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Nocturnal Emissions: An Apposite Subject for the Study of Masculinities. A Historiographical Overview

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Abstract

The history of nocturnal emissions reveals the shifting boundaries between physiology and pathology, as well as the transformation of medical knowledge surrounding masculinity. They have played a central role in the construction of the male body, interpreted differently according to the era, as a sign of illness or a natural physiological process of transition to adulthood.

Keywords

Gender – masculinities – sleep – nocturnal emission – wet dreams

Michel Foucault understood the scientific importance of “pollutions nocturnes” in the specific context of the history of sexuality.¹ He revealed their importance by tracing the origins of concerns about seminal loss to the doctrinal reflection of Cassian: “Here is the reason why, all through this battle against the spirit of fornication and for chastity, the sole fundamental problem is that of pollution – whether as something that is subservient to the will and a possible form of self-indulgence, or as something happening spontaneously and involuntarily in sleep or dreams.”² Foucault drew a genealogy of the problem of volition in the desires of the flesh from the work of this Christian monk. From this, he concluded that “the central value of the question of masturbation has an altogether other origin from that of the doctors’ campaign in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries”.³

Despite this reference in Foucault, however, “nocturnal emissions” – as a research subject – has received relatively little attention from historians.⁴ This lack of consideration – or perhaps of interest – may partly be explained by the fact that nocturnal seminal emissions have been naturalised over time and are

1 The French term “pollution nocturne” is translated, in this introduction, as nocturnal emission during sleep or, in short, nocturnal emission.

2 Michel Foucault, “The Battle for Chastity,” in *Michel Foucault. Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1997), 185–197, at 192. This is the separate publication of a chapter of Foucault’s history of sexuality, articulated after a discussion with Philippe Ariès. For more on Cassian’s interpretation of nocturnal emissions, see, for example, John Kitchen, “Cassian, Nocturnal Emissions, and the Sexuality of Jesus,” in *The Seven Deadly Sins: From Communities to Individuals*, ed. Richard Newhauser (Leiden, 2007), 71–94.

3 Foucault, “Battle for Chastity,” 186.

4 See, for example, Guillaume Garnier, *L’oubli des peines: Une histoire du sommeil (1700–1850)* (Rennes, 2013), 217–260; Nicolas Laurent-Bonne, “Jalons pour l’histoire de la répression des rêves sexuels,” in *Expériences oniriques dans la littérature et les arts du Moyen Âge au XVIIIe siècle*, ed. Mireille Demaules (Paris, 2016), 51–66; M. Jeanne Peterson, “Precocious Puberty in the Victorian Medical Gaze,” *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 4.2 (2008), <www.ncgsjournal.com/issue42/PDFs/peterson.pdf>; Dávid Molnár, “The Healing Power of Erotic Dreams in the Age of Humanism,” *Primerjalna Knjizevnost (Ljubljana)*, 41.2 (2018), 135–144; Jacqueline Murray, “Men’s Bodies, Men’s Minds: Seminal Emissions and Sexual Anxiety in the Middle Ages,” *Annual Review of Sex Research*, 8.1 (1997), 1–26; Charles Stewart, “Erotic Dreams and Nightmares from Antiquity to the Present,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 8.2 (2002), 279–309.

now part of normal male physiology. Indeed, amongst the various biomedical markers of puberty one can find the first ejaculation during sleep, as well as changes in body hair and voice and more.⁵ In the current global North, nocturnal emissions mark the transition to adulthood for boys.

A second reason for this comparative invisibility of nocturnal emissions in historiography may lie in the fact that the topic has been mostly approached from the angle of masturbation: in the wake of Foucault's work, nocturnal emissions have been taken as both a sign and witness of the repression of sexuality. Thus, they have often been associated and confused with onanism, without their specific importance for the wider study of masculinity, male physiology and the gendered construction of the body, sleep and dreams being recognised or documented. It was only recently, for example, that Jacqueline Carroy published a book on dreams, partly reflecting the complexity and importance of dreams in nocturnal emissions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁶

While neglected by historiography, the loss of semen by sleeping men has received special attention, however, from physicians and doctors over the course of several centuries.⁷ Even though the terminology of defilement was borrowed from moral and religious texts, other medical expressions have been used to define this phenomenon: *exoneirosis*, *gonorrhœa dormientium*, *gonorrhœa onyrogme*, *oneirogonorrhœa*, *oneirogmos*, *oneirogyne*, *paroniria salax*, *profluvium seminis*, gonorrhœa oneirogenic, insomnia libidinous, lascivious insomnia, libidinal insomnia, venereal dream, erotic dream, spermatorrhœa and more have been used.⁸ These are just some of the names that

5 See, for example, Robert Kliegman, Bonita Stanton, Joseph W. St Geme, Nina Felice Schor, Richard E. Behrman and Waldo E. Nelson, eds., *Textbook of Pediatrics* (Philadelphia, PA, 2016).

