks like a male member."<sup>4</sup>

The "monstrosity" of an enlarged clitoris troubled anatomists for

several reasons. Women might pass as men or they might hurt their male lovers during intercourse. Moreover, it was regarded as the cause and embodiment of female homoeroticism. Spieghel illustrates the homoerotic implications of an enlarged clitoris: "And even those women are brought to such insane lust that they sinfully lie with other women."<sup>5</sup> In fact, as Valerie Traub has noted, the way early modern anatomy fashioned female sexuality and desire reflects an anatomical essentialism that transmutes "a paradigm of desire into a paradigm of bodily structure."<sup>6</sup> It is because of this homoerotic disposition that Bartholin and many of his colleagues refer to the clitoris as "contempt of men."<sup>7</sup> This "contempt of men" was made visible and intelligible in the figure of the so called "Tribade"—a woman who because of her enlarged clitoris desired and had sex with other women. Bartholin states "sometimes they [women with an enlarged clitoris] abuse the clitoris as if it were a penis and they lie with each other."<sup>8</sup> As Traub notes: "It is not the 'tribade's' inconstant mind or sinful soul but her uniquely female yet masculinized morphology that propels her to engage in illicit behavior."<sup>9</sup>

Feminist critics have argued that anatomy's preoccupation with the clitoris expresses male anxieties about female sexuality and negotiates social and political gender conflicts.<sup>10</sup> In its analogy to the penis as well as in its homoerotic disposition the clitoris figures as a threat to male heterosexual as well as homosocial hegemony. Just how threatening the enlarged clitoris was may be judged from its medical and legal treatment. As Park observes, physicians began considering clitoridectomy, and they recommended this measure not only in cases of clitoral hypertrophy but also as a more general treatment to discipline any kind of transgressive female sexuality.<sup>11</sup> And yet this interpretation is not entirely satisfying because it does not account for the reasons why the early modern Tribade is so prominent in the realm of anatomy and why, despite the anatomist's extraordinary appetite for the Tribade, her anatomy is denied visual representation.

Considering the frequency with which the medical and anatomical literature described the enlarged clitoris it seems significant indeed that those books do not contain illustrations of Tribades or their enlarged clitorises. Rather, anatomical illustrations of the clitoris included in those books are usually small featuring the "normal,"—not enlarged—clitoris, which often enough is barely visible in these small-size images. However, if we leave the realm of anatomy we find numerous visual examples of what the clitoris as long as a swan's neck might look like. Renaissance paintings rendering the mythological story of how Jupiter in the disguise of a swan raped Leda

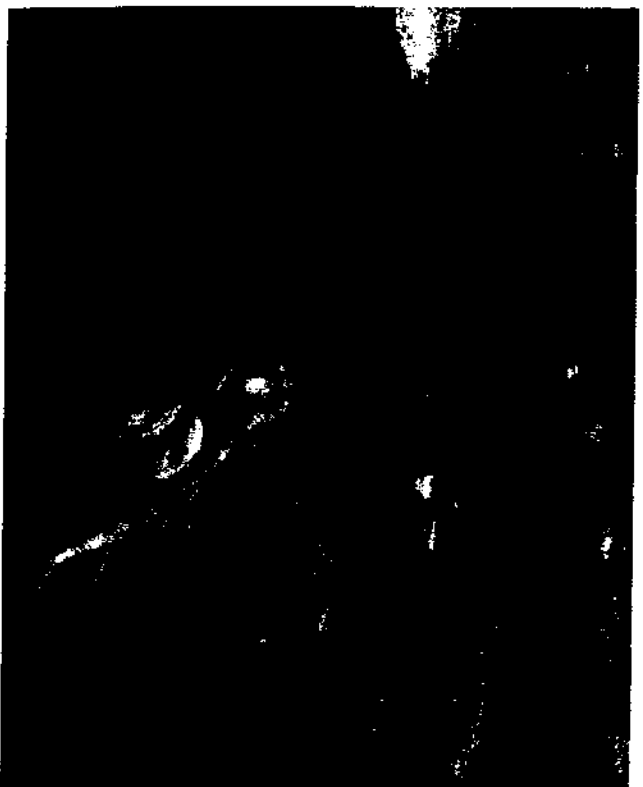


Figure 1. Correggio, *Leda and the Swan*, ca. 1530. Reproduced by permission of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Gemaldgalerie. Photo: Jørg P. Anders.

convey a visual impression of the enlarged clitoris's erotic and sexual possibilities. This motif, which abounded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was rendered by artists like Giorgione, Michelangelo, and Tintoretto.<sup>12</sup> Correggio's version of *Leda and the Swan*, for instance, albeit painted about 1530, before the anatomical rediscovery of the clitoris, might from an anatomical point of view very well be read as an illustration of tribadic sexuality (Figure 1). Early modern anatomy thus associates the clitoris with Jupiter's legendary sexual potency and fertility.<sup>13</sup> But what does it mean that both penis and clitoris are imagined as swan's necks? And why are there no anatomical illustrations of the enlarged clitoris? In what follows I argue that this invisibility allows insight into the relation between touch, vision and the tangibility of the phallus.

