

## We Want Viagra

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THE PAST YEAR SEEMS TO HAVE BEGUN an era of wishful tumescence. As the millennium winds down, gigantic ocean liners, errant asteroids, and the presidential priapus wind up, bobbing full blown into the center of attention. While the American cultural imaginary is pleased with visions of the Titanic knifing into the sea bottom up, astral bodies plunging into the earth, and the chief executive initiating his intern, with a little blue \$10 pill the pharmaceutical imaginary seems to have solved the equipment failure for which all of these spectacular penetrations might compensate. If the beginning of the twentieth century is figured as the big boat's hubristic failure, the end is being advertised as its happy (res)erection.

Certainly, despite the sudden appearance of fields of perky parts, the repeated image of the successfully-interpellated member is not only about a future rife with Trojan-buying octogenarians, or elder hostel parking lots filled with rocking 70s sex vans. In fact, all this excitement is probably not caused by the miracle pill at all. Rather, the passion around Viagra is the highly suspicious tip of an iceberg, the reiterated symptom of a discursive formation which, while it could be just a desire to double your pleasure, double your fun, seems most obviously to be about a specifically gendered equation of potency and power. Indeed, if we accept the penetrating perspicacity of populist *Penthouse* publisher Bob Guccione, who tells us that "feminism has emasculated the American male, and that emasculation has led to physical problems," or the inspired insight of author Gay Talese who, currently writing a book about the penis, tells us that "the penis is a weapon, and much of society has been aimed at controlling it," we might believe that somehow the gentle genital has been the bobbed casualty of castrating Cassandras and the hapless victim of unconstitutional background checks and 3-day waiting periods (*Time* 4 May 98 56). If indeed social and political power were somehow incarnated in the proverbial

“big stick,” and if women’s rights advocates really had an uncontrollable craving to grasp the baton, then Guccione might be right. And if this is indeed what Viagra is all about, then women’s demand for a drug that intervenes in the enzymatic chemistry of the penis makes sense as a desire for symbolic empowerment or at least continuing detente in the domestic short arms race.

But when women say “we want Viagra,” does that mean they are asking for power or merely for an equal opportunity for bliss? Feminists have traditionally been quite phobic about power. Regarded by many feminist activists and writers of the 60s and 70s as the pernicious pith of phallocracy, power became The Thing to Be Avoided in efforts to rethink more liberated cultural arrangements. Ti-Grace Atkinson, described as “the political pioneer of the women’s movement,” shuns power, stating that “in identifying one’s interests with any power class, one thereby maintains the position of that class. As long as any class system is left standing, it stands on the backs of women” (73). Rita Laporte, writing in *The Ladder* between 1968 and 1972 identifies power with specifically male organizational psychology: “Only by banding together and following a leader can men find strength, for they are emotionally and spiritually weaker, more dependent and sheeplike, than women. This animal-like urge to band into groups, while giving the individual members a feeling of potency, also necessitates fighting to defend the prowess of their leader against other, exactly similar groups” (109). More temperate feminists such as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem avoid even the appearance of any direct feminist challenge to male potency even if they indirectly contest gendered structures of power. Friedan, proposing a “New Life Plan for Women” in the 1963 *The Feminine Mystique*, exhorts women to find a solution to what she refers to as “the problem that has no name” by redefining the terms and relations that already exist. She says, “we need a drastic reshaping of the cultural image of femininity that will permit women to reach maturity, identity, completeness of self, without conflict with sexual fulfillment” (351). Gloria Steinem is even more reassuring: “Men think that once women become liberated, it will mean no more sex

for men. But what men don't realize is that if women are liberated, there will be more sex and better" (Qtd. in Laporte 110-111).

Even if we might suspect that the ladies did protest too much, that eschewing power betrayed a wish for it, or that by offering better sex, one could make a deal for liberation, most feminists have long since ceased to think that the connections among power, sexuality, and gender are so unilateral or simple. So while women insisting "we want Viagra" might appear to be another strident call for gender-blind equality premised on a sibling-rivalry competition for the goodies, such an analysis, though probably quite on target for some willing consumers, is primarily a superficial reading appropriate to *Fortune* Magazine and such pundits as "postfeminist" Camille Paglia, who, echoing Talese in the *Time* magazine spread in May of 1998, informs us that "the erection is the last gasp of modern manhood. If men can't continue to produce erections, they're going to evolve themselves right out of the human species. I want men to re-examine, really re-examine why they need this pill. Because they do need it, they need it right now. They need it to bolster themselves. They need it to stiffen their erections. It's like the steel that they would get if they were at war."