6 Jacqueline Carroy, *Écrire les rêves, 19–20e siècles* (Lausanne, 2024).

7 Religious views on nocturnal emissions have been discussed by several historians of both Antiquity and the Middle Ages: see, for example, David Brakke, "The Problematicization of Nocturnal Emissions in Early Christian Syria, Egypt, and Gaul," *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 3.4 (1995), 419–460; Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, PA, 1999); Conrad Leyser, "Masculinity in Flux: Nocturnal Emission and the Limits of Celibacy in the Early Middle Ages," in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, ed. Dawn Haley (London, 1999), 103–120; Simon Lienyueh Wei, "The Absence of Sin in Sexual Dreams in the Writings of Augustine and Cassian," *Vigiliae Christianae*, 66.4 (2012), 362–378; Hector Scerri, "On Menstruation, Marital Intercourse and 'Wet Dreams' in a Letter by Gregory the Great," *Studia Patristica*, 97 (2017), 211–217.

8 The translation of the last few terms into English is by the authors. The original terms in French are: "gonorrhée onéirogononienne, insomnie lascive, songe vénérien, rêve érotique, spermatorrhée". On *gonorrhœa dormientium*, see Michael Sappol, "The Odd Case of Charles

medical experts and scientists have come up with over the years to emphasise the organic, moral or dreamlike dimensions of this phenomenon.⁹

Finally, nocturnal emissions have also been the subject of numerous medical controversies since Antiquity, in which a discussion of nocturnal emissions was also a critique of religious and popular beliefs, which associated incubus demons with the power of stealing sperm from sleeping men. As Juan Rigoli has pointed out, certain stories about incubi circulated despite being officially denied by physicians.¹⁰

It is through a *longue durée* analysis – and within the porosity of boundaries in knowledge and practices about bodies – that nocturnal seminal emissions reveal their historiographical performativity. As with other forgotten or obsolete phenomena and bodily substances, the history of these nocturnal spillages can tell us about the shifting epistemological boundaries between physiology and pathology, as well as about the transformations and circulation of medical knowledge and practices relating to the body, sleep, dreams and sexuality.¹¹ Nocturnal emissions are central to the construction of

Knowlton: Anatomical Performance, Medical Narrative, and Identity in Antebellum America,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 83.3 (2009), 460–498. On the terminology of defilement borrowed from moral and religious texts, see Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel, contenant généralement tous les mots François, tant vieux que modernes, et les termes de toutes les sciences et des arts, divisé en trois tomes* (Rotterdam, 1690), vol. 3, 174. At the end of the seventeenth century, Furetière wrote as follows in his famous dictionary: “nocturnal pollution: also said of the filth which is committed on one’s own body by some indecent act. There are voluntary and involuntary forms of pollution. All touching is criminal when there is danger of pollution. The Church prays at Compline to be protected from nocturnal pollutions.” This translation is by the authors, from the original French: “pollution nocturne: se dit aussi de l’ordure qui se commette sur son propre corps par quelque attouchement impudique. Il y a des pollutions volontaires d’autres involontaires. Tous attouchements sont criminels quand il y a danger de pollution. L’Eglise fait des prières à Complies pour être préservées des pollutions nocturnes.”

- 9 François Boissier de Sauvage lists some of them, classifying pollution in gonorrhoea as “seri fluxus”; see François Boissier de Sauvage, *Nosologia methodica sistens morborum classes, genera et species, juxta Sydenhami mentem et Botanicorum ordinem*, (Amsterdam, 1763), 215. These terms were still used in the nineteenth century in scientific medical dictionaries.
- 10 Even Hippocrates, in *On the Sacred Disease*, was dismissive about belief in incubi, with doctors subsequently distancing themselves from this terminology. For the nineteenth century, see Juan Rigoli, “Cauchemars épidémiques,” *Commun*, 108.1 (2021), 189–202; Margot Guiglielmetti, *Des incubes au cauchemar (1815–1890, France)* (Masters thesis, University of Geneva, 2025). See also the dossier published in Campus, in March 2023: <<https://web.archive.org/web/20241103031526/www.unige.ch/campus/152/dossier4/>>.
- 11 The concept of forgotten physiologies has been very useful to our research; see Francesca Arena, “Dangereux ou salulaire? La réhabilitation du colostrum en Europe au XVIIIe siècle,” in *Allaiter de l’Antiquité à nos jours: Histoire et pratiques d’une culture en Europe*, ed.

masculinity, since they have been alternately described by medicine as evidence of illnesses linked to the loss of virility or as part of the physiological process of becoming a man. It was in the midst of these various controversies that a new medical focus was created in the Western context: the seminal emissions of young men.

