



# VAGINA

*A New Biography*

NAOMI WOLF



virago





VIRAGO

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For A.







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How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky!  
How delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening  
its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known.

Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*









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## What Is the Vagina?

Why write a book about the vagina?

I have always been interested in female sexuality, and in the history of female sexuality. The way in which any given culture treats the vagina – whether with respect or disrespect, caringly or disparagingly – is a metaphor for how women in general in that place and time are treated. And there have been as many ways of seeing the vagina – what students of intellectual history call ‘constructs’ – as there have been cultures. When I began this journey, I thought that if I looked at the vagina from these different historical perspectives, I would learn a great deal about women, both as sexual subjects and as members of communities; this investigation would surely illuminate where we are today. (Also, since I am a woman and I like pleasure, I was eager to learn things I might not know about female sexuality.) I thought I would find the truth about the vagina by studying all of these constructs. I believed that some would prove to be basically accurate, and others, deeply inaccurate. But I now believe that all of them are only partially true, and that some ‘constructs’ – including our own – are thoroughly subjective and full of misinformation.

Is the vagina a pathway to enlightenment, as it was for Indian practitioners of the Tantra? Or a ‘golden lotus,’ as Chinese Tao philosophy maintained? Is it the ‘hole’ that the Elizabethans saw





it as being? Or the test site for female maturity, an organ whose response separates the women from the girls, as Sigmund Freud believed? Or is it what American feminists from the 1970s and on claim it to be: a not-so-important organ subordinated to the more glamorous clitoris? Or is it what contemporary mass-produced pornography says it is: a 'hot,' but essentially interchangeable, orifice, available visually by the thousands to anyone with a modem? Or is it what right-on sex-positive 2000s postfeminism says it is: a zippy pleasure producer for lusty women that demands dial-up satiation, from the texting of random partners for booty calls to high-tech vibrating electronics?

I read books such as evolutionary biologists Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá's *Sex at Dawn*; I reread sociologist Shere Hite's *The Hite Report on Female Sexuality*; I studied histories of the vagina such as *The Story of V: A Natural History of Female Sexuality* by cultural historian Catherine Blackledge; and I looked at the latest research on female orgasm, from scientific databases such as the archives of *Human Reproduction*. I journeyed to laboratories where some of the most cutting-edge neurobiological research is being done on the role of female sexual pleasure – such labs as that of Dr Jim Pfaus, at Concordia University in Montreal, where landmark experiments are establishing that female sexual pleasure plays an important role in mate selection even among lower mammals. I began to feel that all these books, articles, and destinations were only pieces of the puzzle.

For personal as well as for intellectual reasons, I began to realize that the real headline is one that is rarely talked about, outside of a small circle: that there is a profound brain–vagina connection that seemed to me to contain more of the truth of the matter than anything else I was exploring. This book's germ started as a historical and cultural journey, but it quickly grew into a very personal and necessary act of discovery. I needed to learn the truth about the vagina because of a glimpse I had, by



accident, into a dimension of its reality that I had never seen before. Due to a medical crisis, I had a thought-provoking, revelatory experience that suggested a possibly crucial relationship of the vagina to female consciousness itself. The more I learned, the more I understood the ways in which the vagina is part of the female brain, and thus part of female creativity, confidence, and even character.

As I learned about the neuroscience and physiology behind what I had experienced, the connections between the female brain and the vagina introduced themselves into my understanding of other issues women face. Once I had evidence that these connections were real, I felt that they held the key to much that had happened to women throughout history. I also felt that information about these connections – and the insights they afforded into female sexuality and selfhood – were important to bring to women today, and indeed to anyone who cares about women, because they can help us understand and value ourselves so much better.

As part of this investigation, I also wanted to hear what men had to say about their feelings about the vagina – apart from the two-dimensional story that our porn-saturated culture tells us. As I began to talk about what my subject was, scores of men of my acquaintance responded to my questions about their relationship to the vagina with hearteningly endearing answers. Often, though not always, a look of something like adoration or even love would appear in the expressions of men who were willing to describe their feelings about this part of a woman. The feelings these men described, though neither the men nor their words were a random sample, were far from demeaning or pornographic.

