Disobedient members

Impotence is "life's greatest tragedy and life's greatest joke," says Angus McLaren. And now, in addition to encompassing comedy and tragedy, this all-too-human failing has its own history — and one that I found thoroughly enthralling.

Appropriately, Impotence's broad compass of Western history includes scenes theatrical-historical, comic-historical and even — using pastoral in its spiritual sense — pastoral-comical-historical-pastoral. For medieval churchmen, impotence posed theological problems, while ecclesiastical courts struggled with the practical problems of those claiming impotence, either their own or their husbands', to escape unwanted marriages. St Thomas Aquinas believed marriage was for procreation, procreation required coitus and unconsummated marri...
his virility and potency", but he "remain[ed] without assurance, be he so potent, wouldn't worry about performing under such circumstances? Once the thought of failure arises, nothing else does rise.

Not surprisingly, the subtext throughout this book is the word anxiety. "Why impotence?", McLaren asks on his opening page. During earlier research on fertility control, the author found many descriptions of remedies for men "to inflame their lusts and assure their fecundity" in the face of sexual failure. The resulting book is a superb history of ideas, attitudes and treatments for male sexual failure, ancient and modern. There are obligatory references to "masculinities" and "gender boundaries", but rather than the theory it is the manifold stories that impress.

The conclusion may talk of masculinity being "a far more subtle and malleable ideology than many suppose", but the overwhelming impression is rather of "a preoccupation that in some ways has remained a constant" — a constant founded in human anxiety, human vulnerability and human credibility. The details are historically contingent, and temporally and geographically variable, but the forces underlying men's fear of impotence are remarkably fixed.

Impotence's fundamental joke is described throughout history, with McLaren giving accounts from Petronius and Juvenal, through Boswell and Sterndale, to George Bernard Shaw, who recorded his sexual performances as (0), (1) or (2), the quasi-oval (0) elegantly indicating a null outcome despite perceived possibility. Just as every great writer seems to have suffered from impotence, Baudelaire claims: "The more a man cultivates the arts, the fewer erections he has." There surely is an epidemiological study whose consumption is devoutly to be wished.

The tragedy of impotence is its unpredictability and its intractability. Ovid describes how despite being "with the girl that I'd so often dreamed about! Yet I lay with her limp as if I loved not." The joke comes later, when "notwithstanding, like one dead it lay! Now, when he should not be, he's bolt upright." The implication of "he" having an independent mind, later became St Augustine's "autonomy of the penis" — confirmation of man's fall from grace, for prelapsarian Adam could control all his organs. For

"Examination of the Parties: 13th-century Flemish Illumination of Gratian's *Decretum* depicting a canonical court's determination of a husband's impotence"

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