The Penetrated Male:
Phallic Feedback, The Male Hole, and Imposture

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A wife comes home early from work and enters her bedroom to find her husband naked on their bed masturbating. He watches heterosexual penetrative pornography and has a rubber phallic ‘imposter’ wedged snugly inside his rectum. Understandably, she is alarmed. The husband on the bed quickly tells her he is not gay. He loves her dearly and is still excited and aroused by her. He explains that he wants to feel what she feels when they make love. Does she buy that explanation or is something else going on? Simply asked, if we are to accept the penetrated male into our expanding pantheon of sexual states, as it seems we are beginning to do, how do we evaluate such a beast?

In addition to our husband on the bed we’ll use a male character from contemporary French fiction to further explore the dynamics of this sexuality. In Jean Genet’s novel Querelle de Brest,¹ we see penetrative sex between masculine men act as a type of regulatory code of conduct. Genet’s own erotic life among criminals and street hustlers informs these depictions, giving them their fraternal, subjugating force. As punishment for a murder, Querelle gives himself up to Norbert for anal penetration. Being invaded by another man is his self-imposed capital punishment. “Querelle had to execute himself” (Genet 73). Inviting sexual degradation and shame appears to be an

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¹ Published in France in 1947, its homoeroticism is an exploration of violent masculinity that turns the shame of anal penetration into an initiation right.
act of self-sacrifice, a death wish of sorts. But, as we will see, there is a familiar force, a self-organizing hegemonic masculinity, stubbornly holding onto power that prevents Querelle from becoming a martyr. In order to examine the penetrated male and his relationship to the penetrated female, we will use these two men and examine the mechanisms of their orgasms, both physical and psychically, to see if shared significations emerge.

Penetrated men must rearrange their sense of self that, for Leo Bersani, is “the basis on which sexuality is associated with power” (Bersani 218). The penetrator, the man, seemingly more powerful, tops the woman and “assumes that what excites her is the idea of her body being invaded by a phallic master” (Bersani 214). Penetrative sex is always, by its very nature, oppressive, according to Bersani. The penetrated male seems to attempt a dismantling of the phallic self “that swells with excitement at the idea of being on top, the self that makes of the inevitable play of thrusts and relinquishments in sex an argument for the natural authority of one sex over the other” (Bersani 218). The penetrated male could be seen as gaining pleasure from what Bersani sees as the sacrifice of one’s own “internalized phallic male.” Such a sacrifice could tip the scales in the power struggle between men and women, between penetrator and penetrated, as well as highlight, for men, the “strong appeal of powerlessness, of the loss of control” (Bersani 217). Anal penetration is one sex act that can, potentially, produce that sense of powerlessness in men. Comparing that submission with vaginal penetration, we will delineate the relationship between the two and show that the penetrated male may not help alleviate those powerful sexual inequalities but, instead, produces a male self that is more puffed up and self-serving.

Penetrative pleasure is readily seen in the sexuality of gay men, but heterosexual men, very possibly intrigued by these sexual practices, are also exploring an expanded field of sexual play. The husband on the bed, if what he tells his wife is truthful, may exhibit what Maxine Sheets-Johnstone calls, in her work, *The Roots of Power*, “jouissance envy” (Sheets-Johnstone 294). Female jouissance for our purposes, taking a cue from Sheets-Johnstone, we will connect to the female multiple orgasm, “an excess of sexual pleasure or delight or joy” (Sheets-Johnstone 292). The husband on the bed perceives

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2 *Jouissance* comes from the French, “enjoyment” or “pleasure” but with a sexual connotation, i.e., orgasm. In Lacanian terms it often encompasses pain, generated from the excess of pleasure. Lacking an English equivalent, translations of Lacan’s work leave the word intact. Though phallically determined, Lacan admits to a particular feminine *jouissance* that remains ineffable.
the female orgasm as a product of his masterful penetration skills. So, ‘logically,’ if he were to be penetrated, he too would experience this excess. His orgasm is limited, one and done. The husband on the bed envies the excess of the female orgasm. He seeks that moment when “pleasure and pain become irrelevant, in which the sexual emerges as the jouissance of exploded limits, as the ecstatic suffering into which the human organism momentarily plunges when it is pressed beyond a certain threshold of endurance” (Bersani 217). To explode his sexual limit, his singular orgasm, it would make sense (to the husband), that penetration would hold a key. It seems reasonable (to the husband), that when the sexual invades the male anus, what has been sealed tight and regulated, a “rupture of personal homogeneity” (Bataille 68) must occur that mimics or attempts to replicate the jouissance of the penetrated female. He will then experience this sexual excess, the ecstasy of self-shattering, the loss of control. Or will he? Before we address this question, we need to take a quick detour and explain why we construct what seems like an overly simplistic comparison.

