

What is a Woman and What is Feminine Jouissance in Lacan?

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Let me begin with a story: a young girl returning home from school at noon. She sits down at the kitchen table to eat the hot meal her mother has made her for lunch. Her mother sits down across from her. The mother has already had lunch with her husband, but she wants to keep her daughter company and hear her tell about her day at school. The girl begins to eat the good food her mother has prepared and answers some of her questions, but what she really hopes for from this meal is to reconnect with herself, to be able to move from the commotion of school to the silence and calm of home. So there they are, seated across from one another. Little by little, the silence grows between them. The girl is concentrating on her meal; suddenly she raises her head and sees before her a pair of terrifying eyes, emptied of anything human, staring at her, immobile, as if her mother had disappeared from this world and had left in her place the eyes of a monster who looked at her without seeing her. The little girl trembles beneath this gaze and can't lower her eyes before this vision. This scene is repeated numerous times during her childhood. She becomes an adolescent, a wife, a mother, a professional woman: the gaze always returns. And during her analysis, many years later, it will re-emerge, always accompanied by the question: "*where did my mother go when she would leave her empty gaze fixed on me?*" and she will always answer it in the following way: "*I think she went back to Auschwitz. Such a monstrosity can't be anything else but Auschwitz.*"

Having become a charming and pretty young woman, she does her military service and meets boys who are all handsome, nice, and intelligent. She is attracted to several of them and doesn't know which to choose. One of them talks about his love of dancing and invites her to accompany him to a club one evening. She accepts with enthusiasm tinged with apprehen-

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sion, knowing that she is not at ease with her body, which she feels is heavy and stiff. Nonetheless, she goes dancing with him. In the crowded club, swept along by the dark, rhythmic, deafening music, she finds herself face to face with him and begins to move. Shyly, she raises her eyes to meet his. He smiles at her all the while dancing to the beat. Bit by bit, his body relaxes and he gives himself over to the music. His eyes gently close. She can not stop looking at him, watching his face become transformed. As he disappears into the dance, the look of a baby who has just finished nursing and who falls asleep on his mother's breast appears on his face. It is as though, sated and filled with jouissance, he has lost consciousness, and he makes convulsive faces. This is how the face of the man who dances opposite her appears in her hypnotized eyes. He dances wonderfully, entirely concentrated on his dancing; he doesn't see her any longer, he doesn't see anyone, he is not connected to anyone, he is in another world. She falls in love with him and marries him. Some years later, when she is in analysis, she runs into

one of her suitors at a party from her time in the army. During the next analytic session, she recalls that period of her life and asks herself why, among all the men around her at the time, she chose the one who became her husband. She falls silent, then says: “*it was because of the way he danced, because of that hypnotizing thing about him.*” She falls silent again, then: “*he reminds me of my mother, but I don’t know in what way, exactly.*” There is another silence, then the analyst and the analysand say at the same moment: “*it was the mother’s gaze at the kitchen table over lunch.*”

In Lacanian terms, one can call this story the phallic envelope of feminine jouissance. To explain these terms, I will refer to the questions of sexuality and feminine jouissance in Lacan. Man is the subject of language, says Lacan. When he comes into the world, he is caught up in language. “*Language is there. It is something that has emerged. Now that it has emerged, we will never know when how it began, nor how things were before it came into being.*”¹ Language does not arise from the individual, it is always there, in the world, outside; it awaits the newborn. It gets in his way. When it reaches him, he is traumatized by it. Lacan believes that the fundamen-

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tal trauma is the fact of coming up against language. Language is what tears man from his animal existence and makes him come into a human existence. It forevermore cuts his natural and direct connection with being, with the world, with his body of jouissance. This connection will always be mediated by language and fashioned by the culture that goes hand in hand with it. For this reason, something of the primal existence of a human being is castrated. He is constructed as a subject around a hole, with a desire and a drive that are unconsciously linked to a very specific object which is supposed to close up that hole that has arisen within him. Lacan calls this object the “object (a).”

