

Transversal: International Journal for the Historiography of Science, 2024 (16): 1-14
ISSN 2526-2270
Belo Horizonte – MG / Brazil
© The Author 2024 – This is an open-access journal

Special Issue *Scientia Sexualis* and Historiography of Sexuality

“The Solitary Vice”: Masturbation in Álvaro Vieira’s Medical Column (Brazil, 1952-1972)

Arthur Marinho S. Vargas¹ [<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0430-3194>]

Abstract:

Abstract: This article analyzes Brazilian doctor Álvaro Vieira’s understanding of the problem of masturbation. More than just for his profession, Vieira was known for his column in the Rio de Janeiro newspaper *O Jornal*, clarifying his readers’ doubts and questions, acting, in reality, as a cultural mediator. When dealing with the subject of masturbation, we can see that he was committed to addressing what he considered to be mystifications, prejudices and remnants of ignorance about the practice, proposing it as something normal and natural under certain circumstances. However, in his interpretation, even though he sought to distance himself from the foundations of onanism, the way masturbation has been pathologized since the 18th century, in his speeches this same pathologization is still present in some way, making his thinking more complex and less linear in the history of this sexual activity.

Keywords: History of Sexuality; History of Masturbation; Onanism; Cultural Mediation; Álvaro Vieira

Received: February 14, 2024. Reviewed: May 26, 2024. Accepted: June 5, 2024.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.24117/2526-2270.2024.i16.06>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

1

Introduction

A reader from Friburgo writes to Álvaro Vieira. He is a doctor from Paraisópolis, Minas Gerais, specialized in physiology, who died in 1990 at the age of 83, responsible for the medical column of the Rio de Janeiro newspaper *O Jornal* (which he joined in 1938) and also head of the medical office of Assis Chateaubriand’s *Diários Associados*, where he worked for more than 50 years. He also worked for the *Diário da Noite*, *Cruzeiro*, *Jornal do Commercio*, *Rádio Tupi* and *TV Tupi* (*Jornal do Commercio* 12/05/1990). His work as a clinician is not important here. We are primarily interested in his work as a columnist for *O Jornal*. Therefore, let us go back to our reader. She, as I was saying, is faced with a “rather embarrassing question” from her son (she doesn’t say which one), a pupil at a priests’ school. The boy is committing “grave

¹ Arthur Marinho S. Vargas is a Ph.D. student at Federal University of Minas Gerais. address: Av. Pres. Antônio Carlos, 6627 - Pampulha, Belo Horizonte - MG, 31270-901. Email: arthurmsvargas@gmail.com

mortal sins under the watch of God”, as he learned there. In other words, he masturbates without being able to stop himself. The mother, unable to “give the right advice, for lack of knowledge of the subject”, asks the doctor for help (*O Jornal* 05/02/1963). This is what we see in this 1963 edition of *O Jornal*, more specifically in the column “Medicine for everyone”. The name is significant. As is the topic that motivated the zealous mother to write. It is the recognition of knowledge in the public sphere and the pertinence of making an intimate subject the object of interference by the figure endowed with that same knowledge.

Published in this Rio de Janeiro periodical between the 1950s and 1970s, “*Medicina para todos*” (“Medicine for everyone”) was a project by the doctor from Minas Gerais to make issues related to the subject accessible to a wider audience, covering the most diverse topics. However, of those dealt within the paper, those of a sexual nature stand out without a shadow of a doubt: the bulk of the missives he receives, he says, are from “disturbed people in the sexual sphere”, which gives him the opportunity to defend the existence, in higher education courses, of a compulsory course on sexuality (*O Jornal* 10/09/1952). And even in this large figure, the subject of masturbation is almost obligatory: answering a question from a “reader for several years”, he says, hyperbolically, that he has focused on the subject of “self-satisfaction” “thousands of times” (*O Jornal* 06/18/1957). Vieira is aware of the importance of his role and knows that it was the topic of sexuality that ended up making him known to the public as a columnist. Taking stock of his work in 1972, in an interview with Andréia Lima, he said that he dealt with all sorts of people: doctors, teachers, lawyers, “even the humblest sections of the population, which can be seen in the handwriting of some of his letters”. He received more than twenty thousand of them and was considering publishing them as a book. His mission was one: “to reach as many readers as possible who can benefit from the problems of others” (*O Jornal* 05/17/1972).

We can classify Álvaro Vieira as an intellectual along the lines of Jean François Sirinelli. Given its polysemic nature, the author offers us two definitions of the term: phenomena.

one broad and sociocultural, encompassing creators and cultural “mediators”, the other narrower, based on the notion of engagement. The former includes journalists and writers, secondary school teachers and scholars. On the steps leading up to this first set are some students, potential creators or “mediators”, as well as other categories of “receivers” of culture.

The other definition, on the other hand, is “narrower and based on the notion of engagement in the city’s life as an actor – but in specific ways, such as signing manifestos –, witness or conscience”. But, according to Sirinelli, one category is not autonomous from the other (2003, 242-243). In other words, Álvaro Vieira is an intellectual according to both definitions: one because of his role in conveying medical-psychological theories to a wider public, in short, as a cultural mediator; the other because of his interest in conditioning the public debate on sexuality and intervening in the lives of Brazilian citizens in a positive way, so that they have a relationship with this aspect of their existence that is less riddled with prejudice and superstition. This model of intellectual is very similar to the one proposed by Ângela de Castro Gomes and Patrícia Santos Hansen, i.e. “men who produce knowledge and communicate ideas, directly or indirectly linked to political and social intervention” (2016, 10).

