The secret vice: masturbation in Victorian fiction and medical culture


**Abstract**

This dissertation considers the representation of masturbation in medical and fictional texts between the mid-Nineteenth Century and the first decade of the Twentieth. Discussion of masturbation in this period has been dominated by the writings of medical historians such as Paula Bennett and Vernon A. Rosario II, and Jean Stengers and Anne van Neck, who make but passing reference to the wider cultural manifestations of the practice. This dissertation goes beyond the pioneering work of these writers in order to address how the symptomalogies and prognoses associated with the medicalised practice of masturbation are manifest in the fiction of the period. The dissertation addresses both clinical and popular medical writings on the subject, and makes reference to ephemeral as well as canonical fictions. Among the issues which are discussed during the six chapters of the dissertation are the distinctive issues of male and female masturbation, the association of masturbation with male homosexuality and lesbianism, the representation of masturbation in pornography and the symptomalogical congruence between masturbation and other pathological disorders. The latter has implications for the boundary between diagnosis and misdiagnosis, and the dissertation addresses this particular point through a reading of two fictional characters who have, effectively, been misdiagnosed by the assumptions of twentieth-century criticism. The Introduction reviews the critical issues raised by masturbation. Chapter One examines the symptoms and medical literature of male masturbation in the Victorian period, paying particular attention to the manner in which such writings play upon the anxieties of the male subject aspiring to a conventional, conjugal relationship, and to the symptoms associated with the habitual onanist. These symptoms, and their implications, are discussed with reference to Latimer, the debilitated narrator of George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil* (1859). Chapter Two complements the first chapter by way of an investigation of the largely overlooked discourse on female masturbation. Reference is made to a wide range of clinical and popular medical works, and the symptomatology of the female onanist is clarified with reference to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and an anonymous pornographic novella, 'Lady Pockingham', first published in 1879. Chapter Three expands on one of the issues raised in its immediate predecessor, namely the congruence between the symptoms of masturbation and those of other disorders. Making particular reference to the fictional representation of consumption, the chapter considers the erotic implications of IS. Le Fanu's novella 'Carmilla' (1871), and notes also the connections between masturbation, consumption and female same-sex desire. Chapter Four continues the theme of homosexual desire by considering the manner in which the discourse on masturbation impacts upon the representation of sodomy and male sexual inversion. This chapter makes extensive use of the anonymous homosexual novella *Teleny* (1893), and notes in particular how the work is influenced by clinical medicine. Chapter Five explores the connection between masturbation and obsessive behaviour, making particular reference to Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). The central character of the novel, Bradley Headstone, is further analysed in order to consider the representation of epilepsy, and the symptomalogical connection between this disorder and masturbation. The final Yll chapter compares the pathology and symptoms of opium addiction and masturbation. Chapter Six examines the portrayal of Dorian Gray, alleged to be a masturbator by some modern critics, but whose condition may more accurately be seen to conform to that of the opium abuse he is also associated with in Wilde's 1890 novella. The chapter's revisionist response to this assumption is echoed by a subsequent analysis of John Jasper in Dickens' *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). Nominally an opium smoker, Jasper is a character who also displays the stigmata of the onanist. The Conclusion recalls the issues examined in the Dissertation, before considering the persistence of the discourse on masturbation in the later Twentieth Century, with particular reference to Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) and Willy Russell's *The Wrong Boy* (1999).
The Secret Vice: Masturbation in Victorian Fiction and Medical Culture provides a unique consideration of writings on self-abuse in the long nineteenth century. The book examines the discourse on masturbation in medical works by English, Continental and American practitioners and demonstrates the influence and impact of these writings, not only on Victorian pornography but also on Victorian fiction.