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The Churning in the Flogging of ‘Umayra: Or, Towards a History of Masturbation in Premodern Islamic Law

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Abstract

This article traces juristic debates on the ethics of masturbation from the formative period of Islamic law to the early nineteenth century. I document the appearance of discussions of the practice in the earliest extant sources and explore how masturbation figures in the Sunnī and Šī‘ī *ḥadīth* corpora with attention to regional patterns of dissemination. I also address the terminology used by jurists and point to material in encyclopaedias, *adab* and other works where relevant, and include some comparative observations from other cultures. My overall findings include the fact of clear regional patterns of opinion across the *amṣār* (garrison cities) in the early period and an unmistakable increase in “conservatism” on sexual matters with the consolidation of the legal schools (*madāhib*), as well as a clear distinction between Sunnī and Šī‘ī views on the practice. I conclude by attempting to explain the relatively low visibility of masturbation in legal sources and to account for the doctrinal shift more generally.

Keywords

Masturbation – *fiqh* – sexuality – *muğūn* – gender

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If you come to a valley, without an intimate
Then masturbate, without harm or constraint.¹

Modern masturbation is profane. It is not just something that makes those who do it tired, crippled, mad or blind but an act with serious ethical implications.²

Hey, don't knock masturbation! It's sex with someone I love.³

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1 Introduction

Abū l-'Anbas al-Şaymarī (d. 275/888) was a man of many talents. A native of Kufa and a jurist, he was appointed to the post of judge in Şaymara (at the mouth of the R. Ma'qil, near Basra), before “his vivid penchant for coarse humour very early earned him a reputation as a buffoon sufficient for him to be admitted to the court circle of al-Mutawakkil [r. 232–247/847–861]”.⁴ He also entertained interests in astrology, oneiromancy and poetry, and many amusing anecdotes are reported of his humour. It is unfortunate that none of his forty-odd works is extant. Among these lost titles, Ibn al-Nadīm (d. c.380/990) records one of particular interest, *al-Ḥaḍḥaḍa fī Ğald 'Umayra* (literally, “The Churning in the Flogging of 'Umayra”).⁵ The book's title contains two euphemisms for masturbation: *ḥaḍḥaḍa* (“churning”, or the motion of liquid being shaken in a vessel) and *ğald 'Umayra*, the flogging of 'Umayra (the diminutive form of a personal name or *ism*), flogging being suggestive of repetitive motion.⁶ Both

1 Anon., *Idā ḥalalta bi-wādin lā anīsa bihi, fa-ğlid 'Umayra lā dā'a wa-lā ḥaraḡu*. See al-'Arabi, al-Qāḍī Abū Bakr b. (d. 543/1148), 1424/2003: 111,315. This is the earliest variant of the line I have found; other wordings will be noted where relevant. See also al-Munağğid 1975: 93.

2 Laqueur 2003: 13.

3 Allen (dir.) 2001. *Annie Hall*, see www.dailyscript.com/scripts/annie_hall.html [accessed 12/11/2021].

4 Pellat EI².

5 Ibn al-Nadīm 1430/2009: 11,468; Szombathy 2013: 149 (fn. 94); Antoon 2014: 41; Myrne 2020a: 186.

6 Shuraydi 2014: 250–251. I thank Tariq al-Timimi for pointing me to this reference. See also the discussion of *ğ-l-d* in Guo 2012: 199.

terms figure in the first known dictionary of the Arabic language, the *Kitāb al-Ayn* of al-Ḥalīl b. Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī (d. 160/776, 170/786 or 175/791), the earliest reference I have found to either metaphor.⁷ The common euphemism for penis among the pre-Islamic Arabs was, it seems, Abū 'Umayr, whence the flogging of 'Umayra.⁸ Another popular term for masturbation, *istimnā'* (literally, "sperming"), applies equally to men and women.⁹ In his classic study of sexuality in the first four Islamic centuries, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munaḡḡid observes that most sexual metaphors found in the Arabic language existed prior to the emergence of Islam, and that their number continued to increase thereafter.¹⁰ Early Islam, al-Munaḡḡid notes, did not dim the pre-Islamic fondness of the Arabs for sex, but it did regulate and channel this desire, attempting "the taming of the Arab self" (*tahdīb nafs al-'arab*).¹¹ It is no longer fashionable to speak in such essentialising terms, but one wonders whether and to what extent this notion, suitably qualified, holds true for masturbation.

This article, though taking an obscene work of *adab* (*belles-lettres*) as its point of departure, will not be concerned with works of imaginative literature. A comprehensive treatment of masturbation in Arabo-Islamic culture would, indeed, require a book-length treatment, something akin to Thomas W. Laqueur's magisterial *Solitary Sex*. Here, I will attempt something far more modest: an assessment of the place of masturbation in premodern Islamic law. By "masturbation", I refer specifically to self-stimulation with one's own hand (not that of a wife or slave concubine, in the case of males, which most jurists permit), though I will occasionally remark on the use of objects. Even in the narrower domain of law, the corpus of material remains vast. I have chosen to focus on representative references to the practice in the premodern period, with the aim of evaluating, in diachronic fashion, how juristic attitudes changed over time. The sources focus overwhelmingly on male masturbation, as one would expect, given their exclusively male authorship. In the interests of comprehensiveness, I begin by compiling and translating relevant material in

7 Aḥmad, al-Ḥalīl b. n.d.: IV,133–134; see also al-Zabīdī, Abū Bakr b. (d. 1205/1791) 1965: XVIII,317.

8 Aḥmad, al-Ḥalīl b. n.d.: IV,133. It is curious, therefore, why the practice is referred to as *ǧald 'Umayra* rather than *ǧald 'Umayr* or the like. A friend (who wishes to remain anonymous) explains the use of the feminine form as an additional diminution (*tašǧīr*).

9 On the basis that *istimnā'* is *ṭalab al-manī* (the "seeking" of seminal emission), and both men and women were understood to generate *manī*. Massad 2007: 308. This is perhaps the most common term used for the practice in the modern period, along with the "secret habit" (*al-ʿāda al-sirrīyya*). On masturbation in the biography of the historian and novelist Ġurǧī Zaydān (d. 1332/1914), who popularised the term, see *ibid.*: 307–310.

10 Al-Munaḡḡid 1975: 144.

11 *Ibid.*: 27.

the Sunnī and Šīʿī *ḥadīṭ* corpus, before commenting on masturbation in more narrowly legal (i.e. *fiqh*) texts and occasionally, *tafsīr* (Qurʾān commentary).¹² I will also briefly attempt to relate my findings to the research of Europeanists, most importantly Laqueur, who speaks of a growing moral panic in the modern period, typified by the anonymous publication of the treatise *Onania: Or, the Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution* (c.1712).¹³ Laqueur contrasts the tone and content of *Onania* with attitudes found in previous European literature: “Nothing in the entire corpus of ancient medicine, Greek or Latin, or in the medieval or Renaissance tradition that derived from it, gives warning of what was to come after *Onania*.”¹⁴ Unfortunately, owing to constraints of space I will not have the opportunity to discuss masturbation from a comparative point of view in Late Antiquity, in Jewish law, or in numerous other domains deserving of comment.¹⁵ I may thus revisit this subject in a future publication, covering the ground I have had to omit here.¹⁶

Briefly, my findings are that the earliest legal sources and *ḥadīṭ* compilations, in the late second and early third Islamic centuries, contain a range of attitudes towards masturbation, mostly permissive. Categorical prohibition was, in this early period, a fairly marginal view. It is clear that attitudes towards masturbation hardened over time, particularly with the consolidation of the four Sunnī *maḏāhib* (legal schools), whose jurists sought to marginalise earlier, more permissive views.¹⁷ Notwithstanding the presence of conflicting reports in the Šīʿī *ḥadīṭ* corpus, moreover, one finds that jurists of that school seem to have universally adopted a prohibitive stance towards masturbation. There are important shared features of the discussion that cross sectarian lines that I will

12 Those who object to the use of the term “Sunnī” for texts of the late second/early third Islamic centuries as anachronistic should note the reference to *ahl al-sunna* in Ḍirār b. ʿAmr (d. c.200/815), 1435/2014: 130. When using the term “Šīʿī” in this article, I refer to the Twelver-Šīʿa.

13 Laqueur 2003: 247–358.

14 Ibid.: 90.

15 One important place to start would be the Talmud: see Bavli Niddah 13a–13b. The Talmudic material is generally much more prohibitive than what is typically found in the Islamic tradition (with the exception of a few dubiously-transmitted eschatological *ḥadīṭ* cited below). See also Laqueur 2003: 111–124.

16 There is evidently a need for further research; Kecia Ali’s seminal study of Islamic sexual ethics only refers to masturbation twice, in passing, in the context of al-Ġazālī’s (d. 505/1111) discussion of marriage. See Ali 2013: xxvi. Nor is there any reference to masturbation in Hina Azam’s fine monograph on sexual violence: see Azam 2017. An *Index Islamicus* search for “masturbation” yields two results, neither of which is especially useful: Hoseini 2017: 2076–2081; Nigst 2015: 239–269.

17 Cf. the characterisation of juristic attitudes in Musallam 1983: 33–34; Bellamy 1979: 34–35. See also the survey in *al-Mawsūʿa al-fiqhiyya al-Kuwaytiyya* 1404–1427: XXXIX, 140–141.

highlight when relevant. On occasion, the early material requires unpacking. In a cluster of reports purporting to originate with the Companion Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68/687–688, hereafter, the Ibn ‘Abbās cluster), for example, we are told that masturbation is “better than illicit sex” (*ḥayrun min al-zinā*), though marriage to a slave woman is preferable.¹⁸ Marriage to another person’s slave is permitted in the Qur’ān in cases where those unable to obtain the means to marry fear falling into sin (*dālika li-man ḥaṣīya al-‘anata minkum*).¹⁹ The suggestion that masturbation is preferable to illicit sex but less desirable than marriage to a slave – whose offspring would, in the event, be born enslaved²⁰ – is curious. Before embarking on any further analysis, however, it is best to first let the reports speak for themselves.