In the role of intellectual mediator, the object of Gomes and Hansen’s interest, Vieira is not just a mere transmitter of knowledge, a simple vulgarizer. He creates new meanings for the knowledge he sets out to work with, leaves his mark, his own conceptions. In short, he creates something new: “the intellectual who acts as a cultural mediator produces himself new meanings by appropriating texts, ideas and knowledge that are recognized as pre-existing. With these other meanings inscribed in his production, what the intellectual has ‘mediated’ effectively becomes ‘another product’: a singular cultural good” (Idem, 18). Continuing, the authors say that

Such intellectuals would be those focused on the construction of representations that have a major impact on a society, being strategic in understanding how a series of new meanings are generated from the reception of cultural goods; how such goods move between varied social groups; how the sphere of culture effectively communicates with the social sphere. (Ibidem, 26)

The doctor from Minas Gerais, in this type of work, is part of a more general movement that took place in the Brazilian intellectual and journalistic scene in the 1940s and 1950s, in which a series of actors, from different socio-professional backgrounds, saw themselves as cultural mediators of different medical-psychological theories (Cerqueira 2019).

The process of cultural mediation suggested by Álvaro Vieira opens up space for active participation by the public, insofar as the subjects covered in his column are motivated by the issues raised by the public. However, it should be noted that their participation is conditioned by a selection process, typical of the periodical press in general (Luca 2006, 106), both regarding how letters were chosen to be covered and in the way their content is presented in the text.

When talking about sexuality in general and masturbation in particular, Vieira draws on the knowledge he has accumulated in his daily work as a clinician and columnist, as well as from his reading on the subject. His proposal is to go beyond what is commonly said about what he euphemistically calls “solitary vice” or “self-satisfaction”. In short, to go beyond the principles of onanism, a term he does not use. Masturbation, to summarize what I will discuss more extensively below, has become the object of special concern in normative discourses on the body and sexuality since the 18th century, both because of the pathological effects it was considered to have on the flesh of the so-called onanist, and because of the social problems caused by its frequency. As the 20th century progressed, we came across a change in conceptions about this sexual practice, placing it within a discourse, largely supported by psychoanalysis, which considered masturbation to be part of the individual’s psychosocial development and which, at some point, had to be overcome. Álvaro Vieira’s speeches, answering his readers’ questions, are set in the middle ground between these two models of understanding.

Thus, we can move on to the kind of questions that this text sets out to answer: how does the problem of masturbation appear in Álvaro Vieira’s column? By the problem of masturbation, I mean the inscription or exclusion of this practice within a sexual normality (or even a sexual pathology), the constitution of the practitioner’s body and sexuality as objects of knowledge and the effects of power over them, with a view to the relationship that the individual should have with themselves, their body and their pleasure. What kind of intellectual influences underlie the columnist’s understanding of the issue? What is new in his way of understanding it? And how is the pathologization of masturbation by the principles of onanism, which I will discuss below and which Vieira initially tries to reject, still presents itself in his considerations?

To study Álvaro Vieira’s column and his positions on the problem of masturbation is to take a look at the long history of the practice. Vieira is the representative of a moment in this trajectory and understanding his opinions is of the utmost importance if we are to understand how producers and purveyors of knowledge about sexuality sought to move away from the assumptions of the onanism model, dominant in this sphere for more than two hundred years, allowing masturbation to be thought of in a less restrictive way.

Divergences

In 1955, with the aim of countering Álvaro Vieira’s heterodox opinions on the subject, a doctor from the south of Brazil wrote a letter to his colleague in which he defended



continence as the safest method to guard against the terrible and inevitable consequences of masturbation, especially since continence causes “no inconvenience to men’s health”. This missive was published in its entirety in Vieira’s column, maintaining, as usual, the anonymity of the sender. The judgments made about the practice are, for us, of considerable importance due to their representativeness. The “solitary vice”, said Dr. JM, is the first to which adolescents apply when they leave puberty. They prematurely and unnaturally excite a sense that they should guard. They seek a “detestable and criminal pleasure, and foolishly expose themselves to the worst disorders, physical and moral depredation, diathesis diseases and death”, the result, after all, of using a genital function that is not yet theirs to exercise. It is a universal vice, he points out, such is its incidence at all ages and in all places, “no matter how disgusting it is”, but it has a greater affinity with adolescence. Masturbation manifests itself in many ways, not only according to age but also according to temperament. It is not always a crime, it should be emphasized: “In many cases, it is a manifest vice, an attack on nature; in others it is a nervous tic, a real disease; sometimes it is an obscure and ill-defined compound of crime and neurosis. The result is that responsibility is variable, sometimes complete, sometimes relative and slight, or even nil”. What there is, above all, is its unnatural character, repeatedly highlighted in these lines, given that it makes use of organs that are not yet fully developed, needlessly violating continence, with dire consequences for health, which we can verify by the functioning of its mechanism (*O Jornal*, 09/23/1955).

Acting on the brain, it determines a motor reaction that is summed up in the “venereal spasm”. Alongside the uncontrollable *jouissance*, we have “an action and reaction of a cerebral-spinal order that surpasses any maneuver”. A shameful and frivolous act is, at the end of the day, also a dangerous act because of what it does to the nervous system: it shakes it and by repeating this shaking, it alters and unbalances it. “Its final result is to exhaust the nerves, or in other words, to ruin the vital force and thus prepare the ground for diathesis and particularly tuberculosis”, since the organism, weakened, becomes inert to the “invading army of microbes”. The final result of this process is, of course, death. Rare death, true, but also true is the terrible procession of suffering that affects the masturbator, compromising him physically and morally:

It’s not just headaches, neuralgia, pain, nervous weakness, abulia that torture them; it’s neurasthenia with all its miseries: it’s hysteria, it’s madness. And often suicide. They are useless, they no longer have the ability to apply themselves, the taste for work; they get bored, waste their time, look everywhere for distraction and pleasure, and often fall into unspeakable excesses. Marriage doesn’t attract them; they don’t get out of masturbation except to plunge into other vices that are against nature.