In a relationship, the divided subject is only ever interested in the object (a), says Lacan. He can only relate to his partner through the intermediary of the object of his desire and the object of his drive. What infuses life into the relationship of a subject with his partner is the object (a), the recognition of which, within the partner, has the effect of giving rise in the subject to a connection with his partner, such that his partner seems to him to be “his soul.” It is not the qualities of the partner as a person which determine his choice by the subject, but rather the recognition of the object (a) within him. And if that were not sufficient, even in sexual relations with the partner, the sexual pleasure (jouissance) of the subject does not correspond to what is precisely assumed in sexual intercourse: that is, the experience of mature, genital, sexual pleasure. That idea is one of the bombs thrown by Lacan, which he states in the following way: “*There is no such thing as a sexual relation.*” This formulation is first hinted at by Freud.

In order to understand this, one needs to keep in mind that, being a subject of language, the subject is forever separated from his animal being (he can no longer have direct access to the object, he must pass through language). Lacan’s thesis is that, as far as sexual relations are concerned, language has made us awkward. Being separated from our jouissance has separated us from our natural, drive-oriented *élan*. According to Lacan, the verb “baiser” (*lezayen* in Hebrew) signifies “to fuck”, but that, too, fails [to fill the lack once and for all.] It is the same in Hebrew with the verb *lidfok*, which means both “to fuck” and “to be had”. And even though we don’t have any

drive-oriented *élan*, we generally succeed in having sex and reproducing, thanks to a few conventions, prohibitions, and inhibitions that have been transmitted to us by means of the phallic function—which is a symbolic function, the only one that, in the unconscious, allows us to situate ourselves in the graph of sexualization. The phallic function occupies the place left empty in the unconscious by the “*there-is-no-such-thing-as-a-sexual-relation*.” It offers to the subject, whether a man or a woman, the ideal of his or her sex, and structures the encounter between the two sexes (the sexual encounter). It determines and structures sexual relations and maps out for the subject his or her authorized sexual jouissance.

Phallic jouissance is a jouissance which has been eroticized; consequently, it is a jouissance which one can explain in terms of sexual jouissance. The moral law transmitted to the subject entering into the phallic order is like a healing bandage. This intelligible, moral law constitutes “a user’s guide to lack” for the speaking subject in his relationship with the external world. It acts as a brake to the jouissance imperative, a moderator which tries to establish a certain harmony between the subject and the world that surrounds him. Finally, the necessity of the phallic function appears as contingent. That is to say that what is dictated by the phallic function is neither innate, nor natural, nor instinctive, but rather cultural. Our subjective encounter with this cultural dictate possesses diverse characteristics, the products of chance, linked to the circumstances of this particular encounter.

The phallic function gravitates around the phallic signifier. This is the same signifier which serves to designate our relationship to language. It is the signifier of castration, [which is itself one of the effects of language on the subject, insofar as language constructs the subject]. The detachable parts of the body can represent the loss that we then suffered, and it is in this way that the object (a) often takes on the imaginary form of a detachable bodily object, like the breast, the feces, the voice, and the gaze. The penis has a different status. It is at the same time separate and external to the body, “detachable” but is also part of the body. It can be “potent” in its presence during erection, as it can *not be*. In its manifestation during erection, it

reveals itself as a complete unit, but it is then that it “falls.” It is in its potent state that it contains fertility. It transmits the seeds of life in the act of copulation, but at the moment of the act, the presence of the penis is absent. This double meaning, which is repeated in diverse forms of presence/absence, veiled/unveiled, tumescence/detumescence, has resulted in the election and the elevation of the imaginary penis to the level of a signifier, of *the* signifier of lack, of castration: the phallus. In its symbolic status, the phallus represents castration, as well as our (phallic, yet unstable) power. Since it serves in this way, it is the phallus that represents the symbolic order. For this reason the symbolic order is also called the phallic order. The phallic order is subordinate to the phallic function. It is the phallic function which structures our conception of the world, our social order, and our sexual positioning. In the absence of an instinctual sexual orientation, of a natural inscription of the two sexes as a feminine or a masculine sexual positioning, we can, as a

result, only situate ourselves within sexuality with respect to the phallus. There is no possibility of the inscription of the two sexes without reference to the phallic function.