But why do they need it? Despite Paglia's articulate call to the pharmacopeia, I suspect that Viagra, the Titanic, the Millennium, and Monica Lewinsky converge around a spectre even more frightening than impotence and have at stake something more vital and basic than either the upper hand in a gender war or pleasure past 50. At first glance, it appears that Viagra is an instance of over-literalization; the Phallus has finally become just the penis and this penis is highly fallible. Viagra is the "objective correlative" of the long erosion of patriarchal power, as the metaphorical figure-heads of patriarchy—the father and the Phallus—become too literal to perform their regulatory functions.<sup>1</sup> That Viagra can so easily elevate the organ points paradoxically to the organ's organ-ness, deflating its power mystique, but at the same time suggesting that there exists somewhere else a power that can fix it. This displacement of the Phallus into the bowels of transcorporate culture

<sup>1</sup>For a longer discussion of this trend, see my *Reproductions of Reproduction: Imaging Symbolic Change*.

<sup>2</sup>I'm speaking here of Jacques Lacan's notion of the Phallus as an inaccessible object of desire.

shifts the gendered terms of patriarchy from the comforting binaries of complementary gender to the more perplexing and unlocated functions of a more truly veiled Phallus finally detached from its human referent into realms of pharmacological magic.<sup>2</sup>

Although we might characterize the twentieth century as a period during which at least some cultural activity has been aimed at covering over and compensating for the loss of the paternal metaphor; and even if on some level Viagra is perhaps the last, overly-literal magic bullet that salvages the Phallus in all its elevated grandeur, letting the dance begin with a full head of Propitious locks is not as much about mere impotency, Rogaining lost youth, staving off death, or even revealing the Symbolic failure of patriarchy as it is about reasserting sexual difference—about making sure boys are still boys and girls girls. If the spectre of phallic potency looms like a Macy's Thanksgiving day parade balloon in the cultural imaginary, then its presence is not so much about feared impotence (which, because admitted and curable, is no longer really a fear), but is rather about an apprehension that the context within which phallic potency is significant has disappeared. Viagra discourse works to resecure ideas of complementary sexual difference through which women are again rendered inferior versions of men. This flip side of potency is indeed linked to power through anxieties about the loss of American national primacy as transnational corporatism, cybermarkets, and globalism permeate traditional boundaries and level the imagined differences between them and us whoever we or they are. Sexual difference then becomes the local, delusively natural evidence of the persistence of a structure of binary difference that contributes to the possibility of continued modes of dominance and discrimination. Even if the Phallus has been shown to be deflatable, having one still counts as long as an epistemology of binary oppositions continues to operate as the primary organizer of cultural sense.

The fear of the loss of sexual difference is not a new anxiety. Feminism was read by some (such as Phyllis Schlafly and Anita Bryant) as advocating a loss of sexual difference; one of the primary early ploys in the anti-feminist cam-

paign of the late-60s and 70s was the obsessive reference to the horror of unisex bathrooms and the more covert but equally appalling implication that feminists were all man-hating lesbians whose refusal to comply with the demands of public femininity blurred the distinction between males and females. The fear of the loss of sexual difference, however, is not merely a fear spurred by feminism; it is motivated quite literally by the medical technologies of transsexuality, the recognition of genetically intersexed beings, and the disappearance of the reproductive necessity for all but gametes (and with cloning not even those) that all point to what Monique Wittig has argued and Judith Butler elucidates in *Gender Trouble*: that gender is constructed and performative rather than essential or true; that outside the Symbolic there are not simply two distinctly defined opposing and complementary genders. And if sexual difference is one imaginary site of a grounded guarantee of difference, then the loss of other kinds of clearly delineated racial, ethnic, national, and even class oppositions could also contribute to this fear. Thus, disciplining behavior and appearances in terms of a binary gender code serves purposes beyond a simple reproductive logic. But what are these purposes and what forms does this fear take?