Our discussion here is limited and somewhat crude. We handicap ourselves in order to confirm or eliminate a relationship between the penetrated male and the penetrated female, a comparison that is already unbalanced. Female jouissance has many faces, facets, and foils. We can only examine one manifestation, the jouissance of the penetrated female. We assume, at the risk of sounding primitive, as most men do when approaching the topic of female sexuality, that there are a certain percentage of women who experience this sexual excess, this multiple orgasm, when they accept penetration. To reduce our discussion to this single act is to exclude a rich and complicated analysis of female sexuality that has been made by an army of critics. We make this simplification because male sexuality itself has been so simplified. Regarding the concepts of Freud and Lacan, Sheets-Johnstone suggests, “what progressively comes to the fore in Lacan’s developing psychoanalytic is an enigmatic female and fully transparent male” (Sheets-Johnstone 293). Our discussion could be an opportunity to more fully understand female jouissance and bring some mystery back into male sexuality, but this lies outside our purvey. We will simply try to either induct the penetrated male, as a cousin or close relative to the penetrated female, into a family of penetrated sexual states or quickly check him off the list as an imposter. One person who may be qualified to make that evaluation is the wife of the husband on the bed.

The wife accepts, at face value, her husband’s explanation of why he has a dildo sticking out of his ass. But something about his explanation doesn’t
add up. Is the penetrated male expressly shattered? Does he experience this excess or is it possible that his sense of self is magnified; his ego, further phallicized and inflated, with no loss of consciousness, only sexual self-hyperbole and a “psychic tumescence” (Bersani 218)? Does the self of the penetrated male simply become hopelessly narcissistic? These are two crucial possibilities to examine as we consider the penetration of Querelle and the self-penetration performed by the husband on the bed. And hopefully we will end up with some helpful advice for the wife. What part does she have to play? Should she stay or should she go?

Shame and naïveté, the ability to deflect the signifier of the shamed bottom, are important to this discussion as we look at penetration and the place it finds itself within male sexuality. We will show that the penetrated male must be considered naïve, lacking a signification for shame, in order for us to see him as narcissistic. Shame, on the other hand, is a primary trigger for the sexual self-shattering effects of penetration. If the ego of the internalized phallic male feels shame, if our husband on the bed feels debased, then the sensation of the penetrative orgasm he experiences in that state of mind attaches itself in perpetuity to ‘being caught.’ We will then see if that experience has any kinship to female jouissance, as we have defined it. If Querelle experiences orgasm while being penetrated, his death sentence for murder, and a signification of shame sparks an erotic humiliation, something like female jouissance, an excess of pleasure and pain, will overwhelm his sense of self and he will discover other worlds of erotic possibility. The penetrated male and the penetrated female, sharing a similar sexual positioning and this signification of shame, sexual receptivity, may be experiencing kindred emotional states.

For the penetrated female, that moment when she becomes sexualized, can be read as a signifier for a type of shame. She is the bottom end of a sexual power struggle that Bersani highlights when he references arguments against penetrative sex made by Catherine MacKinnon. Sheets-Johnstone tells us how Lacan deflects the implications of this glaring inequality, the phallically determined top and bottom, by the reductive, easy argument that a woman’s experience, the multiple-orgasm, is ineffable, that because of its mysterious source, though initiated by the phallus, the locus of her

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3 MacKinnon’s basic assertion is that “what is called sexuality [penetration] is the dynamic of control by which male dominance - in forms that range from intimate to institutional, a look to rape - eroticizes and thus defines man and woman, gender identity and sexual pleasure.” Bersani views this relationship as the source of the sexually shattered self and, unlike Mackinnon, views this state as undeniably erotic.
experience is undefined. This is a point of contention for Sheets-Johnston. She puts forth the argument that, for Lacan, “female sexuality is a problem because females are capable of one orgasm after the other. They are capable of an excess of sexual pleasure or delight or joy, and such excess is not accounted for in the Lacanian psychoanalytic libidinal economy” (Sheets-Johnstone 292).