The subject who is anchored (“capitonné”) to the phallic order must situate himself within the differences between the sexes. The choice of positioning is not the equivalent of biological anatomy. Situating oneself on the masculine or feminine side is the result of an unconscious choice, a choice tied to unconscious messages transmitted by one’s parents and to both contingent and unconscious circumstances. Women can situate themselves on the masculine side, just as men can situate themselves on the feminine side. The choice of the masculine or feminine side means that one situates oneself differently with respect to the phallic function. That choice takes place subsequent to the oedipal conflict. Lacan refers to the oedipal conflict both derived from Freud and beyond Freud. In short, the oedipal conflict is the scene of one’s being anchored (“la scène de capitonnage”) to the phallic function, and it is the father who is responsible by introducing the law of the father, and by allowing the structuration of the castrated subject. He who, as a result of his oedipal scenario, situates himself in the masculine position, is a subject who functions entirely within the phallic

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function, that is, as a castrated subject who accepts the law of the father. Thus, he inscribes himself as a desiring subject who aspires to complete his lack with the object (a). As a man, he will seek the object (a) in his female companion. He probably thinks he has fallen in love because of her wonderful qualities, but his choice is above all the result of his recognition of signs of the presence of the object (a). As Lacan explains, one ought not to say I love you, but rather “I love in you.”²

The inscription of the masculine position renders the subject entirely anchored (“capitonné”) to convention, to the institutional, to an “everyman”. On the contrary, the inscription of the feminine position does not allow for the universal. I speak of the feminine subject as female even though it may not necessarily refer to a woman from the anatomical point of view. The person who situates herself as woman is not entirely within the phallic function. What does such a statement mean? That she, too, is situated on the side of the phallus but that she also has the choice of not being there. A woman is divided in two—she has a relation to the phallus but she has something beyond the phallus. Regarding her being beyond the phallus, Lacan situated woman as an absolute and separate category. By situating her outside, he considers that something of the phallic function escapes woman. She is situated beyond the phallus. That “beyond” refers to her absolute mystification as the absolute Other. That place where woman is situated and which escapes the phallic function is also linked to the phallic function. Woman is therefore “not all in the symbolic order.”³ Man and woman are signifiers. What they signify is related to their anatomical difference. Given that the phallus is the chosen signifier, man, being endowed with a penis, is the appropriate one to designate the model human, the subject entirely anchored to the phallic function, that is to say, the subject who is within a discourse and who is desiring. Woman, “due to her anatomical difference” from the man is more appropriate to designate the absolute Other of the phallic dialectic. A dialectic from which she slips away, but which results from that very logic. Woman therefore becomes the great Other with respect to man, but also with

respect to herself. The absolute Other (the Other's Other) is a logical supposition which can be deduced from the simple

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fact that we are caught in the symbolic order. Lack, within the symbolic order and detached from the real, necessitates the logical assumption of existence outside of the symbolic, outside of language. An existence linked to the One, to the primal real, continuous and complete. Woman, since she partially escapes the phallic order, represents this unity. Feminine jouissance is removed from the phallic order, and as such, it is outside of language.

But is it really a matter of joining the One, the absolute, the real? Lacan's response is negative. She who is situated on the feminine side can testify to the experience of another jouissance, she can reveal herself as experiencing such a jouissance, but she can't say anything about it. One cannot say anything about it except the fact that it is about a non-phallic jouissance. Lacan refers us back to Bernini's sculpture in Rome so that we can glimpse, insofar as possible, this feminine jouissance. Woman is the symptom of man, Lacan tells us, precisely because she cannot promise him the unity that he expects from her and that he hopes to reach through her. Her status as category of the absolute makes the illusion of a possible union shimmer before our eyes. The fusion of another with her would realize the One. But as Lacan tells us: "*One can only get pleasure from one part of the body of the Other, for the simple reason that one has never seen a body curl itself up, to the point of inclusion and devouring, around the body of the Other. That is the reason why we are reduced to a simple little embrace, like that, to grabbing a forearm or anything else—ouch! Getting pleasure ("jouir") has this fundamental property: that it is, in effect, the body of one who gets pleasure from a part of the body of the Other.*"⁴