To my surprise, many heterosexual men who were willing to talk to me about how they really felt expressed a kind of holistic (that is, not merely sexual) *gratitude* for the vagina, and they did not stress aspects of pleasure in isolation from what they



often characterized as a sense of relief and joy at being so completely ‘accepted’ and so fully ‘welcomed.’ Indeed, *acceptance* and *welcome* were two words that came up again and again in men’s discussions with me. Their responses made me think that women underestimate the importance to men of women’s acceptance of them.

Of course, we can assume that some of these responses were mediated by the fact that a woman was asking the question; but the fact that so many men struck the same emotional tenor over and over again makes me believe that there was some truth here. When I described the connections I was finding between the vagina and other kinds of creativity and well-being, some replied that these possible connections conformed to some of their own experiences with the women in their lives.

That initial set of insights about the brain–vagina connection, and the more subtle truths I derived from it about female emotional and sexual responses, altered my own life, my relationship, and my way of seeing, for the better. It made me feel, in a new way – no disrespect to men – incredibly *lucky* to be a woman, and it helped me to understand better exactly *why* women are lucky to be in their bodies.

One source of discomfort about being a woman in this culture is that the language we have with which to talk about our bodies, and about the vagina in particular, is so very awful. The common misreading of the vagina as ‘mere flesh’ is a major reason for this discomfort. Female sexual pleasure, rightly understood, is not just about sexuality or just about pleasure. It serves, also, as a medium of female self-knowledge and hopefulness; female creativity and courage; female focus and initiative; female bliss and transcendence; and as a medium of a sensibility that feels very much like freedom. To understand the vagina properly is to realize that it is not only coextensive with the female brain, but is also, essentially, part of the female soul.



As I grew to better understand this aspect of the vagina, I began to put questions to women and to researchers that explored the connection between the vagina and female creativity, confidence, and the sense of connection to things and to people. The answers I received confirmed to me that I was heading in the right direction.

Before I began my research, many aspects of the vagina in history and in society had been mysterious to me, from the question of why so many women writers and artists had had their bursts of greatest creativity after a sexual awakening, to why some women tend to become addicted to love, to why heterosexual women are so often existentially torn between a bad boy/good man attraction to – on a darker note – why the vagina has been targeted for abuse, violence, and control for most of Western history.

The more I learned about the neurology of the vagina and the biochemistry it releases in the brain, the more these mysteries, which had seemed all my life to be cultural, cleared up for me. Once one understands what scientists at the most advanced laboratories and clinics around the world are confirming – that the vagina and the brain are essentially one network, or ‘one whole system,’ as they tend to put it, and that the vagina mediates female confidence, creativity, and sense of transcendence – the answers to many of these seeming mysteries fall into place.

In the first section of the book, I explore the ways in which the vagina has been severely misunderstood. By looking at recent science, and asking questions in person and online, I found that the vagina’s experiences can – on the level of biology – boost women’s self-confidence, or else can lead to failures of self-confidence; they can help unleash female creativity or present blocks to female creativity. They can contribute to a woman’s sense of the joyful interconnectedness of the material and spiritual world – or else to her grieving awareness of the



loss of that sense of interconnectedness. They can help her experience a state of transcendental mysticism that can affect the rest of her life – or leave her at the threshold of that state, inviting that there is something ‘more.’ This latter experience, in turn, can lead not only to a decrease in her desire for sex but can also risk a tincture in the rest of her life of what can only be called ‘existential depression’ or ‘despair.’

The second section of this book explores how social control of the vagina, and of women’s sexuality, has been a vehicle to control women’s minds and inner lives throughout the history of the West.

The third section looks at the contemporary scene, and shows how modern pressures, such as the prevalence of pornography, are desensitizing both men and women in relation to the greater ‘life’ of the vagina.

