

Surprise of Surprises: Virginia Woolf, Mary McCarthy, and the Politics of Female Pleasure

by Tara Roeder

Whenever a woman is incapable of achieving an orgasm via coitus, provided the husband is an adequate partner, and prefers clitoral stimulation to any other form of sexual activity, she can be regarded as suffering from frigidity and requires psychiatric assistance.

—Frank S. Caprio

The advent of psychoanalysis in the twentieth century heralded a new interest in women's sexuality. This focus is evident not only in numerous (predominantly male-authored) psychoanalytic accounts, but in the literary work of male writers from D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce to Henry Miller and Norman Mailer. Yet often running counter to these narratives are the texts of women who author their own visions of sexual pleasure. My goal here is to explore the work of two powerful twentieth century female authors who speak back to dominant conceptions of sexuality. While on the surface the work of Virginia Woolf and that of Mary McCarthy appear to have little in common, each is deeply invested in exploring the politics of sexuality in innovative ways. Reading the work of Virginia Woolf against the first wave of Freudian theory and the work of Mary McCarthy against the numerous studies that emerged in the 1950s linking femininity to passivity is instructive in demonstrating how female-authored

counter-narratives can disrupt masculinist understandings of female pleasure. Such readings offer us a window into how these women were able to re-script the beliefs of analysts who would, in the words of feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, “ratify ... the status quo into psychic laws, and perpetuate it under the sanction of ‘normalcy’” (98).

In *Prescription for Sexuality: Sexual Citizenship in the Cold War Era*, Carolyn Herbst Lewis examines the ways in which “healthy female sexual response” came to be regarded as the “foundation of successful heterosexual performance for both men and women in the 1950s” (38). In the wake of Freud’s work, a generation of doctors and psychoanalysts became adamant that anything but vaginal orgasm as the result of sexual penetration “did not qualify as well-adjusted, mature, healthy, or normal” for women (38). In line with the gendered mainstream political ideology of the day, “nice” women did not enjoy clitoral stimulation.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir—another woman author who defiantly resists the kind of gendered essentialism at the heart of such “normalizing” projects—pays special attention to the complexity of women’s eroticism, describing the “opposition of ...two organs: the clitoris and the vagina” (372). For de Beauvoir, there is significance in the fact that “the clitorid system remains unmodified in the adult, and the woman retains this erotic independence all her life” (372). In part an attack on what she sees as a Freudian focus on biological determinism, de Beauvoir’s ambitious and unprecedented study claims that vaginal sexuality is of “secondary importance” (372). Addressing the work of Kinsey et. al., de Beauvoir attempts to resist the characterization of women’s “passive” role in regards to both sexuality and society at large, famously claiming that “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (267): “[T]he passivity that

is the essential characteristic of the 'feminine' woman is a trait that develops in her from the earliest years. But it is wrong to assert that a biological datum is concerned; it is in fact a destiny imposed upon her by her teachers and by society" (280).

Like de Beauvoir, Woolf and McCarthy represent the voices of early to mid-twentieth century women writers who imagined their own paths through the contested territory of "clitoral" versus "vaginal" orgasms; "normal" versus "deviant" sexual pleasure. Woolf and McCarthy address mainstream expectations about female orgasms in decidedly different ways. Although McCarthy effaces the earlier, radical politics of clitoral orgasm inscribed in the texts of Virginia Woolf, examining the two writers in light of each other highlights some of the diverse ways in which 20th century women have sought to re-imagine prevailing psychoanalytic wisdom on the subject of women's pleasure. Rather than explicitly engaging in an oedipal confrontation with status quo configurations of the "ideal" orgasm, the fiction of women as different as McCarthy and Woolf introduces alternative possibilities for female sexuality in response to popular paradigms.

This essay offers a feminist engagement with the politics of the female orgasm in McCarthy and Woolf, reading their texts against the grain of psychoanalytic wisdom that privileges vaginal penetration as procreative, mature, and desirable. As Judith Fetterly reminds us, "When only one reality is encouraged, legitimized, and transmitted and when that limited vision insists on its comprehensiveness," we lose the ability "to change our understanding of these fictions" (xi-xii). By delving into the counter-narratives of women, we can engage in meaningful acts of re-vision, conceived by Adrienne Rich as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old

text from a new critical direction” (Rich 18). The women whose texts I engage with here do exactly that, re-vising male-authored versions of female sexuality. I hope to show the meaningful ways in which their voices disrupt a larger socio-political framework in which female sexuality has been pre-scripted and co-opted by masculinist expectations.