The Viagra obsession's connection to epistemologies of gender and formations of imagined national power does spur an inquiry into the character and stakes of a discursive formation such as Foucault outlines in *Archaeology of Knowledge*. Though the rest of this paper will not be exactly a Foucauldian reading of sex/gender formations, I want to begin by mapping the parameters of what would roughly approximate his notion of a discursive formation—"the interplay of the rules that make possible the appearance of objects during a given period of time"—in other words, what makes the Viagra phenomenon (including its invention, marketing, popularity, and the question of its applicability to women) possible and necessary now? We might answer this question by analyzing "the interplay of the[ir] appearances and dispersion" of "themes, images, and opinions" to define "a field of strategic possibilities?" (37)—by identifying the various and often contradictory phenomena that contribute to the field of anxiety and possibility

to which Viagra might belong and the interests those contradictions serve.

I suggested above that Viagra is at least concurrent with an obsessive interest in the Titanic, some kind of Millennial anxiety, a more shadowy obsession with objects hurtling to earth, and a prurient and smug fixation on Bill Clinton's sexual experiences. I would add in addition to these emblematic narratives of hubris, penetration and destruction, several other cultural preoccupations and seeming inconsistencies. There is the enthusiastic erosion of Affirmative Action, the odd alignment of feminists with instead of against Clinton, the rise of the cigar, a fear of untrammelled immigration and uncontrolled racial mixing, Jerry Springer's total captivation with transgender and transsexuality, a fascination with large-eyed infantile aliens who both are and are not us, the Promisekeepers, the Klan, scads of adulterous politicians, and a series of rather odd statements around Viagra itself.

In the Viagra category, there are at least six curious anomalies or contradictions, all of which point to Viagra's underlying stake in protecting sexual difference conceived specifically as gender complementarity hidden within an institutional discourse of equality—or at least equal access.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>This is the discourse as that existed in November, 1998. Of course, it continues to multiply, but so far has reiterated this formulation.

1) *Time* magazine reports that Pfizer "leaving nothing to chance, has even requested and received the Vatican's unofficial blessing for Viagra" (52). Presumably this sanctified sildenafil (the non-romantic generic name for Viagra) is used only to aid reproductive relations, but given Viagra's cotillion allure to the post-menopausal set, reproduction seems to be the last thing on the minds of the coitally rejuvenated. But why else would the Vatican unofficially stoop to consecrate a "quality-of-life" drug?

2) Another set of rather odd contradictions exists around the mention of the Viagran's partner. Included as belated acknowledgement that it takes two, the press consistently tags on the presumably sated partner at the ends of its declarations about customer satisfaction. After recounting the Papal high sign, for example. *Time* announces that "All in all, a happy ending for American men, their partners, and especially Pfizer stockholders, who have seen the value of their shares jump nearly 60% this year" (52).

Notwithstanding the all-too-literal parallel between Viagra's effects on the direction of the market and sex organs, that partners (who could presumably be women or men, though the press on Viagra so far makes impotence a heterosexual condition) are mentioned in a list with stockholders points to the all-too-obvious profit motives of Viagra marketing, a campaign that thrives, as Paul Starr observes, on men rushing to be declared impotent. To determine the success of the drug, William Steers, University of Virginia urologist, notes that the best measure would be spousal questionnaires. But, he continues, "when you ask women about sex with their Viagra-enhanced husbands,...their response is always lower than the men's" (Cohen 26). Indeed, women have been complaining to Dear Abby that they aren't so happy that their husbands have rediscovered their old toys; increased sexual activity among previously benched players has resulted in an increase in bladder infections and other maladies in women. Dr. Ruth Westheimer, sex adviser, warns that "Even if a man has an erection from floor to ceiling and can keep it that way for an hour, it will not be pleasurable for a woman if he is not sexually literate" (*Time* 56). Dr. Ruth's common sense approach is curiously contradicted by an accompanying statement from Nancy Friday. "It is frightening," Friday says, "to be a male these days. We are a performance-oriented society, and sex has always been to the woman's advantage. For sex to occur, all she has to do is lie there" (*Time* 56).