The jouissance in sexual relations is in some ways always autoerotic. It is autistic, although it includes the other, since it does not unite, doesn't become One. What is clear for Lacan is the existence of a hole, of a gap, and the sole supporting structure of this gap is the object (a).⁵ This holds true for men and women. A woman is not an object (a) anymore than a man is. She herself is concerned about an object. On the one hand, she takes on the role of *semblant* and attracts a man to her by posing as the object of his desire. On the other hand,

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she herself looks for a sign of the presence of her object (a) in a man. Which is the same as saying that phallic jouissance involves both man and woman. A woman must pass through castration as much as a man. Gaining access to the phallic order is the necessary condition for situating oneself on the feminine side on the graph of sexuation. As a woman, she also has to answer to an object (a) in her phantasm as the object of her jouissance. And this jouissance is a phallic jouissance just like a man's, and that is so even if she chooses a man as her partner. As a woman with a sexual identity, she has a masculine libido as a man does. However, in addition to phallic jouissance, woman also

has access to a supplementary, feminine jouissance, beyond the phallus, a jouissance that cannot be named, nor conceptualized, nor explained.⁶

The game of love masks the existence of the hole whose sole supporting structure is the object (a). In love, we believe we can close this gap and join with the other to form One. To quote Lacan: “*It is the same, for a woman, except that what happens, but what is not obvious, is that we believe she truly says something; that’s where the plug comes into play. In order to believe in her, we believe her. We believe what she says. That’s what is called love. . . . Believing her is a fairly widespread state of mind, thank God, because at least that makes for having company. We aren’t all alone any longer. And that is the reason why love is precious...*”⁷ The meaning of this sentence is that for a woman as for a man, this illusion of union in the One is equivalent to “believing in woman,” that is, believing in what a woman signifies, believing that woman is an absolute Other, the Other’s Other, the equivalent of God and of truth.

The encounter with a partner gives birth to the illusion that sexual relations exist. The illusion lasts for a time, a time suspended, during which the subject will realize that it is a “*trompe-l’oeil*.” In his *Encore Seminar*,⁸ Lacan tells us: “*the shift of the negation from ceases to not write itself to does not cease to write itself, from contingency to necessity, that is the point of suspension to which all love attaches itself.*” That is, that the encounter conditioned by cultural dictates and chance is interpreted by the subject as a necessity in the sense that: “we were

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made for each other.” Love tends toward an image, the image of a promise of completeness, of an existence without gaps. The fact remains that we still do not have access to the Other without the object (a), which is itself the source of this hope.

A partner is “chosen,” as they say, for the way in which he or she is a whole image, an ideal. This being the case, that image is, in some way, the clothing or the cloak for the object (a). According to Lacan, the fundamental contribution of psychoanalysis is the recognition of the link that the object (a) maintains with its envelope, its cloak. The object (a) can be a traumatic object due to the fact of its link with an encounter with the real and with castration. The repetitive need to return to the object (a) is not without a connection with Freud’s repetition compulsion—the return to the traumatic real with the hope of uncovering the truth and of trying to grasp this traumatic real which is at stake, to give it a meaning. It is the phallic signifier which allows for this link between the subject and the object (a). The phallus transforms it into a desired object precisely when the object (a) is covered over by an envelope which at the same time veils and reveals it. From its origin as a traumatic object, the object (a), through the intermediary of the phallus, becomes an amalgamated and desired object. The amalgam is a variant of the object, and marvelous variant of the object transformed into the ideal. The phallus is that which maps out the path towards the ideal and which creates the sexual/erotic coloration in which the chosen partner becomes desirable since it is within him or her that the sign of the presence of an amalgamated object can be found. In other words, the phallic object is double—the traumatic object becomes an amalgam and the partner who clothes this object becomes sexual/erotic for the subject.