2 The Masturbation Corpus

A few prefatory remarks are in order. In this section, I have compiled and translated the earliest variants of reports on masturbation in the Sunnī and Ṣūfī *ḥadīth* corpus, and have sought to identify death dates for all of the tradents mentioned therein. I use the term *ḥadīth* in its earlier, non-technical sense of a report attributed to an authority figure (see report 5, below). Where specific tradents are mentioned in the *riḡāl* (narrator criticism) literature as unknown persons i.e., as *maḡhūl al-ḥāl*, I have indicated this with a question mark, thus “[?]”. On occasion, it has proved impossible to know a tradent’s identity with certainty, particularly in cases where he is a lesser-known figure and is referred to solely by his *kunya* (teknonym). In many cases, especially in the Ṣūfī corpus, no death date is presented in the literature; we only know that such-and-such a narrator was a Companion of one of the *Imāms*, for example. I have used this information to present the narrator’s *floruit*. Where one or more death dates

18 The earliest reference to this report I have found is Aḥmad, al-Khalīl b. n.d.: IV,133.

19 Q. 4:25: “Any one of you who has not the affluence to be able to marry believing free-women in wedlock, let him take believing handmaids that your right hands own; God knows very well your faith; the one of you is as the other. So marry them, with their people’s leave, and give them their wages honourably as women in wedlock, not as in licence or taking lovers. But when they are in wedlock, if they commit indecency, they shall be liable to half the chastisement of freewomen. That provision is for those of you who fear fornication; yet it is better for you to be patient. God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate”. See Arbery 1955: 104. See al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) 1422/2001: VI,591–616; al-Qurṭubī, ‘Alī b. Muḥammad (d. 671/1272) 1427/2006: VI,225–243. For the views of proto-jurists, see ‘Abd al-Razzāq (d. 211/827) 1403/1983: VII,263–265.

20 Children born of the union between a slave woman and a man who is not her master are born enslaved; unlike the children of slave women and their masters.

are presented in the literature, I have given the most well-established, and have only presented alternative dates when it has been too difficult to identify the more secure one. I have also made a note of the provenance of tradents, to facilitate characterisation of their *isnāds* (chains of transmission). For Sunnī collections, I have presented information about provenance (e.g., Kufan) for tradents who were active in the first two Islamic centuries, excepting the compilers of those collections. I have done so on the basis that *ḥadīth* transmission was for the most part highly localised in this period. Where particular tradents in this early period cannot be easily attributed to a single city, or when information about their origins and city of residence has not been available, I have omitted this characterisation. For the Šīʿī corpus, I have included information on the provenance of tradents at every stage of transmission, excepting the compilers, on the basis that the final occultation of the Twelfth Imām occurred only in 329/941. I have done this largely for the sake of comprehensiveness, as Šīʿī *isnāds* are on the whole much more difficult to characterise as belonging to a particular city, as compared to their Sunnī equivalents. Where a tradent's *nisba* (attribution) allows one to identify his provenance without any ambiguity (e.g., al-Qummī), I have left this to readers to infer. Finally, I have not sought to document every known occurrence of any particular *ḥadīth*, but only its earliest attestation.

1. *ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Šanʿānī* [d. 211/827] – *Ibn Ǧurayǧ* [Meccan, d. 150/768]: *Aṭāʾ* [b. Abī Rabāḥ, Meccan, d. 114 or 115/732 or 733] detested masturbation (*al-istimnāʾ*). I [Ibn Ǧurayǧ] asked, “Does it have [any penalty or expiation, *aḥīhī*]?” He answered, “I have not heard [a report to that effect].”²¹
2. *ʿAbd al-Razzāq – Sufyān* [al-Ṭawrī, Kufan, d. 161/778] – *ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUtmān* [Meccan, d. before 135/752–752 or 140/757–758] – *Muǧāhid* [Meccan, d. 104/722]: *Ibn ʿUmar* [d. 73/692] was asked about [masturbation]. He said, “That is the one who f – s himself (*dālika nāʾik naḥsihi*).”²²
3. *ʿAbd al-Razzāq – al-Ṭawrī* and *Maʿmar b. Rāšid* [Basran, d. 153/740] – *al-Aʿmaš* [Kufan, d. 148/765] – *Abū Razīn* [Masʿūd b. Mālik, Kufan, d. c. 80/699–700 or 95/713–714] – *Abū Yaḥyā* [Mišdaʿ al-Aʿraǧ, Meccan, d. 117/735–736]:²³ A person told *Ibn ʿAbbās* [d. 68/687–8], “I fondle (*aʿbaṭu*) my penis until I ejaculate”. [Ibn ʿAbbās] said, “Marriage to a slave woman is better, and it [masturbation] is better than illicit sex (*zinā*).”²⁴

21 ʿAbd al-Razzāq 1403/1983: VII,390.

22 Ibid.

23 I thank Tariq al-Timimi for correcting my erroneous identification of this tradent.

24 Ibid.: 390–391. Cf. Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) 1437/2016, XVI:465, where Ibn ʿAbbās says “*Uff!*” once before answering. This is usually an expression of frustration (as in Q. 17:23) or, in this case, shock, surprise or embarrassment. Cf. al-Dūrī, Ḥalaf (d. 307/919), 1409: 4, where the *isnād* is given as *Abū Kurayb* [Muḥammad b. al-ʿAlāʾ, Kufan, d. 248/862] – *Yaḥyā b. ʿĀdam*

4. *‘Abd al-Razzāq – Ma‘mar – al-A‘maš*: The same report as above.²⁵
5. *‘Abd al-Razzāq – Ibn ‘Uyayna* [Kufan, d. 198/814] – *‘Ammār al-Duhnī* [Kufan, d. 133/750–751]: *Muslim* [b. Abī ‘Imrān al-Baṭīn, Kufan, fl. late 1st/7th–2nd/8th centuries] said, “I saw *Sa‘īd b. Ğubayr* [Kufan, d. 95/714] meet with *Abū Yaḥyā*, and they recalled the *ḥadīth* of Ibn ‘Abbās. Abū Yaḥyā said, “*Ibn ‘Abbās* was asked about a man who fondles his penis until he ejaculates, so he said, ‘Marriage to a slave woman is better than this, and it [masturbation] is better than illicit sex.’”²⁶
6. *‘Abd al-Razzāq – al-Ṭawrī – ‘Abbād b. Maṣūrah* [Basran, d. 152/769–770]: *Ġābir b. Zayd Abī l-Ša‘tā’* [Basran, d. 93/711–712] said [when asked about masturbation], “It is your fluid (*mā’uk*), so spill it (*fa-ahriqhu*)!”²⁷
7. *‘Abd al-Razzāq – Ibn Ğurayğ – Ibrāhīm b. Abī Bakr* [Meccan, fl. 2nd/8th century] – a[n anonymous] man: *Ibn ‘Abbās* said, “It [masturbation] is nothing but one of you rubbing his penis (*ya’ruka zubbahu*) until its fluid comes out.”²⁸
8. *‘Abd al-Razzāq – Ibn Ğurayğ – Ibrāhīm b. Abī Bakr – Muğāhid*: “In times gone by, they [the Companions] used to encourage (*ya’murūn*) their young men to masturbate, and a woman likewise, to insert something [into her vagina]. “We asked *‘Abd al-Razzāq*, “What would she insert?” He answered, “[The narrator] means a pestle (*saqq*), to ward off of the need for illicit sex.”²⁹
9. *‘Abd al-Razzāq – Ma‘mar – Ayyūb* [al-Šaḥṭiyānī, Basran, d. 131/749] or somebody else – *Muğāhid*: The same report as above.³⁰

[al-Aḥwal, Kufan, d. 203/818] – *Sufyān* [al-Ṭawrī] – *al-A‘maš – Ismā‘īl b. Samīr* [al-Ḥanafī, Kufan, fl. late 1/7th early 2/8th C.] – *Abū Razīn – Abū Yaḥyā – Ibn ‘Abbās*. I thank Tariq al-Timimi for bringing my attention to this report.

25 *‘Abd al-Razzāq* 1403/1983: 391.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid. Note that this and the next report are not included in the chapter on “The dispensation for it [masturbation]” – the implication being that *‘Abd al-Razzāq* (or a subsequent editor) did not necessarily understand them to suggest permissibility.

28 Ibid. Cf. Ibn Ḥazm 1437/2016: XVI,465.

29 *‘Abd al-Razzāq* 1403/1983: 391–392. Cf. Ibn Ḥazm 1437/2016: XVI,466. Ibn Ḥazm’s version of the report has Muğāhid say that they used to encourage their youths (in another MS: women) to masturbate, “... thereby preserving their chastity (*yasta’iffūna bi-dālik*)”. On 16:460 Ibn Ḥazm reports via his *isnād* to *‘Abd al-Razzāq – Ibn Ğurayğ* – someone he trusted: “*Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī* [d. 110/728] used to see no problem with a woman inserting something – meaning a *š-b-q* – [into her vagina] to ward off of the need for illicit sex”. I have not been able to find this word with the required sense in any of the classical dictionaries. Christopher Melchert has kindly pointed out to me that Reinhart Dozy defines a *šabuq* as a small club (not unlike a pestle). See *idem* 1927: 1,722.

30 This and the subsequent report are not found in Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-A‘zamī’s edition of the *Muṣannaf*: see *‘Abd al-Razzāq* 1436/2015: VI,284. In other respects, the editions agree.

10. *Abd al-Razzāq – Ma‘mar* – someone who used to transmit from *al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī*: Al-Ḥasan used to give a dispensation for it (*yuraḥḥaṣu fī dālik*).³¹
11. *Abd al-Razzāq – Ibn Ḡurayḡ*: *‘Amr b. Dīnār* [Meccan, d. 126/744] said, “I see no problem (*ba’s*) with masturbation”.³²
12. *Ibn Abī Ṣayba* [d. 235/849] – *Sufyān b. ‘Uyayna* – *‘Ammār* [al-Duhnī] – *Abū Muslim*³³ – *Abū ‘Imrān*³⁴ – *Abū Yaḥyā*: I saw a man asking *Ibn ‘Abbās* a question, “O Ibn ‘Abbās, I fondle my penis until I ejaculate”. He answered, “Uff! Uff! It is better than illicit sex, but marriage to a slave woman is better”.³⁵
13. *Ibn Abī Ṣayba – Wakī‘* [b. al-Ḡarrāḥ, Kufan, d. 196/811–812] – *‘Aṭā’ b. Qudāma*³⁶ – *‘Ikrima* [Meccan, d. 105/723–724]: *Ibn ‘Abbās* said, “*Ibn ‘Umar* was asked about it (meaning masturbation) and said, “That is the one who “does” himself (*al-fā’il bi-nafsihī*)”.³⁷
14. *Ibn Abī Ṣayba – Wakī‘ – Aflaḥ* [b. Ḥumayd, Medinan, d. 158/774–775]: *al-Qāsim* [b. Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr, d. 108/726–727]³⁸ was asked about “Those who guard their chastity, except for their wives and slave concubines, are beyond reproach; whoever seeks [anything] beyond is a transgressor.”³⁹ [He said,] “Whoever seeks anything beyond this, transgresses (*fa-huwa ‘ād*)”.⁴⁰

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.: 392 (this and all subsequent references to the *Muṣannaf* ‘Abd al-Razzāq refer to the Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-A‘zamī edition unless otherwise specified).