3) The most telling contradictions around Viagra appear when women are included in formulations where their inclusion really makes little sense. For example, *Time* gives us "One more nugget of possibly boring but crucial biochemistry: the erectile tissue in the penis has a finite number of receptors for cyclic GMP [the relaxation chemical]. This means that a normally functioning man with adequate levels of the chemical shouldn't get any more bang for his buck by gobbling Viagra; the variations anyone feels in his or her sexual response are due to factors outside the drug's purview" (56). His or *her* response? Like a habit gone wrong, the thoughtless inclusion of women in penile formulations seems part of an ingrained practice of grammatical parity where the conventional "his and her" makes a for-

mulaic nod to gender equality. However, *Fortune* informs us parenthetically, “(Women also have erectile tissues)” (118), but no one ever mentions whether these tissues also have GMP, the specific chemical at stake here or specifies any further where or what these “tissues” are.

4) The idea of women using Viagra assumes, like *Fortune*, that women possess some euphemistically designated “erectile tissues,” some abbreviated parenthetical version of something like the penis, which is not a very new idea at all. Sigmund Freud saw the women’s clitoris as a little penis while also denying such morphological similarity in favor of anatomical complementarity, shifting his attention, as he presumed women did, from the clitoris of the woman’s infantile masculine stage to the vagina of her mature femininity.<sup>4</sup> There is, however, a complex incompatibility in employing both a model of morphological similarity *and* a model of genital complementarity at the same time. If they are similar, the parts just don’t add up; if they are complementary, some get left out. The Viagra phenomenon images women’s genitals as if they were simultaneously finger and glove, without, of course, ever mentioning by name or outside whispered parentheses anything but the vagina. In fact as downright explicit as the press is about the penis with diagrams, painfully detailed cross-sections, and first person reports on the particulars of posture, positing that Viagra might affect a part other than the vagina or some vague general genital area seems to be something that cannot be said, even parenthetically. Why not? Because despite the logical dependence on anatomical analogy, the potential benefits of Viagra for women are all characterized in the realm of complementarity. Not only does this assume a heterosexual norm, it produces and enforces it by limiting the ways sexual activity is perceived. At its heart, the notion of complementarity is always about heterosexuality.

Even though what is at stake here is sexual *difference*, morphological analogy and complementarity are really two versions of *sameness*. While analogy would seem to suggest some initial difference, it depends upon finding and privileging likeness. While complementarity would seem to suggest difference, it really renders differences as greater

<sup>4</sup>Freud discusses this shift and its difficulties in “Female Sexuality.”

or lesser versions of the same. Shifting from analogy to complementarity, then, is like switching from parity to hierarchy, from equivalence to relativity. Morphological similarity does provide the logic by which Viagra might work for women—a possibility mentioned sooner or later by every article discussing Viagra's profitability. Viagra works by blocking the action of the enzyme that breaks down the chemical (GMP) that enables the relaxation of erectile tissue. In relaxed tissue sexual excitement sends blood flowing to arteries which expand and cut off the veins that otherwise balance the plumbing. Most descriptions of Viagra's operation are not that detailed, being more the idea that sildenafil simply widens blood vessels, permitting blood to flood to appropriate areas, a description that permits continued fantasies of a women's market.

With the continued glossing of Viagra's actual operation, its action becomes more generalized and we slide from a logic of analogy into the realm of genital complementarity. *Time*, like *Fortune*, parenthetically notes that "(the drug's merits appear to be manifold; doctors think it might even improve the sexual response of postmenopausal women)" (52). For men Viagra is figured as aiding conservation-as augmenting the account without simultaneously draining it; for women Viagra might enhance the banking experience. One doctor who thinks so is Dr. Jennifer Berman who not parenthetically, but in a little set-off box in *Consumer Reports*, suggests that Viagra might help women "by increasing blood flow to the genital area and allowing the smooth muscles of the vagina to relax" (62). *American Druggist* also informs us that "It has been theorized that Viagra could improve blood flow to women's sexual organs, making intercourse more enjoyable and possibly relieving cases of vaginal dryness" (22). In terms of Viagra's complex process of negating the negator of the relaxer that expands, in males *relaxed* erectile tissue is actually the opposite of what is meant; whereas, for women relaxed wet tissue is exactly what is meant. As (I suspect) Berman is glossed again and again, the benefits of Viagra for women turn increasingly into vaguely dislocated benefits to coupling in general. Viagra might permit women to perform their recipient role better and more enjoyably, presumably

for both parties.