If there is no activation point the female can control, then she is dependent upon the phallus for that activation. “How can this hole, this nothing, be the source of a seriate joy?” (292) She loses control, her autonomy, over this ephemeral orgasmic thing that Lacan refuses to directly identify. Penetration for a woman, if sexual and invited, seems to reveal a type of pleasure already present. An idea of what that condition could be comes to us from Kathryn Stockton. Referencing the Bersani essay, she tells us “sex is a kind of intensification or a mode of revelation of an always already-shattered self” (Stockton 15). Women then experience this self-shatteredness more first hand when accepting penetration for sexual pleasure. Penetration, with its accompanying signification, the shamed bottom, is one way to provide the necessary ‘pain’ that merges with pleasure. These are key components to a female jouissance. For Stockton, this self-shattered state is an ever-present condition that is simply unveiled during sex.

For Lacan, female jouissance is enigmatic, whose potential may or may not always be present, because its source cannot be located independent of phallic determination. Sheets-Johnstone believes female jouissance can and must be an explained phenomenon. Lacan cannot explain its nature because “he never comes close to speaking of the living body” (Sheets-Johnstone 295). Lacan does not recognize the living body. His loci of sexual power and response are metaphoric not corporeal. Sheets-Johnstone wants holes to be located corporeally and explains, “jouissance is clearly an experience of the felt body, in particular, the tactile-kinesthetic body” (294). She asks how it is possible to explain the female’s sexual experience in terms of jouissance without referencing “the living body, and not simply the female living body, but the male living body” (294). In order for us to explain what the husband on the bed and Querelle experience, we must behold the living, corporeal, male hole. We must locate the locus of the self-shattering male, something Sheets-Johnstone does not attempt.

She makes a move away from the male hole back to his phallus in order to explain why Lacan refuses to articulate then map his concepts onto a physical reality. Instead of exploring the penetrated male, using the
penetrated female as a model, she uses male anxieties surrounding the phallus, castration anxiety and Sartre’s concept of dissolution, to explain Lacan’s refusal to explore, even to invent a language capable of explaining female jouissance, or the sexuality of lack, other than to say that it is simply beyond the phallus. She remains phallocentric in her analysis. But as she shuns the male hole she does leave us with an imperative that we will take up. “The corporeal archetype of the female as model of the unconscious prevails. Something wonderful and foreboding cannot be reduced to the law of the signifier, the phallus is powerless to condense it in an algebraic formula” (Sheets-Johnstone 295). The physical, corporeal, female body, most notably her hole, is the standard we will use. “All such sites of wonder and foreboding are potentially sites of new discoveries and new beginnings, sources of creativity that are outside the endless chain of signifiers” (295). “All of our powers originate on the grounds of that corporeal real” (295). We now take up the journey she bypasses.

If the female locus of jouissance is indefinable, then that seat of power inside the male hole may be equally illusive. But then again, maybe not, as seen in the de-flowering of Querelle. “Here it comes. At the first thrust, so strong it almost killed him, Querelle whimpered quietly, then more loudly, until he was moaning without restraint or shame” (Genet 75). “Querelle ejaculated onto the velvet” (76). An awesome anal orgasm is his punishment for knifing Vic. As Querelle moans without shame while being penetrated, a crucial ingredient, the signifier of the shamed bottom, goes missing for achieving a sexually shattered self. He does, however, achieve orgasm, not from the stimulation of his erection, but from stimulation directed at a spot inside him. Is this comparable to the significations of the penetrated female? Male physiology provides an answer to this question and is crucial to understanding the male anal orgasm as it relates to a female multiple-orgasm.