All remedies fail if they are not preceded by just one: the will. In the end, the doctor seems to regret that there is no cure for such a great evil in the laws of men, in opposition to the order of nature and the designs of morality: “Contrary to natural law, the solitary vice is also contrary to moral law; it prostitutes the genital function, shamefully abuses the sense, sacrifices all duties to a inferior passion. And yet the civil law does not affect it” (*O Jornal*, 09/24/1955).

We can see from the analysis of Dr. JM’s text that masturbation is a harmful practice because it doubly violates the order of the world: nature and morality. Or rather, nature punishes the breaking of the moral rule. His campaign is not words in a vacuum. He is not inaugurating it. In fact, he is still a representative of a model of perception of masturbation that has its origins more than two centuries earlier, at the dawn of the 18th century, despite its transformations. This was a time when Western medicine had the honor of discovering and cataloguing a new pathology: onanism. If masturbation had previously been part of the Christian compendium of sins of the flesh or was repressed for violating the procreative

principle (Katz 1995, 48-49), just in the Century of Reason, the world was faced with a new way of understanding the practice, now in a considerably secularized way, a movement in which medicine took the place of religious groups as those capable of dictating what is right and wrong, what is, in short, moral, from a predominantly natural, materialistic perspective (Laqueur 2004, 13, 18, 186), although it is possible, as Michel Foucault did, to trace the genealogy of onanism back to the development of the Christian pastoral care of the flesh (2010a pp. 161). Named after a biblical passage², the new disease, announced in a book called “Onania”, a work by an anonymous Englishman published in the early years of the 18th century, stands out as a specific problem, which distinguishes it from the set of sexual practices and other peripheral sexualities. From a Fleckian perspective, let’s call this model as “onanistic style of thought”³. This is characterized by three elements: (i) the fact that it looks at masturbation as a diffuse pathology, as something entirely deleterious, with profound and extremely damaging influences on the body and spirit of the practitioner; a pathology that can be explained by incorporating different types of knowledge, according to the development of medicine and its specialties (for example, biochemistry or the science of metabolism (Laqueur 2004, 51-59)), which gives it a kind of versatility over the years, not limited to the arguments that inaugurated it, more in line with the knowledge of the 18th century; (ii) because it was a disease with social implications since its problems were not restricted to the masturbator himself and (iii) because it demanded a series of technologies capable of combating the effects and advance of the practice, for the sake of health, morality and society. This was the dominant way of looking at the issue in the Western medical world for more than two hundred years, giving rise not only to the construction of certain types of knowledge, creating a whole body of literature on the subject, but also to the emergence of a veritable anti-masturbation crusade that would reach its peak until the beginning of the 20th century.

What distinguishes onanism as such? As a pathology, Michel Foucault shows us, it is characterized by a double quality: a “total disease”, it is the depository of the effects of all known illnesses, and it also has the capacity to be referred to as the origin of any other that, in the future, devastates the masturbator’s body; the latter, devastated by this procession of morbidities, could find the end of his existence as the end of his suffering (2010a, 205-206). The causes of such serious effects lie either in the waste of semen (Corbin 2006, 453-454), so vital for the body’s vigor, or in the exhaustion of the brain’s nerves and fibers, stimulated by an exercise with no real counterpart and no ability to replenish the fluids expended there (Laqueur 2004, 206-208), as in the case of Dr. JM’s text mentioned here. This is the price paid, said the anti-masturbatory crusaders, according to Thomas W. Laqueur, for violating the social order – nature punishes those who deviate from it (Idem, 40-41). If in the 1700s onanism was a pathology, in the following century, with the development of the Scientia

² In Genesis 38:8-10, Onan is struck down by God for dissipating his semen outside the vagina of his wife, who was previously his sister-in-law, because, having departed from the divine precept, which laid down a series of obligations for the brother-in-law, he didn’t want to impregnate his brother’s widow, since the offspring would not be his, but the latter’s.

³ A thinking style can be understood “as directed perception in conjunction with corresponding processing on the mental and objective plane. This style is marked by common characteristics of the problems that interest a collective of thought; of the judgments that it considers to be self-evident and of the methods that it applies as means of knowledge. It is eventually accompanied by a technical and literary style of the system of knowledge” [emphasis in original]. In short, it is a type of perception and articulation of problem-solving that is carried out in a certain way and not in another, encapsulated by what Fleck calls a collective of thought, that is, “the community of people who exchange thoughts or find themselves in a situation of reciprocal influence of thoughts, we have, in each of these people, a bearer of the historical development of an area of thought, of a certain state of knowledge and of culture, that is, a specific style of thought” [emphasis in original] (2010, 149, 82).

Sexualis, it also came to be seen as a deviation of the sexual instinct – a new concept inaugurated there – as, in short, an abnormal practice (Foucault 2010a, 243-245).

In addition, the 18th century was also responsible for creating another relevant aspect of the modern history of masturbation: its intrinsic link with the sexuality of children and adolescents. These are the main characters in this intimate and public drama, which is of special interest to the adult world. Hence the organization of whole technology, of power effects aimed at maximizing control over their bodies, their gestures, their company, their thoughts, over their entire lives in the smallest details, in short, so that the family, the school, medicine are themselves responsible for guaranteeing the health and vitality of these individuals against a practice that is so nefarious, so terrible, so insidiously deleterious (Foucault 2010a, 217-218; Laqueur 2004, 52-53, 56; Conceição 2015, 116-119).