To better understand the relationship between physiology and gender pathology, and in particular how involuntary nocturnal emissions contribute to the construction of the male body, it is interesting to note that there are still forms of pathologisation of these bodily products in our contemporary society, similar to what happened in the global North in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. “Dhat syndrome” is one example of such pathologisation.¹² This describes a nosology that has been used since the 1960s in a postcolonial context, to refer to signs similar to nocturnal emissions in Ayurvedic folk medicine.¹³ The “first dedicated book to Dhat syndrome” was published in 2024.¹⁴ So too was the most recent work by the researcher Diederik Janssen, which is also devoted to this subject.¹⁵ While Dhat syndrome is clearly linked to experiences and anxieties in the Indian

Francesca Arena, Véronique Dasen, Yasmina Foehr-Janssens, Irene Maffi, Daniela Solfaroli Camillocci (Turnhout, 2022), 201–205.

- 12 The medical literature on the Dhat syndrome is very extensive: see, for example, H.K. Malhotra and N.N. Wig, “Dhat Syndrome: A Culture-Bound Sex Neurosis of the Orient,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 4.5 (1975), 519–527; S. Jadhav, “Dhāt Syndrome: A Re-evaluation,” *Psychiatry*, 3.8 (2004), 14–16; K.S. Deb and Y.P.S. Balhara, “Dhat Syndrome: A Review of the World Literature,” *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 35.4 (2012), 326–331; Om Prakash and Sujita Kumar Kar, “Dhat Syndrome: A Review and Update,” *Journal of Psychosexual Health*, 1.3–4 (2019), 241–245; Sujita Kumar Kar, Vikas Menon, SM Yasir Arafat, Amit Singh, Anamika Das, Akanksha Shankar, Pawan Sharma and Sayuri Perera, “Dhat Syndrome: Systematic Review of Epidemiology, Nosology, Clinical Features, and Management Strategies,” *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 65 (2021), 1–11; Jyoti Das and Siddharth Dutt, “Dhat Syndrome: A Socio-Cultural Perspective,” *Indian Journal of Mental Health*, 82.2 (2021), 128–132; Mohammad Muntasar Maruf, Tamkeen Saleem and S.M. Yasir Arafat, “Dhat Syndrome: A Fact or Myth,” in *Dhat Syndrome: Medical, Psychological and Sociocultural Aspects*, ed. Sujita Kumar Kar, S.M. Yasir Arafat and Vikas Menon (London, 2024), 163–176.
- 13 A. Sumathipala, S.H. Siribaddana and D. Bhugra, “Culture-bound Syndromes: The Story of Dhat Syndrome,” *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 184.3 (2004), 200–209, at 204.
- 14 Kar et al., “Dhat Syndrome.”
- 15 Diederik F. Janssen, “Dhat Syndrome East and West: A History in Two Acts,” *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 48 (2024), 918–939, <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-024-09874-4>>. Janssen also worked on nocturnal emissions in other publications: see idem, “First Stirrings: Cultural Notes on Orgasm, Ejaculation, and Wet Dreams,” *The Journal of Sex Research*, 44.2 (2007), 122–134; idem, “Autospermatophagia in Dhat Syndrome: Historical European Observations. Letter to the Editor,” *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 20 (2024), 1–2.

subcontinent, it has also been described in other geographical contexts, such as Oman in a 2017 article.¹⁶ Dath syndrome is a potent reminder of the enduring importance of nocturnal emissions as a subject of cultural and medical anxieties. It raises questions about the historical trajectories of ‘wet dreams’ as a subject of medical thinking, from Antiquity to modern times and their potential reframing in colonial and postcolonial contexts.

If we break down historiographical production on nocturnal emissions according to different periods, we find, for Antiquity, a brilliant article by Valeria Andò, who discovered that women, in Hippocrates’ work, also experience nocturnal emissions, using the verb form ἐξονειρώ (a variant, as she explains, of the more common ἐξονειρώσσω).¹⁷ The Italian historian is one of the few to question the gender of semen, moving away from an interpretation based on Aristotle’s corpus, which claims that females do not produce semen.¹⁸ The historiography of Antiquity is also rich in research that has approached the balance of bodily fluids, including semen, from the perspective of the history of medicine. The historian of medicine Antoine Pietrobelli, for example, explained that Antiquity thus offered the possibility of a positive interpretation of seminal losses of all kinds: evacuating excess, lightening the body, promoting growth, and developing virility.¹⁹

In the Middle Ages, according to the historian William MacLehose, nocturnal emissions were a matter of concern for medicine, natural philosophy and theology as they raised the question of the sleeper’s mind, which was deemed uncontrollable and problematic.²⁰ From the perspective of a cultural

16 Aida Saihi MacFarland, Mohammed Al-Maashani, Qassim Al Busaidi, Aziz Al-Naamani, May El-Bouri and Samir Al-Adawi, “Culture-Specific Pathogenicity of Dhat (Semen Loss) Syndrome in an Arab/Islamic Society, Oman,” *Oman Medical Journal*, 32.3 (2017), 251–255.