## Typography, Tangibility, and the Phallus

As a starting point for the problematization of this context I turn to some well-known but rarely discussed anatomical illustrations of the penis. The first one is included in Bartholin's *Anatomia Reformata* (Figure 2). It shows the male genital from different perspectives and in different states of dissection. View V features "the penis and its muscles in situ."<sup>14</sup> Perhaps the most unusual feature about this illustration is the shape of the penis, which looks like a question mark. In fact, it almost perfectly matches the question mark of the Antiqua type. In this context, it is interesting to note that the German edition of the *Anatomia*, which uses the image the wrong way round, draws attention to the relation between body part and typography. From this inverted perspective the shape of the penis is said to "represent the shape of the letter S," which of course is the mirror image of the question mark.<sup>15</sup> Notably it is the typographical sign that governs the shape of the penis.

An even more spectacular and clearly sexualized representation of the penis as question mark is featured in Giulio Casserio's *Tabulae anatomicae*, published posthumously by Daniel Bucretius in 1627 together with Spieghel's *Fabrica* (Figure 3).<sup>16</sup> The volume contains 78 large size anatomical plates, "all of them," the subtitle notes, "new and never seen before."<sup>17</sup> The plate displays, according to Casserio's explanation, "the penis in its natural situation without the skin in order to make visible all of its parts." This "natural situation" is a young man in a semirecumbent position with his legs wide open, surrendering his circumcised penis and anus to the gaze of the beholder. Obviously, the carefully designed engraving shows much more than seems necessary for the anatomical visualization of the penis.

This complex image with its multiple layers of meaning profoundly questions the relation between sex and gender. While the penis suggests the maleness of this figure, the excised testes as well as the circumcised penis point to his lack of masculinity. Furthermore, the image suggests that the male is about to give birth: as Sander Gilman notes, the youth's "position of parturition" as well as the protruding anus propose the male's motherhood.<sup>18</sup> Gender ambivalence is furthermore expressed through an iconography that makes use of binarisms. The left foot resting firmly on the ground contrasts with the instability of the right foot's position. The strong left arm clenching the tree and stabilizing the body contrasts with the awkwardly distorted right arm. The stretched upper half of the body contrasts with the twisted lower half. And, finally, the quiet pastoral setting in which the man rests is opposed to the presence of a castle in the background. This

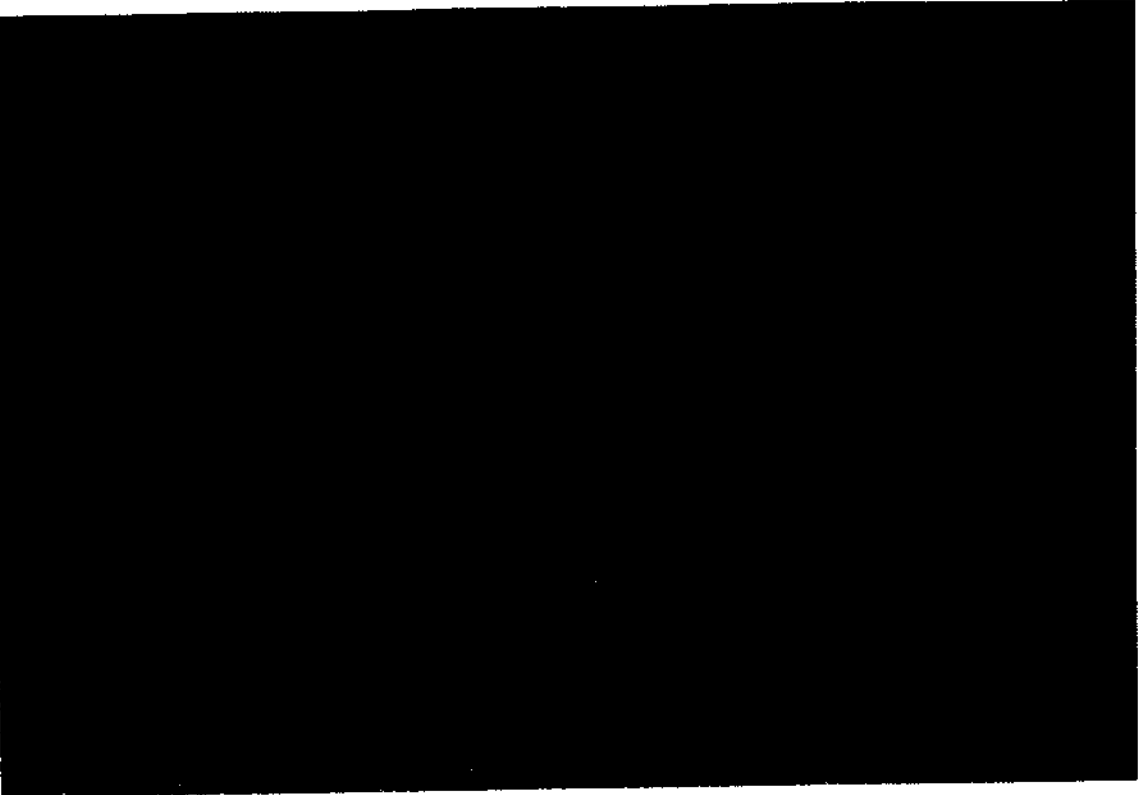


Figure 2. "Anatomy of the Penis," in Thomas Bartholin, *Anatomia Reformata* (Hague-Comitis: Vlacq, 1660), 149. Reproduced by permission of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Abt. Historische Drucke.