And why, one wonders, is there such a pressing concern with the sexuality of children and adolescents, with their masturbatory practices? Without forgetting Laqueur’s contribution, which I think is entirely plausible, I also have to agree with Foucault’s theses. Before going any further, it is necessary to clarify the fundamental divergence between the two authors. For the French thinker, the problem of masturbation is part of a process of disputes over sex, a political and economic problem that emerged in the Western world from the 18th century onwards. The body of the child and adolescent emerges as one of these fields of dispute, which is why it needs to be managed. The “masturbating child” is part of what he classifies as “specific devices of knowledge and power regarding sex”, particularly what he calls the “device of sexuality”. Its *raison d’être* is not simply to reproduce, but to build up ever deeper knowledge about people’s bodies in order to better control them. As a result, we have the production of discourses on peripheral, non-normative sexualities, so that these subjects are classified and increasingly managed and watched (2020, 42-54, 113-116). The anti-masturbation crusade had a considerable interest in the masturbator’s body because it was the “seed of future populations” (Foucault 2019, 348). Controlling their sexuality would, therefore, be a disciplinary and biopolitical investment (2010b, 211-213). Laqueur, on the other hand, is somewhat skeptical of Foucault’s assertion that power generates new forms of desire in order to better manage them later, based on specific technologies of power in the case of masturbation. This is because the history of the modern self, he tells us, is part of another larger history, the joint march between commercial and civil culture. Laqueur does not deny the idea that truths about the body have been invented, that new discursive forms have formed types of perversion, such as the figure of the masturbator. However, the anxiety surrounding masturbation takes a different path from the other paradigms of disciplinization the sexual body, according to Foucault, such as the hysterization of women, the socialization of procreative behaviour and the psychiatrization of perverse pleasure, such as homosexuality. The anxiety surrounding masturbation, he explains, is older, almost a century older than the date on which Foucault delimits the emergence of these new biopolitical technologies, these technologies aimed at the calculated management of the lives of individuals and populations. The problem of masturbation predates the creation of “sexuality”. It would then have its origin in an ethical issue, in the erroneous exercise of values so dear to the capitalist society that emerged in the 18th century – imagination, desire, individualism and privacy – perverted into themes such as solitude and addiction, a threat to the norms of sociability and moral self-governance (2004, 273-274, 278-280, 339). As I said, I believe it is possible to incorporate both approaches into one analysis.

Despite its mutations, such as the incorporation of the thesis of degeneracy or the discoveries of medicine and biochemistry (Laqueur 2004, 51-52), the fabulation of onanism suffered an immense shock with the constitution of new knowledge about sexuality, such as sexology and psychoanalysis, dissociating masturbation from a pathology. For Freud, masturbation is a fundamental and natural expression of human sexuality, perfectly appropriate for the natural stages of a person’s development. Abandoning it is a necessary

step towards becoming a functional adult. According to Laqueur, “It was the site of the great struggles through which sexuality was channeled by civilization; and conversely, failure to manage it became the prototype for all other sorts of failure”. In short, what was once ethically suspect and, within medical thinking, pernicious, with Freud became an arena for “normative psychogenesis”. It is a stage that must be overcome. Adolescence, from this perspective, can be seen as a point between the autoeroticism of childhood sexuality and adult sexuality. Continuing to masturbate after this stage is a kind of “rebellion” against the norms of the 20th century. The influence of Freud’s perception of sexuality and his belief in the existence of development would go far beyond the discipline itself (Idem, 71-74). This is what will be seen in this text.

I won’t go any further into this story because it is precisely at this point that the debate raised on the subject in Álvaro Vieira’s column takes place, that is, at the intersection of the fable of onanism with the idea of masturbation as a transitory sexual practice within a normative framework. In fact, the vocabulary of psychoanalysis presents itself in many ways in Vieira’s texts, and it is psychoanalysis that will shape the contours of his interpretation of this development process, even though it is marked by its own characteristics. First of all, it is necessary to dissociate oneself from onanism as a way of interpreting masturbation: against the opinions defended by the medical reader from the south, his colleague from *O Jornal* assured that “This crude talk full of phantasmagorical shadows is much more harmful to youth than the act itself, without this psychic preparation for morbidity, we only say” (*O Jornal* 07/12/1955). The result of all this, he asserts, is the appearance of “future restrictive complexes, serious, difficult for psychiatrists to eliminate” (*O Jornal* 04/11/1953). “All modern studies”, he assures us:

have shown unequivocally that it is not “physiological” masturbation that leads to various illnesses, particularly nervous ones. On the contrary, the restrictions imposed by the old taboos, the assertions with no scientific basis that this attitude leads to the grave or to madness, create in people conditions of the most complicated sexual neuroses, due to the feeling of guilt about something entirely natural and routine in life. (*O Jornal* 09/25/1955)

For him, this is not the point of the debate on this sexual practice. For Vieira, the awareness that there is libido in all human beings, governing their desires and determining their demands, is what explains masturbation. In his texts, it appears as a force of diffuse origin and also of a physiological nature, more specifically glandular, depending on the moment. Firstly, it is, in any case, inherent: “The manifestations of the sexual instinct (libido) are unavoidable, which is why it is a force of the same origin as the conservation of the individual, food” (*O Jornal* 10/21/1956). Years later, Vieira explained that libido “is the reproductive force that leads to sexual intercourse, to perpetuate the species on earth”, and therefore has a “respectable purpose” (*O Jornal* 04/08/1972). It goes through stages, which determines the specific character of the satisfaction at each stage of its manifestation, which is why it is sometimes independent of a strictly sexual component. This is why the nature of children’s libido is different from that of adolescents, because, as the doctor states, “Thus, the child has their libido according to organic evolution; the boy already has another type, the adolescent another and the adult another”, so that, even in very young beings, it manifests itself as an instinct of satisfaction without necessarily having its sexual and glandular component present (*O Jornal*, 05/04/1968). In adolescents, it does occur in an unmistakably glandular way, although Vieira had previously extended its hormonal nature to all stages. In this case, masturbation would be strictly physiological. Masturbation, the columnist tells us, is normal and physiological in adolescence, pre-adolescence and even childhood. “Therefore, we could say without support from anyone else, just from our observations and conclusions, that the subject is universally the same, independent [sic] of religion, politics, climate, race, etc. entirely subordinated to glandular physiology” (*O Jornal*