17 See Valeria Andò, “Sogni erotici e seme femminile nella antica medicina greca,” *Medicina nei secoli, arte e scienza*, 21.2 (2009), 663–669, at 665. On the use of this terminology by Hippocrates, see also Silvio Marino, “De genitura – ΠΕΡΙ ΓΟΝΗΣ [Hippocrates],” *Journal of Ancient Philosophy*, 18.2 (2024), 82–112, <<https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.1981-9471.v18i2p82-112>>; Franco Giorgianni and Hippocrates, *La natura del bambino* (Palermo, 2012).

18 David Lefebvre, “Le sperma: forme, matière ou les deux?” *Philosophie antique*, 16 (2016), 31–62.

19 Antoine Pietrobelli, “La *scientia sexualis* des médecins grecs: histoire et enjeux du corpus *Peri aphrodisiôn*,” in *Dossier: Émotions*, ed. David Konstan (Paris, 2011), 309–338, <<https://doi.org/10.4000/books.editionsehess.2623>>. This translation is by the authors, from the original French: “[...] évacuer le trop-plein, rendre le corps léger, provoquer sa croissance et développer sa virilité [...]].”

20 William F. MacLehose, “Captivating Thoughts: Nocturnal Pollution, Imagination and the Sleeping Mind in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century,” *Journal of Medieval History*, 46.1 (2020), 98–131.

historian, Anne-Lydie Dubois examined the role of nocturnal emissions in the construction of masculinity in the Middle Ages.²¹ Similarly, Núria M. Farré i Barril showed that medieval theology considered nocturnal emissions to be one of the perverse and sinful manifestations of the body, all the more problematic insofar as they called into question the opposition between masculinity – associated with reason and strength – and femininity, which was characterised by bodily weakness.²²

The majority of historians of early modernity have shown little interest in the male body, as Cathy McClive and Jennifer Evans have pointed out, meaning that it therefore remains a subject to be explored in its own right.²³ For the seventeenth century, there are the publications by Juliette Lancel on erotic dreams and by Claire Gantet on dreams, but neither mentions masculinity.²⁴ It is possible that research on nocturnal emissions for this period has been obstructed by epistemological pitfalls: These pitfalls include the question of the gender of seed, which has been only briefly addressed by the work of Thomas Laqueur, but which has subsequently been criticized.²⁵ We could refer also to the focus of research on embryology, which has given little thought to the question of virility for this period.²⁶

The point is not to establish an analogy between the sexes, but to highlight that, for a long period, seed and semen were not just a matter concerning men. Semen was also seen as feminine and this female seed was believed to be

21 Anne-Lydie Dubois, *Former la masculinité: éducation, pastorale mendicante et exégèse au XIIIe siècle* (Turnhout, 2022); and eadem, “Rituels d’endormissement et veilles ascétiques dans quelques sermons et exempla médiévaux,” in *Le sommeil: Théories, représentations et pratiques (Moyen Âge et époque moderne)*, ed. Bernard Andenmatten, Karine Crousaz and Agostino Paravicini Bagliani (Florence, 2024), 51–69.

22 Núria M. Farré i Barril, “Interpenetrations of Nature and Morality: The Case of Nocturnal Seminal Emissions in Medieval Theological Thought,” *Quaderns-e. Institut Català d’Antropologia*, 12 (2008), <www.raco.cat/index.php/QuadernsICA/article/download/124412/172392/0>.

23 Cathy McClive, “Masculinity on Trial: Penises, Hermaphrodites and the Uncertain Male Body in Early Modern France,” *History Workshop Journal*, 68 (2009) 45–68; Jennifer Evans, *Men’s Sexual Health in Early Modern England* (Amsterdam, 2023).

24 Juliette Lancel, “The Dream and the Sin: Erotic Dream in the France of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in *Framing Premodern Desires: The Transformation of Sexual Ideas, Attitudes and Practices in Europe*, ed. Satu Lidman (Amsterdam, 2017), 173–188; Claire Gantet, *Une histoire du rêve: Les faces nocturnes de l’âme (Allemagne, 1500–1800)* (Rennes, 2021).

25 Thomas W. Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, 1990); idem, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (Brooklyn, NY, 2004).