To summarize the preceding and before taking up once again the story with which I began in the light of the concepts presented above, I restate my question: what is a woman for Lacan? Woman is a myth and a symptom. As we have said several times, it is not a question of woman from an anatomical point of view, but of woman in her symbolic significance, as signifier. The difficulty is that we often remain stuck on the imaginary meaning of woman, and consequently, we do not

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manage to rid ourselves of the concrete image of woman in order to conceive of woman in terms of her place within a certain logic. Insofar as we are dependent upon language, resulting in the loss of our being (ex-sistence), it is logical to suppose that there must be an exception, which exists outside of language, one which would not undergo castration. It seems, then, that it would be possible to have access to an existence outside of language, outside of castration. Language is such, Lacan tells us, that we cannot help but return to this supposition of a substance impregnated with the function of being. The supposition of a here-and-now and of a beyond is the effect of language and of its structure. *"Isn't it true,"* asks Lacan, *"that language imposes upon us the idea of an ex-sistence and as such obliges us to recognize that we do not have and do not know anything about this ex-sistence."*⁹ It is precisely in relation to this point that woman is situated as signifier, and it is for this reason that she can only be a myth and a symptom. She is that which authorizes the belief in a beyond, and she is at the same time the failure of that promise. That is the reason why she is, on the one hand, elevated to the status of God and at the same time degraded and disdained. It is thus that Lacan articulates the concept in the *Sinthome*: *"it was an absolute necessity for the human race that there be an Other of the Other. That is the one we usually call God, but which analysis reveals to be, quite simply, woman."*¹⁰ Lacan takes up Freud's idea when he situates woman as being not entirely anchored in the phallic function. Freud, in fact, tells us that the threat of castration in a girl is not as strong as it is in a boy, and it is for that reason that her superego is weaker. Such a daring statement incurred the wrath of women, and particularly of feminists. Lacan takes up Freud's idea, but subverts it. For Lacan, being entirely under the regime of the phallic function is not a desirable thing, since that has as a consequence the institution of normality, universality, the bourgeoisie and the lack of specificity. By situating him or herself on the woman's side, the subject becomes more open, without being enclosed within the framework and institutional rules which block particularity. The possibility of particularity is found precisely in woman. The fault line, which imprisons the subject in the institutional framework of language, makes

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him at the same time one among others, one without any particularity, one who makes it possible to suppose the infinite existence of particularity outside of language. This is what can be logically deduced from the definition of woman. Since they are situated outside of language, outside of the group, we agree to assume that each one of them exists separately: each one with her particularity. That is why Lacan refuses to speak of Women (**The** woman/ **La** femme). He speaks of one woman and of another woman and

of another. “**Women**” (**La femme**) like **Men** (**L’homme**) is the name which contains the idea of membership of a group as an effect of language. [But, ultimately woman is not an essence, a whole being, thus Lacan writes Woman in his sexuation graph as *L_a femme*]. That is, Woman is a signifier, not an essence.

I return now to our story, hoping that after this detour through Lacan, you will have acquired a better understanding in order to decipher it in Lacanian terms. The importance of the first scene requires that I repeat it: *a young girl returns home from school at noon. She sits down at the kitchen table to eat the hot meal her mother has made her for lunch. Her mother sits down across from her. She has already had lunch with her husband, but she wants to keep her daughter company and hear her tell about her day at school. The girl begins to eat the good food her mother has prepared and answers some of her questions, but what she really hopes for from this meal is to reconnect with herself, to be able to move from the commotion of school to the silence and calm of home. So there they are, seated across from one another. Little by little, the silence grows between them. The girl is concentrating on her meal; suddenly she raises her head and sees before her a pair of terrifying eyes, emptied of anything human, staring at her, immobile, as if her mother had disappeared from this world and had left in her place the eyes of a monster who looked at her without seeing her. The little girl trembles beneath this gaze and can’t lower her eyes before this vision.*

The story begins with an ideal and satisfying maternal image, but suddenly this maternal image falls away and allows feminine jouissance to appear in all its nakedness. The mother becomes an absolute Other. There is no longer any mother.