03/18/1959). Years later, he distinguished the difference in masturbation between children and adolescents: for the former, the sexual component is often absent, depending more on external factors (phimosis, worms, etc.); for the latter, it is normal and purely sexual (*O Jornal* 03/17/1968). Because the libido is a biological requirement (despite that sexually indifferent minority), the individual’s will is considerably reduced, which, for Vieira, undermines any attempt to promote an ideal of absolute sexual abstinence. To deny the power of instinct is to go against nature. What is possible, on the other hand, is continence, which means a moderate and temperate use of sexual exercise (*O Jornal* 06/10/1955; 07/08/1955).

Masturbation thus appears to us as part of a long evolution process of the libido, which will culminate in a relationship with another person. It is, therefore, “fleeting, it exists at a time and must disappear, be replaced by the normal function” (*O Jornal* 03/11/1970). Its absence, at this stage, is the mark of an “organism that is poor in its endocrine system” (*O Jornal* 27/06/1968). He even goes further, saying that anyone who moves away from this obligatory stage is “wrong”, an “abnormal”, “pathological”, “a sexual weakling, of intermediate endocrinology” (*O Jornal* 04/11/1953). Álvaro Vieira estimates that this stage will affect 98% of men and 75% of women (*O Jornal* 08/11/1956). Because it is inevitable, since it is part of a common evolutionary process, absent only in those with glandular deficiency, masturbation is not a vice of Brazilian adolescence, but is a normal practice in the youth of all countries. In other words, its normality lies precisely in its universality (*O Jornal* 04/11/1953). In this configuration, it has a specific function, which Vieira will explain in a more complex way from the 1960s onwards. It guarantees, for example, the growth of the organ in men (*O Jornal* 12/12/1968). Above all, “masturbation is a necessity imposed by two orders of factors: one phylogenetic, ancestral; the other, glandular, current” (07/10/1969). Therefore, the practice is both a preparation for what Vieira will call normal function, sort of a school for the correct exercise of sexuality in its corresponding period (it awakens the individual’s attention to “the great problem of reproduction” (*O Jornal* 12/22/1970)), and the satisfaction of a pressing desire that can only be achieved in this way because it is the one possible for a given period of life.

Convergences

To say that masturbation is normal and natural at a certain moment is to imply that it can be abnormal and unnatural when not understood as a transitory attitude or restricted to childhood and adolescence. It is in these circumstances that some of the basic elements of the onanistic edifice become apparent in Vieira’s appraisal of the now fully-fledged “solitary vice”, seen as such because of the problems it carries when practiced outside the period and circumstances that the columnist believes are proper to it. If, in general, the doctor tries to move away from the main points that support the fabrication of onanism, particularly the belief that masturbation is inherently pathological or intrinsically unnatural, there are elements in it that survive in a vestigial way, because, as Ludwik Fleck pointed out, “in every style of thought there are always traces of the descent of many elements of evolutionary history” (2010 pp. 150). There are four aspects that keep alive the closeness of the style of thought of which Álvaro Vieira is a representative (masturbation as normal and natural if transitory and under certain conditions) to that which was dominant about the practice for over two hundred years. These are the idea that masturbation can be an addiction, that it is an erroneous exercise of the faculty of imagination, that it has consequences for the individual’s body and psyche and the belief that there are possible technologies for controlling the practice of masturbation.

1. *Vice*. For Álvaro Vieira, “perfect sexual fulfillment” rests on the combination of libido, erection and orgasm. Solitary addiction departs from this ideal configuration because it achieves orgasm without libido and also without erection (*O Jornal*, 10/09/1952). Addiction can be conceptualized as “the pre-established search for pleasure, without the requests of

nature”. Addiction is pernicious because it “distorts the elevated conception of the sexual sense” (*O Jornal* 09/09/1956). It is also considered a vice because it is “humiliating” for those who practice it (*O Jornal* 01/27/1952). It is also characterized by being done in a “hidden” (*O Jornal* 27/01/1952) and “individualizing” way (*O Jornal* 06/10/1955). The problem with the masturbator, the columnist tells us, is that, unlike alcohol and narcotics, he takes his “drug” with him (*O Jornal* 06/29/1972). As Laqueur shows, it was an inherently private and secret vice, without the need for partners, without witnesses and without social regulations or community disapproval, because, after all, far from the knowledge of others, masturbation was a terrible practice not only because it was private or solitary, but because it was the negative double of the ideal of privacy and autonomy so valued by modernity (2004, 231-233). It is this nefarious character of masturbation, its capacity for full, autonomous and ungovernable realization, that makes it so nefarious for Vieira because it is now carried out outside of strictly natural, physiological limits, which means outside of age and the corresponding conditions. Since it needs to be sublimated, as he goes on to say (*O Jornal* 12/21/1952), maintaining it as a common sexual practice places it within the realm of abnormality. A step backwards in the evolution of the libido, it is an “unnatural, perverted, prostituted act, without any ethical sense within the evolutionary conception” (*O Jornal* 09/09/1958). Those who continue to masturbate even after they have grown up “become an automaton, a dominated person, taking a detrimental step backwards in their function” (*O Jornal* 01/28/1954). As a consequence, the masturbator becomes “incapable of normal function or, rather, does not feel normality because he has become attached to addiction” (*O Jornal* 03/11/1970).