26 See, for example, Nick Hopwood, Rebecca Flemming and Lauren Kassel, eds., *Reproduction: Antiquity to the Present Day* (Cambridge, 2018).

involved in reproduction. This is probably why we still find descriptions of female nocturnal emissions in the eighteenth century.²⁷ It should also be noted that this idea of male and female semen and male and female nocturnal emissions also appears in some Arabic medical texts.²⁸ Indeed, the idea of female nocturnal emissions – as a normal part of conception – can even be found in a hadith from the collection of the Islamic scholar Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī.²⁹

It is worth remembering that it was not until the end of the seventeenth century that European scientists “discovered” and became interested in the vital presence of spermatozoa, and it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that they described all of their functions.³⁰ At the same time, the discovery of spontaneous ovulation in women challenged this concept of female seed. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the moral economy of seed was therefore called into question and completely rethought, as were the gender performances associated with it.³¹

Historians of the eighteenth century, particularly those working on the latter half of the eighteenth century, have shown an interest in the vast production of texts on onanism during this period. It is therefore through the prism of male masturbation that nocturnal emissions have been evaluated in the analyses by these historians.³² Yet little attention has been paid to the

27 The question of whether women are able to experience nocturnal emissions is also discussed in other geographical contexts, such as in Zimbabwe, for example, in a 2009 article: Calvin Gwandure, “Mubobobo: Women Have No Sexual Fantasies in Their Sleep,” *The Open Anthropology Journal*, 2 (2009), 74–81.

28 Alison M. Downham Moore and Rashmi Pithavadian, “Aphrodisiacs in the Global History of Medical Thought,” *Journal of Global History*, 16 (2021), 24–43, at 33.

29 El-Bokhārī, *Les traditions islamiques*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1906), 461.

30 On the description of the functions of spermatozoa, see, for example, Christina Benninghaus, “Beyond Constructivism? Gender, Medicine and the Early History of Sperm Analysis, Germany 1870–1900,” *Gender & History*, 24.3 (2012), 647–676.

31 See, for example, Anne Carol, “Esquisse d’une topographie des organes génitaux féminins: grandeur et décadence des trompes (XVIIe–XIXe siècles),” *Clio. Histoire, femmes et sociétés*, 17 (2003) 203–230; eadem, “Le genre face aux mutations du savoir médical: sexes et nature féminine dans la fécondation (xvie–xixe siècles),” in *Le genre face aux mutations*, ed. Luc Capdevila et al. (Rennes, 2003), <<https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pur.15873>>.

32 There are many publications on onanism, masturbation and Samuel-Auguste Tissot, but none that we know of that distinguish between pollution and onanism from a critical masculinities perspective; see, for example, Alexandre Charles Wenger, “Lire l’onanisme: le discours médical sur la masturbation et sur la lecture féminine au XVIIIe siècle,” *Clio. Histoire, femmes et sociétés*, 22 (2005), 227–243; Patrick Singy, *L’Usage du sexe: Lettres au docteur Tissot, auteur de l’Onanisme (1760), Essai historiographique et texte transcrit par Patrick Singy* (Lausanne, 2014). An important study for this period is that by Nahema

ways in which doctors renegotiated the physiology and pathology of seminal loss through a new concern with forbidden sexuality during the eighteenth century. The questions remain, therefore, as to why – and how – nocturnal emissions have turned into a disease for men. One research branch comes from the historian Ruben E. Verwaal.³³ Seed, according to Verwaal, has never been a static object in the history of medicine, but has instead been associated in different ways with individual behaviours that could produce either health or illness.

The epistemological transformations that sleep and dreams underwent between the end of the eighteenth and through the nineteenth century, moreover, probably contributed to nocturnal emissions becoming a new issue for masculinity.³⁴ The question of self-mastery, a characteristic that has been associated with virility since the Middle Ages, was now joined in medicine by the questions of volition and conscience.³⁵ Was a man responsible for his own dreams? How could dreams be controlled? Were asexual thoughts before going to sleep enough to avoid erotic dreams and thus unwanted seminal emissions during sleep? Stains on the sheets upon waking up were now evidence of a man's weakness in the face of carnal desires. Who inspected the sheets and thus became witness to this weakness? Maids, mothers and fathers alternate in this role, depending on the social context.

In this respect, men's lack of control over their bodily fluids, including semen, i.e., their problematically leaky bodies, has been studied through the prism of the medicalisation of sexuality.³⁶ Medicine's growing interest in

Hanafi, who highlights the issues of masculinity in Tissot's text: Nahema Hanafi, "Je décharge quelquefois sans bander parfaitement...": évocations masculines de la sexualité avec le médecin Samuel-Auguste Tissot," *Dix-huitième siècle*, 47.1 (2015), 103–118; see also Micheline Louis-Courvoisier and Vincent Barras, *La Médecine des Lumières tout autour de Tissot* (Geneva, 2001).

33 On the physiology of semen, see Ruben E. Verwaal, *Bodily Fluids, Chemistry and Medicine in the Eighteenth-Century Boerhaave School* (London, 2020), chapter 7 "Semen in flux," 195–222.