The prostate gland, sitting on top a large nerve bundle, is easily accessed from inside the rectum. This is the corporeal center for male sexual response to penetration. It is the proud parent of the hands-free anal orgasm. Querelle explodes onto the velvet, without shame. He is simply the willing recipient of pressure placed on a bundle of nerve endings, which produces a transformative sexual release. If a signifier of shame is not part of this equation, at least as he experiences it, then a self-shattering does not occur. Something else happens in its place. Though initially seeking punishment for a crime, Querelle, in essence, experiences the birth of a new self. Once that barrier is breached (his hole), he experiences what it’s like to be a “real fairy.” He becomes more aware of self, not as it relates to the experience of a
woman, but as an expanded signification of male sexuality, his penetrated self. A signification of shame seems to be missing.

Because Querelle experiences this orgasm through an erect penis (its presence is ubiquitous while he is being penetrated), he never loses sight of the fact that he is, at all times, the possessor of the phallus. The husband on the bed, self penetrated, erection in hand, is also reminded of the same thing. Both penetrations reinforce for these guys the immense phallic power they possess. Their sense of the internalized and externalized phallic male is multiplied. Far from shattering his sense of self, the penetrated male understands, via the explosive nature of an anal orgasm, the immense power of his male partner’s phallus. He understands that his own phallus contains that same power. The penetrated male holds an erect penis in hand, but also holds tight to his partner’s activated phallic power within the muscled grip of his breached orifice. The penetrated male is made more aware of phallic power. This contrasts sharply with what Jean-Paul Sartre sees as a man’s dissolution when he enters a woman.

A man penetrates his female partner (in missionary position for the sake of this argument). He looks down to enjoy the view, and sees that his penis, his phallic power, has disappeared, essentially castrated and dissolved inside his partner. Sheet’s-Johnstone gives us this assessment of Sartre’s idea: “By inserting his penis inside a female, he allows himself to be negatively transformed into a being that is no longer a fullness of being, a being who can no longer fill holes, a diminished human specimen” (Sheets-Johnstone 176). When a man penetrates another man, again in missionary position, he looks down and sees his penis swallowed up, but also sees (consider the vantage point), that his partner’s erection remains visible. The phallic signification of sexual power is always present with the penetrated male. No dissolution occurs. There is no self-shattering.

This resistance to self-shattering does depend, however, on the man’s naiveté. Because of his power position, as the constant possessor of the phallus, he sets his own limits of shame within his sexual constructs. Even when he wishes to include being penetrated as part of his sexual repertoire, he is assured the presence of his own erection to reinforce the notion that his penetrative power always lies in wait, even while he is being penetrated. He can still fuck his wife or his boyfriend or his fist at any time. He is always able to reclaim his power position. This is a naiveté produced by power. “I am not shamed by being penetrated because, while I invite the penetration, my
erect penis, my phallus, as you can plainly see, swells with the imminent power of penetrative potentiality that I can, at any moment, call upon.”

The husband on the bed tells his wife, “Honey, its just something new and a little freaky. Look at me; I still have enough hard phallic energy for you. This is no big deal!” If being penetrated does not shame him, if he deflects the signification of the shamed bottom by setting the parameters of his own penetration, then he maintains autonomy over his sense of self. There is no shattering, no dissolution, no “jouissance of exploded limits” (Bersani 217). He becomes narcissistic. In Lacanian terms, the penetrated male is both having the phallus and being the phallus.4

Sheets-Johnstone suggests Lacan himself suffers from this narcissistic condition linguistically, that he has a “linguist priapism” that he himself recognizes when he asks whether or not he is just blowing himself up out of proportion, his concern for his own “imposturing.” She contends that “in blowing himself up out of all proportion and in dissembling before us, he is precisely playing the role of the Lacanian phallus; he both has and is the object of desire” (Sheets-Johnstone 318). Linguistically fucking himself, his tongue becomes the imposter for his penis. “Having it [linguistic phallus], he inflates as only a male does, and, in an archetypal sense, makes a grand spectacle of himself; being it, he parades as the totemic figure he would like to be but is not since he is not his dearest object” (Sheets-Johnstone 318). Such phallic imposturing is seen in other forms of popular culture.