But there is one caveat. This evolutionary scheme is best applied only to men. The double sexual morality that was current at the time, the power relations between men and women that determined a type of hierarchical and relational configuration between the genders (Bassanezi 1996), made the exercise of sexuality different for one and the other. Thus, the need to overcome masturbation is stricter for them because, when the time comes, they have easier access to prostitutes. Women are more bound by moral laws and, therefore, theoretically cannot have any pre-marital contact, which justifies self-satisfaction as the “only logical and relieving way out”. For men, the problem is different since once they pass the “masturbatory phase” and reach adulthood, there is no reason to continue the practice. “Some authors call it an act of prostitution because if a man has the freedom to meet free women and doesn’t do it, it’s accepted that it’s out of the economy, so as not to spend money”. For this reason, “While the woman is free of these burdens on her conscience, the man who has reached maturity is shackled by various factors to normal conduct and cannot descend the steps he has already walked or climbed” (*O Jornal* 09/09/1958). For an adult man, as he states in his column, this time published by the *Jornal do Comércio*, in Amazonas, resorting to masturbation is only justified in very specific cases, such as for those detained, hospitalized for long illnesses, in prison and who are not married or who live in the countryside, without access to brothels (*Jornal do Comércio* 06/29/1972).

The columnist attests that:

In the organization of the Brazilian family, once a man has become a young adult, he has complete freedom to practice his sexual life, even without paternal restrictions. Is it the same for women? No, although she is made of the same biological material as the man, so she has the same ancestral (phylogenetic) forces making demands of her, the same glandular forces throbbing in her veins, but without social permission to practice sexual impositions with freedom. She is watched by society and much more by her parents. (*O Jornal* 12/22/1970)

This is why Álvaro Vieira is more condescending towards women who masturbate, a pragmatism that has its origins in circumstances: “And since women don’t have ostensible

rights to sexual freedom, all that’s left is masturbation as an escape valve for nervous tension, for understanding schoolwork, for sleepless nights, for unmotivated irritation”. Understanding the problem through this prism will make those who are more intolerant of masturbation see it as an obligatory passage for both sexes (*O Jornal* 12/23/1970). Within a problematic marital relationship, for example, when there is no alternative to the demands of the body, masturbation is the option that least harms the “morals of the couple”, because it would avoid a greater evil, adultery (*O Jornal* 01/27/1952). In any case, it is this same social and moral configuration, which seeks to preserve women’s sexuality, that must sometimes be taken into account in the masturbatory act itself. That’s why he recommends that girls don’t practice self-satisfaction with objects “to avoid future consequences, since our family is still organized according to old patterns” (*O Jornal* 07/10/1969).

2. *Incorrect use of the faculty of imagination.* One of the problems linked to masturbation, apart from its secretive nature in a world that prized transparency and its propensity for excess, which had no similarity to any other sexual act, was its lack of connection with reality, since it was “the creature of the imagination” (Laqueur 2004, 21). This topic appears clearly in Álvaro Vieira’s condemnation of the recurrence of the practice in functional adults, but he adapts it to the Freudian vulgate, when he states, for example, that “Addiction distances the libidinous image; self-satisfaction dulls the libido, resulting in a lack of correspondence with the sexual object, which becomes meaningless to the addict. Thus, his attempts will be crowned with failure” (10/09/1952).

This use of sexual imagery is central to Vieira’s thinking about normal sexuality. He speaks of a male perspective in which the satisfaction of desire in a heterosexual relationship is possible and viable and is hierarchically superior to peripheral sexualities. The “solitary addiction”, he explains, means that the female image is no longer the sought-after element; the individual begins to feel satisfaction with himself, introverting, equivalent to a homosexual” (04/08/1955). The woman, in this case, inspires nothing in the man and “the normal sexual act has as much significance for them [the addicts] as the presence of a car on the street” (06/03/1955). Masturbation is an ethical problem here, because it antagonizes what that society values about the use of the imagination, since the practice depletes it, resorting to it incorrectly, since it is dissociated from what is real and, if possible, palpable, as well as the ability to relate to someone else, which means normal sexuality. All these truths, which are ethical and moral assessments, have their reality precisely in the fact that they are based on nature. Thus, Vieira, condemning masturbating creatures, guarantees that “they have exchanged the sexual act, which is physiological, of mutual attractions, of identical desires for joint affirmation, of emotional harmonization, for pleasure without an object, without an image, for emptiness” (*O Jornal* 08/15/1970).

3. *Organic and psychological changes.* As Álvaro Vieira himself says, nature punishes what is unnatural. So it is with masturbation: “it is vicious, without sexual ideal, without altruistic purpose, without the protection of love, without ancestral connection, without biological obligation. It is the negation of all this” (*O Jornal* 04/08/1972). The consequences of this punishment are twofold: it alters the organism, both in its regulations and in its forms, and it incapacitates the masturbator psychologically. Needless to say, this understanding of the results of the practice is perhaps the most obvious revival of the fabrication of onanism, without, however, descending into the belief that it produces diseases (organic pathologies) and that its acceptable result is death. Let us take a look: the addiction to masturbation, which no longer gives any pleasure and therefore no excretion, atrophies the testicular glands in order to put an end to this “act repelled by nature itself”. The same happens to women: their “fountains dry up” (*O Jornal* 04/08/1972). Also in the case of women, abuse can permanently alter the external appearance of the genitals (*O Jornal* 02/11/1971) and interrupt menstrual flow (*O Jornal* 06/16/1971). It has anatomical effects “common to both sexes”, which are permanent and “will become defects or anomalies in the creatures” (*O Jornal* 06/03/1969). It can cause oiliness in the nose (*O Jornal* 10/18/1952).