34 On this, see Hélène David, *Le songe au XVIIIe siècle ou la mise à l'épreuve du sujet et de ses limites. L'exploration des confins* (PhD thesis, University of Lille, 2016); Gantet, *Une histoire du rêve*.

35 On the question of nocturnal emissions and masculinity, see Dubois, *Former la masculinité*.

36 On the lack of control over bodily fluids, see Elizabeth Stephens, "Pathologizing Leaky Male Bodies: Spermatorrhea in Nineteenth-Century British Medicine and Popular Anatomical Museums," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 17.3 (2008), 421–438. On the issues connected with leaky male bodies, see also Lisa Wynne Smith, "The Body Embarrassed? Rethinking the Leaky Male Body in Eighteenth-Century England and France," *Gender & History*, 23.1 (2011), 26–46.

masturbation in the nineteenth century has been analysed by historians of medicine as a first stage of this process.³⁷ Among the physical symptoms attributed to masturbation were discharges from the urethra and involuntary losses of sperm – referred to at the time as “spermatorrhoea” – which caused great concern among both men and their doctors, the history of which some historians of medicine have started to contextualise since the 1980s.³⁸ Among the psychological symptoms, Judith Knelman presented spermatorrhoea in her 1996 article as one of the hegemonic expressions of male “nervous debility” in the nineteenth century.³⁹

These “spermatorrhea panics” renewed and updated anxieties about onanism. In the nineteenth century, they spread through medical treatises and health advice books that perpetuated the image of male bodies as “weakened” and made “effeminate” by the involuntary loss of their seminal fluid, which was framed as a vital fluid essential to male health.⁴⁰ At the same time, other medical specialities emerged and took up the issue. In the nineteenth century, surgeons and alienists, among others, devoted much attention to seminal losses during sleep shifting the borders of pathology once again. Nocturnal leaks were gradually separated from daytime discharges and masturbation became a new medical issue in its own right. Through alienism and clinical practices in asylums, nocturnal emissions came to signify the

37 Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, “Body Doubles: The Spermatorrhea Panic,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 12 (2003), 365–399; eadem, *Unauthorized Pleasures: Accounts of Victorian Erotic Experience* (Ithaca, NY, 2003); Robert Darby, “William Acton’s Antipodean Disciples: A Colonial Perspective on his Theories of Male Sexual (Dys)Function,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 13.2 (2004), 157–182; idem, “Pathologizing Male Sexuality: Lallemand, Spermatorrhea, and the Rise of Circumcision,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 60 (2005), 283–319.

38 B.R. Burg, “Nocturnal Emission and Masturbatory Frequency Relationships: A 19th-Century Account,” *The Journal of Sex Research*, 24.1 (1987), 216–220; Lesley A. Hall, “Forbidden by God, Despised by Men: Masturbation, Medical Warnings, Moral Panic, and Manhood in Great Britain, 1850–1950,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 2.3 (1992), 365–387; Michael Stolberg, “An Unmanly Vice: Self-Pollution, Anxiety, and the Body in the Eighteenth Century,” *Social History of Medicine*, 13.1 (2000), 1–22; Dominic Hodgson, “Spermatomania – the English Response to Lallemand’s Disease,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 98 (2005), 375–379; see also note 37 above.

39 Judith Knelman, “Nervous Debility: A Disorder Made to Order,” *Victorian Review*, 22.1 (1996), 32–41.

40 Stolberg, “An Unmanly Vice”; Elizabeth Stephens, “Redefining Sexual Excess as a Medical Disorder: Fin-de-siècle Representations of Hysteria and Spermatorrhoea,” in *Pleasure and Pain in Nineteenth-Century French Literature and Culture*, ed. David Evans and Kate Griffiths (Leiden, 2008), 201–212; eadem, “Coining Spermatorrhea: Medicine and Male Body Fluids, 1836–1866,” *Sexualities*, 12.4 (2009), 467–485.

“fragments of a psychology of sexual life” and thus the development of puberty in men.⁴¹ Yet, according to the clinical cases mentioned, alienists also witnessed ejaculation disorders and male impotence in neurotics, perverts, sadists, masochists, and fetishists, according to the famous doctor Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing.⁴² While there is a vast literature on the subject of “sexual deviance” in the nineteenth century, very little research exists on the place of nocturnal emissions within these discourses of deviance and on the issues that nocturnal emissions raised in medical controversies and in disciplinary and professional boundaries around the physiology and pathology of the male body. Given their usefulness, moreover, in understanding the consciousness of sleeping men, nocturnal emissions also played a central role in the development of sexual psychology. At the same time, knowledge of this subject produced a new divide regarding masculine performance, creating a paradoxical dual obligation of ejaculating and controlling the male body in all contexts, including during sleep and in sexual activity.