The final section of the book explores how to ‘reclaim the Goddess’ – that is, how to reframe our sense of the vagina, in relationship to ourselves and to our lovers, in the context of its actual neurological task of being a mediator and protector of women’s highest, most joyful, and most unbroken sense of self. I will look at what women really need – for sexual happiness and fulfillment, but also for overall well-being – based on new neuroscience, as well as on what I learned from several Tantric masters, who spend their days healing or awakening women who are sexually and emotionally wounded or dormant.

Most of the examples in this book, especially about the physiology of female arousal and orgasm, will have implications that are inclusive for women of any sexuality – gay, straight, bisexual, and so on. But one of my primary themes is the exploration of heterosexual women’s physical and emotional interactions with men. Some of the scientific studies focus directly on the physiology of heterosexual intercourse.

This focus on my part is not because I think that lesbian and bisexual arousal, orgasm, relationships, or mind–body connec-





tions are any less fascinating than their heterosexual counterparts. It is because, rather, I believe (especially now) that female sexual responses, and the female mind–body connection, are so complex and so worthy of careful, individualistic attention that I do not believe that the politically correct approach of lumping all female experience together, with a nod to categories, can do justice to these variations. Parallel questions about the physiology of lesbian and bisexual Eros, the lesbian and bisexual mind–body connections, and the question of the vagina in lesbian and bisexual contexts, all deserve entire books of their own.

Nor are these questions directed only to women currently in relationships; while, as noted, many examples center around lovemaking, more insights apply to women’s sexual relationships with themselves first of all.

### What Is ‘the Goddess’?

Throughout this book, I will be referring to a state of mind or a condition of female consciousness I will call, for ease of reference, but also for the sake of the echo, ‘the Goddess.’ I don’t mean to summon up in your mind crunchy-granola 1970s images of pagan Goddess worship on all-female retreats in state parks, nor am I intending a simplistic pop-culture shorthand for ‘self-esteem.’ Rather, I am carving out rhetorical space that does not yet exist when we talk about the vagina, but which refers to something very real.

Psychologist William James established a school of study known as ‘biological consciousness’ – that is, the exploration of how the physical body affects states of mind. In 1902, James brought out his classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*.<sup>1</sup> In this book, on which I am basing part of my argument, he explores the role of the transcendent experience – which most people have had only in hints or glimpses, but which



current research shows that many people have experienced to some degree – in healing traumatized or depressed lives.<sup>2</sup> Without making claims for the objective nature of ‘God’ or ‘the Sublime,’ he addressed the issue of neurology as a substratum for these common mystical experiences. He made the case that when the brain experiences the states that correspond to those concepts, even though these may be physically based experiences, nonetheless, transformation of a person is possible: ‘as a matter of psychological fact, mystical states of a well-pro-nounced and emphatic sort are usually authoritative over those who have them.’<sup>3</sup>

James believed that these mind states – which he and we call ‘mystical,’ and which the poet William Wordsworth described as a sense we all have, at moments, of familiarity with a ‘glory’ that is elsewhere – are available to us through the doorway of the subconscious.<sup>4</sup> ‘Mystical states indeed wield no authority due simply to their being mystical states . . . they tell of the supremacy of the ideal, of vastness, of union, of safety and of rest. They offer us *hypotheses*, hypotheses which we may voluntarily ignore, but which as thinkers we cannot possibly upset.’<sup>5</sup> These states are transient and passive, but James pointed out that as a result of experiencing such states of consciousness, great healing, great creativity, and even great happiness often entered people’s lives. Were people indeed happier, more loving, and more creative as a result of even momentary experiences of ‘God’ or ‘the Sublime,’ whether or not those mind states were caused by mere biochemistry? He made the case that they were.

Even before the latest neuroscience showed that the female orgasmic brain reveals activity that leads to a kind of loss of ego boundaries, a mystical or trancelike experience – perhaps not identical to what James was investigating, but not so different in its effect – scientists have known that there is a long-established link between orgasm and the release of opioids in the brain.