Johnny Knoxville and the boys from Jackass5 represent how males, in a Lacanian sense, maintain hegemonic masculine power structures by “making a spectacle of themselves in the imposture of phallic display” (318). These guys are radically re-defining what it means for a male to be penetrated. A toy car is inserted into Ryan Dunn’s rectum. Bam Margera flies a kite tied to anal beads he inserts into his rectum. Knoxville gets his prostate massaged. Wee-Man inserts an apple into Preston Lacy’s ass for a pig to eat. Their standing within the social structure of this group of friends, and their plays for power, are directly connected to the amount of debasement they endure.

4 Giving a nod to Butler’s exploration of the phallus as “transferable” its “plastic property,” the dildo becomes the phallus. From “The Lesbian Phallus” Butler says, “to insist on the transferability of the phallus, is to destabilize the distinction between being and having the phallus.”

5 Jackass premiers on MTV in 2000. It emerges out of the extreme skateboarding community as a reality TV show involving dangerous stunts, hidden camera pranks, and dares, mostly as acts of humiliation that often involve crude sexual situations.
For the maintenance of masculine hierarchies, such behaviors seem counter intuitive. But according to R.W. Connell in her discussion of hegemonic masculinity, men in power have the ability to rearrange the rules by which they organize themselves. “When the conditions for the defense of patriarchy change, the bases for the dominance for a particular masculinity erode” (Connell 77). Women in this age group, mid to late 30s, are as educated, as independent as their male counterparts, and have more control over life decisions than women from previous generations. The extreme nature of the stunts, dares, and humiliations these guys put one another through may be in response to the erosion of old systems of masculinity initiated by a greater amount of female independence. The *Jackass* boys may be responding to a new set of social cues. As Connell points out, “new groups may challenge old solutions and construct a new hegemony” (77). To remain an enlisted member in good standing, instead of counting sexual conquests or racing fast cars or achieving some great sporting triumph, a member of the *Jackass* band of brothers must vomit the swallowed goldfish back into its bowl, endure genital mutilation, or be strapped to a luggage cart in bondage gear and paraded through an expensive hotel lobby.

These behaviors do not create self-shatterings and, arguably, there is no sexual satisfaction taken from this debasement. The phallic representations, the toy car, the apple, the anal beads, and the friend who inserts them, are acting as imposters to the phallus of sexual penetration, thus, as Sheets-Johnstone tells us, referencing Lacan, they create a *homo-social* “spectacle of imposture.” This imposture, at least with the *Jackass* boys, appears to neutralize shame. They take control of shame because these penetrations become acts of male bonding, reinforcing one’s standing within the social group. They are sources of pride not shame. These guys make themselves unaware of any shame connected to the debasement of their own bodies. They become naïve and therefore prone to narcissism. This behavior creates a male, phallic, feedback loop, which reinforces maleness as the dominant governing force. As strange as it may seem, these outlandish behaviors maintain the structures of their re-invented hegemonic masculinity.6

In *Jackass 3D*, near the end of the movie, Knoxville holds a bowl full of colorful dildos. Slow-motion explosions rock the bowl out of his hands and no females anywhere in sight. These are air-

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6 Judith Halberstam addressing a conference of mostly gay white men at the University of Michigan in 2005 references Eve Sedgwick and offers this cautionary note, “white men (gay or straight) pursuing the interests of white men (gay or straight) always means a heap of trouble for everyone else.”
born dildos without specified destinations. They act as phallic imposters, not to shame the participants who handle them, but to reinforce the autonomous nature of the phallus. It (they) can go anywhere. This brings us back to our husband on the bed.

The husband finds another source of desire, emanating, not from his wife’s opening, but from inside his own rectum, an impostured desire. His being the phallus, his hole’s desire for penetration, is the imposter of the desire coming from within his wife’s hole. Having the phallus he achieves his own penetration with a rubber, phallic imposter. He makes a spectacle of himself, and when he reaches orgasm, centered on the prostate, there is no multiple-orgasm, no excess. There may be an enhanced, more explosive, singularly intense ejaculation, but this doesn’t explode his sexual limits, simply redefines them. He just falls asleep more quickly. Because there is no signification of shame or excess, it bears little resemblance to a female sexual response. His phallic self is not sacrificed or shattered but experiences a narcissistic inflation. The male anal orgasm is an imposter to the jouissance of the penetrated female. What is a wife to do?