33 I have not been able to identify this narrator.

34 I have not been able to identify this narrator.

35 Ibn Abī Ṣayba 1409/1989: IV,33. Based on his careful reading of the various edition of the *Muṣannaf* of Ibn Abī Ṣayba, Tariq al-Timimi has indicated to me that this *isnād* seems to contain mistakes (though it appears this way in all printed editions of the text): it should read *Ibn Abī Ṣayba – Sufyān b. ‘Uyayna – ‘Ammār* [al-Duhnī] – *Muslim b. Abī ‘Imrān – Abū Yaḥyā* (cf. reports 3 and 5). I thank Tariq for the three hours (!) he spent working on this *isnād*.

36 This seems to be a mistake, as I have not been able to find a tradent with this name. Muḥammad ‘Awwāma’s edition of the text has ‘Iṣām b. Qudāma (Kufan, fl. 2nd/8th C): see Ibn Abī Ṣayba 1427/2006, 9:435. I thank Tariq al-Timimi for referring me to this edition of the text, and thus confirming my hunch about the narrator. All subsequent references to the *Muṣannaf* of Ibn Abī Ṣayba refer to the Kamāl Yūsuf al-Ḥūt edition unless otherwise specified.

37 Ibid.: IV,33.

38 Many death dates (all early second Islamic century) are presented in the sources: I have chosen to use Ibn Sa’d’s.

39 Q. 70:29–31, as per the edition. In *tafsīr* literature the reference is usually to Q. 23:5–7, as it occurs earlier in the Qur’ān and therefore attracts more comment.

40 Ibn Abī Ṣayba 1409/1989: IV,33. Ibn Abī Ṣayba includes this report in his chapter on masturbation, even though al-Qāsim does not refer the practice explicitly.

15. *Al-Ḥasan b. 'Arafā* [d. 257/870–871] – *'Alī b. Tābit al-Ġazrī* [fl. 3rd/9th century] – *Maslama b. Ġa'far* [place of origin unknown, d. c.170/786–787–180/796–797] – *Ḥassān b. Ḥumayd* [?]: *Anas b. Mālik* [d. 93/712] reported that the *Prophet* said, “[There are] seven [kinds of sinners] that God will not look to on the Day of Resurrection, nor [will He] purify them or gather them with the rest of creation (*al-'ālamīn*), and they will be the first to enter Hell – unless they repent! Unless they repent! Unless they repent [and are] among those whose repentance God accepts. [Firstly] the hand-f – r (*nākiḥ yadihi*) ...”⁴¹
16. *Al-Kulaynī* [d. 329/941] – several of our associates – *Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ḥālid* [Kufan, d. 274/887–889 or 280/893–894] – *al-'Alā' b. Razīn* [Kufan, fl. 2nd/8th century] – a[n anonymous] man: I asked *Abū 'Abd Allāh* [Ġa'far al-Ṣādiq, d. 148/765] about masturbation. He answered, “It is a despicable deed (*min al-fawāḥiṣ*) and marriage to a slave woman is better”.⁴²
17. *Al-Kulaynī* – *Aḥmad b. Muḥammad* [b. Ḥālid] – *Abū Yaḥyā al-Wāsiṭī* [fl. 3rd/9th century] – *Ismā'īl* [b. Baššār] *al-Baṣrī* [fl. 2nd/8th century] – *Zurāra* [b. A'yan, Kufan, d. 150/767–8]: I asked *Abū 'Abd Allāh* about masturbation [lit. “rubbing”, *dalk*]. He said, “That is the one who f – s himself. There is no [penalty or expiation, *lā šay'a 'alayhi*”].⁴³
18. *Al-Kulaynī* – *Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā* [al-'Aṭṭār, Qummī, 280/893–4] – *Muḥammad b. Aḥmad* [b. Yaḥyā b. 'Imrān al-Aš'arī, Qummī, fl. 3rd/9th century] – *Aḥmad b. al-Ḥasan* [Qummī, fl. 3rd/9th century] – *Amr b. Sa'īd* [al-Rāšidī, Madā'inī, fl. 2nd/8th century] – *Muṣaddaq b. Ṣadaqa* [al-Madā'inī, fl. 2nd/8th century] – *'Ammār b. Mūsā* [al-Sābāṭī, Medinan, fl. 2nd/8th century]: *Abū 'Abd Allāh* said regarding the one who f – s an animal or masturbates (*yadluk*), “If a man ejaculates in these or similar ways, it constitutes illicit sex”.⁴⁴
19. *Al-Kulaynī* – *Muḥammad b. Aḥmad* – *Abū 'Abd Allāh* [Muḥammad b. Aḥmad] *al-Rāzī* [al-Ġāmūrānī, fl. 3rd/9th century] – *al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī b. Abī Ḥamza* [al-Baṭā'inī, fl. 2nd/8th–3rd/9th century] – *Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Mu'min* [Zakariyyā b. Muḥammad, fl. 2nd/8th century] – *Ishāq b. 'Ammār* [al-Sābāṭī, fl. 2/8th century]: “I said to *Abū 'Abd Allāh*, ‘Is committing illicit sex worse than drinking wine? How is it that [drinking] wine is punished with eighty stripes, and illicit sex [by a non-*muḥṣan*, i.e. never

41 'Arafā, al-Ḥasan b. 1406/1985: 64. For a variant of this *ḥadīṭ* with a slightly different wording and a longer *isnād*, see al-Bayhaqī, *Abū Bakr* 1423/2003: VII,329–330. For further variants of the report, where the hand-f – r is the third category of sinner mentioned, see the discussion in al-Albānī 1412/1992: 1,490.

42 Al-Kulaynī 1428/2007: V,325.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.: 325–326.

previously married person is punished] with one hundred? He said, ‘O Ishāq, [all] fixed penalties (*al-ḥadd*) are one, but [the punishment for illicit sex] is increased [by twenty stripes for the offender’s] wasting of his seed (*taḍyīr al-nasl*) and for depositing it in a place other than that commanded by God’.⁴⁵

20. *Al-Kulaynī* – *Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā* – *Aḥmad b. Muḥammad* – *Muḥammad b. Sinān* – *Ṭalḥa b. Zayd*: *Abū ‘Abd Allāh* said that a man who fondled his penis [i.e., masturbated] was brought before *Amīr al-Mu’minīn* [‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, d. 40/661]. He [‘Alī] struck the [offender’s] hand until it turned red, then married him off [using funds from] the Treasury (*bayt al-māl*).⁴⁶
21. *Ibn Bābawayh* [d. 380/991] – his father [‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn b. Bābawayh al-Qummī, d. 329/941] – *Sa’d b. ‘Abd Allāh* [al-Aš‘arī, Qummī, d. 299/911–912 or 301/913–914]⁴⁷ – *Muḥammad b. Ḥālid al-Ṭayālīsī* [Kufan, d. 259/873] – *‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Awn* [b. Ḥabīb, Raqqī, fl. 2nd/8th–3rd/9th centuries] – *Ibn Abī Naḡrān al-Tamīmī* [Kufan, fl. 2/8th–3rd/9th centuries] – *‘Āšim b. Ḥumayd al-Ḥannātī* [Kufan, fl. 2/8th century] – *Abū Baṣīr* [Layth b. al-Baḥtarī, Kufan, fl. 2nd/8th century]: “I heard *Abū ‘Abd Allāh* say, ‘There are three [kinds of sinners] to whom God will not speak on the Day of Resurrection, nor will He look to them or purify them, and theirs is a painful punishment: the one who plucks his grey hair, the one who f – s himself, and the one who is f – d in his bottom’”.⁴⁸
22. *Ibn Bābawayh* – *Ibn al-Walīd* [al-Qummī, d. 343/954–955] – *Aḥmad b. Idrīs* [b. Aḥmad al-Qummī, d. 306/918–919] and *Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā al-Aṭṭār* – *Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā b. Imrān al-Aš‘arī* – *Aḥmad b. al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī b. Faḍḍāl* [Kufan, d. 260/873–874] – *Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm b. ‘Ammār*⁴⁹ – *Ibn Nūba* [?]: *Zurāra b. A‘yan* and *Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm*⁵⁰ said, “*Abū ‘Abd Allāh* was asked about the creation of Adam and Eve. It was said, ‘There are people who claim that God created Eve from Adam’s smallest, lowest rib.’ He responded, ‘Glory be to God! He is immeasurably greater

45 Ibid.: VII,168. This report does not address masturbation explicitly, but its implications for the practice are clear, whence al-Ḥurr al-‘Āmilī’s (d. 1104/1693) inclusion of it in his chapter on the subject. See al-‘Āmilī 1409: XX,352–353.

46 Ibid.: 170.

47 Interestingly, Sa’d b. ‘Abd Allāh is said to have reported much Sunnī material and to have studied with al-Ḥasan b. ‘Arafa (see report 15). See al-Ḥūrī, al-Sayyid Abū l-Qāsim (d. 1413/1992) 1413/1992: IX,78.