5) The plain fact is that despite Viagra's auspicious beginnings as a prospective heart drug, official research has only just begun on Viagra and women which is interesting given the fact that Merck is quite forthright about Propecia's threats to the unborn. While market interests might explain why hair loss remedies have been tested on women (since if the hidden secret for men has been impotence, then the recently outed secret for women is baldness), why didn't these same interests pounce upon the frigidity market? Because the problem isn't that women might just lie there, but that "it" might just lie there. Pharmaceutical planners already perceived women as merely lesser passive recipients of male sexual activity who didn't really need to elevate their mood. Even though the medical profession has been increasingly reminded of its male bias (using male bodies as standard or neutral testing terrain, producing and marketing remedies for maladies that more visibly affect males), that Viagra goes from heart to part renders quite allegorically visible the continued gendering of medical technology and its representations that suggest the ways medicine itself is bound up not only with commodity culture, but with policing sexual difference as a biological-research founded medical fact which it at the same time constantly denies. As Kate Clinton observes, "Viagra seemed to get PDA fast-track approval in about ten minutes, while RU-486—the morning-after pill which women need now more than ever—has not been approved in this country despite years of trying. And I doubt," she continues, "that women will ever get a drug specifically designed for their own sexual needs because that would involve more than the most anecdotal, 'when we say men, we mean women, too' research." Analogy, while seeming to include women, actually enables their erasure as specifically different entities.

6) The issue of insurance coverage for "quality-of-life" drugs such as Viagra, Rogaine, Propecia, and Retin-A also myopically focuses on the unfairness of a drug that is too expensive to let all men stand democratically equal among their peers. The possible lack of insurance coverage for this essential remedy prompted philanthropist Ace Greenberg

to donate \$1 million to provide the drug to guys unable to afford it—that’s 100,000 nights of rapture (Carlson 21). It’s nice that Greenberg and more amazingly some insurance companies and HMO’s are willing to underwrite a stiffening economy, but their continued refusal to pay for birth control pills, abortion or other effects of such prowess again points to the ways the medical profession perpetuates and in fact underwrites ideologies of sexual difference as a rationale for disparate treatment, especially in the realm of reproduction.<sup>5</sup>

One way to understand these contradictions and inconsistencies is that Viagra is the outstanding figure head of a formation that simultaneously masks and enables the reestablishment of sexual difference perceived as binary and oppositional. The co-existing discourses of equality—women have “erectile tissues” too; complementarity—men are active uppies, women passive innies; and such institutional omissions as not doing research on women or providing insurance coverage for women’s “quality-of-life” remedies or birth control constitute the complex mechanism through which an anatomically-based social practice of sexual discrimination is revived, re-rationalized, and re-naturalized.

The contradictions within this formation point to the presence of the same kinds of contradictions in other circumstances in which gender parity seems to be either granted or highly defended against. In employment, education, and government a discourse of parity stands in the place of and obscures the contradictory, still discriminatory practices of the institutions. Practically speaking, what this means is that in places where the greatest claims are made for gender parity and where linguistic usage and superficial opportunity seem to reflect an awareness of gender oppression, etc., the institutional structure hosting such enlightened discourse will in fact display a continued reliance on notions of complementarity and its corollaries of implied inferiority and defensible disparity. This translates into such conditions as fewer women in high paying jobs, “justified” lower average salaries for women, the continued demeaning of women’s interests and projects, and persistent expectations that women will in fact comply with

<sup>5</sup>The “quality-of-life” drugs covered by various insurance programs are often limited. See for example *Newsweek’s* summary of policy restrictions.

the traditional helper role.

This is not simply another example of a hypocritical front, window dressing, or the idea that it's not what an institution says, it's what it does that counts. It is instead an entire complex wherein a simple transfer of terms through a common node—in this case most graphically the term “erectile tissue”—reestablishes a sexual difference rather carelessly aligned with both gender and sexual role as a natural, scientific fact, a status which finally wrenches gender away from the neighborhood of the uncertain, squishy, and changeable. This structure of masked contradiction around sexual difference is not foundational but reflective, providing one model by which rigid difference is maintained while seemingly eroded, a dynamic that extends to other kinds of difference such as nationality, ethnicity, race, sexuality—which are also and by the same mechanism of dynamic transference translated from similarity to opposition. An example of this would be the contradictions that play out in the border areas of the American southwest. While national policy endorses NAFTA which would seem to equalize trade partners and erase border barriers to trade, it also and at the same time begins erecting metal walls along the US-Mexico border in Arizona and jealously guards them from inquiry, photographs, and anything that might look like activism.<sup>6</sup> If NAFTA seems to open things up, it does so to close them down, to distinguish and separate Mexicans and Americans, illegal and legal immigrants, lesser and better so as to enable continued exploitation of workers by exporting jobs to lower paying locales and threatening the export of remaining jobs if workers ask too much.