In addition, there is a large body of critical research on masculinities that questions the medical and social representations of sperm and the performances of virility.⁴³ The concept of the “ejaculation imperative”, developed by Michael Johnson, is particularly helpful today in questioning the associations of ejaculation with sexual performance and dominant masculinity. As Johnson points out, ejaculation, as a marker of hegemonic masculinity, must occur within a precise sexual script: in a heterosexual relationship, within a certain timeframe, and as the culmination of sexual intercourse. Thus, hegemonic masculinity has been closely linked to the ability of producing an ejaculatory response according to socially normed criteria.⁴⁴ Johnson’s work

41 This translation is by the authors from the original in French “[...] fragments d’une psychologie de la vie sexuelle [...]” in Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Étude médico-légale psychopathia sexualis avec recherches spéciales sur l’inversion sexuelle*, translated from the 8th German edition by Emile Laurent and Sigismond Csapo (Paris, 1895), <www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/24766/pg24766-images.html>. On alienism, see Francesca Arena, “Pollutions nocturnes,” in *DicoPolHis*, ed., Hervé Guillemain (Le Mans, 2023). On clinical practices in asylums, see Camille Bajoux, *Soigner la virilité: Une histoire de la santé masculine* (Lausanne, 2024).

42 Krafft-Ebing, *Étude médico-légale psychopathia sexualis*.

43 See, for example, Alain Giami, “Le ‘glauque’ ou la production du sperme infertile,” *Ethnologie française*, 41.1 (2011), 41–48; Sebastian Mohr, “Containing Sperm – Managing Legitimacy: Lust, Disgust, and Hybridity at Danish Sperm Banks,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 45.3 (2016), 319–342; Lisa Jean Moore, *Sperm Counts: Overcome by Man’s Most Precious Fluid* (New York, 2007).

44 Michael Johnson, “Just Getting Off’: The Inseparability of Ejaculation and Hegemonic Masculinity,” *The Journal of Men’s Studies*, 18.3 (2010), 238–248.

is useful for analysing the failure to comply with these norms in contemporary society: What about men who cannot control their ejaculation? What about those whose ejaculations do not conform to the norms and social contexts, outside of which they are not legitimate?

Against this background, it is all the more surprising that so few studies have looked at the role of nocturnal emissions in the construction and normalisation of adult masculinity: How do age norms evolve around nocturnal emissions? We know that in Alfred Kinsey's work, conducted in the second half of the twentieth century, nocturnal emissions were understood as a marker between boys, young men and men.⁴⁵ Some researchers believed that the first nocturnal emission was similar to the first menstruation in girls.⁴⁶ Are emissions thus to men what menstruation is to women?

Finally, no historical work has yet been dedicated to nocturnal emissions from a post-colonial perspective, and very few works have been devoted to the history of seeds or to the intersection of medicine and the colonial question in general.⁴⁷ In this context, we would like to highlight the 2021 article by Maria Kanwal and Rabia Iftikhar. While looking at spermatorrhoea in twenty-first century Pakistan, they also included an overview of its nineteenth-century global history, in which they interpreted this diagnosis purely as a "manifestation of male hysteria".⁴⁸ While not conducted by historians, such a broad comparative approach – cross-cultural and covering more than two centuries – nonetheless allowed Kanwal and Iftikhar to interpret nocturnal emissions in a new light.

45 Alfred Kinsey devoted an entire chapter of his book *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Bloomington, IN, 1948) to "Nocturnal emissions," 517–530; see Iris Rivoire, "Les rapports Kinsey et la sexualité des femmes, by Iris Rivoire, Francesca Arena, Marie Leyder," in *Nuits polluantes* (13.01.2025), <<https://doi.org/10.58079/132ha>>; eadem, "Kinsey: les femmes et les rêves érotiques, by Francesca Arena, Marie Leyder, Iris Rivoire," in *Nuits polluantes* (20 December 2024), <<https://doi.org/10.58079/12yzi>>; eadem, "Les études universitaires augmenteraient-elles la fréquence des pollutions nocturnes? Les rapports Kinsey," in *Nuits polluantes* (27 June 2024), <<https://doi.org/10.58079/11wcm>>. For a critique of Kinsey's findings, see also Barbara S. Matthews and Joel W. Wells, "A Comparative Study of Nocturnal Emissions," *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy*, 9.2 (1983), 26–31.

46 Jordan A. Chad, "The First Ejaculation: A Male Pubertal Milestone Comparable to Menarche?" *Journal of Sex Research*, 57.2 (2020), 213–221.

47 See, for example, the work on the history of representations by Andrew S. Curran: *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment* (Baltimore, MD, 2011); Delphine Peiretti Courtis, *Corps noirs et médecins blancs: La fabrique du préjugé racial* (Paris, 2021).