The damage is also psychological. Masturbators lose their personality, become unstable, cannot concentrate on any subject and have a weak memory (*O Jornal* 10/11/1968). They are insomniacs, nervous and lack willpower (*Jornal do Comércio* 06/29/1972). Taken beyond its “normal limits”, it causes damage such as the inability to consummate the normal act, “future sexual coldness, a feeling of anguish, irritability, sadness for no apparent reason, insomnia, nervousness, memory loss, etc., etc.” (*O Jornal* 05/28/1955). Impotence, almost always psychological in origin, is another consequence that masturbators have to face (*O Jornal* 03/17/1954).

4. *Technologies of containment and control.* The most spectacular facet of the history of the anti-masturbation campaign was the creation of a series of technologies aimed at controlling the bodies of children and adolescents, as I have already mentioned. Although Álvaro Vieira considers masturbation to be a normal and natural stage in the development of the libido, he can’t escape the belief that the practice, even in these cases, can be reduced and, even more so, in those in which it becomes a potential cause of all kinds of harmful results, with the masturbator taking an active and positive part in controlling their own actions, gestures, thoughts and desires.

We humans, he says, “have moral, social and religious censures to impose on the child. When these alone fail to place him in a more considerate situation, then work, exercise, swimming, games etc. etc. that can use up energy are indicated”. This strategy is justified not because masturbation is an evil in itself, but because of the need to prevent the practice from descending into addiction and the “misrepresentation of the great meaning of reproduction”. So, “restraint”. Early masturbators can’t pay attention in class, don’t sleep, get irritable and nervous (*O Jornal* 05/04/1968). Remedies, in the case of adolescents, are not viable, because the function “must be directed and not compressed” (*O Jornal* 03/17/1968).

And when the addiction has already taken hold of the individual, especially the adult? In these cases, Vieira recommends a series of measures: marry someone of your “social standing” (*O Jornal* 06/03/1959); go after prostitutes (06/25/1954); use hormones or a rectal preparation (*O Jornal* 12/21/1952); take tranquilizers and seek your husband’s understanding (*O Jornal* 10/23/1955); seek out specialists, such as Drs. Gilvan Torres and Spinosa Rothier (*O Jornal* 01/28/1955); use psychiatric assistance (*O Jornal* 12/21/1952). Gilvan Torres and Spinosa Rothier (*O Jornal* 01/28/1954); to use psychiatric assistance (*O Jornal* 03/11/1970); to resort to psychotherapy, particularly hypnotherapy, since it works with the “subconscious” (*O Jornal do Comércio* 06/29/1972). The measures recommended by Vieira point to the prominence of medical knowledge and, beyond that, psychoanalytical knowledge as the most competent authorities to deal with such an urgent issue, an authority which, if it dates back to the beginnings of the 18th-century anti-masturbation crusade, here, for the columnist, is transferred from the body of the child and adolescent to that of the masturbating young adult, transformed into the nemesis of his sexual ethics.

Conclusion

The texts in Álvaro Vieira’s column point to masturbation as a burning problem for his readers, as, in general, were all those with a sexual theme. His speech, in this advisory literature, seeks to distance his audience from the horrors advocated by the heralds of onanism, now disseminating a model of understanding that sees the practice as a normal, natural and legitimate activity at a certain point in the subject’s psychosexual development. This new way of looking at it, different in many respects from the style of thinking that has been dominant in Western medical knowledge since the 18th century (but without completely escaping it), has its origins much more in the advance of other types of knowledge about sexuality, such as psychoanalysis, than as a result of a behavioral change within Brazilian society with regard to sexual matters, which would only appear on its horizon from the 1970s onwards, even though they had been the subject of concern in the public

arena since the 1960s, according to Benjamin A. Cowan (2016, 50-51, 55). Vieira is not its greatest representative, nor the most learned, nor the most notorious, but someone who acted as a kind of mediator of this knowledge for a wider public, imbued with the belief in the need to demystify sexuality in order to build normative and functional subjects.

With its appearance in Brazil marked by a normative perspective, as part of the arsenal of psychiatry (Rocha 1989, 35-38), psychoanalysis emerged as knowledge mobilized for the construction of a nation project, including by those most closely linked to eugenicist and hygienist thinking (Torquato 2015 pp. 55-57, 64). But the areas it sought to cover went beyond this. The “sexual question”, such a hot topic in the first half of the 20th century, became a breeding ground for a discussion based on new references, such as the Freudian theses, a discussion that was mainly covered by doctors of different kinds (Carrara; Russo 2002, 274). The lay public would be one of the main focuses for the dissemination of debates around this sexual issue and psychoanalysis itself, before its institutionalization process (Russo 2002, 56). With the consolidation of this knowledge on the Brazilian intellectual scene, the family “expanded its territoriality of control” and what it considered to be legitimate sexuality expanded. This expansion, however, at that time (the 1930s) was limited to one class, “since these [illicit sexualities] transgressed the limits of sexuality linked to the function of reproduction, and their approval was located in the parents’ bedroom” (Rocha 1989, 83-84). In this way, psychoanalysis was gradually able to become an authoritative type of knowledge in the discussion of the subject, so as to remove the problem of masturbation from the exclusive domain of the onanistic style of thought. Psychoanalysis, we can say, is part of a more general process of modernization in Brazilian society, including in the sexual sphere. Of course, Álvaro Vieira never presented himself as a psychoanalyst, but his reflections are imbued with a whole vocabulary that has its origins precisely in this discipline, albeit marked by its own contours. Being an intellectual mediator of knowledge about sexuality, as Vieira intended to be, meant appropriating the knowledge that he considered the most modern on the subject and, in this case, psychoanalysis lent itself well to the role.