***She Began to Like it a Little: Challenging the “Tyranny of the Orgasm” in Mary
McCarthy***

Mary McCarthy writes to Hannah Arendt on December 11, 1970, “I saw the current Women’s Lib idol, an absurd Australian giantess [Germaine Greer] who made remarks like ‘We must make them understand that fucking is a *political act*’” (Brightman 275). Although notoriously hostile to organized feminism, McCarthy’s aversion to “politicized fucking” had taken a different form in 1947, when her anger over Lundberg and Farnham’s *Modern Woman, The Lost Sex* led her to write a scathing review entitled “Tyranny of the Orgasm.” In it, she critiques the book’s “adjuration to American women to return to the home and leave men’s pursuits to men” (168). Starting with Kinsey’s findings that “from 50 to 85 per cent of American women college graduates had never experienced an orgasm” and “the percentage continued to decline as schooling was less intensive” (McCarthy 167), Lundberg and Farnham attempted to show, in the wry words of McCarthy, that “woman can recapture the orgasm by accepting her biological destiny. She must have at least three children and renounce her ego-striving activities in higher education and career-seeking [...] She must also renounce sexual freedom” (169). The “modern” woman (of whom McCarthy herself was an exemplar) was

described as neurotic and frigid. “If frigidity is to be viewed as a national scandal on a par with political corruption,” McCarthy writes, “the remedy at least seems obvious. The mother of little girls has only to present Dr. Kinsey’s figures to the truant officer” (167). Lambasting “the disingenuousness of this kind of reason that uses its own hypothesis as proof, that appeals always to the authority of ‘facts’ and allows itself at the same time an anarchy of interpretation” (173), “Tyranny of the Orgasm” is one of the few pieces by McCarthy in which the anger beneath the irony is palpable.

In Chapter Two of her novel *The Group*, published in 1963, McCarthy tackles the female orgasm on her own terms. In “Tyranny of the Orgasm,” she scornfully remarks that in *The Lost Sex* “the terminology of love and of medicine is replaced by the jargon of the factory and the garage” (170). McCarthy decides to bring back the terminology, not of love, but of medicine, when she describes Dick (with his “friendly, instructive voice”) undressing Dottie for her first sexual encounter: “he left her in her slip, just as they did in the doctor’s office” (*The Group*38).

Dick forces himself on Dottie, and Dottie likes it:

“Damn it,” he said. “Relax. You’re making it harder.” Just then, Dottie screamed faintly; it had gone all the way in. He put his hand over her mouth and then settled her legs around him and commenced to move it back and forth inside her. At first, it hurt so that she flinched at each stroke and tried to pull back, but this only seemed to make him more determined. Then, while she was still praying for it to be over, surprise of surprises, she started to like it a little. (41)

Then (surprise of surprises), Dottie has an orgasm: “all of a sudden, she seemed to explode in a series of long, uncontrollable contractions that embarrassed her, like the hiccups, the moment they were over, for it was as if she had forgotten Dick as a person” (41). When Dick falls asleep on top of her, she of course assumes that “something had gone wrong—probably her fault,” and is “ashamed of the happiness she had felt¹” (41). When she wakes Dick, he has the “air of a satisfied instructor”:

“You *came*, Boston,” he remarked ... Dottie glanced uncertainly at him; could he mean that thing she had done that she did not like to think about? “I beg your pardon,” she murmured. “I mean you had an orgasm.” ... “A climax,” he added, more sharply. “Do they teach that word at Vassar?” “Oh,” said Dottie, almost disappointed that that was all there was to it ... “It’s normal then?” she wanted to know, beginning to feel better. Dick shrugged. “Not for girls of your upbringing. Not the first time, usually.” (45).

It’s certainly not normal if Lundberg and Farnham have anything to say about it, and, as Dottie recalls, “Even mother hinted that satisfaction was something that came after a good deal of time and experience and that love made a big difference” (46)².