48 Maria Kanwal and Rabia Iftikhar, "Manifestation of Spermatorrhoea (Male Hysteria) in Adulthood – A Grounded Approach," *Pakistan Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 20.1 (2021), 3–16, at 4.

In general, however, it was – partly – by distinguishing themselves from racialised men that European doctors tried to weave the contours of masculinity and the new hierarchies of virility, *de facto* normalising white masculinity (a notion which will be analysed in Nina Studer’s contribution to this thematic section).⁴⁹ Nocturnal emissions were viewed, in the Western context, precisely as an element in the physiological process of becoming a man.

Many gaps in the historiography remain, opening up a vast field of research. The articles collected in this thematic section offer information that can push forward our understanding about nocturnal emissions and close some of the existing gaps. While not exhaustive, these articles are the results of an exchange that took place in May 2024.⁵⁰ These were organised within the framework of our research project “Nuits polluantes” dedicated to the medical history of nocturnal emissions.⁵¹

Jennifer Evans’s article contextualises the relative absence of overt and extended discussions of nocturnal emissions in English protestant medical publications from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as no treatises or even chapters were solely dedicated to this question. In this specific category of sources, Evans argues that nocturnal emissions were neither depicted as being especially damaging – in contrast to gonorrhoea and other venereal diseases – nor as directly connected to sin. Despite this, patients nonetheless held themselves somewhat responsible – and were deemed so by medical experts – as nocturnal emissions were believed to be caused by lustful thoughts. This usually led to an anonymisation of living patients’ names in publications, comparable to the discretion offered in discussions of venereal diseases.

Two articles of this thematic section are dedicated to medical theories on nocturnal emissions in the nineteenth century. Sophie Panziera’s article examines how “lascivious dreams” were interpreted in early–nineteenth century French physiological discourses on sleep. As her analysis demonstrates, such dreams – independent of whether they involved nocturnal ejaculations – were understood in this context as manifestations of the body’s natural functioning, resulting from an incomplete state of sleep. Panziera’s study seeks to show that this physiological interpretation emerged within a complex

49 See Francesca Arena, Sébastien Farré (eds.), *Santé, genre et sexualités : les masculinités au regard du (post-)colonial* (Chênes-Bourg, 2021).

50 “Un/Doing Masculinity: Wet Dreams from the 18th Century to the Present,” 22–23 May 2024, University of Geneva. For more details, see: <<https://wetdreams.hypotheses.org/734>>.

51 “Nuits polluantes: masculinité et médecine en Suisse et en France (XVIII–XX siècles),” University of Geneva, 2023–2025; see <www.unige.ch/cmcss/recherche/recherches/projets-actuellement-soutenus/les-pollutions-nocturnes>.

interplay of scientific, professional, and social dynamics. It formed part of a broader effort to challenge religious and divinatory superstitions traditionally associated with dreams. At the same time, it served as a means for physiologists to assert their expertise on the subject of dreams, in a context marked by competition with philosophical and moral sciences. This medical reading – advanced by male authors – can be seen, moreover, as an attempt to depathologise and normalise nocturnal emissions by framing them as part of normal sleep patterns and, by extension, as expressions of normative sexuality.

Nina S. Studer, by contrast, looks at the emergence of the diagnosis of spermatorrhoea in the 1830s, which she defines as the specific moment in which notions of a French imperial masculinity began to be formed. Studer argues that the worldview of the creator of spermatorrhoea, the French doctor François Lallemand, was shaped by procolonial ambitions and a deep Orientalism, which led him to fear an imminent war between the expanding West and ‘the Orient’, and that this worldview influenced both his view of healthy masculinity and, consequently, his very diagnosis. In this context, nocturnal and diurnal emissions turned into a marker of a dangerous failure in French men that, Lallemand feared, might at once cost France its colonial empire and lead to the West’s loss in its looming confrontation with the Orient.

At the turn of the twentieth century, as male puberty became the focus of increasing medical attention, nocturnal seminal emissions emerged as a key element in the construction of masculinities. Marie Leyder’s article explores how these emissions were interpreted during the first half of the twentieth century – veering between physiological norm and pathological sign – through a cross-analysis of medical literature and patient records from the Bel-Air psychiatric clinic in Geneva. Focusing on four case studies of patients born around 1900, the study traces the shifting meanings attributed to these bodily phenomena, ranging from markers of virility to indications of sexual deficiency, and highlights the interpretive role of dreams in clinical assessments. It also examines how these emissions were evaluated within psychiatric treatments, particularly in relation to surgical interventions on male sexual organs.

These contributions respond to some of the questions that remain open to new research on seminal emissions, while also highlighting some of the areas that require more attention from historians. What we have all come to realise, having each begun to work on this subject from very different starting points – on very different corpora and from different periods of history – is that seminal emissions are an enduring topic of medical and cultural controversies, often hidden from view by a perspective that uses contemporary gender and medical categories from the global North.