Although he points to new perspectives, his ideas are imbued with prejudices that originate both in his interpretation of sexual ethics, creating scales of values for sexual practices, in which masturbation emerges as an inferior element, and from a connection with the basic elements of the onanistic edifice, of which he is, in any case, a kind of heir, even if he isn’t aware of it. What is negative about onanism, as has been the belief since the 18th century, is appropriated and adapted to a new interpretative scheme for the practice of masturbation, in which it only ceases to be innocuous, even morally, when it goes beyond the limits that have been determined by this new style of thinking.

Álvaro Vieira’s ideas indicate a reconfiguration of the framework of what is normal in the field of sexuality, from an organic/moral point of view, as was the case with the restrictive model of onanism, to another that is markedly ethical, which admits masturbation as a possibility circumscribed within what is valuable. Although this is a new interpretation of the issue, I won’t say that this is necessarily an evolution, because things don’t progress in a progressive or linear way. The pathologization of masturbation still appears, albeit faintly, even in somewhat recent times. To cite an example, I’ll take a scene from the Brazilian comedy show *Hermes e Renato*, from the mid-2000s. A parody of a documentary about addictions, it features a man who is “addicted” to masturbation, “pale, thin, sweating profusely”, “very debilitated”, the clear effects of the expenditure of his energies dissipated in the recurrence of the act (he is said to have spent hours in the bathroom). His fate ends abruptly in death: a tribute to pleasure that makes it clear how much onanism is still a presence hovering ghostly over us (Acervo – Hermes & Renato 2015).

References

- Bassanezi, Carla. 1996. *Virando as páginas, revendo as mulheres: Revistas femininas e relações homem-mulher (1945-1964)*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira.
- Carrara, S. L. e Russo, J. A. May/August 2002. A psicanálise e a sexologia no Rio de Janeiro de entreguerras: entre a ciência e a auto-ajuda. *História, Ciências, Saúde*. Manguinhos, Rio de Janeiro, vol. 9 (2), 273-290. Available in: <https://www.scielo.br/j/hcsm/a/q5JQ6MVH4ByCrFcNMFXFcrw/?format=html>. Consulted November 06 2023.
- Cerqueira, Ede Conceição Bispo. 2019. *Cláudio Araújo Lima e a divulgação de teorias médico-psicológicas no Rio de Janeiro (1940-1959)*. Doctoral thesis. Casa de Oswaldo Cruz – FIOCRUZ, Rio de Janeiro.
- Conceição, Joaquim Tavares da. May/August 2015. “Vícios execráveis”: campanha médica de combate à masturbação e à homossexualidade entre os pensionistas de colégios-internatos (1845-1927). *Revista Brasileira de História da Educação*, v. 15, n. 2., 111-132. Available in: <https://periodicos.uem.br/ojs/index.php/rbhe/article/view/38926>. Consulted October 31 2023.
- Corbin, Alain. 2006. O segredo do indivíduo. In: PERROT, Michelle (org.). *História da vida privada 4: da Revolução Francesa à Primeira Guerra*, 419-499. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.
- Cowan, Benjamin A. 2016. *Securing sex: morality and repression in the making of Cold War Brazil*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Fleck, Ludwik. *Gênese e desenvolvimento de um fato científico*. 2010. Belo Horizonte: Fabrefactum.
- Foucault, Michel. 2010. *Os anormais: Curso no Collège de France (1974-1975)*. São Paulo: WMF Martins Fontes.
- Foucault, Michel. 2010. *Em defesa da sociedade: Curso no Collège de France (1975-1976)*. São Paulo: WMF Martins Fontes.
- Foucault, Michel. 2019. *Microfísica do poder*. Rio de Janeiro; São Paulo: Paz & Terra.
- Foucault, Michel. 2020. *História da sexualidade 1: a vontade de saber*. Rio de Janeiro; São Paulo: Paz & Terra.
- Gomes, Ângela de Castro; Hansen, Patrícia Santos. 2016. APRESENTAÇÃO – Intelectuais, mediação cultural e projetos políticos: uma introdução para a delimitação do objeto de estudo, 7-37. In: Gomes, Ângela de Castro; Hansen, Patrícia Santos (org.). *Intelectuais mediadores: Práticas culturais e ação política*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira.
- Katz, Jonathan Ned. 1996. *A invenção da heterossexualidade*. Rio de Janeiro: Ediouro.
- Laqueur, Thomas Walter. 2004. *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation*. Nova York: Zone Books.
- Luca, Tania Regina de. 2006. História dos, nos e por meio dos periódicos. 111-153 In: PINKSY, Carla Bassanezi (org.). *Fontes históricas*. São Paulo: Contexto.
- Rocha, Gilberto S. 1989. *Introdução ao nascimento da psicanálise no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Forense Universitária.
- Russo, Jane A. 2002. A difusão da psicanálise no Brasil na primeira metade do século XX – da vanguarda modernista à rádio-novela. *Estudos e Pesquisas em Psicologia*, UERJ, Rio de Janeiro, ano II, nº 1, 51-61. Available in: <https://www.e-publicacoes.uerj.br/index.php/revispsi/article/view/7704>. Consulted November 06 2023.

- Sirinelli, Jean-François. 2003. Os intelectuais. In: Rémond, Rene (org.). *Por uma história política*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora FGV, 231-270.
- Torquato, Luciana Cavalcante. 2015. História da psicanálise no Brasil: enlaces entre o discurso freudiano e o projeto nacional. *Revista de Teoria da História*, a. 7, v. 14, n. 2, 47-77. Available in: <https://revistas.ufg.br/teoria/article/view/39248>. Consulted October 31 2023.