48 Ibn Bābawayh 1362/1983: 106.

49 I have not been able to identify this narrator.

50 I have not been able to identify this narrator.

- than what they claim! They say – who says this, that God is incapable of creating a wife for Adam without a rib? He leaves a way for our critics (*ahl al-tašnī*) to say that Adam f – d himself (*yankih ba'ḍahu ba'ḍā*), if [Eve was created] from his rib. What is to be done [with such people]? God's judgement lies between us and them ...”⁵¹
23. *Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī* [d. 386/996] – *Abān b. Ismā'īl* [Kufan, d. 210/825–856]⁵² – *Anas* [b. Mālik]: The Prophet said, “God destroyed a nation (*umma*) for fondling their penises.”⁵³
24. *Ibn Ḥazm* [d. 456/1064] – *Muḥammad b. Sa'īd b. Nabāt* [d. 429/1037–1038] – *Aḥmad b. 'Awn Allāh* [d. 378/988] – *Qāsim b. Ašbağ* [d. 340/951] – *Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Salām al-Ḥušanī* [d. 286/899–900] – *Muḥammad b. Baššār Bundār* [d. 252/866] – *Muḥammad b. Ġa'far Ġundar* [Basran, d. 193/809] – *Šu'ba* [b. al-Ḥağğāğ, d. 160/776] – *Qatāda* [b. Dī'ama al-Sadūsī, Basran, d. 117/735] – a[n anonymous] man: *Ibn 'Umar* said, “It is just a vein (*aṣab*) that you rub (*tudallikuhu*)”.⁵⁴
25. *Ibn Ḥazm* – *Muḥammad b. Sa'īd b. Nabāt* – *Aḥmad b. 'Awn Allāh* – *Qāsim b. Ašbağ* – *Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Salām al-Ḥušanī* – *Muḥammad b. Baššār Bundār* – *Muḥammad b. Ġa'far Ġundar* – *Šu'ba* – *Qatāda* – *'Alā' b. Ziyād* [Basran, d. 94/712–713]: His father [*Ziyād b. Maṭar al-Adawī*, Basran, fl. 1st/7th century] said, “They used to do that [while far away from home] on military campaigns (*kānū yaf' alūnahu fī l-mağāzī*); a man would fondle and rub his penis until he ejaculated”. *Qatāda* added: *al-Ḥasan* [al-Baṣrī] said of one who masturbates, rubbing his penis until he ejaculates, “They used to do [that while far away from home] on military campaigns (*kānū yaf' alūna fī l-mağāzī*)”.⁵⁵
26. *Al-Bayhaqī* [d. 458/1066]: *al-Buḥārī* [d. 256/870] reported in his *Tārīḥ: Qutayba* [d. 240/854–855] – *Ḥumayd al-Ru'āsī* [Kufan, d. 189/805] – *Maslama b. Ġa'far* – *Ḥassān b. Ḥumayd*: *Anas b. Mālik* said “Those who

51 *Ibn Bābawayh* 1429/2008: III,379–380. Karen Bauer suggests that “self-marriage” would be a better translation, here, because marriage is the conventional translation of *nikāḥ*. I disagree, based on the consideration that the word is often used to mean sex, exclusively of marriage, e.g. *nikāḥ al-bahā'im* (bestiality) and *nikāḥ al-nisā' fī adbarihinn* (anal intercourse with women, i.e. *al-lūtīyya al-suğrā*, minor sodomy). I thank Karen for her insightful discussion of this point.

52 *Al-Ḍahabī's* (d. 748/1348) condemnation of this tradent is unusually strident: he is a liar (*kaḍḍāb*), “[Who has only been] mentioned for the sake of distinguishing him [from other narrators, *li-l-tamyīz*], may God forgive him!” *Al-Ḍahabī* 1402/1982: x,348–349.

53 *Al-Makkī*, *Abū Ṭālib* 2020: 1,307.

54 *Ibn Ḥazm* 1437/2016: XVI,465.

55 *Ibid.*

- f – their hands will come forth on the Day of Resurrection with pregnant hands”.⁵⁶
27. *Al-Bayhaqī* – *Abū Tāhīr al-Faqīh* [d. 410/1019–1020] and *Abū Bakr al-Qāḍī* [al-Ḥīrī al-Šafi‘ī, d. 421/1030]⁵⁷ – *Ḥāǧīb b. Aḥmad al-Ṭūsī* [d. 336/947–948] – *‘Abd al-Raḥīm b. Munīb* [fl. 3rd/9th century] – *Yazīd b. Hārūn* [Wāsiṭī, d. 206/821] – *Sufyān al-Ṭawrī* – *‘Ammār al-Duhnī* – *Muslim al-Baṭīn*: *Ibn ‘Abbās* was asked about masturbation (*al-ḥaḍḥaḍa*). He said, “Marriage to a slave woman is better, and it [masturbation] is better than illicit sex”.⁵⁸
28. *Al-Bayhaqī* – *Abū Zakariyyā’ b. Abī Ishāq al-Markazī* [d. 414/1024] – *Abū ‘Abd Allāh b. Ya‘qūb* [d. 344/955] – *Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Waḥḥāb* [d. 272/886] – *Ġa‘far b. ‘Awn* [Kufan, d. 207/822–823] – *al-Aǧlaḥ* [Kufan, d. between 145/763–158/775] – *Abū l-Zubayr* [Meccan, d. 126/743–744]: A boy (*ǧulām*) came to *Ibn ‘Abbās* as [Ibn ‘Abbās’] audience were rising [from their places to leave]. The boy remained seated. Some in the audience urged, “Get up, boy!” Ibn ‘Abbās said, “Leave him be, for something keeps him seated”. When they were left [alone], the boy asked, “O Ibn ‘Abbās, I am a young man (*ǧulāmun šābbun*) with a strong libido (*ǧilma*), so I rub (*adlik*) my penis until I ejaculate”. Ibn ‘Abbās answered, “It is better than illicit sex, and marriage to a slave woman is better [than masturbation]”.⁵⁹
29. *Abū Šuǧā’ al-Daylamī* [d. 509/1115]: *Anas* [b. Mālik] and *Ibn ‘Umar* said, “[There are] seven [kinds of sinners] that God will not look to on the Day of Resurrection, nor [will He] purify them or gather them with the rest of creation (*al-‘ālamīn*), and they will enter Hell, unless they repent, for whosoever repents, God accepts their repentance: the one who f – s his hands ...”⁶⁰
30. *Ibn Asākir* [d. 571/1176] – *Abū ‘Alī al-Ḥasan b. Aḥmad* [al-Ḥaddād, d. 515/1122] – *Abū Nu‘aym* [Aḥmad b. ‘Abd Allāh] al-Ḥāfiẓ [d. 430/1038] – *Sulaymān b. Aḥmad al-Ṭabarānī* [d. 360/918]⁶¹ – *Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Šamad b. Abī l-Ġarrāḥ al-Mašīšī* [fl. 3rs/9th–4th/10th centuries] – *Muḥammad b. al-Wazīr al-Dimašqī* [d. 250/864–865] – *Ḍamra b. Rab‘a*

56 Al-Bayhaqī, Abū Bakr 1423/2003: VII,330. I have not been able to locate this report in the printed editions of al-Buḥārī’s *al-Tāriḥ al-kabīr* or his *al-Tāriḥ al-awsaṭ*.

57 I thank Tariq al-Timimi for helping me to identify this tradent.

58 Al-Bayhaqī, Abū Bakr 1424/2003: VII,323.

59 Ibid.

60 Al-Daylamī, Abū Šuǧā’ 1406/1986: II,332.

61 Though this tradent is a famous *ḥadīṭ* scholar, I have not been able to find the report in any of his three *ma‘āǧim* (compilations).

- [al-Filasṭīnī, d. 202/818] – *Rağā' b. Abī Salama* [Palestinian, d. 161/777–778] – [Ibn Šihāb] *al-Zuhrī* [d. 124/742] – *Ḥumayd b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān* [b. 'Awf, Medinan, d. 95/713–714] – *Abū Hurayra* [d. 57/678, 58/679, or 59/680]: The *Prophet* forbade f – g the right hand.⁶²
31. *Al-Ḥurr al-Āmilī* [d. 1104/1693] – *Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. 'Īsā* [al-Aš'arī al-Qummī, fl. late 2nd/8th–3rd/9th centuries] in his *Nawādir* – his father [Muḥammad b. 'Īsā b. 'Abd Allāh al-Aš'arī al-Qummī, fl. 2nd/8th–early 3rd/9th centuries]: [Ġāfar] *al-Šādiq* was asked about masturbation. He said, “A terrible sin (*ḍanb 'azīm*) that God forbade in His Book. The one doing it is like someone who f – s himself; if I knew he was doing it, I would not eat with him.’ The questioner asked, ‘Clarify for me, O Son of the Prophet of God, where in the Book of God I may find this prohibition.’ He answered, ‘God’s saying, “Whoever seeks [anything] beyond it is a transgressor”,⁶³ and [masturbation] is “beyond it”. The man asked, ‘Which is worse, illicit sex or [masturbation]?’ He replied, ‘It is a terrible sin. Some have said that some sins are less egregious (*ahwan*) than others: but all sins are egregious to God, because they are misdeeds (*ma'āṣī*), and God is not pleased with His slaves’ sins. God forbade us to commit them, for they are the actions of Satan, and God said, “Do not worship Satan”,⁶⁴ [and] “Satan is an enemy to you: so treat him as an enemy. He only invites his partisans to dwell in Hell.”⁶⁵
32. *Al-Mağlisī* [d. 1110/1699]: The *Prophet* said, “The palm-f – r (*nākiḥ al-kaff*) is cursed”.⁶⁶

62 Ibn 'Asākir 1418/1997: LIV,122. The compiler notes that this version of the report is unique to Muḥammad b. al-Wazīr.

63 Q. 23:7.

64 Q. 36:60.

65 Q. 35:6. al-Āmilī, *al-Ḥurr* 1409, XXVIII, 364. I have not been able to locate this report in the printed edition of Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. 'Īsā's *Nawādir*. See also al-Mağlisī, Muḥammad Bāqir (d. 1110/1699) 1403/1983, CI:30, where it is said to be found in *Fiqh al-Riḍā*, attributed to 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn b. Bābawayh. I could not find this report in the printed editions of *Fiqh al-Riḍā*.