¹ Much like the narrative of female heterosexual experience outlined in *The Second Sex*: “(During intercourse) the fever (of female sexual excitement) rids her of shame for the moment, but afterward she is ashamed and horrified to think of it” (391).

² Although, luckily for female normalcy, a second, clitoral orgasm brought on by Dick’s manual stimulation is “less thrilling”; “‘Didn’t you like that,’ he demanded [...] ‘Not quite so much as the other, Dick.’ Dick laughed. ‘A nice, normal girl. Some of your sex prefer that.’ Dottie shivered ... it seemed to her almost perverted” (48).

Despite her contempt for Dottie (and Dottie's contempt for non-vaginal orgasm), McCarthy's "frank" detailing of the "facts" of a woman's first experience with intercourse—like her subsequent fitting for a pessary—is a significant act politically: "To bring certain kinds of information into print, even as *fiction*, is ultimately to rework the public/private divide and to redefine national propriety with its attendant unself-consciously universalist claims"(Miller 189). McCarthy is claiming a space in public discourse for the private experiences of women. I want to suggest that Dottie's orgasm is significant in another way as well; Simone de Beauvoir writes that "according to Stekel's statistics ... scarcely 4 per cent of women have orgasmic pleasure from the beginning" (391). McCarthy's unusual choice in giving Dottie—a Vassar graduate, and thus part of the most "frigid" portion of the "lost sex" Lundberg and Farnham are trying to liberate through housework-related orgasm—a climax during her first sexual experience is indeed significant. (As is Dottie's being "almost disappointed that that's all there was to it" afterwards—not only was it easy for her, it was also no big deal.) McCarthy's decision to grant an orgasm to an unmarried, sexually inexperienced female college graduate having definitively non-procreative sex continues the work she began in "Tyranny of the Orgasm." McCarthy undoes the logic of Lundberg and Farnham³ with the sexual exploits of Dottie and Dick.

What happens to Dottie afterwards is no triumphant feminist narrative—after being told by Dick to "get herself a pessary" (58), Dottie ends up alone and ashamed on

³ Logic she bitingly outlines, in "Tyranny of the Orgasm," as: "The devaluation of the home made woman lose her ... sense of self importance ... Woman, to recover her prestige, began to compete with man in his own domain, to work outside the home, vote, get educated, fornicate, and neglect her children ... but woman's biological nature ... punished her for not having children, for undervaluing the home and the feminine activities (nursing, dishwashing, sewing, furniture-polishing, cooking, tutoring), by refusing her the orgasm (168).

a park bench. Dick never contacts her, and she hides her contraceptives in the park and returns home to Boston. Yet while the sardonic anger of “Tyranny” is replaced by McCarthy’s trademark distance and irony in *The Group*, make no mistake about it: the writing of Dottie’s orgasm (despite McCarthy’s claims to the contrary) is indeed “a political act.”

A System of Waves: Clitoral Orgasm as Protest in Virginia Woolf

Unlike McCarthy, Virginia Woolf is well known for her explicit engagement with feminist politics in her non-fiction works such as *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*. In her fiction, Woolf continues her significant commitment to challenging phallogocentric logic, specifically through the inscription of female sexuality. Simone de Beauvoir writes that, “It is striking that in the woman there is a choice of two systems, one of which perpetuates juvenile independence while the other consigns woman to man and childbearing” (373). The “choice” between the clitoral and the vaginal is seen as the choice between “juvenile independence” and submission to a patriarchal model of procreative heterosexuality. In the world delineated by Freud, the vagina rightfully usurps the clitoris as a girl “becomes” a woman; “mature” female sexuality is, for Freud, vaginal⁴ (676). Within de Beauvoir’s “two systems” model, the choice of clitoral orgasm

⁴ In “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm,” Anne Koedt corrects this assumption: “Whenever female orgasm and frigidity are discussed, a false distinction is made between the vaginal and the clitoral orgasm. Frigidity has generally been defined by men as the failure of women to have vaginal orgasms. Actually the vagina is not a highly sensitive area and is not constructed to achieve orgasm. It is the clitoris which is the center of sexual sensitivity ... Although there are many areas for sexual arousal, there is only one area for sexual climax; that area is the clitoris.”

by an adult woman can thus function as a protest against patriarchy, a defiant sign of “juvenile independence.”

