The Birth of a Science: From Masturbation Theory to Krafft-Ebing

1. Masturbation and *Phantasia Morbosa*

The architects of pre-modern conceptions of the perversions were ecclesiastical scholars. The most influential of these, the thirteenth-century Italian theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), drew up the core Christian taxonomy of sexual sins in his *Summa Theologiae*, combining ideas from Augustinian Christianity and Aristotelian philosophy. In his magnum opus Aquinas defines any sexual act from which procreation cannot follow as ‘unnatural vice’. He furthermore divides unnatural vice into different species of lechery. All sins of lechery are, first, in conflict with right reason, and, second, in conflict with the ‘natural pattern of sexuality for the benefit of the species’.

The species of lechery are self-abuse, bestiality, sodomy (sex with a person of the same sex) and deviations from the natural (genital) form of intercourse such as anal and oral sex. The worst of all the unnatural
vices, Aquinas argues, ‘will be that which saps the
c basis on which all of them rest’.2 He fears that crimes
against the principles of nature, both in thought and
in sexual practice, pose a threat to the basic theoretical
economy of the scholastic system of reasoning:
‘A mistake in our thinking about the inborn principles
of knowledge goes to the very bottom, and so
does a practice opposed to the pattern set for us by
nature.’3 Here, a thirteenth-century thinker already
gestures towards the potentially destabilizing and sub-
versive power of perversion ‘in theory and in practice’,
which twentieth- and twenty-first-century queer the-
orists were to celebrate as a means of challenging
the fundamental assumptions underlying essentialist
notions such as ‘natural’ and ‘normal’.

Since lechery in all its manifestations ‘flouts nature
by transgressing its basic principles of sexuality’,
Aquinas writes, ‘it is in this matter the gravest of sins’.4
Reason is man-made, but the plan of nature comes
from God. A violation of the plan of nature is thus a
direct crime against God and worse than crimes against
reason, amongst which count fornication, incest and
adultery. Aquinas then compares the different modal-
ities of lechery and draws up a hierarchy: ‘The gravity
of a sin corresponds rather to an object being abused,
than to its proper use being omitted,’ he reasons, and
thus the lowest rank is held by the solitary sin mastur-
bation, whilst the greatest sin is that of bestiality as it
crosses the species barrier.5 Copulating with cattle and
other members of the animal kingdom is followed by
sodomy, ‘which does not observe the due sex’, which
in turn is a graver sin than sexual acts that do not
adhere to the ‘due mode of intercourse’.6 Amongst the