As this dynamic plays out in the social realm, it is easy to see how a covert appeal to sexual difference translates into overt returns to the nostalgic fantasy of definitive gender roles in such groups as the Promisekeepers and the Baptist Church. But even their appeal to good old fashioned patriarchalism, premised on men's again taking up the responsibilities they had knavishly relinquished, is a discourse of generosity and redistribution that masks a stake in definitive, God-given genders that become equated with the two terms of sexual difference. In a circular logic, then, oppositional sexual difference provides the grounds for the

<sup>6</sup>I am indebted to Claudia Sadowski-Smith for this example.

distribution of authority and responsibility. It also easily accounts for the Jerry Springer phenomenon, since his shows provide multitudes with the opportunity for catharsis around the uncertainties presented by his trans-guests. Large-eyed infantile aliens negotiate the fear of a completely alien difference by rendering aliens not only in familiar terms, but as children who pose no threat of difference at all.

But how does this jealous preservation of binary difference work in relation to some of the other pervasive phenomena I mentioned at the beginning? Clinton certainly doesn't need Viagra, but that is exactly the point. According to Republicans, who, if Dole is still a figurehead, do need Viagra, the problem with Clinton is that he doesn't know where the line is. He spends too much time indiscriminately screwing around in his office and not enough time practicing the kinds of discrimination that would keep the distinctions between America and China, rich and poor, black and white, native and immigrant clear. Without those distinctions America risks losing, not its virtue (which was already lost) or a moral ethic based on sexual difference (which is busy being reborn with the reborn), but our identity as an America Which Is Not Them—not Chinese or Mexican or gay. The evil here is not the Them whose condition of identifiable alterity contributes to the same old structure of oppositional difference, but the Them who already incarnate the dissolution of rigid lines of distinction—those of mixed race, the transgendered, gay and lesbian, the unacculturated nonnative, and border crossers of all kinds. It is not a coincidence that the Ku Klux Klan hates all of these pretty equally, since what the Klan objects to is not African-Americans *per se*, but integration as a figuration of the possibility of racial mixing, of losing the lines and hence the ability to discriminate and shore up their own identity. Clinton's line-crossing also explains in part why many feminists haven't rushed to condemn him. Not only do the policies of the current regime seem more friendly to women and to liberal programs of equal opportunity in general, but also with 30 years recent savvy feminists might see obsessive Republican line-drawing, its simplistic binarisms, and its alignments with everything from HMO's to the Christian Coalition as a little

<sup>7</sup>The invisible term in Viagra discourse is race.

Race itself is not mentioned as an element in any quasi-scientific discussions of Viagra and neither commentators nor advertising images include African-Americans or seem aimed at blacks in general.

While it is fairly simple to see how this might fit into the myth of black male endowment (black males, like Clinton, don't need Viagra), it is also a part of the subtle siting of power

as a white corporate prerogative. The only black comedy routine I have seen was one on BET where three African-American comedians said they'd rather spend the \$12 on booze and drugs.

Surely there have been others, but probably not on as obsessive a scale as Jay Leno, who still mentions it almost every night.

<sup>8</sup>For example. *The Wall Street Journal* reported in July, 1998 on black market Viagra in India as well as Indian attempts to copy it.

dangerous.<sup>7</sup>

Losing the lines is like losing borders; losing borders dissolves the fiction of nation just as losing the fiction of nation endangers the notion of border. The loss of nation is a problem in a time when the nation is *de trop* anyway, when economic systems have become global and when the local has ceased to have much meaning or distinction. For now Viagra apparently functions to shore up nationhood, as its licensing and production are identified with an American base and fantasmatic medical one-up-manship. And if the nation is pumped up with Viagra, so is its military which reportedly will spend \$50 million to supply its troops and retirees with a Viagra that "sort of burst on the scene," as a Pentagon spokesman put it in the *New York Times*.