66 Al-Mağlisī, Muḥammad Bāqir 1403/1983, CI:30.

<i>Isnād</i>	Reports	Total
Mixed	9, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 26, 28, 30, 31	14
Kufan	3, 4, 5, 12, 16, 27	6
Meccan	1, 2, 7, 8, 11	5
Basran	6, 10, 24, 25	4
Sans <i>isnād</i>	23, 29, 32	3
Total		32

3 Analysis of the Masturbation Corpus

Firstly, a word about terminology. It seems the preferred terms for masturbation in the *ḥadīṭ* corpus are *istimnā'* and, to a lesser extent, *ḥaḍḥaḍa*. There is also much reference to various acts of self-f – g, including the notion that the masturbator f – s himself (reports 2, 17, 21, 22, 31), using one or both hands (15, 26, 29, 30) or his palm (*kaff*, 32). A number of other reports evoke the motion involved, rubbing (*d-l-k* or *'r-k*, 7, 17, 18, 24, 28) or fondling (*'b-t*, 3, 4, 5, 12, 20, 23) and, in one case, both (25).⁶⁷ I have not found any references to *ǧald Umayra* in the corpus. The reports are also highly gendered, as one would expect: the penis is referenced a number of times (3, 4, 5, 7, 12, 20, 23, 25, 28). Mentions of *istimnā'* or even rubbing, fondling and self-f – g are, on the other hand, ambiguous, as these may equally apply to women.⁶⁸ Marriage to somebody else's slave can be assumed to be an option only available to males, though we do know from early sources that free women were sometimes married to male slaves.⁶⁹ Two reports (8, 9) do refer to women in the context of masturbation, and suggest the use of an implement: a pestle, functioning as an improvised dildo.

67 Comparable to the Latin terms *frico* (rubbing) and *contrecto* (to caress): see Laqueur 2003: 99. Juynboll notes that the terms *saḥq* and *siḥāq* (ordinarily referring to tribadism and female same-sex activity generally) “are also used for female masturbation”, though I have not encountered the terms in this sense in the *ḥadīṭ* corpus. See Juynboll 2007: 133 n. 3. I thank Christopher Melchert for pointing me to this reference.

68 Gendering as male merely reflects the grammatical rule that groups of whatever size are categorised as such as long as there is a single male present.

69 'Abd al-Razzāq 1436/2015: VII,259 (on what happens if free women come to partly or fully own their enslaved husbands). Conceivably, the women in question may have been former slaves. It is clear from these reports, however, that the freedom of the female partner in a marriage does not automatically lead to the termination of the union.

Sunnī *ḥadīth* material does not imply that there is any this-worldly punishment or expiation required of the masturbator (and in one case clearly denies it, 1); it is only in the Šī'ī corpus that one finds reference to the punishment of masturbation as a *ta'zīr* offence, i.e., one awarded at the discretion of and to an extent determined by the judge (20). Nonetheless, a range of Sunnī jurists did come to hold that masturbation was a *ta'zīr* crime, as we will see shortly. A considerable number of the early reports do not have a clear bearing on whether the practice is forbidden or not (1, 2, 13, 17). Others clearly convey the view that there is nothing at all wrong with the practice (6, 7, 11, 24, 25) – or go as far as suggesting that the early Muslims positively *encouraged* their youths to adopt it as a means of obviating the need for illicit sex (8, 9). The Ibn 'Abbās cluster – various reports, all of which revolve around the same dictum attributed to that Companion (i.e., masturbation is better than illicit sex) – looms large in the Sunnī corpus (3, 4, 5, 12, 27, 28). One should note that a contrary, far less censorious view is also attributed to him (7). There is also a close correspondence between several reports of different sectarian origins, often involving the use of identical phrases (e.g., comparing 16, 17, and 21 to the Sunnī material) or common framing narratives, such as the eschatological punishment of three/seven categories of sinner (15, 21, 29, hereafter the three/seven sinners cluster). However, there are also distinctive sectarian elements, such as the Šī'ī condemnation of Eve's creation from Adam's rib (22),⁷⁰ and, perhaps, the notion that the masturbator is guilty of wasting his seed (19).⁷¹ On the whole, the Šī'ī corpus is far more negative towards masturbation, a fact also reflected in juristic attitudes.

It is abundantly clear that Meccan jurists adopted a more permissive stance on masturbation. The reports with Meccan *isnāds* reflect a lack of explicit prohibition (1, 2), neutrality (7, 11) or even the view that the early Muslims (presumably, the Companions) would positively encourage (*ya'murūn*, in the imperative) their youths to masturbate (8), whether male or female. This and report 9 (with a mixed *isnād*) are the only explicit references I was able to find to female masturbation in the *ḥadīth* corpus. There are jurists, as we will see, who discuss the use of implements by women, but this belongs to a much later period. The reports with Kufan *isnāds* are dominated by the Ibn 'Abbās cluster (3, 4, 5, 12, 27). Most of these narratives are not condemnatory in tone, though critical of the practice. Report 12 does, however, include Ibn 'Abbās' expression

70 On Twelver-Šī'ī attitudes to the creation of Eve from Adam's rib, see Bauer 2015, 123–129.

71 One can speculate that this has something to do with the greater Šī'ī emphasis on sacred lineage. On the wasting of seed generally, see Musallam 1983: 34.

of embarrassment (“*Uff! Uff!*”), the only version to do so.⁷² Ibn ‘Abbās’ tone in the Kufan and non-Kufan variants of the report comes across as much less judgemental and somewhat matter-of-fact. Report 28 depicts a kindly, even avuncular Ibn ‘Abbās, the sort of figure a young man can approach for advice about what is clearly an embarrassing personal issue. The one unambiguously Kufan Ṣīī *isnād* (16) reflects the same basic idea: that marriage to (somebody else’s) slave woman is preferable, but adds the criticism that masturbation is nonetheless a “despicable deed (*min al-fawāḥiṣ*)”. Later Twelver-Ṣīī authorities understood this condemnation to suggest that masturbation was a major sin (sing. *kabīra*), and the same judgement may be inferred from reports 15, 18, 19, 21, 23, 26, 29, 31, and 32.⁷³ The four Basran *isnāds* (6, 10, 24, 25) report permissive views; one can assume that this was the general opinion in that city.

One would have expected to find that Kufan jurists adopted the more permissive stance on masturbation, given that they (and the Ḥanafīs, following their lead) held that the touching of one’s private parts (sing. *farǧ*) with one’s hand does not invalidate *wuḍū’* (minor ritual purity).⁷⁴ As the Prophet is reported to have said, “What is it but a piece of your flesh (*muḍǧatun minhu*)?”⁷⁵ Ṣīī jurists defended the same view.⁷⁶ Presumably, jurists who held that the penis was, in this respect, no different from one’s nose, thigh, or other bodily part would be more easy-going about self-stimulation. One can see this logic at work in reports 6, 7 and 24: it is your fluid, or your member, so do whatever you like, as it were. But this is not the case, in fact, and the Kufans did not apply the same rationale to masturbation. Finally, we see Q.23:5–6 being invoked to buttress prohibition (14, 31), something emphasised even more strongly in the *fiqh* literature, to which we will turn shortly. Based on our survey of the *ḥadīth* corpus, three trends seem quite clear: Meccans and Basrans permitted or even encouraged masturbation, while Kufans were much more inclined to prohibition, at least under most circumstances (i.e., unless one feared committing illicit sex). In the earliest period, categorical prohibition was a marginal view, one that became mainstream with the emergence of the classical schools.

72 Though Ibn Ḥazm’s version of report 3 also includes a single use of “*Uff!*”

73 On major or grave sins, see Lange 2008: 101–105; on the “wasting of semen”, see *ibid.*: 210.

74 For the views of jurists, see Wheeler 2004: 91–97; the issue is also discussed (with characteristic brilliance) in Katz 2002: 123–135.

75 See the reference in Wheeler 2004: 97 (fn. 27).

76 I thank Kumail Rajani for discussing this point with me. See al-Kulyanī 1428/2007: 111,27; this is described as the majority view in al-Ḥillī, al-‘Allama (d. 726/1325) 1433/2011: 1,257–60.

4 Masturbation and the Jurists: Early Discussions and Subsequent Developments

Laqueur notes that in Classical Antiquity masturbation did not occupy the foreground of the moral imagination: “sex with oneself meant ... little before the Enlightenment ... ‘the ancients viewed onanism with the most serene indifference.’”⁷⁷ Ancient doctors were, similarly, “almost entirely silent on the subject”.⁷⁸ Laqueur suggests that this indifference was a function of authorship and audience: the elite males producing and consuming medical and ethical literature enjoyed almost unlimited access to a variety of sexual outlets, and masturbation has traditionally been the resort of those without means.⁷⁹ We have already seen that marriage to someone else’s slave was considered a preferable alternative to onanism, that is, for those unable to marry free women. While the claim that masturbation was a matter of indifference before the Enlightenment is evidently Eurocentric (though Laqueur does address pre-modern Japan), there are nonetheless important overlaps between the Greek and Islamic traditions, as far as the ethical evaluation of masturbation is concerned. This is unsurprising, given that the basis of the Islamic medical tradition, as it emerged in Late Antiquity, is essentially Greek. Galen (d. c.216) wrote that good health required the periodic expulsion of excess seminal fluid; for this reason, Diogenes the Cynic (d. 323 BCE) was not to be reproached for his (public) masturbation.⁸⁰ Galenic medicine prescribed the self or assisted sexual stimulation of women for the same reason, in order to prevent the dangerous “suffocation of the womb (Ar. *iḥtināq al-raḥm*)”, a therapy that was subsequently discussed in the Islamicate medical tradition.⁸¹ Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) is reported to have held, not unlike Galen, that masturbation is merely “the removal of an excess from the body (*iḥrāj faḍlatin min al-badan*)”, permissible when required (in cases of need, *ḥāǧa*) – just like bloodletting and cupping.⁸² This is not the only opinion attributed to him, however; and the views of early jurists are nothing if not varied.