In her 1925 novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf highlights the ways in which patriarchal narratives cannot successfully contain female desire. The most illuminating feature of Clarissa Dalloway’s love triangle (Peter, Richard, Clarissa) is that it’s not a triangle at all; “the most exquisite moment of [Clarissa’s] whole life” involves another woman (34). Pondering “this question of love ... this falling in love with women,” Clarissa thinks, “Take Sally Seton; her relation in the old days with Sally Seton. Had not that, after all, been love?” (32). The moment of connection with another woman is described as:

a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture...for that moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed.
(32)

Clarissa’s memories of her relationship with Sally ignite the text: “The strange thing, on looking back, was the purity, the integrity, of her feeling for Sally. It was not like one’s feeling for a man. It [...] sprang from a sense of being in league together, a presentiment of something that was bound to part them (they spoke of marriage always as a catastrophe)” (34). While traditional heterosexual encounters are predicated on the notion of male as active and woman as passive, the expression of love between two

women will have a different shape. The hierarchy of patriarchal relationships can be undone in the moments of passion between women who are “in league together.”

Clarissa remembers Sally kissing her “on the lips”: “The whole world might have turned upside down!” (35). This moment permits the creation of a private space between the two women:

The others disappeared. There she was alone with Sally. And she felt she had been given a present, wrapped up...something infinitely precious, wrapped up, which, as they walked (up and down, up and down), she uncovered, or the radiance burnt through, the revelation, the religious feeling!—when old Joseph and Peter faced them: ‘Star-gazing?’ said Peter.” (36)

The gift of Sally’s kiss, Clarissa and Sally’s rhythmic walking, alone, together, is abruptly halted by the intrusion of the men: “It was like running one’s face against a granite wall in the darkness! It was shocking; it was horrible!” (36). Clarissa’s memory of this moment of “juvenile independence” (de Beauvoir 373), the pleasure of which “radiates throughout the whole body” (de Beauvoir 396), is also a moment of dissent, a reminder of the “integrity” of the bond she shared with Sally before the “catastrophe” of marriage. Here Woolf makes clear that Freudian “maturation” narratives, as well as traditional marriage plots, are unsatisfactory constructs for her female characters.

Peter Walsh, of course, sees things differently: “Women, he thought, shutting his pocket-knife, don’t know what passion is ... Clarissa was as cold as an icicle” (80).

The “wrapped up” love that Clarissa and Sally share (and the “virginal” aspect she

displays publicly) are veiled threats to masculine narrative. Although publicly Clarissa has followed the Freudian model of sexual “maturation,” trading the pleasure of Sally’s kiss for that of heterosexual marriage, the memory of “the most exquisite moment of her life” retains the power to transport Clarissa back to the “sudden revelation” that comes from a moment of connection with another woman. The lyric, orgasmic quality of Woolf’s language when describing these moments can’t be fully contained by the other—triangular, heterosexual—plot of the text.

By blurring the boundaries between private and public, “feminine” and “masculine,” and personal and political in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf is indeed “suggesting that we damn ourselves if, in constructing a view of the world we deny a connection between politics and feelings or values, and so create a politics lacking both beauty and joy” (Edwards 111). She is also offering, as a (politically significant) counter-narrative to the patriarchal story of Freudian development, a powerful account of women’s connections couched in the language of the clitoris.

The theme of female desire as multiple also runs throughout 1927’s *To The Lighthouse*, where “nothing is simply one thing” (186). The lighthouse as phallus is denied a privileged space in the text; instead Woolf acknowledges a plurality of models of female pleasure. Mrs. Ramsay, the “essential female” who “knows without looking round” (9), gently insists to Lily Briscoe that “an unmarried woman has missed the best of life” (49). “Oh but,” Lily thinks, “there was her father; her home; even, had she dared to say it, her painting. But all this seemed so little, so virginal, against the other. Yet...she liked to be alone; she liked to be herself; she was not made for that” (50). Lily provides an alternative model for women, gently insisting on the intimate pleasures of

art, home, and solitude in the face of Mrs. Ramsay's concern with finding her a suitable husband.