But national affiliation merely masks and protects what are really the market monopolies of multinational corporations who wish to safeguard their patents in inventive foreign markets such as India, where Pfizer's drug would be prohibitively expensive, but where enterprising pharmaceutical companies rapidly produce cheaper knockups.<sup>8</sup> The international desire to keep it up with the Joneses promotes border crossing in the form of black markets and the "illegal" expropriation of Pfizer's formula in countries such as Japan where Viagra is not yet approved and marketed. And as of July, that was most of the world (since in July, 1998 Viagra had been approved in only 14 other countries).

Like Viagra, the Titanic, resurrected in two competing versions, is also an emblem of barrier-breaking technology. The artifact Titanic discovered as a result of advanced technologies that enable the exploration of the deep ocean has resulted in several documentary replays of the Titanic disaster that rue the monumental hubris of early twentieth century overreaching. This documentary Titanic represents the product an overly proud culture that suffers the fate of the great equalizer, its technological superiority vanquished by a badly placed iceberg. Playing out the same equality-masking oppositional difference dynamic as Viagra, on the one hand the Titanic is a symbol of class superiority and conscientiously patrolled borders (1st, 2nd, 3rd class) whose fate is destruction—a seeming parable of how insisting on

distinctions and disturbing the limits of human achievement becomes a matter for divine retribution. Its disastrous end harmonic with millennial anxiety, the Titanic's rediscovery via sonar and deep-sea exploration equipment is an example of how to monitor the borders between surface and depth, life and death, past and present, them and us as we pass into a potentially borderless future. The film *Titanic* reproduces this dynamic in the more condensed form of a fictional tale of class border crossing, whose romantic and democratic impetus is snuffed by spectacular, expensive, and prolonged scenes of destruction. The movie *Titanic* enjoys the opposite fate of its namesake; its hubris really paid off.

The Titanic, Clinton, and even errant asteroids and space aliens exist on the line between discrimination and indiscriminatio, between distinction, order, and conservation and a lack of distinction, chaos, and expenditure—kind of like the difference between hard and soft. The co-existence of these phenomena brings these oppositions together in a way that pays lip service to the progressive and inevitable dissolution of traditional boundaries while at the same time functioning as a lesson against over-extension and as a covert site for the reestablishment of the very oppositions and boundaries they seem to challenge. But while this reading of the dynamic played out through Viagra discourse seems to provide a paradigm that links these many phenomena, it, too, is finally a bit too easy, depending, as it does, on the same structures of binary thinking.

While I think that sexual difference is indeed the alibi of the discursive formation around Viagra, such salvaging activity does imply an anxiety. If reenforcing sexual difference can allay it, then what might such an anxiety be? The clue or symptom to this yet other effect of Viagra discourse exists in what has been the subject of fascination all along—in the “erectile tissue” that serves as the transitive term between analogy and binary opposition, between one kind of same difference and another. What is at stake here finally is, I think, warring concepts of difference itself. The dynamic relation between analogy and complementarity is very much a mechanism that reinforces a specific idea of difference as static, oppositional, and discernable. But “erec-

tile tissue,” that euphemistic term that seems to designate identity—the identity of tissues across sexes, the identity of analogy and complementarity—itself enacts a different kind of difference. “Erectile tissue” is never self-identical. Always threatening change of some sort, erectile tissue is never what we think it is. It demonstrates both catachresis and anamorphosis, models that return to Derrida’s *differance*, where difference is constantly misapprehended, misperceived, or displaced and ungraspable. This difference is not a structural appurtenance or principle, but is instead the deferring propensity that both enables difference and suspends it. This different difference is part of what Foucault tries finally to describe in *Archaeology of Knowledge*, so in a sense it is fitting that this archaeology ends up at the same point.

The term “erectile tissue” is a catachresis, never really referring to what anyone means by it. If “erectile tissue” refers to something other than a penis, then to what does it refer, since any other specific referent is missing, at least in Viagra discourse? In women the term “erectile tissue” is parenthetical, existing between two graphic lips, otherwise unlocated, a part rather than a whole. “Erectile tissue” is a floating signifier which isn’t erect in the common meaning of the term at all. But in what ways can the term “erectile tissue” even refer to the penis, its most obvious signified? The term “erectile tissue” seems larger than the penis, including the penis and as yet other unlocated stuff. To equate the penis and erectile tissue is to make the penis larger than it is, which of course is the function of Viagra. And if the penis merely belongs to the set of things comprised of erectile tissue, then it too is only a part instead of the whole which is never what we mean by penis. The referent of “erectile tissue,” then, is evasive, unstable, constantly displaced, enacting not a semantic game, but a difference that is never where or what it seems to be.