There is another respect in which Laqueur’s observations about Classical Antiquity hold true for the texts surveyed below. Insofar as the Ancient Greeks and Romans addressed masturbation at all, he notes,

77 Laqueur 2003: 83–84.

78 Ibid.: 87.

79 Ibid.: 88.

80 Ibid.: 90–94.

81 Ibid.: 95; Myrne 2020b: 27–31.

82 Al-Qurṭubī 1427/2006: xv:12. He seems to borrow without acknowledgement from Ibn al-‘Arabī 1424/2003: III,315.

... it was to make clear that it was not fit and proper for the erotic life of a gentleman ... it figured largely as a joke about the dismal state of one so frustrated as to be reduced to so lowly a practice ... [it constituted] a violation of a libidinal sumptuary law. A gentleman ought not to, indeed ought not need to, masturbate, given the options he had available: slaves, boy or girl, prostitutes, women of the lower orders.⁸³

In a number of places, a similar ethic was clearly at work among Muslim jurists. I will content myself with a single example here: Abū Bakr b. al-ʿArabī notes that even if there were clear scriptural evidence to permit masturbation, those possessed of *murūʿa* (manliness) would avoid it. He avers that marriage to a non-Muslim slave is preferable, according to the majority view, and that masturbation is disgraceful (*ʿār*) in a lowly man (*danīʿ*), let alone a great one.⁸⁴

Before addressing the views of the *madhab*-jurists, it is worth saying something about the discourse on masturbation in the formative period of Islamic law, which I date from the 1st/7th century to the full crystallisation of the classical schools, c. late 4th/10th century. We find that the subject is addressed in the context of fasting, pilgrimage, criminal punishment and in commentaries on Q. 23:5–7, among other places. As for the eponyms of the schools themselves, Mālik (d. 179/795) is reported in the *Mudawwana* to have held that pilgrimage is invalidated by a person's taking pleasure in the friction caused by the motion of their riding animal (i.e., *taladdudan bi-dālik*) if this results in ejaculation. Saḥnūn (d. 240/854) then asks Ibn al-Qāsim (d. 191/806) if the same is true of "evil women (*širār al-nisāʿ*)" who "fondle themselves" (i.e., *al-ʿabat bi-naḥsihā*) until climax: yes, Ibn al-Qāsim replies.⁸⁵ This view is hard to interpret as a categorical prohibition of masturbation, since there are many otherwise perfectly lawful actions that are prohibited while in the state of *iḥrām* (ritual sanctity).⁸⁶ Mālik is, in other early sources, reported to have forbidden masturbation based on his reading of Q. 23:5–7.⁸⁷ The view of al-Šāfiʿī (d. 204/820) requires no

83 Laqueur 2003: 100, 110.

84 Ibn al-ʿArabī 1424/2003: 111, 315. The juristic discourse on masturbation presents us with an excellent example of what Katz has recently discussed in terms of the multiple normative frameworks that jurists negotiate in their works. *Fiqh* in no sense exhausts jurists' account of morality, she rightly suggests. Of the four normative frameworks described by Katz, *murūʿa* is the least developed. See Katz 2022: 20, 223 (fn. 71).

85 Al-Tanūḥī n.d.: 11, 186.

86 See e.g., the discussion in Wheeler 2004: 108–13.

87 Ibn al-Mundir (d. c. 318/930) 1425/2004: V, 181; Ibn al-ʿArabī 1428/2007: V, 432, reporting this from Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Ḥakam (d. 268 or 269/882–883, a student of al-Šāfiʿī and Ibn Wahb) via Ḥarmala b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (fl. 2nd/8th century).

interpretation, by contrast: any sexual outlet other than one's wives or female slaves is absolutely forbidden, per Q. 23:5–7. Thus, "Masturbation (*al-istimnā*) is not permissible – and God knows best".⁸⁸ Two views are usually attributed to Aḥmad, as we have already had occasion to remark, one of them more permissive (exactly *how* permissive was the subject of much disagreement).⁸⁹ In their early *ḥilāf* (legal disagreement) works, Ibn al-Munḍir and al-Ṭabarī both note al-Šāfi'ī's view, which the former adopts. Ibn al-Munḍir further reports that al-Ḥasan (al-Baṣrī) detested (i.e., *yakraḥ*) masturbation (cf. report 10), while the Meccan 'Amr b. Dīnār (as per report 11, above) gave a dispensation (*ruḥṣa*) for it. The view that the masturbator "does" himself is attributed to 'Ikrima as well as Ibn 'Umar (cf. report 13).⁹⁰ Al-Ṭabarī refers to the Ibn 'Abbās report and the view attributed to Anas b. Mālīk that masturbators are "cursed" (cf. reports 15, 23, 26), contrasting this with the opinion permitting masturbation. He ascribes permissibility to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (cf. report 10, 25), al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim (d. 105/723) and the Basran al-'Alā' b. Ziyād (d. 94/712–3), who proclaimed, "There is no problem with it! We used to do it while [far away from home] on military campaigns" (*lā ba'sa bi-dālik, qad kunnā naf'alhu fī maǧāzīnā*) (cf. report 25).⁹¹

The extreme legal diversity of the formative period was tamed by the emergence of the classical schools; this insight, true across the whole range of the law, holds for masturbation too. Before proceeding, I should note that the Prophetic *ḥadīṭ* on masturbation in the Sunnī corpus were widely acknowledged to be poorly transmitted, and thus not probative.⁹² I should also mention that the subject features in legally-oriented Sufi works (as we saw with *Qūt al-Qulūb*,

88 Al-Šāfi'ī, Muḥammad b. Idrīs 1422/2001: VI,246–247; idem 1414/1994: I,195; Ibn al-Munḍir 1425/2004: v,180. I should note that al-Šāfi'ī is said to have permitted masturbation in his *qadīm* (i.e., the views he held before relocating to Egypt): see Ibn 'Ābidīn (d. 1258/1842) 1386/1966: II,399. Al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277) reports via Ibn Kaḡḡ (d. 405/1015), alternatively, that al-Šāfi'ī suspended judgement (*tawaqqafa*) on masturbation in his *qadīm*: see al-Nawawī 1412/1991: VII,206.

89 I have not been able to find a discussion of the issue in the surviving *masā'il* collections of Aḥmad's students and grand-students. A discussion of later Ḥanbalī sources will follow in the section on *madḥab*-jurists.

90 Ibn al-Munḍir 1425/2004: v,181. He also mentions the Ibn 'Abbās report. *Al-Išrāf* is an abridgement of his longer work, *al-Awsaf*. However, I find that the latter adds little to the discussion other than some material from the *Muṣannaf* of 'Abd al-Razzāq, of which Ibn al-Munḍir was an important earlier transmitter. See idem 1431/2010: IX,124–125.

91 Al-Ṭabarī 1420/1999: 303–304. For the new edition of the text, see idem 1442/2021: I,226–227.

92 See, e.g., Ibn al-Ġawzī (d. 597/1201) 1401/1981: II,144–145; Ibn Kaṭīr, Abū l-Fidā' Ismā'īl (d. 774/1373) 1420/1999: v,463.

report 23).⁹³ I shall now survey some representative opinions of the *madhhab*-jurists, before ending with some concluding observations on what I believe to be a clear diachronic shift in viewpoint on the ethics of masturbation.

Among the Ḥanafīs, the Transoxanian Abū l-Layṭ al-Samarqandī (d. between 373/983–984 and 393/1002–1003) mentions the view of an earlier jurist of his school who was asked if masturbation is lawful. He responded, “If it is done without desire (*šahwa*), or in order to calm one’s desires (*taskīn mā’ihī min al-šahwa*), then there is no harm (*lā ba’s*) in it, and it is [divinely] rewarded (*ma’ğūr*).”⁹⁴ In another source, in a marked departure from the tradition, masturbation is said to have been the cause of the revelation of Q.23:5–7, according to Nağm al-Dīn al-Nasafī (d. 537/1142).⁹⁵ Among later figures in the school, the Yemeni Abū Bakr al-Zabīdī (d. 800/1397–8), a commentator on the *Muḥtaṣar* of al-Qudūrī (d. 428/1037), notes that masturbation is a *ta’zīr* offence.⁹⁶ The Egyptian Ibn Nuğaym (d. 969/1563) prohibited it, judging it a minor sin (*šağīra*).⁹⁷ Another important postclassical member of the school, the Ottoman *muftī* of Damascus al-Ḥaškafī (d. 1088/1677), judges the act prohibited and subject to discretionary punishment, citing al-Zabīdī.⁹⁸ Elsewhere, al-Ḥaškafī prohibits masturbation (deeming it *makrūh taḥrīman*) with the exception of the case where a man fears committing illicit sex, in which case it is hoped there is no sin in doing so (*yurğā an lā wabāla ‘alayhi*).⁹⁹ His commentator and fellow *muftī* of Damascus, the famous Ibn ‘Ābidīn, the single most authoritative Ḥanafī of the late postclassical period, observes that masturbation is prohibited if it is done to excite one’s desire (*li-stiğlāb al-šahwa*). If overcome by lust, however, and one is without a wife or slave concubine, it is hoped that masturbating in order to calm oneself is not sinful (citing al-Samarqandī). If the alternative is illicit sex, it becomes obligatory.¹⁰⁰ He repeats this elsewhere,

93 See the discussion in al-Ğazzī, Nağm al-Dīn (d. 1061/1651) 1432/2011: x,559–560. Al-Ğazzī reports (via al-Damīrī, d. 808/1405) that monkeys engage in auto-fellatio, as is rumoured of the artist formerly known as Prince (d. 1437/2016); cf. al-Nuwayrī (d. 733/1333) 1424/2004: ix,206. See also al-Ğazzī 1432/2011: v,510–511, where masturbation is condemned as an “abomination of Satan (*min qabā’ih al-šayṭān*)”. For a study of this work, see Patel 2012: 224–275.

94 See Mangera 2012: 252. The jurist is Abū Bakr (?) or, according to another ms, Abū Naşr. I thank a friend (who wishes to remain anonymous) for his help with understanding this phrase.

95 Al-Nasafī, Nağm al-Dīn 1440/2019: xv,16.

96 Al-Zabīdī, Abū Bakr b., 1427/2006: ii,389.

97 As cited in al-Şawkānī (d. 1255/1839) 1423/2002: 21.

98 Al-Ḥaškafī 1423/2002: 310.

99 *Ibid.*: 146.