Mrs. Ramsay's model of sexuality is indeed based on female/male mutuality:

Rose's arrangement of the grapes and pears, of the horny pink-lined shell, of the bananas, made her think of a trophy fetched from the bottom of the sea ... she saw that Augustus Carmichael too feasted his eyes on the same plate of fruit, plunged in, broke off a bloom there, a tassel here, and returned, after feasting, to his hive. That was his way of looking; different from hers. But looking together united them. (97)

The juxtaposition of "grapes and pears" with "the horny pink-lined shell" and "the bananas" gratifies her. Her ("female") way of looking is complemented by Carmichael's ("male") way; she imagines the bottom of the sea while he "plunges in" and breaks off blooms. "Looking together," however, "unites them." Male and female are reciprocal for Mrs. Ramsay, who in many ways enacts (even as she slyly complicates) the kind of binary imagining of "male" and "female" Hélène Cixous famously maps out in her essay "Sorties": "Activity/passivity; Sun/Moon; [...] Father/Mother; Head/Heart" (37).

For Lily, the sources of pleasure are different, and creative in another way. Her act of painting is described in the following terms:

With a curious physical sensation, as if she were urged forward and at the same time must hold herself back, she made her first quick decisive stroke.

The brush descended. It flickered brown over the white canvas ... A second time she did it—a third time. And so pausing and so flickering, she attained a dancing rhythmical movement, as if the pauses were one part of the rhythm and the strokes another, and all were related; and so, lightly and swiftly pausing, striking, she scored her canvas with ... lines which had no sooner settled there than they enclosed ... a space. (158)

This space, the product of rhythmic strokes, is a space of female pleasure, the pleasure of women who “like to be alone.” Woolf’s language here is decidedly suggestive of sexual pleasure. As Jennifer Beth Simmons points out, “Through masturbation women [can] ‘test and transgress’ not only the interrelations of fantasy and reality, but also the heteronormative prescriptions of gender and sexuality” (73-74). Lily’s intense pleasure in solitude and art is a threat to normalizing, gendered prescriptions that would prefer to assign her a role as one half of a distinctly gendered, reciprocal couple.

Woolf is careful to avoid, however, creating a Lily/Mrs. Ramsay binary; there’s a *but also* here. Mrs. Ramsay too speaks a language of multi-faceted desire when she feels as if the light of the lighthouse:

were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight, she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness, and it silvered the rough waves a little more brightly ... and the blue went out of the sea and it rolled in waves of pure lemon which curved and swelled and broke upon the beach and ecstasy burst in her

eyes and waves of pure delight raced over ... her ... and she felt, it is enough!

It is enough! (65)

Woolf's luxuriant language here suggests that the ability to achieve ecstasy in solitude remains for even the "essential" wife and mother, Mrs. Ramsay. The joyful and "private" experiences of both women in *To the Lighthouse* challenge a reading of the lighthouse as phallic signifier, as well as Mr. Ramsay's slow, linear plod to the letter Z. Female experience—and the function of female orgasm—in *To the Lighthouse* is illuminated by Lily Briscoe's realization that, "The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark" (161).

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf makes explicit the politics of Mrs. Dalloway, which hint that marriage and heterosexual procreativity are not the be all and end all of women's experience. In the figure of Lily Briscoe, the androgynous artist, Woolf creates a female character whose pleasure comes solely from herself. While many of Woolf's female characters tug at the recognized scripts of Freudian sexuality, Lily tears them wide open. Moreover, Woolf transcends the realm of the literal in her fiction, linguistically and structurally inscribing the contours of female pleasure in her work. In their non-fiction, both Woolf and McCarthy explicitly challenge masculinist notions of the possibilities available to women. In Woolf's fiction, these challenges present themselves not only through her narratives of non-conforming women, but through the very shape of her texts. The politics of such a choice is indeed a radical one; by

refusing to replicate its tropes or patterns, Woolf unmoors the very foundations of phallogentric sexuality.

Political Orgasms and Orgasmic Politics: A Conclusion

The act of creating erotic knowledge has a political, as well as aesthetic function. By recoding the diverse sexual experiences of women in defiantly unapologetic terms, both McCarthy and Woolf resist power structures that demand passive, receptive versions of femininity.