It’s important to reference the limitations of this discussion, not just as epilogue, but to fully recognize this discussion as only part of the tip of a much larger discussion. The type of male penetration depicted here is very vanilla. The anal penetration is invited, planned, and expressly controlled. When compared with vaginal penetration of a similar ilk, we see they are potentially very different. We make the claim that this type of penetrated male, because he is able to deflect a signification of shame, has little in common with the jouissance of the penetrated female. Instead we see it reinforce the phallocentricity of the male sexual response. Having and being the phallus, linguistically with Lacan, socially, within the hierarchy of the Jackass boys, and sexually, with our husband on the bed, does not allow a penetrated male, no matter how generic the penetration, to experience anything akin to female jouissance. Male penetration alone, particularly when it is initiated and controlled by the man himself, does not equalize the power struggle within the sexuality of males and females. It may, in fact, given that such penetration produces this narcissistic inflation, cause the male to be more aware of the power of the phallus. Do women really want their men filling themselves up with more of themselves?

Far from answering this question outright, we complicate matters by resetting the argument through the claim that the penetrated male has not shattered his sense of self. A much closer, more detailed look at the varieties
of shame is needed. Stockton’s work could help expand and further inform us just how “debasements that lodge in a mind, or spread throughout the brain, still enter through the body” (Stockton 24). There are a hundred and one ways to shame one’s self sexually. What we leave out here is the discussion of the fantasies of shame and what role they may or may not be playing inside the heads of these men getting penetrated. It could be that true shame exists only in the mind, things we may share with our partners or, more likely, always keep secret. Would it be different for our examination of Querelle if he fantasized about being raped? Are the Jackass boys just horsin’ around, playing it off as though it’s all just tom-foolery, or are there shameful, sexual fantasies churning inside their heads as they debase one another that they use in private moments to initiate and sustain sexual encounters with themselves or their partners? Maybe Lacan, in his private fantasies, really did regard his own hole and linguistically produced a language of signifiers to explain the sexuality of lack, but was too ashamed to publish it.

And, finally, to our husband on the bed, it’s time for him to face his wife. Can this couple find an agreeable equilibrium? She could go along with the action he has initiated, but she decides to enact a different scenario that may produce a more satisfactory result. “Take your hands off the dildo,” she tells him. “Go wash it and give it to me.” He does as he is told. “Stay naked.” He drops his bathrobe. She wipes off her makeup, dons a pair of her husband’s chinos, and takes control of the penetration. If the wife enacts the penetration and couples it with an unexpected role-play that incorporates a type of shaming that the husband responds to, will the husband, now not in control of his own penetration, come closer to experiencing something like his wife’s jouissance? It could work.

We devote the last word to the most visible type of the penetrated male, the homosexual. With the phallus always present in these sexual exchanges, applied reciprocally or not, there is a genuine concern for the negative effects of this phallic feedback. Gay men have been called narcissistic for a long time. It may be the most misunderstood characteristic assigned to them. But when we consider male sexual physiology, the prostate, the anal orgasm, the ever-present penetrative potential of their own phallus, this narcissistic inflation may overpower, most notably in the gay male, all other forms of sexual pleasure. The concern is that the ecstasy of self-shattering may actually be out of reach for him. The ecstasy of the inflated narcissistic self, the orgasm of being fucked by one’s own admired reflection, is a sensation caught within a solidly inflated phallic determination. This can either provide
a healthy self identification with other men, leading to strong social structures within gay male groups, or the reflection can hold one’s own male gaze so firmly, that little or no regard is paid to other groups, sexual or otherwise. If the penetrated male, as we have described him, does not experience female jouissance, but just a pumped up version of his own reflection, where do we look to help us assign value to this creature?

“To be penetrated is to abdicate power” (Bersani 212). What is important about this maxim is what is missing. How is one penetrated? Who is penetrating? What power does a gay man abdicate to another gay man? If narcissistic inflation is viewed as a power share between gay men who have no real power to begin with, then is this not just pumping one another full of failed power? Gay men may well be the Hans and Franz of the male, phallic, feedback loop. Their exchange of the perceived power of the phallus may be the cornerstone of a homosexual power dynamic that, like its hetero counterpart, is self-sustaining only as it is narcissistic.
Works Cited