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She disappears from the depths of her eyes, breaks off contact, entirely outside of speech, outside of any connection, beyond all communication. This little girl’s encounter with feminine jouissance is traumatic. She subsequently develops a fascination with this jouissance which paralyzes and frightens her. This scene is repeated. As a little girl, an adolescent, a young woman, she always returns to this scene. This return is accompanied by the same question: Where does my mother go? This question is an attempt to hitch traumatic feminine jouissance to a meaning. Imagining “Auschwitz” as a response was an attempt to bring her mother back from nowhere to reconnect her with her history, and by doing so, situating her as a subject. In the analysis of our young girl, many years later, something else came out: in her unconscious fantasies about Auschwitz, her mother desired the handsome Nazi officers. The little girl constructed this sexual fantasy based on certain remarks made by her mother about the “handsome Germans.” This fantasy allowed the little girl to link the traumatic feminine jouissance to a phallic meaning. Although her encounter with jouissance was an encounter with a non-phallic jouissance, the girl succeeded in situating her mother as a sexual woman who desired men. This fantasy about a mother who desires men is the very same one that will direct her later in her choice of a partner. But what determined her specific choice of a partner was precisely the point of fascination of the young girl with respect to her mother’s feminine jouissance. It is precisely at the moment when the young man withdraws into himself, cuts himself off from her with the expression of feminine jouissance on his face, that she immediately falls in love with him. The vision of the young man closing his eyes is the

specific trait that connects him with the feminine jouissance of her mother and that inspires her love. Obviously, she was not aware of that. She fell in love with a handsome man who danced magnificently. She didn't know, and it took years of analysis for her to perceive that what charmed her about this man is directly linked to the traumatic feminine jouissance in her mother. However, this jouissance was clothed in a phallic envelope. In other words, the non-phallic jouissance was transformed into the object (a) of phallic jouissance for the little girl. The phallic function

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which enables the eroticization and normalization of one's love life worked in such a way that the intolerable and traumatic nexus of jouissance became a phallicized object (a), clothed in a charming erotic and sexual mantle. It is this phallic cloak that allows the passage from the horror of the real object to the amalgamated object. This being the case, feminine jouissance had already undergone this transformation in her partner. The rigid and death-like jouissance in her mother was transformed into a dance of the body and a baby face sated with jouissance. This metamorphosis already had the effect of a phallic cloak, which facilitated the passage of the object of horror towards the amalgamated object.

Two other points are of interest in this case:

First of all, the man chosen as a partner was identified as having access to feminine jouissance, and was therefore inscribed on the feminine side of the graph of sexualization. This example allows us to observe yet again that a man, defined as such by biological anatomy, can absolutely situate himself on the feminine side, and that this, moreover, does not make him homosexual.

Furthermore, and in conclusion, the object (a)—the object of phallic jouissance, which itself must be cloaked by the partner's charm and his eroticized and sexualized image—in this specific case, has cloaked feminine jouissance. We therefore have here a double cloaking: traumatic feminine jouissance has been covered over and phallicized by the object (a) which itself was cloaked by the charming dancer.

Endnotes

¹ Jacques Lacan, *Des Noms-du-Père*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 2005, p. 27. [This is a recent publication in the series « Champ Freudien, Pardoxes de Lacan ». It brings together two lectures, from July 8, 1953 and from Nov. 20, 1963. The second lecture is the only lesson from the seminar “Les Noms-du-père” which was interrupted by Lacan's losing his qualifications as “didacticien”.]

² Jacques Lacan, *Seminaire XI, Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1973, p. 299. “But I point it out to you...stressing that the one in analysis says, in effect, to his partner, to the analyst—I love you, but because inexplicably I love in you something more than you—the object (a), I mutilate you.” [trans. by Jane Cowles]

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³ Although the Lacanian notion of “pas toute” is often translated as “not whole,” it is probably more accurate to translate it as “not all” [Trans. note].

⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire XX, Encore*, trans. Bruce Fink, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1974, p. 26.

⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire R.S.I.*, unpublished, lesson of January 21, 1975.

⁶ But Lacan does refer to multiple orgasms as well. [Ed. note]

⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire R.S.I.*, unpublished, lesson from January 21, 1975, p.66.

⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire XX, Encore*, trans. Bruce Fink, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Paris :, Éditions du Seuil, 1975, p. 132.

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire XX, Encore*, trans. Bruce Fink, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1975, p. 44.

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire XXIII, Le Sinthome*, ed, Jacques-Alain Miller, Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 2005, p. 128