While I'm hesitant to structure this conversation in terms of a binary, I do think that one way of highlighting the significance of such acts is to briefly look at the prose of McCarthy and Woolf in the light of synchronously male-authored texts. Woolf contemporary and fellow modernist D.H. Lawrence, for example, provides a vision of female sexuality in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* that is no less political than Woolf's own, though his agenda is quite different. Lawrence posits the act of mutual, male/female orgasm, achieved via vaginal intercourse, as a powerful counter to the crippling forces of industry. Although his view of heterosexual intercourse as a reciprocal act diverges significantly from the kind of misogynist views being promoted by other male authors of the time (notably the Italian Futurists), Lawrence's reciprocity only goes so far: "I believe in being warm-hearted [...] in fucking with a warm heart. I believe if men could fuck with warm hearts, and the women take it warm-heartedly, everything would come all right," declares Mellors (207). Significantly, Mellors rather bitterly criticizes women who "just lie there like nothing and let you go ahead"; women who "pretend they're passionate [...]"

but [...] they make it up”; women who “want to be the active party [...] and bring themselves off”; women who are “just dead inside”; and finally, women who “put you out before you really come” (203). (These latter though, are “mostly the lesbian sort,” whom Mellors “could kill.”) This misogynist rant leaves a proscriptive space for what de Beauvoir calls the “true woman,” the woman who “unreservedly accepts being defined as the Other” (224). In contrast, the multiple avenues of pleasure open to Woolf’s female characters (male/female reciprocity, certainly, but also multiple versions of self-pleasure) suggest that it is up to women themselves to define both their purposes and their sources of sexual enjoyment.

Norman Mailer (a snide critic of McCarthy’s *The Group*), sees his own work in “The Time Of Her Time” as sexually revolutionary. In his preface to the piece in *Advertisements for Myself*, he writes: “There was a frontier for my generation of novelists. [...] We had to write our way out into the unspoken territories of sex” (476). The particular way in which Mailer writes himself “out into the unspoken territories of sex” here happens to rely largely on the myth of the frigid, neurotic woman who secretly longs to be degraded by a “virile” man. The story revolves around his protagonist’s attempt to “give” an orgasm to a Jewish college student with “all sorts of Lesbian hysterias in her shrieking laugh” (487). Denise does not have orgasms, which leaves him feeling, in his words, “murderous because she had deprived me, she had fled the domination which was liberty for her” (490). Increasingly enraged by her sexual “independence” (496), he eventually “succeeds” in his quest when he forces her to have anal sex and whispers in her ear “You dirty little Jew” (502). Since literature is indeed “political” (Fetterly xi), McCarthy’s critique of Lundberg and Farnham, as well as her

account of Vassar-educated Dottie's matter-of-fact first orgasm, seems even more crucial as an alternative to Mailer's phallus-driven account of how a man's sexual revenge on a female intellectual leads her to ecstasy.

As bell hooks reminds us, "We still live among generations of women who have never known sexual pleasure, women for whom sex has only ever meant loss, threat, annihilation" (86). In the face of such knowledge, it seems instructive to look to the work of women who have mapped out stories of women's erotic enjoyment, who explore a variety of sexual practices that "may range from promiscuity to celibacy, from embracing one specific sexual identity and preference or choosing a roaming uncharted desire" (hooks 92). The erotic knowledge created by Mary McCarthy and Virginia Woolf certainly calls into question the limited and static notions of female pleasure that had come to define the female experience in the work of many early to mid-twentieth century psychoanalysts and authors. When examined together, the defiance of McCarthy and the lyric protest of Woolf illuminate some of the diverse possibilities available to 20th century women writers who sought to wrench the female orgasm from the bounds of Freudian teleology. Politicized and contextualized, Dottie's orgasm becomes a critical response to Lundberg and Farnham's insistence that women are consistently defined by lack, while the clitoral pleasure of Woolf's protagonists speaks back to a linear understanding of female sexual development. The juxtaposition of these heterogeneous narratives leads ultimately to a multiplicity of models for female climax—in effect, to the toppling of the tyranny of *the* orgasm.

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