100 Ibn ‘Ābidīn 1386/1966: iv,27.

asking whether masturbation is sinful because it involves taking pleasure in a part of oneself or because it is the excitation of desire in an inappropriate manner, resulting in the wasting of one's seed (*safh al-mā'*). Ibn 'Ābidīn adopts the latter view, remarking that intercrural sex (*tafkhid*) with one's wife is lawful, even though it wastes one's seed. This case is unlike masturbation with one's hand or into a hole in a wall, which excites one's desire and wastes one's seed in an unlawful manner.¹⁰¹

The Mālikīs seem to prohibit masturbation categorically. Abū Bakr b. al-'Arabī claims that the practice was introduced to mankind by Satan, and that most scholars deem it unlawful.¹⁰² Ibn al-'Arabī is not the only author to invoke the language of *murū'a*, as noted previously, or to suggest that masturbation was not the practice of gentlemen. The Qur'ān commentator al-Qurṭubī repeats the same material, and we will see similar comments from non-affiliated jurists who deem the anti-masturbation *ḥadīth* poorly transmitted.¹⁰³ Among later Mālikīs, Ḥalīl b. Iṣḥāq al-Ġundī (d. 767/1365), author of the famous *Muḥtaṣar*, infers from the previously cited passage of the *Mudawwana* that the practice is unlawful.¹⁰⁴ The North African Sufi and jurist Zarrūq (d. 899/1494) notes Aḥmad's reported toleration of masturbation, saying that such opinions are not permissible to exploit.¹⁰⁵ The most sustained discussion of the question by a Mālikī comes from the North African theologian al-Ḥasan al-Yūsī (d. 1102/1690), in a passage in his *adab* work *Zahr al-akm fī l-amṭāl wa-l-ḥikam*. He cites an alternative version of the poetry found above as the first epigraph to this article (using *mararta* in place of *ḥalalta*, *fa-aḍrib* instead of *fa-ḡlid* and *'ār* rather than *dā'*), attributing it to some "dissolute persons (*ba'ḍ al-muḡḡān*)".¹⁰⁶ He notes, *contra* the poet, that masturbation is disgraceful, and that any attempt to attribute its permissibility to Mālik is sheer falsehood. Even if 'Amr b. Dīnār reportedly gave some dispensation for it, most scholars in fact prohibit it. Masturbation, moreover, leads to the wasting of one's seed (*taḍyī' al-baḍr*).¹⁰⁷

101 Ibid.: II,399.

102 Ibn al-'Arabī, 1424/2003: III,315. He claims that the term *istimmā'* belongs to the Iraqīs, surely a mistake.

103 Al-Qurṭubī 1427/2006: XV,12.

104 Iṣḥāq 1429/2008: III,58.

105 Zarrūq 1428/2006: II,884.

106 On Muḡūn, see the magisterial Szombathy 2013.

107 Al-Yūsī 1401/1981: II,92–93.

The Šafī'ī, like the Mālikīs, unanimously prohibit masturbation.¹⁰⁸ The judge and diplomat al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058) mentions that his school's eponym considered it a lesser form of *zinā* (along with bestiality).¹⁰⁹ Though al-Šafī'ī was aware of some scholars' view of its permissibility, alongside the fact that some permitted it for travellers, masturbation is forbidden. It leads to the forsaking of marriage and the termination of lineages (*inqiṭā' al-nasl*), just like (male) sodomy (*liwāt*).¹¹⁰ Abū Ishāq al-Širāzī (d. 476/1083), the first professor appointed to the *Nizāmiyya* college in Baghdad, similarly staying closely to the view of his *Imām*, prohibiting masturbation based on Q.23:5–7. He deemed it a *ta'zīr* offence.¹¹¹ Abū Muḥammad al-Bağawī (d. 510/1117, 515/1121 or 516/1122), the famous Qur'ān commentator, similarly presents Q. 23:5–7 as evidence for prohibition, mentioning that this is the view of most scholars.¹¹² Al-Nawawī, the most authoritative Šafī'ī of his generation, forbids masturbation outright.¹¹³ Ibn Ḥağar al-Haytamī (d. 974/1566), the so-called *mufṭī* of the Two Sanctuaries (i.e., Mecca and Medina), and the most authoritative of the postclassical members of the school, gives the same verdict, as does the Egyptian al-Buğayramī (d. 1221/1806).¹¹⁴

The Ḥanbalīs disagree considerably among themselves on the subject of masturbation. They attribute two views to their eponym, as noted above, and some later jurists were at pains to deny that it could be practiced without a truly compelling need. The idiosyncratic Ibn 'Aqil is reported to have maintained the distinctive view, among members of his school, that masturbation was categorically prohibited.¹¹⁵ Elsewhere, he is claimed to have deemed it preferable to marriage to slave women, a view that is described as problematic (*fihī naẓar*).¹¹⁶ Ibn Qudāma (d. 620/1223), the pillar of Damascene Ḥanbalism in his generation, prohibits masturbation, on the grounds that it leads to the

108 One can always find minor exceptions; e.g., al-Šawkānī mentions that the obscure Šafī'ī jurist Ḥašim b. Yaḥyā al-Šāmī (d. 1104/1692–3) permitted masturbation. See al-Šawkānī 1423/2002: 22.

109 Al-Māwardī 1419/1999: xvii,235. The context is witnesses testifying to the fact that illicit sex has taken place: they must specify that the *zinā* in question involved the entrance of the penis into the vagina. Otherwise, unqualified references to *zinā* might refer to bestiality or masturbation.

110 Ibid.: ix,320.

111 Al-Širāzī, Abū Ishāq, 1416/1995: III,341.

112 Al-Bağawī, Abū Muḥammad 1417/1997: v,410.

113 Al-Nawawī 1412/1991: vii,206.

114 Al-Haytamī, Ibn Ḥağar 1357/1983: III,409; al-Buğayramī 1415/1995: II,457.

115 Ibn Rağab (d. 795/1393) 1425/2005: I,351. This, notwithstanding Ibn 'Aqil's reported claim that the Ḥanbalīs never prohibited masturbation. See Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751/1350) 1970: iv,96.

116 Ibn Rağab 1352/1933: 246.

termination of lineages; but it is permissible if one fears committing illicit sex. He also mentions Aḥmad's view that it allowed one to remove excess seminal fluid from one's body, but does not seem to accept the obvious implication of this, viz., that it is perfectly natural.¹¹⁷ The brilliant and controversial Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) discusses the issue in several places in his sprawling corpus. In one place, he observes that the majority of scholars prohibit it, and that masturbation is a *taʿzīr* offence.¹¹⁸ Elsewhere, he states more emphatically that the categorical prohibition (whether or not one fears committing illicit sex) was upheld by the majority among both early and later jurists (*salāfan wa-ḥalāfan*), clearly an overstatement. The opinion of Aḥmad permitting it is strictly limited to those who legitimately fear falling into sinful relations, not those who merely seek pleasure or masturbate out of habit, or while fantasising about sex. All of this is utterly forbidden.¹¹⁹ His disciple, Ibn al-Qayyim, forbids the practice for those who are able to marry or purchase a slave concubine or those without the means to do so who nonetheless do not have reason to believe they will commit *zinā*. This notwithstanding, Ibn al-Qayyim reports the opinion that prisoners, travellers and the poor (i.e., those without the means to marry or purchase concubines) are allowed to masturbate; the school has an explicit text (*naṣṣ*) from their eponym on the matter, and the Companions are reported to have practiced it while away from home on campaign (cf. al-Ṭabarī, above). Ibn al-Qayyim then provides us with salacious details on what one assumes are contemporaneous sexual practices:

If a woman without a husband is overpowered by desire (*ḡilma*), some of our [Ḥanbalī] associates permit her to take *al-akarnabaḡ*,¹²⁰ that is, a thing made of [animal] hide to resemble a penis, which she inserts [into her vagina]. Similarly [they hold, she can use] a cucumber or a small gourd. The correct view, according to me, is that this is not permissible, because the Prophet advised those [struggling with] sexual desire and unable to marry to fast. Had there been any other means [to cope, without infringing on the law], he would have mentioned it ... if [a man without means] bores a hole in a watermelon,¹²¹ or in dough or leather, or

117 Ibn Qudāma 1414/1994: IV,93.

118 Ibn Taymiyya 1425/2004: XXXIV,229.

119 Ibn Taymiyya 1416/1995: X,574.

120 On this term, see the learned discussion in al-Azdī 2021: 410 (fn. 1222). I thank Emily Selove for kindly bringing this footnote to my attention.

121 On the use of watermelons as aids to masturbation in the poetry of Abū Nuwās (d. between mid-198 and early 200/813–815), see Smoor 2014: 32. On masturbation in the poetry of Abū Nuwās generally, see Montgomery 2011: 100, fn. 71. Montgomery translates *ḡald ʿUmayra*

scrapes a recess into a statue (*ṣanam*) and ejaculates into it, this is, based on what we have said previously, preferable (*ashal*) to his masturbating with his hand ...¹²²

Ibn al-Qayyim's student Ibn Rağab permits masturbation in cases of *ḍarūra* (necessity), in contrast to Ibn 'Ādil (d. 880/1475), who deems Q. 23:5–7 clear evidence of its prohibition.¹²³ Ibn Rağab's view is shared by the authoritative Egyptian Ḥanbalī Maṣū' b. Yūnus al-Buhūti (d. 1051/1641), who clarifies that the necessity in question is the fear of committing illicit sex.¹²⁴ The most authoritative of the postclassical jurists of the school, al-Mardāwī (d. 1026/1617, a teacher of al-Buhūti), limits himself to stating that there is no expiation due for masturbation, attributing this view to Aḥmad, via al-Qāḍi Abū Ya'lā (d. 458/1065).

The view of the Ṣī'a forms an interesting contrast to the Ḥanbalīs; among the former, there is total unanimity of opinion that masturbation is prohibited. Ṣayḥ al-Ṭā'ifa (d. 460/1067) even claims that a consensus exists on this point, basing the prohibition on Q. 23:5–7 and the *ḥadīth* of the seven sinners.¹²⁵ His student al-Qāḍi Ibn al-Barrāğ (d. 481/1088) deems masturbation a *ta'zīr* offence, citing report 20.¹²⁶ Al-'Allāma al-Ḥillī, well known for his detailed knowledge of legal *ḥilāf*, limits himself to noting that masturbation is prohibited, and that it voids one's ritual seclusion (*i'tikāf*).¹²⁷ In the important legal primer *al-Lum'a al-Dimašqīyya*, which attracted numerous commentaries, al-Šahīd al-Awwal (d. 786/1384) writes that masturbation is a *ta'zīr* offence (citing report 20) and that guilt is established with two upright witnesses and a single confession.¹²⁸ In what is probably the most important commentary on the work, al-Šahīd al-Ṭānī (d. 965/1557 or 965/1558 or 966/1558) justifies the prohibition with reference to Q.23:5–7, noting that report 20 has a defective *isnād*. He adds that Ibn Idrīs (d. c.598/1201) held that two confessions are required to establish guilt for masturbation, rather than one.¹²⁹ Al-Ḥurr al-'Āmilī, in his important *ḥadīth* compilation cited previously, attempts to reconcile report 17 (in which

as "battering Bobby", a Glaswegian colloquialism, and notes that Abū Nuwās was "the first to describe masturbation in his verse". I thank Emily Selove for this reference.