Opioids – a form of neuropeptide – produce the experience of ecstasy, transcendence, and bliss. Sigmund Freud, in his book *Civilization and Its Discontents*, referred to what Romain Rolland had identified as ‘the oceanic feeling.’ Rolland had used the phrase to refer to the emotional tenor of religious feeling, the ‘oceanic’ sense of limitlessness. Freud called this longing infantile.<sup>6</sup>

But Freud was a man; and recent science may indicate that, at least in orgasm, women can experience this oceanic feeling in a unique way. New MRI research, by Janniko Georgiadis and his team, showed in 2006 that regions of the female brain that have to do with self-awareness, inhibition, and self-regulation go quiet for women briefly during orgasm.<sup>7</sup> This can feel to the woman involved like a melting of boundaries, a loss of self, and, whether exhilaratingly or scarily, a loss of control.

Generally, neuroscientists over the past thirty years have confirmed that James was biochemically correct: there are indeed changes in the brain that correspond to the experience of ‘the Sublime.’ Tremendous benefits – a greater sense of love, compassion, self-acceptance, and connectedness – have been shown in people who have cultivated those states of mind, as psychologist Dan Goleman’s work on ‘emotional intelligence,’ in his 1995 book with that name, and the Dalai Lama’s work on meditation have shown. Western researchers have also demonstrated that meditative bliss states can involve opioid release. All women, as we will see, are potentially multiorgasmic; so the mystical or transcendental potential of female sexuality described above also allows women to connect often, and in a unique way, even if just for brief moments, with experiences of a shining, ‘divine’ or greater self (or nonself, as Buddhists would say) or with a sense of the connection among all things. Producing the stimulation necessary for these mind states is part of the evolutionary task of the vagina.

Philosophers have spoken for centuries of ‘a God-shaped hole’ in human beings – the longing human beings feel to connect



with something greater than themselves, and which motivates religious and spiritual quests. As seventeenth-century philosopher Blaise Pascal put it: 'What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and unchangeable object; in other words by God himself.'<sup>8</sup>

Scientists have teased out the fact that this longing, this hunger to fill an 'infinite abyss,' is a neural capability we are all born with, an innate ability to experience and connect with something that feels, subjectively, like transcendence. The Dalai Lama's work on meditation, along with that of Dan Goleman, suggests that specific sites in the brain light up when Buddhist monks, for instance, experience a meditative state, and Stanford neuroscientists are finding the neurology of bliss.<sup>9</sup> Typically, in this mind state, one feels, among other things, that all is well with oneself and with the universe, and the vexations and limitations of the ego fall away. Artists have produced some of humanity's greatest works of music, painting, and poetry following such experiences.

So I will make the case throughout this book that there is a version of this connection with 'the Sublime' – even if it, too, like Rolland's 'oceanic feeling,' is simply a neurological trick of our magically complicated human brain wiring – that women can experience during and after certain moments of heightened sexual pleasure. I maintain that this feeling is critically linked to an experience of self-love or self-respect, and a sense of freedom and drive. This is why the issue of whether or not female sexuality is treated with love and respect is so very crucial. Such moments of heightened sexual sensibility lead to a woman's awareness that she is in a state of a kind of perfection, in harmony with





and in connection with the world. In that state of consciousness, the usual inner voices that say the woman is not good enough, not beautiful enough, or not pleasing enough to others, are stilled, and a great sense of a larger set of connections – even a sense of what I will call, for lack of a better term, a Universal or Divine Feminine – can be accessed.

Major creative insights, and powerful work, can emerge after an experience of transcendence of this kind. I do believe that when women learn to identify and cultivate an awareness of ‘the Goddess,’ defined in this way, their behavior toward themselves, and their life experiences change for the better – because self-destructiveness, shame, and tolerance of poor treatment cannot live in harmony with this set of feelings.

But I would argue, less literally, that the Goddess – a gendered sense of self that is shining, without damage, without anxiety or fear – inheres in every woman and that women tend intuitively to know when they have glimpsed it or touched upon it. When women realize the spark of the Goddess in themselves, healthier, more self-respecting sexual behavior follows. The vagina serves, physiologically, to activate this matrix of chemicals that feel, to the female brain, like the Goddess – that is, like an awareness of one’s own great dignity, and of great self-love as a woman, as a radiant part of the universal feminine.

The vagina may be a ‘hole’; but it is, properly understood, a Goddess-shaped one.