If catachresis provides a linguistic model for a different difference existing as an additional glitch between signifier and signified, anamorphosis provides another prototype in the realm of the visual where the phallic function, at least according to some psychoanalysts, gains its significance. “Imagine a tattoo,” Jacques Lacan suggests, “traced on

the sexual organ *ad hoc* in the state of repose and assuming its...developed form in another state” (88).<sup>9</sup> Djuna Barnes’ Dr. O’Connor described one that, “at a stretch spelled Desdemona” (16). The difference performed by Lacan’s fantasy anamorphosis is not the difference in the tattoo from small to large, but rather exists in the techniques of distortion and inverted perspective, in the range of points that link the tattoo’s graduated images to some imaginary Cartesian perspective where we rather than the image, rather than the tattooed penis, are really the center. If we remove the imaginary Cartesian grid—the image as we suppose it to be—and with it our centered selves, then the tattoo’s anamorphic range of appearances enacts a free-flowing quadrated version of differences in the constantly shifting relations among the various possible points of observation (the viewer, the implied center point of an implied perspective, points of mixed perspective) and the range of all possible appearances (like the image stamped on a deflating balloon) as these shift through time, all of which are, practically speaking impossible to pin down but which can only be graphed on the parabolas of quadratic equations or better in the ungrounded curves of Riemannian or differential geometry.<sup>10</sup> This version of difference seems a complex form of comparison, relativity, or graduated variation, but without the Cartesian center or a Euclidean reference point, it has no mooring in an oppositional grid and no way to contrive one.

Viagra discourse works hard to muster, consolidate, and organize differences around a single point, “balanced,” as *Time* poetically describes it, “on the delicate fulcrum of an erection” (4 May 1998, 57). Its panic is neither about impotence nor the kind of cruel slight made by Zeida Fitzgerald on the adequacy of Scott’s equipment, allayed by Hemingway’s wise explanation of perspectival foreshortening.<sup>11</sup> As much as Viagra discourse, like Hemingway, tries to remove potency, adequacy, gender, and sexuality from the mistaken realms of perspective back into the domain of measurable fact, the widespread presence of these efforts may signal the more exciting possibility that such oppositional difference can no longer be permanently retrieved, that the *differance* that keeps sliding away oper-

<sup>9</sup>Lacan precedes this remark in *Four Fundamental Concepts* with a comment on distortion which is also linked to the notion of difference I am espousing: “Distortion may lend itself...to all the paranoiac ambiguities, and every possible use has been made of it, from Arcimboldi to Salvador Dali. I will go so far as to say that this fascination complements what geometrical researches into perspective allow to escape from vision (87).

<sup>10</sup>Riemannian or differential geometry is a “general analytic geometry of curved spaces of any dimension.” The relevant element of this is that such a geometry does not assume “that the n-dimensional ‘curved’ space is embedded in any higher-dimensional flat space, and there is no actual ‘flat tangent space’ to be attached” (Sklar 42). In other words, there is no fixed locus or Euclidean point that would enable the reestablishment of a binary model.

<sup>11</sup>In "A Matter of Measurements" in *A Moveable Feast*, Ernest Hemingway tells the story of how Zelda Fitzgerald told Scott that the way he was built he "could never make any woman happy and that was what upset her originally. She said it was a matter of measurements" (190). After taking a look, Hemingway tells Fitzgerald that he's "perfectly fine" (190). "It is not basically a question of the size in repose...It is the size that it becomes. It is also a question of angle" (191).

<sup>12</sup>This paper owes some of its insights to the delightful audiences who heard earlier versions: Indiana University, SUNY-Geneseo, and SUNY-Albany, and to those who contributed comments or press clippings: Frankie Allmon, Larry Clopper, Judith Alien, Julia Walker, Beth McCoy, Michele Shauf, Ellen McCallum, and Cary Wolfe.

ates less and less as a mode of discrimination and oppression and more as a mode that makes such discriminations less and less possible. Even if Viagra is conservative in all its biochemical and cultural functions, it is so because the fulcrum itself has either crumbled, is so proliferated as to be meaningless, or the human species has evolved itself finally beyond the last gasp of modern manhood.<sup>12</sup>

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