122 Ibn al-Qayyim 1970: IV,96–97.

123 Ibn Rağab 1352/1933: 246; Ibn 'Ādil 1419/1998: XIV,172–173.

124 Al-Buhūti, Maṣū' b. Yūnus 1427/2006: II,587–588.

125 Al-Ṭūsī, Abū Ġa'far Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan 1387/1967: IV,242.

126 Ibn al-Barrāğ 1406: II,534.

127 Al-Ḥillī, al-'Allāma 1414/1993: VI,257.

128 Al-Awwal n.d.: 172.

129 Al-Ṭānī, al-Šahīd 1424: IV,382–384.

Ġāfar al-Šādiq denies that any punishment or expiation is required of the masturbator) with the views of his school. He does this by invoking *taqīyya* (precautionary dissimulation). He reads the statement about self-f – g as an *a fortiori* argument: sex with one's relatives is forbidden, ergo sex with oneself, even more so. He concludes by reaffirming the view that masturbation is a *ta'zīr* offence.¹³⁰

Curiously, the jurists who did not adhere to any of the established schools tended to have the most to say on the subject. The most involved discussion of masturbation I have come across in a comprehensive premodern *fiqh* work is found in the *Muḥallā* of the formidable *Zāhiri* (textualist) jurist, Ibn Ḥazm.¹³¹ He holds that a woman who rubs something against herself (without inserting it) until she climaxes is not guilty of sin; the same is true of a man who masturbates. No scholar, he points out, disagrees that it is perfectly lawful for a person to touch their sex organ (specifying the use of the left hand for men), and since no scriptural text explicitly prohibits masturbation, it must be lawful.¹³² This licitness notwithstanding, Ibn Ḥazm declares the practice detestable: it is not an action one associates with cultivated behaviour or the virtues (*laysa min makārim al-aḥlāq wa-lā min al-faḍā'il*).¹³³ Ibn Ḥazm then recounts a series of reports from the *Muṣannaḥ* of 'Abd al-Razzāq (in the order 2, 3, 7, 24, 25, 6, 8, 9, 11) with some interesting departures from its two printed editions, and includes two unique reports via his own *isnād* I have not found anywhere else (24, 25). He deems reports 2, 3, 7, and 24 dubiously transmitted (*maǧmūza*), while reports 1, 8, 9, 11, and 25 are authentic.¹³⁴

The verdict of the Yemeni Chief Justice al-Šawkānī (d. 1255/1839) somewhat resembles that of Ibn Ḥazm. In his *tafsīr* of Q. 23:5–7, al-Šawkānī notes that some jurists have invoked the verse to prohibit masturbation.¹³⁵ He refers his readers to an independent treatise he has written on the subject, *Bulūǧ al-munā fi aḥkām al-istimnā* (sic).¹³⁶ I will summarise the main findings of this work, which occupies 24 pages in the printed edition. After citing Ibn al-Qayyim and the *Muṣannaḥ* of 'Abd al-Razzāq at length, he notes that most

130 Al-Āmilī, al-Ḥurr 1409: XX,353.

131 Ibn Ḥazm 1437/2016: XVI,464–466. In the modern period, a number of treatises have been written on the subject. One outstanding example is the treatise of the highly idiosyncratic Moroccan *ḥadīth* scholar and Sufi al-Ġumārī (d. 1413/1993) n.d.

132 Compare this with Bavli Niddah 13a–13b, where touching the penis is the focus of the prohibition (not extended to women).

133 Ibn Ḥazm 1437/2016: XVI,464.

134 Ibid.: 466. This is somewhat odd, as Ibn Ḥazm does not in fact cite report 1. He does not comment on the authenticity of report 6.

135 Al-Šawkānī 1414: III,561.

136 Al-Šawkānī 1423/2002; idem n.d.: VII,369–387.

scholars forbid masturbation categorically, while a minority permit it unrestrictedly.¹³⁷ Q. 23:5–7 is not a proof of its prohibition, he comments, for if the verse was understood to prohibit all forms of non-vaginal sex with one's wives or slave concubines, any other forms of seeking pleasure in them would be unlawful – which is absurd.¹³⁸ After weakening the condemnatory *ḥadīṭ* on the subject (including reports 15 and 30), al-Šawkānī declares that for those without wives or concubines, or for those unable to access their spouses (owing to travel etc.), masturbation is akin to other forms of lawful medical treatment (*min abwāb al-tadāwī*).¹³⁹ The worst that can be said is that it is a doubtful matter (*min al-mutašābihāt*), but if there is a compelling need for it (*darūra*), it is permitted.¹⁴⁰

5 Conclusions

We have already seen that permissibility seems to have been the majority view in the first two Islamic centuries or so, with clear regional patterns emerging among Basran and Meccan jurists (lawfulness), as well as Kufans (prohibition, barring those fearing illicit sex). The consolidation of the classical legal schools demonstrably led to the marginalisation of more permissive opinions on masturbation. The Šafīʿīs, Mālikīs, and Ṣūfīʿīs categorically prohibited it; the Ṣūfīʿīs most emphatically of the three. Opinions among the Ḥanbalīs and Ḥanafīs were decidedly mixed, though the Ḥanbalīs were perhaps the more inclined to permissive views (notwithstanding the protests of later representatives of the school). Maverick (Sunnī) textualists were always quick to comment that the *ḥadīṭ* condemning masturbation are poorly transmitted. It is possible that the Ṣūfīʿī stance owes something to the prohibitive view of the Kufans, though the comparative permissiveness of the Ḥanafīs undermines this thesis, somewhat. In any case, the views of Ṣūfīʿī jurists are far more categorical than anything one finds in the earliest sources. One can speculate that this owes something to their views on the importance of lineage (ultimately, of the *Ahl al-Bayt*), as indicated previously.

Overall, the shift we have documented arguably represents a dramatic reversal of opinion on the ethics of masturbation. The views of later Sunnī jurists remain, nonetheless, a world away from the moral panic discussed by Laqueur.

137 Al-Šawkānī 1423/2002: 23.

138 Ibid.: 24.

139 Ibid.: 26–29.

140 Ibid.: 35–37.

Instead, as was the case in Classical Antiquity, masturbation stood condemned by the jurists as a form of “unmanly” behaviour. It does not figure in the works on major sins by Aḥmad b. Hārūn al-Bardīǧī (d. 301/914), ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Qurṭubī (d. 646/1248–1249), al-Dahabī, Ibn al-Mibrad (d. 909/1503), Šaraf al-Dīn al-Ḥaǧǧāwī (d. 968/1561), Ibn Ḥaǧar al-Haytamī, and Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1206/1792).¹⁴¹ Arguably, this is a function of the juristic conceptualisation of sex: sex (licit or otherwise) is a penetrative act, unlike *siḥāq* (tribadism), for example. It thus comes as no surprise that references to self-stimulation are relatively few and far between in the legal literature, and are entirely absent from the representative works of the major sins genre listed above. References to bestiality (*ityān al-bahā'im*) and sodomy (whether the receiving person is male or female) are, by contrast, ubiquitous. “Sex” that does not involve other people and does not entail (phallic) penetration is not sex; it is morally ambiguous. As the Ḥanafī jurist al-Kāsānī (d. 587/1191) writes, in another context,

The imposition of the *ḥadd* on a woman for *zinā* is never because she is a *zāniya*, because the [basic] act of *zinā* cannot be accomplished by her, which is sexual intercourse (*waṭʾ*, i.e. penetration). Rather, she is [only ever] a penetrated (*mawṭūʾa*), not a penetrator (*wāṭiʾa*). Her designation in the Exalted Book as a fornicatress (*zāniya*) is [only] figurative (*maǧāz*), not literal (*ḥaqīqa*). So [the *zinā* punishment] is imposed upon her due to her being fornicated *with* (*maznī bi-hā*).¹⁴²

School-specific arguments about the logic of *ḥadd* punishments aside, this passage clearly reflects a more fundamental commitment about the nature of sex as a penetrative act involving a phallus. Thus, references to sex with the hand or palm or involving the use of a rudimentary dildo only go so far; they are *figuratively* sex.

In terms of the shift in attitudes towards masturbation documented in this article, one can remark that it is of a piece with other doctrinal changes from the formative period to the consolidation of the legal schools. Although the classical schools' near-monopolisation of the production of law undoubtedly

141 Al-Bardīǧī, Aḥmad b. Hārūn, 1424/2003: 537–548; al-Qurṭubī, ‘Alī b. Muḥammad 1418/1997; al-Dahabī n.d.: 87–512; Ibn al-Mibrad 1425/2004; al-Ḥaǧǧāwī n.d.: 518–521; al-Haytamī 1356; al-Wahhāb 1416/1996. The editor of al-Dahabī's work includes extremely useful discussions of the history of the major sins genre (9–24) and on the numerous editions and abridgements of *al-Kabā'ir* (25–29). I thank Christian Lange for suggesting I explore this genre.

142 Cited in Azam 2017: 184.

led to the marginalisation of all kinds of views (later deemed idiosyncratic or *šādd*) across the whole range of the law,¹⁴³ it is too early to conclude that the trend whereby minority opinions became the majority view (and *vice versa*) was the norm, or even common, as some have asserted.¹⁴⁴ Elsewhere, I have suggested that the equation of modesty laws with sexual morality had already begun to receive greater emphasis by the early 3rd/9th century; others have noted the widespread deployment of the “corruption of the age (*fasād al-zamān*)” doctrine, typically in ways that can be equated with greater social “conservatism”.¹⁴⁵ Though much remains to be done, it seems plausible to conclude that the greater integration of Islamdom in the Late Antique Near Eastern context led to increased social stratification and conservatism in sexual matters. The precise mechanisms through which this occurred remain, however, to be demonstrated.

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143 For one of many examples, see the prohibition of various forms of slavery discussed in Schneider 2007.

144 E.g., Salaymeh 2016: 200. Salaymeh points to three such doctrinal shifts to argue that Islamic law lacks an “essence” or innate characteristics that “develop” over time.

145 Anchassi 2021: 145; idem 2020: 168. On *fasād al-zamān*, see, e.g., Sadeghi 2013: 113–123, 139–140; Katz, 2014: 68–70. The term “conservatism” is less than ideal, in this context, as I have demonstrated a clear *shift* in doctrine.

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